



# GOLD DUST

Hardyna Vedder

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Translated from the German

by Brigitte M. Goldstein

**“Life’s happiness depends on good thoughts.”**

Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), Roman Emperor

**Gold Dust**

**Part I**

**The Incorruptible**

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core of the digital teaching concept

Papillon

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**Content:** Fascinating fabulous creature and incredible events full of magic create the magnificent scenery for a breathtaking fight between good and evil.

GOLD DUST symbolizes the vision we all are searching for, our dearest wish. For that PRINCE ARON OF NUBIA risks everything. He tangles with the gold hat ministers, gets to know the god of dreams phantasos, the gate of illusions, the three days of wonders, and the excessive bird of terror. He lights up the masks of the seven gates and risks a dangerous battle. Together with the beautiful persian, miss monti, he stands in the way of his dark majesty...

**Author:** The author Hardyna Vedder used to work in different professions before she started to write after long study trips.

Based on the idea of writing a childrens book a study project developed which is an example for new paths of imparting knowledge in the 21.Century.

Thirst for knowledge and interest in topics taken from literature, history, philosophy, art and religion as well as openness for science, environmental topics and new media have influenced the development of the GOLD DUST trilogy.

## Phantasos

Dark nights are cloaked in dark coats. Dark coats conceal dark secrets. But when a shining red dot appears amid this darkness and concealment, it is Phantasos whose hand is at play. It is he who opens sleeping eyes. And so it was also on that night. A dark roof spanned over the golden city of Aurum.

The darkness enveloped Aron in a mysterious cloak and pulled him far away from reality into a world of magic, for the night is the progenitor of dreams. The prince's mind was asleep, but the gate to a magic world beyond stood wide open.

A splendid stallion, rearing in a bright white light, flashed before his mind's eye. The rider, whose mysterious name was Phantasos, nestled against the animal's neck and soothingly whispered in his ear: "Calm." The horse's front hooves immediately crashed to the ground, setting off small explosions in the sea-blue labyrinth of majestic twists of the brain. Aron's sleep was shaken. He looked directly into the dream god's split face.

"Could it be that it was broken once and put back together?" the dreaming prince wondered as he studied the phantom image more closely. The left half of the face seemed to consist of water gleaming in colors of turquoise and blue. Foaming sea waves, in place of hair, flowed from the head straight down the back. The right side of his face dissolved into earthy sand tones from the forehead to the chin. Twigs with gently sprouting leaves shot from his head, forming a triangle with the surf. At the crest, the elements of earth and water merged in such a bizarre way as to give the dream god an inadvertently weird appearance. In place of the chin, there was a globe. Around his neck germinated blazing red poppy flowers; for poppies are hallucinants. They give wing to dreams.

Aron was flabbergasted by the sight of the magnificent creature whose entire body was wrapped in a bright-red, ankle-length cloak from under which peeked out his bare feet stuck in stirrups. The middle toe of the right foot sported a precious jade signet ring, representing the mingling of fantasy and reality.

Aron was enchanted by the exotic look of the dream god. But best of all about him, to the prince's mind, was the magic crimson cloak. Little flames flared up inside it, one by one, only to go out again just as quickly. Shooting stars exploded, parrots flew peacefully past brawling beasts, a sea monster was in hot pursuit of a ship, storms devastated the world, rivers coughed up human waste onto their banks, a blade of grass pursued a terror-struck man whose legs were giving way under him. People stood in window openings; some jumped out and began to fly. A child was hounded by a rabid dog, mythical creatures gorged themselves at richly laden tables, a farmer chased away a poor old woman without offering her food or drink, children with wings on their backs moved from house to house asking for a bit of love, but stony hearts shushed them away. At one point, it rained tar and sulphur, then again pearls and gems, and so it went on and on, endlessly.

Aron couldn't get enough of it. The images hastened through the cloak so they could reach the humans before they would wake up. The dream god had an easy time giving wing to the fantasies. Suddenly, Phantasos dispelled the dream images

until nothing was left but the clouds in the sky into which the crimson garment sailed away. Then he drew the prince's attention to an exquisite object by upholding to him a magic mirror daubed in golden splendor: "This will be your fate, for the unfathomable plans of the ineluctable one are born in the night," said the illusory image not without pathos. I wonder what he means by fate, thought the dream-intoxicated heart of the prince. As if Phantasos had understood the language of the heart, he added: "Fate is the part of our future which we are unable to alter." Prince Aron waited, eager to explore the mystery of his life, but he turned away disappointed for he saw nothing unusual. Only his own mirror image stared at him curiously. He recognized himself in the mirror, mounted on a horse, the reins tight in his hands. "How trifling can it be? I'll be learning to ride a horse," was his denigrating conclusion. The prince tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep. The magician stowed the magic mirror deftly in his heart and a bird's wing made its way from this spot out of his body to wander on with the clouds. Prince Aron felt cheated. All he heard was the sound of thundering hooves. Then he fell into the darkness of an uncertain void.

The next morning Aron couldn't remember whether he was awake or still dreaming. Sometimes he daydreamed and imagined the strangest things. In his fantasies, he actually saw himself often wandering about in the dream coat, which he had already named "Crimson." "My Crimson," he murmured and stroked his left arm. Since then, though he kept a grim silence about what happened, the idea of a fantasy world would not let go of Aron. It seemed that he had misplaced the key, for nobody approached him about this matter. Though it was early morning, the prince shuffled listlessly like a wilting leaf across the inlaid wood floor and had to garner every ounce of energy to keep from slipping out of his velvet shoes. A terrible headache plagued him as if he could still hear the explosions the thundering hooves taking off in his dream.

He ran his outspread fingers through the raised tips of his hair to drive away the throbbing pain. No use. He dragged his tired body toward the throne room. An oppressively humid blast of air, blowing in through the open palace window, filled the room so early in the morning and intensified the tension in the prince's head. Suddenly he remembered that this was actually not the first time that he had dreamt the crimson dream.

### **The Gold Hat Officials**

The door to the throne room opened and the sun in all its splendor was reflected in the glittering gold of the sun crystals on the walls. Prince Aron closed his eyes. The brightness pained him. His cowed, slow movements told the gathered officials that their ruler felt disconsolate and empty on this morning. When the official for good thoughts saw him touch his forehead with the right hand, lamenting of pain, he greeted him with the words: "Children don't have headaches."

“Officials always seem to know everything better,” the prince grumbled annoyed. “Just don’t be cowed by the grandees,” the evil thoughts snarled at his advisor. “What do you mean by grandees? Actually I’m the grandest. Who do you think sits on the throne here? It seems to me, this gang of officials suffers from a case of dwindling memory.” His lips pursed, the tiny ruler strode across the throne room past the lined up officials, who bowed down promptly as he entered, whereby their high, cone-shaped gold hats were in danger of sliding off their heads. Wearing a golden ceremonial hat was the privilege of Nubian officials, only they were privileged to adorn themselves with this head dress. Every time an official resigned, his hat began to grow, but nobody knew why. Unknown too was the meaning of the symbols and progression of numbers on the cones. No wonder then that the hats stimulated the Nubians’ imagination and they invented ever more varied stories about the four magic gold hats.

Prince Aron almost collided with a peacock who, though he carried a scroll of paper under his arm, had forgotten to put on his glasses. The peacock apologized absent-mindedly and, as a sign of respect, he fanned out his color-gleaming plumes. The absent-minded peacock was one of seven fan birds in the palace whose task it was to study the social order and who were on their way of one day joining the ranks of the great scholars of Nubia, which was a very old civilization. Nubia is an ancient word for “gold” as the peacocks had discovered in writings dating back to even greater antiquity. But that wasn’t enough for them by any means. Their thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. Not even the officials’ gold hats were beyond the purview of their studies. This was due to a folk legend which persisted among the commoners: those in power are those who wear the hat, provided they can decipher the meaning of the ornaments. This is why the officials secretly charged the peacocks with decoding the magic signs on the golden cones. But no matter how many mysteries they solved, ever new questions kept popping up. It was thus no wonder that the peacocks’ minds swirled with a thousand different matters day and night in their quests for enlightenment. With so many distractions a clash with the prince was almost inevitable. All Aron could do to preserve his sanity was to nod while in his head still echoed the hoof beats causing slight concussions.

Thus the day began, as it often did, with a brilliant sun and a moody prince. Two officials took Aron by the arms and lifted him on to the precious sun throne. His short legs dangled in the air without touching the ground, making him wriggle impatiently with furious indignation. His father would never have looked so ridiculous. But where was his father now? Better not think about it, he commanded himself steadfastly. He’d make the official pay for the fact that he was still so small. Enraged, he pounded his sun scepter on the armrest of the throne, a magnificent, high-back seat, in which the prince looked rather small and forlorn.

Aron’s dark eyes scrutinized the line of officials as if he was missing some one. “Where is my wish official?” the prince snapped at the officials present. The scowling tone of his voice did not bode well. They knew that the prince was looking for someone on whom to pin the “guilt” and vent his bad mood. The wish official’s only job was to anticipate the prince’s every wish. So it happened on

occasion that his strength was completely sapped and he felt empty and used up. "He is exhausted and suffers from headaches," the official for good thoughts tried to excuse him.

"You mean to say the wish official is sick because he works too hard?" The prince was getting all worked up. "If someone here has a headache, it's me."

The officials sneered and shrugged.

"I'll teach you respect!" Aron threatened, glowering belligerently.

The prince jumped off the throne and mustered the officials one by one. He may be small, but he was of high birth, which he believed gave him the right to treat the officials with condescension.

"Let's see who among you will have the privilege of catering to my wishes today," he thought out loud.

The official for good thoughts looked him straight in the eye. Carefully, he smoothed out his long, white garment and then stroked his beard with great savor. One might have thought that the good thoughts felt they are being tickled and therefore chuckled softly as if they were at home in the official's beard rather than in his head. The dignitary had his hands full for he thought day and night about how to guide the Nubians toward good thoughts. Symbolic of good thoughts, like the key to a beautiful soul, was a chain of golden thought-threads the official wore around his neck. The prince gave him a long, hard look and brooded for a long time over whether he could use any good thoughts. What for, he concluded, I always have some kind of thoughts. They come and they go. Some stay longer, others pass in a flash. I don't need any good thoughts today. I'm anyway in a bad mood.

He moved on to the official for velvet and silk, whose small, pinched lips gave him a touch of arrogance. Everything about this official exuded a certain elegance, from head to toe. He gave himself airs of indifference as the little prince confronted him, apparently sensing that he could look forward to a day off. The prince despised all the big ado of fitting sessions, feeling fabrics, twisting and turning in the sunlight. Neither did he care for having to change into different attire for every occasion. All this was a nuisance to him. Thus he avoided, as much as possible, the stern official for velvet and silk, who had tried often enough to sound in the prince a string of all that is beautiful and exquisite, radiant and noble.

"Heah, you, velvet and silk! How many garments can a prince wear at any one time?" the prince scoffed at his official. "I own a royal blue cloak of heavy silk embroidered with a golden sun of shimmering gems." He opened the cloak and the sun gems glittered, as proof, not only outside but also from the inside. "There are seven chests filled with the most precious garments which nobody has ever laid eyes on. Why should I wish for a new garment everyday if all I wear is my favorite sun cloak?"

"It is a question of style to dress correctly as the occasion warrants. The people expect this much from their prince. The appropriate dress expresses your nobility toward the people, especially since they look up to Your Highness as a paragon.

You feel like a paragon, don't you?" the official for velvet and silk asked.

"Balderdash" was the prince's snide reply. He didn't like being told what to do. Pompous cock, Aron thought ticked off. Of all the officials, he liked this one the least.

Just then his gaze fell on the official for roast pigeons. "You will have the privilege today of looking after my well-being," the sun prince decided and dismissed the rest of the officials.

"Hurry up. I'm famished!" Aron clapped his hands. The official for roast pigeons was a good-natured, heavy-set man who had no greater concern than the art of eating, but was all too often made to suffer from Aron's binging bouts. The ceremonial aspects of dining, to be celebrated like a feast, were suspended on such days and Aron stuffed his face as if he were on the verge of starving to death. The roast pigeon official's heart sank to see the prince forgetting his good upbringing as he screamed: "Chocolate pudding, sun crowns and strawberry cats, and lily ice cream, topped off with the green foods of the gods, chocolate pineapple and cocoa with mountains of whipped cream, and, and . . . a talking cockatoo of cotton candy! If he can't name the object I want, then I'll just gobble him up. The same goes for you, by the way, if everything doesn't run without a glitch," he warned the official for roast pigeons.

"That'll be lots of fun!" Aron salivated with a big grin on his face. The official for roast pigeons' heart skipped a beat. Some days the prince just couldn't get enough of playing his foul tricks on him.

As for his treasurer, the prince didn't deign to honor him with a single glance as he stormed past him toward the grand table that had been set up with lightening speed.

"That was just in the nick of time," whispered the guardian of the coffers into the ear of the official for roast pigeons. Aron was obsessed with the idea of erecting the highest and most beautiful of towers for his palace. He wanted the sun palace to be visible from far away. But for this, he needed more and more gold currency. It was the job of the treasury official to see to it that the gold currency in the coffers didn't get depleted. Thus the treasurer took a deep breath and stuck his hands, adorned with resplendent amber rings, into his trouser pockets. Today the big treasure chest would stay under lock and key.

Prince Aron sat down at the long table in the dining hall. He looked to the right and left to make sure nobody was watching him. Then he took the silver cutlery from the table and stashed it inside his cloak.

"Where is my silver cutlery?" he snarled at the official for roast pigeons.

"It was here just now. The table was set to perfection," insisted the unsuspecting official for roast pigeons.

"You stole the silver cutlery. I'll cut your salary." Aron chuckled with secret glee. The official for roast pigeons lowered his gaze in dismay. He suffered and remained silent. The thought crossed his mind: the prince is again especially nasty today, just like a poison snake.

The prince had the napkin tied around his neck and started to eat. He ate against his bad mood and put his hope in the happiness maker in the many chocolate dishes. For he still carried a vague, nameless sadness in his heart. "If only my parents were here," Aron ruminated. "Where may they be?" The prince always asked himself the same question. Thoughts passed through his mind like clouds driven by the wind and he had to guard against their getting all too gloomy.

His headaches had subsided but now he felt an intense pain in his stomach from all the pudding and ice cream. Aron thus tiptoed back to the palace garden to his beloved flowers, the lilies, which were waiting for him in the water garden. They weren't hard to find, for they watched their own blooming splendor day in, day out in a massive, mirror-shaped pool. The sea of flowers formed a luxuriant wreath around the water's surface, its beauty protected by a myrtle hedge. Both sides of the pool were lined with a labyrinth of countless confluent paths that gave this part of the palace garden its magic touch.

### **The Twinkling Lantern**

Whenever the prince felt totally lost and was looking to be entertained, he went to this sacred place to visit his favorite flowers. He would sit down among them at the edge of the pool, savor the sweet scent of the snow-white Madonna lilies, and begin to pour out his heart. The lilies alone understood him. In their company, he could be himself. He could talk with them for hours without their being called away to some important event. How should they? Their roots were firmly embedded in the ground. They were thus unable to run away in pursuit of other matters. They had an endless amount of time and patience. Besides, there was one other thing the prince valued about the lilies—their wisdom. Once when he questioned them how they knew all those wonderful things he had never heard before, the flowers explained to him that it had to do with their bond with the earth. This raised the prince's curiosity even more and they had no choice but to reveal a long guarded secret, which they did only because they trusted the prince.

"Mother Earth safeguards the treasures for mankind. And because our roots grow deep into the ground like long tentacles, we are able to absorb tiny crumbs of the earth's wisdom with our long roots and transport them to the surface through our stems," the lilies explained, not without pride, to the completely baffled prince. He found this all so fascinating in a wonderful way that he asked immediately: "Do I have to dig in my legs too in order to receive an answer to all my questions?" This made the lilies laugh so heartily, their contagious mirth affected the prince as well.

"Only plants think with their roots. Your brain, by contrast, is located in your head. You constantly change places and still don't find what you are looking for." Since then, the prince never wanted to miss the lilies' blithe cheerfulness.

Therefore, despite stomach aches from all that pudding and loneliness, he sought out their company. For he had something on his mind that had long troubled him and therefore wanted to discuss with them. Even on the way to the palace garden he was already becoming a different person. The grump in him had

already dissolved into thin air. The lilies had the wonderful gift of enchanting the prince. In their presence he was gracious, even thoughtful. Their gentle aspect and fragrance mellowed his moods.

“I’m the prince, but my heart is heavy,” he spoke to them. “All my subjects know their place in life. The baker bakes bread. Have you ever tasted bread fresh from the oven?” The flowers swayed in the wind and whispered with soft voices: “All we need is sunlight and water. Our blossoms are inhabited by flower elves. They make sure that we feel good and grow well. Occasionally, the gardener loosens the ground and frees us from weeds. This provides us with fresh air to breathe in. But most of all we feel good in your presence.” The lilies enjoyed the conversation with the sun prince as much as he felt good being near them.

“So even the gardener,” Aron muttered disgruntled without returning the compliment. “Like everybody else, he too knows exactly what his purpose is in this world.”

“There are farmers and artisans, jugglers and musicians, some people gaze into the stars and some write down their thoughts on why the world is the way it is. And you, you are the prince, the ruler of Nubia. You are a child of the sun. You are the most magnificent,” chirped the flowers.

“Not really. I’m the child of my parents. I’m much too small and I don’t know what I want,” lamented Aron.

“Sometimes life will germinate strange blossoms,” the lilies replied astounded by the little, radiant lantern seeking to fight its way through a dark cloud and was actually a sun prince.

Without a word, Prince Aron slipped away, carrying his sorrows with him.

“What a pity, until tomorrow. . .,” moaned the flowers who had bloomed in his company. They always bloomed, it was their destiny. But for the prince they blossomed with particular beauty, for he always came back to them. After all, they couldn’t come to him.

Abruptly, Aron turned back once more and asked: “What is the reason for your being in the world?” A rose-colored sheen appeared on the white lilies.

“We want to please. That’s all.”

“How beautiful you are,” said the sun prince and gazed with admiration at the panicles on their stems. They were the strongest smelling and most delicate blooming creations he had ever seen. Modestly, the flowers lowered their heads. “And yet, my heart sits inside of me as heavy as a stone. How can I rid myself of this melancholy?” he poked the patient flowers with his questions.

“This is too much for us. We can’t answer your question. We know a lot, but not everything. The earth gives us only a tiny crumb of her wisdom. There is something that is much older than our good Mother Earth,” the lilies added.

“What’s that?” Aron wanted to know. “What, what, what?” he called out impatiently.

“Treat us a bit more gently. We are very sensitive,” complained the flowers.

“So what is it?” the prince insisted on an answer.

“The earth’s roof: the heavens. The heavens are much older even than our earth. And since the angels inhabit the heavens and are as old as the universe, no question is alien to them. What you should do is ask your angel,” suggested the lilies.

“What kind of angel and why do they inhabit the heavens?” the sun prince had trouble keeping his impatience in check.

“Angels inhabit the heavens because they are the messengers of the Eternal. Every human being has an angel assigned specifically to him to protect him,” the lilies said in unison.

“I don’t have an angel. I’m all alone in the world.” Aron lowered his head in sadness.

“But, of course,” now the flowers sounded very wise. They stretched their flower chalices toward him as if they revealed a secret. “All you have to do is call him. Then he will appear to you.”

“An angel for me alone?” The little prince became very excited.

“Call him before you fall asleep,” the lilies suggested.

“How’s this?” Aron inquired.

“Close your eyes and open your heart.” That was all they gave away. The flowers were exhausted and could only hum softly to the song of the wind. The latter had overheard everything, for, as always, he was lurking about. He liked to listen in. Then he darted all over as if what he had heard didn’t concern him. But in reality his ears grew ever longer and his eyes larger. Nothing could contain his curiosity. Since he had overheard that the prince had doubts about his place in life, he was all the more annoyed at the lilies’ advice. “Asked your angel,” he secretly mimicked the lilies. “Where do these lilies get off?” the wind blew himself up. “All the prince has to do is ask me. I’m three times as clever as all these flowers combined. I’m the one who roams the world. I hear and see everything. The lilies experience nothing, they never go anywhere. They don’t move from the spot and claim to absorb the world’s wisdom with their roots. Don’t make me laugh.” In the process, the wind caused a rather hot breeze to arise as he whirled up considerable heat. The flowers moaned. They longed for water, not hot air.

“I’d like to know who these simplest of creatures think they are,” the wind pondered. “All they do is stand around along the pathway and yet they manage to win the prince over to their side all the time.” However, the wind refrained from wasting any words on them. Instead he started messing up their leaves and tugging on their blossoms. He tugged and messed to his heart’s content. The flower elves peeked out of the blossoms and called out: “The wind, the wind —the heavenly child. He wants to play with us. Hold on tight!”

But the wind didn’t want to play, he wanted to rile the flowers. And so he added something. The wind spirits crawled out from under the folds of his flapping frock and he blew himself up mightily until his hair stood on end. The lilies quivered and flew in all directions. They held on to their leaves in order not to snap. The elves

clung to the edge of the blossoms. "The wind is in a bad mood. His strength is increasing. Hold on tight."

The wind laughed out loud and didn't behave heavenly at all. It was an easy game for him. He was mighty. The flowers were helpless.

### **A Fateful Birthday**

Aron was unaware of how hard the jealous wind spirits pulled on the tender lilies. He was completely lost in thought as he ran back to the palace past splashing springs, gushing fountains, and narrow canals. Until he ascended the grand flight of stairs, his ears were filled only with the rushing, bubbling, splashing, and gurgling of the waters. The prince was eager to tell his favorite toy, a wooden dancing girl on a toy clock, what he had learned from the lilies, namely that somewhere there was an angel whose job it was to protect him and who might be able to free him from his melancholy. All this he wanted to tell her, for just like all children, the prince had a favorite toy and he loved his toy with all his heart. Ever since the time when the king and queen disappeared, he had been in the habit of opening his heart to the dancing girl because he often felt alone and forsaken. It then happened that the ballerina would dance for her prince and his painful thoughts would ease.

Aron could hardly wait for the evening when he would call for his angel and so, against his habit, he went to bed very early. The prince made sure to place the dancing girl on the dresser so that she would be able to see the angel when he appeared. There were no secrets between them. The prince tossed and turned restlessly trying to figure out the best way to call for the angel until his gaze came to rest on the toy clock with the dancing girl. He took down the toy to pass away the time until the angel would appear. He wound up the clock and made himself cozy-comfy between the pillows. The music played and the prince watched with fascination as the dainty, delicate ballerina began to dance. She was breathtaking in her long red bodice embroidered with shiny silver hearts. Her arms were covered with tulle lace and on her head she wore an adornment that resembled the rays of the evening sun. Suddenly it seemed to him that she detached herself from the toy clock and began to take flight. The gentle, soft sounds of the harp soothed his soul and every time he looked at her, his heart began to sing. He held his breath and all he saw was the dancer in the evening glow of the setting sun. Then with the next gentle breeze of her ballet skirt, a thought, silky soft, swirled through his head as if to remind him that he knew his fairy from somewhere. But in a flash, the gentle veil of thought had vanished again and with it the memory. At this moment, he made a fervent wish for her to come to life. She stood erect in her ballet shoes, turning round and round, and through her short tulle skirt moved a breath of air. "Don't forget me," he heard her voice. Or did he imagine it? "How could I ever forget you?" Aron whispered. "You are a gift from my Mama."

He closed his eyes and saw his mother giving him the toy clock with the dancing

girl on his ninth birthday. "I wish you a life filled with happiness. Always carry the dancing girl in your heart. She dances for you alone." The urgency with which his mother spoke filled Aron's heart with foreboding of something mysterious to come. The prince turned the wonderful toy over on all sides, then held it to his ear to listen to the music. Suddenly something strange happened. A regular, pulsing beat reached his ear. Startled, he returned the dancer to his mother with the words: "Mama, there's a living heart beating under the wooden bodice."

"I know, my son. I too have heard the heartbeat," she tried to calm him. The queen took the boy into her arms and told him why she had chosen this toy of all the toys in the world as his birthday present.

"Some time ago, I invited the toy woman to the palace for I wanted to select a very special gift for you. After all, the ninth birthday is a special day for a crown prince. The woman displayed a great variety of toys to choose from. The selection was bountiful and since I was undecided, she turned my attention to this toy clock and told me how the ballerina came to her. She found this toy one day, under unexplained circumstances, in front of her tent. Her curiosity aroused, she lifted it up in order to examine more closely this ballerina which radiated so much grace and beauty. Then she suddenly noticed the throbbing and knew that there had to be something peculiar about this beauty. She seemed to radiate a certain secret. None of the other toys had a throbbing heart, not the knights nor the horses, not the dolls nor the hobgoblins, and certainly not the drummer boy. I too heard the heart beat. And so I selected this toy for you because it held an inner secret," the queen ended her account. Then she gave her son a loving hug. "If you want to listen to the music, you have to turn this little wheel," the queen explained. Aron forgot all about the world around him so enchanted was he by the ballerina. He wound up the toy clock and followed with wide-open, astounded eyes the ballerina's dance to the gentle sounds of a harp. It was only when the harp was drowned out by the forceful blare of fanfares that Aron returned to reality.

Meanwhile, the fanfares had gathered on top of the first tower to proclaim to the world the official beginning of Prince Aron's birthday celebration. The wind, who as always had been lurking on the sideline, pumped himself up mightily and drove with his air spirits into the fanfares. They blared so loud and merrily, their clamoring was audible far beyond the borders of Nubia. The wind's chest swelled because he had caused the fanfares to boom. The gold hat officials had lined up and with them the entire court entourage. Now followed the most important part of the birthday festivities. Prince Aron wound his way to the throne room. He walked down the red carpet which led to the richly decorated sun throne. Suns of gold, pearls and gems smiled at him and seemed to congratulate him. The king placed a piece of pure gold jewelry on each of the crown prince's upper arms and wrists, representing an ancient, baroque symbol of the sun.

"May the force of the sun be with you, my son," said the king. "This sun amulet will protect you and double the years of your life. It is fueled by energy from the sun. All descendants of the sun king receive this sign of their bond with the sun on their ninth birthday. Should you ever be in need, then clink the amulets on your wrists together and you will feel their protective power."

The sun prince bowed down before the king and then retreated with measured steps on the red carpet from the throne room. The fanfares blared for as long as the ceremony lasted. Then they fell silent. The wind spirits would have liked to continue their play in the musical instruments a while longer. They enjoyed causing such a racket. But as soon as the heavy door fell shut behind Prince Aron, the wind called back his spirits.

With lightening speed, the sun prince rushed down the long hallways to catch a glimpse of himself in the only mirror in the castle. This mirror was in his mother's dressing room. Aron placed himself in front of the mirror and what he saw was a boy whose skin was as if powdered with gold dust all over and whose comeliness was unsurpassed. A magnificent brocade shirt bedecked with gold-toned ornaments on a royal blue background endowed his small stature with dignity and elegance. The sun amulets glowed on his arms like the sunshine itself. The prince touched the jewelry pieces gently. They were very precious because they were a gift from his father and because they could prevent misfortune and prolong his life. He extended his arms to both sides. Then the prince danced exuberantly three times around and brimming with joy over his father's gift to him, he declared jubilantly: "I am the sun!"

Even the lilies surprised him with a birthday present so unusual that the prince had to show it on the spot to the ballerina.

"Do you know what the lilies said when I discovered the brass-colored compass at the pond?" —"So that you will always know two things: the straight path and where you are at home." At this moment, the ballerina turned with unusual vigor, the harp seemed to have sounded a wrong note and from under the bodice escaped a passionate sigh, making the prince feel very uneasy. He quickly ran back to the water garden of castle park. He had forgotten the most important thing. How scatterbrained he had been again, this little prince! In all the excitement he had permitted the one word of courtesy to slip his mind. Breathless he sat down at the edge of the pool. He pulled the compass from his pocket and said: "Thank you." The lilies lowered their heads imperceptibly and forgave him graciously for his neglectfulness.

The excitement lasted until the evening for the sunlanders too wanted to congratulate their prince. The prince stood with his parents in the dusk on the balcony of the sun palace. The Nubians cheered the young prince and launched into the sky hundreds of colorful lanterns decorated with little garlands of olive twigs. The life light inside the lanterns reflected the people's wish for the prince, who turned in a circle around the lanterns that bore the inscription: "A garland of love and light that will never wilt all your life long." The prince enthusiastically clapped his hands. The sunlanders too applauded as they launched more and more lanterns. What a sight—the swaying lanterns appended with olive garlands in the evening sky. Aron was very happy on that day.

But his happiness did not last forever. He heard his parents argue in the tower chamber. They fought often. And each time he felt a pain in his heart. Then the prince's heart screamed with all his might: "Please, love each other again!" But his parents' hearts were deaf. They fought each other filled with anger and remained

inaccessible to the child's call for help. Even on that night, the battle became ever louder and more virulent. The prince tiptoed through the castle to the tower chamber. He wanted to know what their argument was about. He halted his steps in front of the door and took a peek through the key hole.

"You are the ruler of the sunland, so fight against Ozelot. We are losing more and more people to him!" yelled his mother.

"I won't think of it!" retorted his father. "He is the lord of darkness and has the dark forces and sinister thoughts on his side. The only way I can defeat him is through a ruse. . ."

"Then come up with something already. I can no longer stand by and watch our sunlanders being lured one by one into the realm of darkness. It's the seven plagues that eat at the Nubians' hearts. We must garner all our strength to return to the Seven Precious Values." Aron's mother was terribly agitated. She waved her hands so vigorously, her bracelets jingled.

"You know very well that these sunlanders do not respect our High Order. They willingly fall for Ozelot's sinister thoughts and all they want is experience the dark side," the king replied.

"I know there are some Nubians who are irresistibly drawn to the dark forces. That's why you have to do something about it before it's too late. Strengthen the rule of good thoughts, speak with the official in charge. He must seek to extend his influence in the sunland more widely," the queen tried to encourage her husband. But the king just saw her as an overbearing nag who always knew everything better. His tone became outright hostile: "I don't have to do anything. The sunlanders must come to believe in the good thoughts of themselves. Something like this cannot be decreed." The king's anger over what seemed a hopeless situation increased.

"Then sit on the fence and watch the lord of darkness lure one sunlander after another away from you. The day will come when only the king of the sunland is left and all the sunlanders are gone," the queen needled her husband with a sharp tongue. And because the king feared his wife's cleverness, he threatened her: "If you don't stop meddling, I'll bestow a castle in the countryside on you where you can stay with your son. And now I won't hear another word."

Aron knew very well that the king spoke from hurt pride and that a castle in the countryside wasn't a gift, but meant as banishment. This was the only way the king could keep the queen from interfering in government business. But he also knew that the queen was truly concerned about the sunland. She wasn't willing to simply give up the battle against the sinister forces of evil.

Aron had to stand helplessly by as what was a battle between the king of the sunland and Ozelot, the lord of darkness, turned into a battle between the king and queen. He thought: "If my parents separate, my heart will be broken for the rest of my life." He heard his mother address his father in a more conciliatory tone: "We should fight together for the good ideas instead of fighting each other." But it was already too late. Word followed upon word. His parents just couldn't get along anymore. The sun prince covered his ears and in his despair had only one

desire: "Why don't you just be quiet. It's only going to get worse." At this moment, his father's head suddenly turned into the head of a fish. His mother started screaming: "Help!" But her head too took on the form of a fish head. Horror-struck, the two stared into each other's fish eyes. Their mouths opened, but no sound came over their lips. Fishes are mute. A shower of ice-cold goose pimples ran down Aron's back. He never forgot this sight. The horrified prince turned and ran away to get help. When he returned to the tower chamber with the official for good thoughts, his parents had disappeared. They looked for them in every corner. Then all the servants and officials joined the search throughout the castle. They looked in every nook and cranny. The next day the entire people of the sunland helped in the search for the king and queen. They scoured the meadows, the forests, the fields, and the rivers. But the ruling pair was gone without a trace. They were never found and never returned. Since then the prince had felt forsaken. He stared at the door for hours hoping to see his parents enter. But this remained a dream. Even the king's and queen's chests and closets were empty, just as if they had never existed. Only the ballerina and the sun amulets reminded the little prince of his happy ninth birthday, which ended in such tragedy. He never spoke about this day again, but it was always on his mind.

Aron opened his eyes. The toy clock had stopped. He put it back on the dresser. Darkness had fallen. The prince pulled the cover all the way up to his nose. Left alone in the dark, he was very afraid. In such a moment, he missed his parents more than ever. He missed them so much, he was seized by a great fear that he would never see them again. Now the prince remembered that he had actually wanted to summon his angel. He closed his eyes, following the lilies' advice. But in doing so, he fell into a deep slumber.

### **Kofur, the Demon of Evil**

The next day was very hot. Not the faintest breeze was felt. Prince Aron was just in the midst of overtaxing his treasurer with his plans. "Edifices convey a message," he made fun of the narrow-minded official who refused to expend a single penny without being coaxed. Aron felt it necessary to distract the parsimonious official's attention from the depleted coffers with the grandiosity of his design. "The message of our sun palace proclaims: The Sun remains and the sun palace praises the sun's immortality. The eyes of the Nubians will light up when they see my monumental work, a work that surpasses any other, for I shall erect the highest tower. It will be topped by a golden sphere that captures the rays of the sun and makes them gleam like a diamond. People shall be astounded by the golden spire that shines at them from afar like the sun itself. "What this will cost!" moaned the treasurer. "And all for a little amazement." "For now, two hundred sun thaler will suffice," the prince snarled at the treasurer.

Following this altercation, Aron ran immediately to his flowers. He wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible and hoped for a bit of rest for his agitated mind. But he had not yet calmed down and, therefore, chewed out the thirsting lilies: "Where's the wind? I can't stand this searing heat any longer."

"Go to the unfinished third tower. We saw the demon Kofur." Then they let their heads drop. When Aron heard the news, he was filled with ill foreboding. Kofur was the messenger of evil, the messenger of Ozelot, an eagle who penetrated the darkness with his two heads and six eyes. The prince ran as quickly as he could to the third palace tower. There he saw Kofur. Evil and menacing, he sat on the highest turret of the unfinished tower. As he got closer, the prince saw that Kofur was holding the wind on a leash while he grunted: "All that comes into being deserves to perish."

Aron, who knew this famous poet's saying, was greatly alarmed. He saw Kofur tightening the noose around the wind's neck, making him cry out in pain. That's exactly what Kofur intended. The little storm made the part of the just finished tower collapse.

"Stop it, you miscreant!" yelled Aron. "Don't you know how much work goes into building a tower?"

"But, of course," croaked the eagle scornfully. "That's why it's such fun to destroy it. I can only destroy, not create."

Aron wished with all his heart that the next wind blast would blow Kofur off the tower and that the leash with which he was holding the wind would snap. He sent this wish via telepathy to his wish official. Just as he finished the thought, the wish was granted. Kofur was lying wailing on the ground with a broken leg.

"I won't forget this, ever. You can bet on it," moaned the injured eagle.

"You'd better not show your face here again, ever. The sunland is no place for creatures with sinister thoughts," Aron admonished the two-headed eagle. Kofur lifted himself up into the air, his two mouths twisting with pain.

"Kofur can only destroy and destruction he shall suffer," the prince turned agitated toward the wind. The sun prince assessed the extent of the damage and was beside himself.

"I have enough problems with the treasurer and now this to boot," Aron gave his anger free rein. "Isn't it better to build something than to demolish?" the prince asked the wind maker.

The wind couldn't care less about the prince's quarrels. He pulled his head out of the noose. His only concern was that Kofur could really become dangerous for him. It was good that the prince rescued him. He actually wouldn't have expected him to be that magnanimous since he always favored the lilies.

"Then again," the wind kept on brooding, "maybe the prince just wanted to save his tower and didn't really care about me."

He felt his neck which was still sore. "One never knows what's up," the wind doubted Aron's honesty and crouched at the feet of the lilies to get some rest. As

suspicious as he was, he was sure he picked the best spot for overhearing the latest news. He allowed only a gentle breeze to spread some coolness.

“Did you meet your angel?” asked the lilies when Aron returned.

“I wasn’t sure how to call him since I fell asleep while playing with my toy clock.”

“Too bad,” the flowers shook their heads.

“Try again today,” they suggested to Aron.

### **The Messenger from Heaven**

At the end of this eventful day, Aron finally went to bed. He stared holes into the air and thought: “If only my angel would show himself. The days weigh as heavy as lead on my shoulders. Frequently I get into unpleasant disputes with my officials. Even though I don’t like it, they constantly challenge me. The angel remains my hope. He lives in the heavens. He is the only one who can see the sadness in my heart. The angel will heal me.” These and similar thoughts went through his head. Then the prince’s eyes fell shut. The night was black, only the stars in the sky glittered. Aron was in a deep sleep when a wing touched him. He immediately opened his eyes as if he had been waiting to be woken. Still somewhat dazed, he asked:

“Good evening. Who are you?”

“I am your angel.”

“But I didn’t call you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Your heart called me.”

“I have never seen you before,” the sun prince said amazed.

“Only those who believe in me can see my body of light.”

Filled with admiration, the prince looked at the buzzing wings of gleaming stars as if they had fallen from the sky onto the angel.

“What would you like to know? What is it that weighs on you?” the angel asked the prince.

“How do you know. . .?”

Aron couldn’t stop being amazed.

“We are always called when humans are unable to find answers to their questions.”

The prince heard the ringing of a thousand little bells. With every movement, the angel shined on him and the bright sound of his voice touched the prince gently. Bedazzled by the enchanting apparition, the little prince asked the angel: “What is it that makes me so sad? Why don’t I know what I want?”

Aron waited for the answer with sorrowful eyes.

“Because you don’t know the longing of your soul!”

“What does that mean?” asked Aron.

“That you must give the longing of your soul a name!”

“I don’t understand,” the prince probed further.

“Think about it,” the angel’s childlike face shined on him.

Then the angel disappeared as if someone had extinguished the light.

The little prince listened into the night. Nothing was there but silence. For a long time thereafter, he still searched his thoughts for what the angel might have meant until, all tired out, he fell asleep. The angel sat at his bed in order to send him good dreams.

Then the prince heard the thundering hooves of horses. Not that he had missed the crimson dream, not at all. It wasn’t a matter of being able to cast a glance into the magic mirror for him to learn more about his fate. He also wanted to be enchanted by the crimson. Phantasos, about whom fluttered the glistening cloak, galloped with lightening speed through the prince’s head. Again, crimson flowed through the dream images of night: a flight of stairs leading nowhere, a lion dog guarding a treasure, a ball of masks hovering over the water, children on whom no demands were made and who were left to do as they pleased all day. . . The dream ended the way it always ended. Prince Aron saw himself mounted on a horse, the reins firmly in his hands. When Aron asked the dream god: “When will I finally learn to ride?” Phantasos fled the scene without even a hint of an answer. He left behind neither a memory nor the usual headaches.

The next morning, Aron was bursting with enthusiasm. He ran to the castle garden to bring the lilies the news.

“An angel appeared to me,” he called out from afar.

“How nice.” The flowers’ heads swayed in the wind. “And what’s so special about that to get you all worked up for?” they asked.

“Because angels are invisible. . .”

“One sees more with closed eyes,” whispered the lilies.

“. . .and because I’m told to give my longing a name,” Aron finished his sentence.

“This is too complicated for us. Ask the wind. He blows around all over, maybe he can tell you the meaning of your angel’s words. Suddenly the wind blew stronger and the flowers held on to their leaves so their heads wouldn’t hit the ground.

“I’ve heard everything,” the wind puffed himself up as he happened to be lurking around the lilies’ stems. “The longing of your soul is that for which you long most fervently; it’s what you dream about, what gives you wings.”

“What I long for?” the little prince pondered. “If I only knew.”

The wind whirled up the leaves and howled: “Every dreamer knows his dream, every fisherman loves fishing, every shepherd loves his herd. Why don’t you, of all

people, have any clue what it is that gives you the most joy in life?"

Aron felt ashamed. He racked his brain and rummaged through his thoughts as through his pants pockets. But all he encountered there was a gaping void. There was absolutely nothing to give him a clue about what he was longing for. Aron was certain about only one thing: He was the ruler of Nubia and the protector of his realm. Now that his parents were lost without a trace, fate had assigned him his place. He had to take their place whether he wanted to or not. He was the crown prince. But he didn't want the crown. Aron suffered under its weight even though it consisted merely of golden laurels. The prince asked himself seriously whether he wanted to be a monarch. Each day seemed like a great burden, like something heavy, as if it was not only the palace with its entire court that was sitting on the crown, but the masses of sunlanders as well. Prince Aron moaned as he hefted the heavy load of the crown through the halls and chambers. That's why he didn't like the crown. It was too mighty for him and it suppressed his fantasy. He, therefore, wore the crown only when he absolutely had to. He needed to be free in order to focus on all the unanswered questions he carried around with him: Why did my parents forsake me? Did they stop loving me? Did they stop loving the sunland? Why am I plagued by this profound sadness? Why am I unable to keep peace with the officials? What will become of me if I don't take on my assignment? His new life without his parents seemed unbearable. That was the only thing he was sure of.

"How come you are so clever?" Prince Aron suddenly asked the wind. The air head felt flattered: "Well you know, it's because I love my freedom, because I move about, because I'm curious and everything interests me."

"And because he's always eavesdropping on our conversations," the lilies chimed in.

"That can't possibly be true!" the wind puffed himself up again. He was quick-tempered and was just then ready to blow his top. "What do you know about life? You, who are always standing around in the same spot uttering wisecracks. In his anger he grasped their stems and gave the lilies a good shaking until the prince saw himself forced to intervene. The flowers dusted themselves off and gave the wind a haughty look.

"Just because you can scream louder, doesn't mean by a long shot that you are smarter," the lilies mustered all their courage. "As powerful as you might be, we won't let ourselves be uprooted without a fight. When we stand together no wind can overwhelm us."

Courageous and with a good deal of defiance, the flowers linked hands. They wouldn't be so easily intimidated: "Do your roots reach deep into the earth? Are you perhaps as earthbound as we are? Well, there you have it. You are an air head, who noses around everywhere and spreads around whatever you can pick up somewhere else."

Why don't you get lost, you know-it-alls, the wind was about to say. But when he opened his mouth something very different came out, besides the lilies wouldn't have been able to get lost at any rate: "Careful, you'd better guard your tongue, you broken down humdrums. Do you think you have a monopoly on knowledge?"

Remember one thing, it is the one who wanders far and wide who also hears a lot."

The wind puffed himself up mightily. His constantly flapping beard stormed and he roared in a spiral upward into the sky. The prince and the lilies shrunk to small, black dots.

"Come back down here, oh worldly wise one," the prince, fearing a calamity, begged him. Such a storm can easily turn into a hurricane. After all, he didn't want the wind to do the lilies any harm and they would end up with bent stems and would wilt away.

In such an explosive mood, the wind could be quite unpredictable. So rather than adding fuel to the fire, the prince took a more diplomatic approach. Thus spoke the prince: "You're the greatest. You showed it to us and we recognize that you surpass us in greatness and knowledge. You're widely traveled and your experience is unsurpassed." These words calmed the wind and he deflated the air spirits. The lilies sighed with relief and rewarded their prince with a hand kiss. The lilies knew that it was better not to provoke the wind since his lack of self-control often clouded his reason.

"But the lilies are just as smart even if their body is fragile and delicate. Everybody has his place," the prince expressed his appreciation to the flowers and elevated them to the same level as the wind. The lilies smiled gratefully. They felt superior to the wind anyway. Not even his grandiosity and free-soaring spirit could change this fact, for the lilies had something the wind lacked: rootedness.

The prince had mitigated the dispute, but that for which his heart longed most had still not been revealed to him. He said good-bye to the wind and the lilies with the words: "I need time to think." Then he added: "Try getting along."

The breeze abated to take a rest, of course at the feet of the lilies. He didn't want to incur any risk that something might escape his inborn curiosity. The wind lifted his head once more and suggested to the lilies: "Well then, let's get along and together let's support the prince. What do you say?" The lilies nodded vigorously with their blooming chalices, making the flower elves inside swing back and forth.

"The prince is so terribly lonely. This is the best idea you've ever had."

The wind was just about to get huffy again with the lilies when he remember that he wasn't in the mood, after all he had just descended from on high. So he kept his peace for a change and cuddled up harmlessly against the lilies' stems. But not for long. The flower elves didn't trust their ear when the wind declared in all earnest—and this was really against his nature: "I wish I was as peaceful as you are and didn't have to pick fights with everybody."

Before the surprised lilies were able to say anything, the wind spirits began to shake themselves with great vigor as if this sentence had sickened them: "How boring! And you," he said, remaining true to his nature and beginning to needle them again, "it wouldn't hurt you to show a little bit of pugnaciousness at times."

"As usual!" the lilies said, turning up their little noses. After that the roughneck finally held his peace.

“What do I long for most, what might it be that my heart desires so very much,” pondered the prince on his way back from the castle garden to the palace. His good thoughts either left him in the lurch or they overwhelmed him with suggestions about what it might be he longed for.

“It just doesn't come to me,” Aron told himself. Just then he remembered the puffy wind and how he had to beg him to come down again. And he saw himself having to strain his neck so he could look up to the mighty wind. “That's it!” The scales seemed to fall from his eyes. At last, the prince had the feeling that he knew what his heart desired most—something he wished with all his heart and would change his life. It was the size of the wind that really impressed him, a size he wished so much for himself. Never having to look up to others. He was the ruler, if that's what he had to be, then he wanted at least look down on his people. “That must be fabulous,” he presumed. “Size lends power. I need this power to stand up to Ozelot's dark thoughts.” That's it exactly, the prince elated, thinking that he had solved all his problems in a single bound. He was happy that the dispute between the wind and the lilies had brought him a step closer to the longing of his soul.

### **The Unfulfilled Wish**

In the palace he tapped his foot twice and immediately two of his officials appeared. They lifted him up and placed him on the sun throne. He still felt rather ridiculous because of his short legs. Aron pinched his lips and snarled at his wish official: “I want be big and strong right now.”

Deep furrows marked the face of the wish official and the dark rings around his eyes gave witness to the fact that there was no end to the prince's wishes day or night. He said: “Your Majesty, this is the only wish I cannot fulfill.”

“Are you the wish official or not?” Aron chided the official brusquely with angry, glaring eyes.

“Majesty, every human being has to grow by himself. Everybody begins small—even a prince. Your wish will be fulfilled, but not immediately,” he dampened Aron's expectations. “Find your way, and you will grow and never be sad again.”

“But I don't want to wait! I want to be big right now! How tall are you, by the way?” the prince asked the flabbergasted official.

“I am nine feet tall.”

“I'm taller,” answered the prince who had just reached about five feet. A haughty streak appeared on his lips. But his eyes betrayed a deep melancholy. When he noticed that the wish official wasn't about to do anything, the prince thought hard how he could advance in this matter. After all, he had pictured everything already nicely in his imagination. Simply because the wish official lost his nerve, he wasn't going to give up so easily. The prince absolutely wanted to reach his height with or without the wish official.

“Why didn’t I think of it right away,” he said to himself, slapping his forehead. His face lit up and the next moment, he stuck his head into the big toy chest. What a mess that was! “It has to be in here somewhere,” the prince moaned while rummaging. His saber, his lead soldiers, canons, drummers, the nutcracker, and a dead rat, all flew to the floor while the blood rose to his head. He looked up and fixed his gaze desperately on the silent dancing girl. She seemed to ask him: “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for my height. It has to be around here somewhere,” Aron mulled it over while continuing to rummage through the chest. Of course, height isn’t a toy and so he didn’t find it. The prince really had thought the search to be much easier.

“If not here, where then?” he asked. His toy chest was the only place where everything he cared about was stashed away. So why not his height? “Where for God’s sake could it have gone. Or could it be that the cat ate it?” But his cat was, as so often, roaming about the world. If she wasn’t in the palace, she couldn’t possible have eaten anything out of my chest, the prince gave his wandering cat that much credit. He was at the end of his rope. Disappointed he flung himself into his chair, let the dancing girl dance, and listened to the sound of the harp. When she had finished her dance, he put her against his ear. And it was then that he heard again the mysterious throbbing.

“I can’t solve your mystery,” he said. “I can’t even solve my own mystery.” He placed the toy clock back on the dresser and continued to torture himself with the question where his height might be hiding. The chest, meanwhile, was waiting to receive the toy company again. But it was far from the prince’s mind to clean up. He let disorder be disorder and took off for the castle garden.

Aron ran down the long hallways of the castle and crossed the knights’ hall in the middle of which was a long table enticingly decked out for a feast. At times, he thought he could hear the noise of boisterous, reveling knights. But nobody was there, only a large hearth in which the fire ignited as soon as someone entered the hall. The firewood crackled briskly as if it was expecting any moment the armored warriors to enter for a festive meal. At the end of the knights’ hall, directly next to the door, stood a lance and on the opposite side was a complete knight’s armor. Every time he stormed past, the prince pulled the knight’s foot. “God be with you, Kunibert,” the prince greeted the hollow set of armor. When the metal started to clink, it sounded as if the armor answered: “God bless you, descendant.” But today the answer seemed more like “who seeketh, findeth.”

“Don’t you dare make fun of me, forebear.” The prince slammed the door behind him and the fire in the hearth extinguished on the spot.

Aron stepped out of the palace into the sunshine. The windows of the officials’ conference hall were wide open. He had to strain his ears to hear what the officials were talking about.

“It’s a tragedy,” said the official for good thoughts. “He’s like a leaf in the wind.”

“But he has everything. Why can’t he be content?” asked the wish official.

“Because he is missing something and because his longing is in search of that which will make him happy. . .” replied the official for good thoughts.

“It seems to me that he’s looking in the wrong places. He believes that being tall will make him happy. He’s simply unwilling to accept the fact that even a prince has to start at the bottom.” Then they put their heads together so that the little prince couldn’t hear anything further.

“Aha,” pondered the sun prince. “If growing taller won’t make me happy, then there must be something else.”

At this moment, the seven peacocks entered the officials’ hall. Probably in order to brood over the secret of the golden hats together with the officials, for the wish official had nothing more urgent to do than to close the windows.

Thus Aron had no choice but to while away the time in the castle garden. When he came back, the doors to the officials’ hall were wide open. So then, seems the secret session is over, Prince Aron drew a sharp conclusion. He ran into the throne room and called for the official of good thoughts.

“I’m asking you the most important question of my life. My entire happiness depends on your answer.” The official listened attentively.

“How can I find out what my heart desires?”

“It’s not as difficult as you think. But it requires discipline,” replied the official for good thoughts. He never had to search for an answer, for the good thoughts were embedded in him. Prince Aron puffed up his cheeks and furrowed his brow. He didn’t like the word “discipline.”

“Every morning upon awaking, write down your dream. Write down what is uppermost in your thoughts, what moves you. Write every morning for several weeks. Then put the paper aside and go back to it only several months later. On reading it, you will recognize, among the many details, that which is uppermost in your heart and what you would like to talk about. Then you will be able to name the longing of your soul and assume the right place in life.” Thus spoke the official for good thoughts.

“That’s too much of a bother to me. You can do that by yourself,” was the little prince’s cheeky reply.

“Then again, you can just think about how you spend most of your time,” the official retorted to give the prince a leg up.

Most of my time, thought Aron, I’m annoyed about something or other. So this can’t be it either. There must be a better way, he hoped. To get to the bottom of this, he waited for his angel in the evening. With eyes closed tight, Aron wished for the sound of bells and the bright light to appear. Something seemed to be touching his shoulder.

“What worries you?” asked the angel sympathetically.

“I don’t know what my soul wants. It’s like a bird. Sometimes it flutters here and sometimes there. I’m restless and impatient.”

“Pay attention to the signs, then you will find your way. Exercise patience, everything needs time. You are still very young,” the angel comforted the little prince.

“That’s what annoys me the most. I finally want to grow and be a grown up,” Aron countered.

“Sometimes it is better to remain a child. Adults are no longer able to see angels. They don’t believe in us because they are too reasonable.” While speaking thus, the angel looked at him so mysteriously that his face began to glow in all its beauty.

The prince forgot what they had just been talking about. He blushed and said nothing more. In his stomach wriggled a thousand bugs. Although the angel had left with the light, the prince lay awake in the dark for a long time, unable to sleep. The angel had tapped on his heart.

### **Lilies or Airhead**

“Did you find clarity for your life,” the lilies greeted Aron the next morning, their leaves swaying. “It was so complicated.”

“My melancholy can be cured if I can find out what my heart dreams about,” Aron hurriedly declared to the lilies.

“You are the ruler. Isn’t that a dream?” asked the flowers.

“It’s the highest status, but not my dream. The responsibility is great. I’m still young,” Aron said annoyed for the hundredth time. “Nubia is the land of the golden sun. We worship the sun as we hold gold sacred, for gold is the color of the sun. Some scholars even claim that the sun’s light is the gold of life. But gold weighs heavily.”

The flowers nodded their understanding. “You want to feel light, but the future of Nubia weighs on your shoulders.”

“It’s good to talk to you and every morning you lift up my heart,” the prince thanked them. The lilies’ words were a balm on his soul. He never had to explain anything to them. They understood the language of his heart. That is why he always behaved very courteously toward the flowers, a fact that infuriated the wind of course, since, as usual, he was eavesdropping on their conversation. Insulted, the wind began to howl. True, he wanted to live in peace with the lilies, yet somehow he found it hard. And since he didn’t want to trip them with his leg, he gave them a push out of pure jealousy. The flower elves rolled out of the blossom chalices and landed directly at the prince’s feet.

“What was that?” the prince said startled.

“That’s enough now you pompous buffoon,” the lilies protested indignantly. They lowered their blossom chalices like long necks and gathered up the poor elves, who reached distraught for the rims of the blossoms.

“This was the last time. Go play your dirty tricks elsewhere. You’d better get lost or you’ll really get in trouble. Then you’ll have to deal with our relatives the irises,” threatened the lilies with faint little voices. “Don’t show your face around here again and definitely not at our feet.”

The prince had never seen the lilies in such a mood. But the wind just couldn’t let go and continued to taunt them: “I’m a rogue, your humble servant.” Then he burst out laughing about his own joke. But when he saw the lilies almost bursting with anger, he realized that he had crossed the line and he stroked and flattered the blossoms and leaves with a cool breeze that sounded like a melody: lilies, my honey-sweet lilies. It was his way of apologizing. And, indeed, it wasn’t before long and he had calmed down the agitated flowers.

Prince Aron didn’t want to interfere in their quarrels every time and so he turned to the wind as courteously as to the lilies:

“I greet you, world traveler. I’m looking for a sign for my life’s itinerary.” The prince addressed the wind with all due reverence. He was greatly concerned to keep the wind in a good mood for he too might be useful as an advisor. Of course, only when he felt like it and his airy spirits weren’t spiraling into heavy air.

“Signs, signs!” the wind was again getting unnecessarily huffy. Why did he have to get into a tizzy right away. “Signs are everywhere. To recognize them depends on the eye of the beholder. But before the signs become visible to you, go to the valley of tears. There you will find out why this experience is important.”

Aron was very impressed by the wind’s intelligence. He recognized that only someone who had traveled the world could have so much knowledge.

“I’ve never heard of the valley of tears in my life, but I’ll follow your advice. I thank you for it.” What was going on with Aron? He often forgot to say hello and today he said thank you twice. The wind’s chest began to swell. With a self-important glance toward the lilies, he puffed himself up one more time, before he subsided to take a rest.

“This little prince is a real greenhorn,” the wind worried about Aron. “I’ll be at his side as much as I can, even if he says hello to the lilies first.” He thought further: “When Kofur held me captive on the third tower, it was the prince who liberated me. He saw to it that Kofur would come crashing down and break his leg. The demon will never forgive him for that. I’ll follow the prince to the valley of tears so he won’t be left on his own. One never knows when the evil one will suddenly appear.”

The sun prince ran back to the palace. He ordered the official of velvet and silk to get his travel boots ready.

“Whereto the journey?” asked the official.

“To the valley of tears,” the prince replied.

“That sounds far away. Wouldn’t horse and buggy be more appropriate?” probed the official.

“I don’t know the way,” replied the sun prince.

“In that case, I’ll have the boots brought immediately,” the official affirmed hurriedly.

When Aron had put on his shiny travel boots with the silver spurs, he ordered the boots: “To the valley of tears.”

The boots were very practical. One just had to click the heels and call out the place and off they would go. They were familiar with every roadway. Arrived at an intersection, the prince didn’t have to decide which direction to take. The boots were never wrong. They marched and marched on until they had reached the valley of tears.

### **In the Valley of Tears**

Aron was astonished. He saw this valley with its steep, towering mountains for the first time. The mountains wore blue coats and their summits glistened snow white. The valley was in the shadow. Trees, bearing tears instead of leaves, lined the way.

“Stop!” Aron ordered his boots. “We’ve arrived.” He sat down on a blue rocky ledge and called out: “I was sent by the wind!” As proof of the truth of what he said, the wind, who accompanied Aron, made the tears clink like crystal drops.

“Whoever enters the valley of tears is very sad,” wailed the tears.

“That’s right,” the sun prince nodded and in doing so lowered his gaze.

“Tell us about your sadness,” the tears encouraged Aron.

“I’m the ruler of this land. The castle walls are marble and the rooftops shiny gold. I own forests and fields. I speak with the lilies in the castle garden. I ride around in a golden carriage and call a pair of boots, who know every way, my own.”

The tears jingled in amazement.

“There are five officials who advise me and fulfill my every wish. And I have an angel who protects me.”

The prince had just ended the enumeration of all his conveniences when the wind had to get in on the act again.

“Don’t forget to mention the throne room,” the swaggerer grandstanded in front of the tears. “You must know that it took away my breath that time when I blew in through the open glass cupola. What grandiosity, what splendor! I was overwhelmed. What I saw was gorgeous-er than anything I’d ever seen before,” bragged the wind. “Actually it was my curiosity that drew me to the throne room for I’d heard much about its magnificence. I had to see how nature beings thanked the king for his restrained governance, for he guided the sun land with much honesty and established harmony in the realm.”

“Tell us more,” begged the tears. They were now just as curious as the wind and wanted to see the throne room through his eyes. The wind was flattered. He was at

the center of attention and the tears took in every word he said. Only Aron didn't quite understand what the throne room had to do with his sorrows. He saw it every day. For him the throne room was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing special.

"So I swept in, merrily and noisily as always, with such force, I was almost blinded by its beauty of this throne room. I was so overawed, I had to gasp for air at first, then I dared blow only softly and with gentleness. The walls were strewn with thousands of sun crystals which illumined the hall so splendidly that to my mind even the sun seemed put in the shade."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" asked the prince.

"On the contrary, everything I saw exceeded by far my wildest imagination. Let's take for example the sun throne: suns of gold, gems, and pearls on a royal-blue background gave me a friendly smile. The back of the throne was shaped like a huge number eight, whereby the upper circle took on gigantic proportions. Circular, colorful patterns swathed a blue sphere in front of which hovered a huge sun crystal in an artistically intertwined gold frame."

"A symbol of sun and earth," added Aron.

The tears were speechless. The wind continued his description of the throne room with great passion.

"So much beauty all at once one might think, and in reality everything appears in duplicate, a throne for the king and a throne for the queen. But behind the thrones, between them, rises all the way into the glass cupola a golden elf on a golden fountain. She carries a horn of plenty from which cascade water blossoms. Let me tell you, I was so blinded by all those riches and the beauty that, to afford my eyes a little rest, I looked inadvertently at the open glass roof through which birds and butterflies flew in and out in an endless stream of coming and going. Then I admired the fountain again until suddenly the elf sculpture came to life for the glockenspiel she bore in her hair announced the hour of virtues.

"Isn't that wonderful," sighed the tears. "We have a truly civilized ruler."

"Every hour the glockenspiel can be heard when the bell-shaped flowers in the elf's hair begin to ring out," the wind went on.

"Then the elf stirs a little and holds on to the horn of plenty even tighter for after the first ring of the bell you can hear chuckling and whispering, and then the four virtues drop first into the swirling water. They have a lot of fun sliding down a. And how delicate they look," the wind rhapsodized. The prince was surprised to see the wind in a dreamy mood. But Aron loved the virtues as well and he therefore nodded his head vigorously.

"They are clothed all in white and wear a gossamer sash which gleams in the colors of the rainbow. Diamond stars on the rainbow ties bear their names. The first to slide down the waterfall with the Key of Wisdom is PRUDENTIA, then comes JUSTITIA, who wears a white feather in a spectacular head dress, followed by FORTITUDO, whose chignon is embellished with endless, glowing needles, and TEMPERANTIA with the amulet of harmony. It's very amusing to watch them. It's almost impossible to turn away from these enchanting beings who are firmly

locking hands. Just then faith, love, and hope scurry through the water vapors. They too lock hands and beam happily. Then it's all over. As the glockenspiel subsides with a low tone, the rainbow dance of the virtues ends and the elf returns to being a statue. What a pity, thinks the onlookers and waits for the next full hour to relive the virtues' high-spirited performance once more."

The tears were completely enthralled: "You paint such a joyous picture of those noble beings. They must be very beautiful. But what is the meaning of their attributes?"

Aron explained to the curious tears what the virtues are capable of: "Prudentia carries the key of wisdom on a grandiose finger bracelet. It is said that wisdom should lead to a good soul and a good soul gives good thoughts. That's why wisdom is the key to many doors. Justitia weighs the human heart against the pen of uprightness, and courage is the mistress of the poles with which she always lifts herself up against defiance. However, moderation, thus it is written in the High Order, is the queen of equanimity. She's responsible for balance in the cosmic order and carries atop a ceremonial pole the glass child with the tuning fork in the amulet of harmony. With its assistance, she can produce harmony in the world and strike a balance between divergences. Everything that is in accord is stable, which is the reason why moderation is tirelessly concerned with uncovering anything off balance and with reconciling any dissonant tones. The universe can only be held together through the conjoining of two contrasting elements."

The translucent ones jingled with excitement and each wanted to outdo the other with examples: "Too much and too little, hot and cold, strong and weak, thick and thin, heaven and earth, day and night, war and peace, good and evil." The tears enumerated the opposites in the world which, according to the will of Temperantia, should swing in harmony with each other.

"Could it be that a little devil sits on one shoulder of moderation and laughs while on the other, a little angel sits shy and withdrawn?" probed the airbag.

"I've heard of it," said the prince. "But I've never seen it."

"And why don't moderation and faith hold hands too? Is it coincidence or just a random prank that separated them?" The tears in their curiosity were unstoppable. The wind puffed up his cheeks. "You are attentive listeners, ask the prince, for I didn't even notice this."

Patiently, Aron instructed them in the teachings of the High Order of his people. "It's this way," he began. "Intelligence, justice, courage, and moderation lock hands because they belong together. The Nubians can gain this ability on their own. But what you really need in life will come to you without much effort. These are the gifts of the Eternal, which only he can grant. They are: faith, love, and hope, the noblest of all sentiments. Whether we find the love of our heart, draw consolation from faith, or never lose hope, these are among the few things in life we cannot control. And this is why they are tied together in a common bond. It's this one fine, but essential, difference between natural and divine virtues which separates them with regard to humans. It's no accident, as you can see, that each group rushes through the waterfall on its own, but rather a sign of their being

different. Are you at all aware that the virtues reside in the rainbow?" Aron asked the tears.

"But how should we?" jingled the tears who were very eager to learn. Now the wind chimed in again: "I've often asked myself why a rainbow encircles the sun palace like a gate everyday at the same time. Probably a gift from the seven worthies, another name for the virtues, to the Nubian ruler who increases the noble thoughts like a treasure," the wind guessed rightfully and the prince nodded in agreement.

"So many interesting things all at once," raved the crystal clear tears. "Tell us about anything else of splendor in the throne room," they begged. The prince gradually lost his patience, but didn't dare displease the tears. They were his only hope for disentangling the knot of his life. Thus he didn't interrupt the exchange for the tears seemed to enjoy it.

"Seven peacocks parade through the throne room. They seem to be carrying the stars of the heavens on their splendid plumes that give the impression of angels' wings."

". . .but with ear-shattering voices. Their calls pierce your bones," the tears jested since they had already experienced live peacocks on their jaunts through the valley.

But the wind was undeterred. As if he hadn't heard the remark, he simply continued: "But beauty has its price. The metallic gleaming plumed adornments are so long that the peacocks prefer walking to flying. I watched them strutting through the hall. They grace the throne with their presence only when the king and queen are enthroned. Most of their time is spent in the library. They can read and write and speak several languages. The peacocks aspire to joining the ranks of Nubia's scholars, so they told me," the wind painted further the picture of harmony. "About the middle of the throne room are two impressive pyramids. To the left are the rushing cascades of the water pyramid. The water streams down without any enclosure and without ever flooding. It chose the pyramid form itself. To the right, the energy of the air forms a flowery pyramid. Water and air form two geometric forms in which they display colorful fishes and blossoms which are meant to accord the king their reverence."

"Oh, we are sorry about that," said the empathetic tears.

"Why so?" asked the wind.

"The fishes and blossoms are going to die. They can never get away." Sorrowfully, they chimed their delicate tear bodies.

"I understand your concerns. But the opposite is the case," the wind calmed the tears. "Both pyramids are connected to the outside world through an underground pipeline so that the water is constantly renewed and the fishes are led back into the sea. They come and go even though it is a long way to the sea. The blossoms too renew themselves daily. The energy attracts the blossoms through the pipelines and expels them again. Thus they can return to the flowers. Each pipeline is stenciled in the shape of the blossom which blocks the opening so

that only those blossoms which correspond to the shape of the pipe can get inside. This works like a filter which can be exchanged according to the type of blossom."

"How do you know all this?" Aron asked the wind. He had never lost any thought over why the blossom pyramid consisted only of one kind of blossom. "It never mattered to me." Amazement was written on the prince's face.

"To me, yes," the wind grinned. "You know how terribly curious I am. Right on the next day, I crawled around in the pipelines and examined it all."

The prince shook his head and smiled, while the wind was already back in his element and resumed his pose.

"Well, I for one think this is genial. The blossoms come sorted by kind into the pyramid and leave again as they came. Rose, jasmine, and orchid pyramids alternate with camellia, tulip, and lily pyramids. Birds, butterflies, fish, water, and blossoms breathe in the cycle of life. They come and go, all safeguarded by the ruling couple. When the king and queen enter the throne room, the flowers greet them with their most precious gift, the blossoms; the water presents them with the most beautiful fishes; the birds and butterflies pause in their flight to bow to them, and as a crowning homage, the virtues bestow on them their rainbow dance."

The tears were flabbergasted.

Then the wind added: "Anybody who has ever seen this exuberant celebration of life will never forget it. Just as you now follow my every word, I too was unable to get enough of it all. Again and again, I looked over the throne room to etch every detail into my memory. I knew that the day would come when somebody would ask me about the throne room. I wanted to be able then to report everything the way I had seen it with my own eyes. That's why the hours in the throne room passed in a flash until the evening descended. Now the throne room was illumined in a wondrous way. The birds carried little sun rays in their claws, while sun crystals were attached to the butterflies' heads. Since there were so many of them, the starlit vaulting glass cupola soon resembled a starry sky. Then the king entered the throne room and the sun crystals on the walls flared as bright as day. I receded through the open glass cupola in the roof. I didn't want to be a nuisance and also had to find out where the butterflies' sun crystals and the birds' sunrays came from. It wasn't long before I discovered in the inner courtyard a flock of agitated birds and butterflies gathering around a tree. The sun rays were huddled in one nest and the sun crystals in another. Although the birds flocked to the palace in groups, the rays and crystals in their nests never went out. It was the sun's gift to the king, which she sent to him through the birds and butterflies. They felt so at home in the throne room that they didn't want to return to their nests for the night. Yes, that's the way it was when the king and queen ruled over the sunland. Now the little prince sits alone on the mighty throne for his parents have disappeared."

A happy wind wiped the sweat from his brow so much had he exerted himself with making sure he wouldn't forget anything.

"Hopefully, the wind didn't exaggerate and it's still just as beautiful," the tears asked Aron.

“The wind’s memory is perfect. The throne room looks exactly as he says. I can confirm that. I’m the prince.”

The tears wiggled their translucent bodies. “You have more than anybody can expect in life. What makes you so sad?”

“My wish official refuses to fulfill my dearest wish.”

“Which is what?” asked the tears.

“I want to grow. And right away.”

A thin sound ran through the tears. They were laughing.

“This wish is dumb.”

“What do you mean?” asked Aron.

“Have you ever wished for the sun to shine at night?”

“Why should I? That would be stupid. At night shines the moon,” Aron looked at the tears with a wry grin.

“Well, then. Children grow every year a little bit. They get bigger and smarter—even little princes. Your wish is unreasonable because you’ll grow anyway—in the course of time and with experience. But never immediately. This is normal but not sad,” was the tears’ verdict.

“Do you have any other sad story to tell us?” the tears asked Aron.

The little prince made a doleful mien. Then he began to tell them what was really depressing him.

“I often don’t feel like getting up in the morning. When I’m finally up, I don’t know what to do. When I go horseback riding, I’d rather rest. When I’m resting, I’d rather have a party. When the party is really fabulous, I get bored in a short while.”

“Keep going,” clinked the tears.

“When I can’t think of anything, I eat ice cream and pudding until I’m sick and I harass my officials, who are the best officials in the whole wide world,” Aron admitted regretfully.

“A prince who gets on his own nerves,” chuckled a few rash tear crystals.

“Be quiet,” commanded the older and wiser ones among them. “This is a serious matter. And why are you the way you are?” they asked of Aron.

“Because I don’t know what I want and because I lost my parents who would stand by me and love me. I’m all alone in the world. Nobody can replace my parents no matter how hard the officials try and seek to fulfill my every wish,” the little prince said softly with his head drooping. “And it looks like they will never come back. Nevermore. That frightens me,” whispered the prince with a tearful voice. “I’ve lost the paradise.”

“That’s really sad,” concurred the tears, who knew exactly what the prince was talking about. “Nobody can replace a mother and father and nobody can replace a child,” the tears shook their heads ponderously.

“Parents and children, that’s like a family tree whose bark is overgrown with ivy. That’s how firmly their hearts are grown together. Each is a part of the soul of the other. And that’s why a separation is so painful and why you have this terrible fear inside of you. It’s a sign that you have lost your balance. It’s like a mud slide pulling the ground from under your feet and you plunging into the depth. Everything in life that was important to you—parents, security, stability— went poof like dust.”

The tears’ words were like a balm on Aron’s suffering heart. Filled with gratitude, he drew in the comforting sounds like a patient who longs for a spoon full of honey.

“What is still certain?” a bitter prince asked without waiting for an answer. “It seems my life is dissipating into air. Nothing is as it once was. I’ve lost my compass. I feel incredibly ill.” The prince was broken in body and soul. The tears felt for him and asked him to leave his tears with them. They said: “Every tear you don’t shed hurts. Only when your sorrow no longer imprisons your heart, will you once again be able to see and hear.”

The wind harkened sedulously to the exchange. Suddenly Aron saw the light. He knew now why he had to come to the valley of tears. And the prince wept because he had treated the officials unjustly, because he had made unreasonable demands, because he never knew what he wanted. He wept over his ill temper which spoiled the day for him and the people near him. Then the prince wept because he felt abandoned by everybody and because he feared to lose all hope of ever seeing his parents again. He shed a thousand tears until he sat in a pool of crystal droplets.

The tears cleansed his soul which had to fight with so many moody spirits. At long last, he had washed it all away. His soul was clean and clear. His heart could see and hear again. He hung his tears turned to crystals on a tree. They were as pure as his heart.

## **Energy Spheres**

“Now you can recognize the signs your angel spoke about,” chimed the tears who rocked gently to a melody of the wind.

“My angel?” the little prince was astounded. “But you cannot see my angel.”

“There you’re right, but with a bit of luck we can hear him,” the tears replied.

“I don’t believe that.” The prince shook smiling his head and asked the wind: “Do you believe the tears?”

“Why not?” granted the wind. “The tears know that you should look out for signs to find your way. So they must have heard something. Why don’t you just ask the tears how they were able to hear your angel. Maybe I can learn something in addition,” smirked the wind who was always ready to pick up something to spread around.

“Be good enough, my dear tears, and tell me how you can hear my angel,” pleaded the prince, eagerly awaiting the answer.

“Well, it's like this,” said the tears turned to crystal drops while making a ray shine through their bodies. “It's the energy spheres. They let us know everything that goes on in the outside world.”

“So that's what it is, it's the energy spheres on which you eavesdrop?” asked the wind, curious as always.

“Well, we wouldn't put it that way,” the tears clinked and chuckled. “But it's true. We hear everything through the energy spheres. Since humans let their dreams and wishes rise into the heavens, all thoughts and memories are mirrored in the memory of our world.”

“How come our dreams rise to the heavens? They could also hide because they want to remain secret, couldn't they?” the prince was unable to hold back his curiosity.

“Thoughts that are released into the world behave no different than seed kernels. A seed that begins to germinate seeks to reach the light, for it dreams of a green garment. But only the sunlight can endow it with a soft green and that's why the seed puts all its energy into gaining the light. Thoughts and ideas too want to grow and flourish. Their lives, too, depend on the sunlight and, like the seed, they strive for the upper reaches. That's why the energy spheres swathe everything you hold dear, and which you call gold dust, in sunlight to protect and nourish it. This is how tears can grow strong and powerful. Believe us,” tooted the tears, “your dreams, your gold dust want only one thing: to grow in order to come true. But whether dreams come true and wishes are fulfilled, only heaven knows. But the road to the heavens is arduous. Many sprouts along the way compete with each other for the light. That's why a dream that is ambitious needs, just as a seed, countless sun rays. Some pursue their dreams for a very long time. They never lose faith that the day will come when their dearest wish will be fulfilled. They never give up hope that it will all end well. For this they give all their love to this dream to lift it to the light. For faith, love, and hope are the ingredients that make wishes ripen.” Aron was flabbergasted.

“And that's the way it is with all your dreams, with your wishes and ideas, with the good thoughts, the irreplaceable gold dust. The more you send up into heaven, the better. For some of these dreams burst. Also wishes that are not strong enough don't stand a chance. They will never be fulfilled because they shatter in the strong counter wind.”

“All I want to do is play,” the wind got huffy again.

“That's why the Nubians need a lot of gold dust for them to realize all their plans and to advance in life,” the tears gave free rein to their thoughts.

“And they also need a strong tail wind for their dreams to gain in momentum and they will move higher and higher,” the wind now made clear his positive side.

The prince had never heard before that gold dust played such an important role in the lives of his people. The wind too blew into his cheeks signaling surprise, only to turn back to listen some more to the tears' account.

“Energy spheres look like gleaming soap bubbles when they fly through the air.

Only high up in the sky does eternity breathe in the energy sphere of the humans as they are transformed forever into the great soul of the universe. It's a lot of fun to try and catch them. Even though the energy spheres are very shy, on occasion, with a lot of skill, we do manage to grasp one. We then press it tight against the ear and listen. At first there is a rushing sound as in a seashell. But then one can hear word fragments and voices becoming clearer. And that's how we learn everything about the world. It's a beautiful game," the tears kept on chatting and clinking endlessly.

The little prince was quite impressed. "That's really incredible."

"I've seen these energy spheres flying around on occasion. But it never occurred to me to catch one and to listen to it," the wind conceded. His surprise almost turned into anger about having overlooked such a wonderful pastime. But his air spirits calmed down before they exploded. He didn't want to annoy the tears by any means. For some reason, they seemed to exercise a magic spell over him.

"Where exactly did you see the energy spheres?" the prince, who had never seen a single energy sphere, questioned the wind.

"You can find them in the sky, very high up in the sky. It's probably their protection since they are so shy."

"But there are days when the wind really gives it to his spirits and then everything whirls through the air and the energy spheres are pushed down to earth. That's our opportunity," the tears rubbed their hands. "Then all we have to do is reach for them."

"Who would have thought? My breeze furthers the transport of human wishes and dreams." I'm a good sort after all. With this talent, I have one up on the lilies, he thought, reveling in self-praise.

"I had no idea about the service I'm doing you," the wind fawned over the jingling crystal bodies, eager to extract a word of praise from them.

"With your volatile temperament we don't have to wait long for you to push one or the other energy sphere our way," the tears scorned. This time the wind didn't complain for he liked the idea of being volatile. Thus it didn't come to a quarrel and the prince, accompanied by the wind, got ready to return to the sun palace.

The sun coat of arms beamed at Aron already from far away. It was thanks to a whim of his father to have the sun palace built in such a way that from a certain angle the sun rays would reproduce the image of the sun on the shiny, royal blue wall. As the prince, the sun coat of arms in view, reached the palace, which he entered through the golden blue marble blocks of the entrance portal, he first took off his well-traveled boots. His feet were hurting him. Even though the journey had been long, it had paid off. For the first time in a long time, Aron felt untroubled. No longer was his heart stuck in his chest like a stone. As if it had grown wings, it leapt with glee because it no longer felt melancholic.

The official for velvet and silk greeted him with pursed lips. Sometimes he was so urbane that he even had trouble speaking. The official took the boots and

handed the prince his black velvet shoes, decorated with tiny suns.

Aron snapped the shoes from his hand and ran to the castle pond to soothe his feet in the cool water.

“Wait for me,” chirped a little voice behind him. It was Miss Monti his cat, a gorgeous animal with fox-red fur and eyes like lamps. A genuine Persian. Beautiful and mysterious.

“What do you know, seeing you around,” the prince greeted his cat. “Where have you been keeping yourself all this time?”

“I lost my way,” Miss Monti tried an excuse.

“At least you did remember where your home is. I’m glad,” Prince Aron teased the cat. “What’s his name?” he enquired his cat. Of course, he knew his cat all too well. There were times when she’d rather hang out with the village alley cats than live at the castle.

“Why don’t you leave me alone and cool your feet,” the cat said irritated.

When Aron immersed his feet in the water, it sizzled.

“That feels good,” moaned the sun prince. The cat sat next to him at the edge and furrowed her brow. “How can you like water,” she asked as a water spray hit her. Aron had purposely been splashing around with his feet to douse Miss Monti. Water shy as cats are, she shook herself vigorously. Aron laughed: “You are really water shy.”

“Just like you,” Miss Monti retorted. “Just think of your cat’s licks in the morning.”

“Come on, I didn’t mean it that way,” Aron made up with his cat. He held out his hand which she accepted with a touch of her paw.

“Lie down next to me. The sun will dry your fur.” No need to tell Miss Monti twice.

Aron blinked into the sun and lovingly stroked the sun amulet on his left wrist. He thought of his father and missed him terribly. Aron would have like to talk with him.

Just then, a swan family swam, proud and charming, over the calm surface of the castle pond. The mother was leading the fleet. At the center were five cygnets, protected by the father who made up the rear of the column. Aron watched the swan family with fascination. Suddenly, the little feather balls crawled onto their swan mama’s back because their little legs were tired from all the paddling, and they nestled in her wing feathers as in a warm muff.

“Look at this, Monti, the swan chicks have it made.”

But the cat just purred blithely in the sun. Swans left her cold.

“How are you?” the prince called out to the swans.

“You can see for yourself. We have parents who help and shield us, who introduce us to the world and teach us how to survive,” the cygnets tweeted all at once, full of praise to be blessed with such good parents.

“And we have children we love to see grow up. We keep together as a family all our lives,” replied the proud mama swan. “We are lucky.”

“This is a sign,” Aron burst forth. Finally, something had appeared from inside of him that had been hidden all this time. An overwhelming thought took hold. “These swans are a sign,” he said to Miss Monti, who was still asleep. At this moment, the prince knew that he wished for nothing more in this world than a real family. Now that he had roused his cat, Miss Monti gave him a sly look from the corner of her eyes. Then she said: “I wouldn’t want to be in your skin.”

“What balderdash!” replied Aron who felt torn from his thoughts.

“Why don’t we change places. You sweat in my fur coat while I sunbathe in your skin.”

“Are you suffering from sunstroke?” Aron asked Miss Monti.

“Who knows. At any rate, I could pale with envy. Your skin gleams in the sun as if it had been powdered with gold dust. You give the impression of being the sun yourself,” the cat fawned over her master.

“Thanks, I know that myself,” was the prince’s derisive answer. “But do you know the meaning of genuine gold dust?”

The cat shrugged indifferently.

“Having a real family that’s the genuine gold dust no matter whether you are born a prince or a shepherd,” retorted Aron, whose thoughts were still with his parents. “And besides, dear lady, I’ve never seen a naked cat.”

Miss Monti stretched and arched her back before rolling up in a ball and mumbling in a huff: “Can’t one make a joke around here?” The prince made no reply.

“Why don’t you tell me more about the genuine gold dust,” begged Monti. All she wanted was go back to sleep more quickly.

“In the valley of tears I heard about the energy spheres,” the prince began by reaching further back.

“What do you mean by energy spheres and what do they have to do with genuine gold dust?” the cat raised her head annoyed. All she really wanted was being rocked to sleep but not with so much effort.

“Don’t be so impatient. The tears told me that all our dreams, wishes, and hopes turn into energy spheres, which float through the air like soap bubbles,” the prince aroused the cat’s curiosity.

“That sounds good. Go on.” The cat placed herself obediently next to the prince and rolled her tail over her front paws. “The energy spheres are the vessels in which we preserve our gold dust.”

“And why are our dreams and wishes —our gold dust—preserved in energy spheres?” Monti asked.

“Gold dust draws its energy from the sunlight. This energy is the basic force of all existing things. It gives our dreams the strength to come true. That’s why energy spheres are like treasure chests which, filled with our most secret wishes, sail through the heavens. In them can be stored anything that seems so important and

precious to us as gold dust. Every human being has his own gold dust, a hope, a dream, or a wish that only has meaning for him. Every little piece of gold dust is part of the cosmos and worthy of being added to the great memory.”

Miss Monti was astounded. “Then, the genuine gold dust inhabits the energy spheres. Or better yet—the energy spheres are the genuine gold dust.”

“Not bad for a kitty cat,” the prince pretended admiration for his cat. Monti ignored the irony. Her nap was long forgotten. Much too exciting was this story of energy spheres filled with gold dust and she pondered over how she might catch one. Her last trophy, a dead rat, was stored in Aron’s toy chest. Now she wanted to place an energy sphere at his feet. It would go better with his toys than this rotten rat. The prince too was engrossed in his thoughts.

“Why, oh why, did my parents leave me alone?” he kept asking the same question and followed the swan family with his eyes. He too wanted to be held in his mother’s arms. She should tell him the most beautiful fairy tales and love him very much.

From his father he wanted to learn horseback riding and fencing and everything he needed to know in life to become a good king.

But in reality he had always been alone even when his parents still lived in the castle. Never was their son of any importance to them. “Do you think my parents loved me?”

“The questions you ask! All parents love their children.”

“Then they were really good at hiding their love from me.”

“Stop it already,” said the cat. “Your parents aren’t ordinary parents. The king and queen have important matters for their country to take care of.”

“What’s more important than to love one’s child?” Aron questioned his cat. Miss Monti purred so loudly the swan father turned around to make sure no danger was threatening from the land.

“Do you remember last Christmas?” the prince asked his cat.

“Was it the Christmas when you asked your father for time,” asked Miss Monti.

“Exactly.”

The cat laughed. “That was too funny.”

As every year, Aron’s father asked him for his wish list. But Aron didn’t want the usual gifts. He always got what he wanted. But that wasn’t what was on his mind. He told his father: “My wish list isn’t ready yet. Do you know how to draw a picture of time?”

“What made you think of that?” asked his father.

“Because this year I have a very special wish. My wish from you is time. Time which we spend together.”

“But my boy,” his father replied. “Time is an invisible eternity that trickles away ceaselessly. Time is not like a rocking horse. A rocking horse can be a gift, not so

time.”

“And yet, you could give me more time if you only wanted to,” protested the son. “My wish is to get time, time to be with you.”

“Aron, don’t be ungrateful,” his father reprimanded him. “The nannies and the teacher take care of your education. If you want to, you can speak with us if we are not occupied with more urgent business.”

Then he received the usual mountains of Christmas gifts and a rocking horse, but no time with his parents.

While the sun prince ruminated thus, he thought: “What wouldn’t I give in this world to hear the sound of their voices once more.” He wanted to preserve the memory of his parents. Just then he suddenly heard the voice of his angel: “Draw a picture of your parents as you carry it in your heart, and you will never forget them.”

“Thank you, my dear angel,” Aron called after the fainting little bell.

“What’s up?” Miss Monti looked at the prince with her lamp-like eyes. “Are you all right?”

Aron jumped up with joy. “Wish official!” he called out. “I wish a canvas and paints.” And there they were with the blink of an eye: the easel with a canvas, paints, and a brush. The sun was shining. Before the prince’s eyes lay the castle pond and the cat next to him. Aron was very happy. “I’ll tell you about my angel some other time. Right now I’m very busy. Go back to sleep, Monti.”

The cat didn’t have to be told twice. The prince painted a picture of his parents the way he had always wished them to be: his father courageous and resolute, teaching him to fight, riding on horseback, and fencing with a sword; his mother with a kindly mien, telling him the most adventurous tales in which elves, fairies, and goblins from the great book of fairy tales come alive and float through the room. The prince glowed with excitement from the effort as he beheld the picture.

“It’s a masterpiece,” he heard the angel’s voice. “Now you will carry the image of your parents in your heart forever just as they carry your picture in their heart. You belong together always. Your parents are in you and you are in them. And now go and follow your heart.” Aron rejoiced. Once again he was filled with joy and he sensed exactly what needed to be done.

“Up on your feet,” he ordered Miss Monti. “There’s loads of work to be done and you can help me.”

The cat dozed in the searing heat of the sun. “Just go ahead, if you have that much to do. I’ll catch up with you later,” Miss Monti tried to persuade the prince.

“No excuses, you lazy little bum. We’ll go together.”

Miss Monti sighed, jumped up, and scampered after Aron. Back at the palace, Aron immediately called his wish official.

“I’ve heard about these energy spheres, which are supposed to be as light as air bubbles. I’d like to have this picture,” he said, unrolling the canvas, “safeguarded

in an energy sphere."

At this very instant, the king, the queen, the horse, the sword, the book of fairy tales, the elves, the fairies, and the hobgoblins, all flowed off the canvas and into an energy sphere. The wish official stretched out his hand and presented him with the sphere containing everything that was most important to the prince. Aron held the memory of his parents toward the sunlight. Now he would never forget them.

"Isn't a happy family for us all as rare as the finest gold dust?" the prince asked his wish official.

"That's outside the realm of my responsibilities. I fulfill wishes and that twenty-five hours a day." The irony in his voice was clearly audible. "Ask the official for good thoughts."

"Never mind," the prince said dismissively. He had achieved everything he wanted. His most ardent wish was clearly visibly stored in the energy sphere. Now all would be well.

"Wonderful!" Miss Monti's eyes sparkled with excitement. The cat was thrilled. "I've never seen anything like this," she said, turning the sphere over on all sides. The sunlight was refracted on the protective casing of the energy sphere and sparkled in the colors of the rainbow. Overcome with emotion, the cat put the little miracle back into the hands of the prince.

Aron, for his part filled with joy, pressed the translucent sphere against his ear. A rushing sound was heard. The tears were right. Then the voices came closer, ever closer. And suddenly he heard his mother. It was really her voice. The prince was startled. She called out: "Solino, help us, my little sun. Rescue us." Then he heard his father: "Ozelot keeps us imprisoned. Don't come here. The black forces will defeat you. You are no match for them. The realm of darkness is replete with black thoughts. It is too dangerous for you. The evil one will lead you into temptation every step of the way. You might break the rules. Then you will never see us again. Please don't come here, I beg you."

It seemed to Aron that his mother was crying bitter tears. "It's so cold and dark. I miss you. . ." His mother's voice broke off in pain and fell completely silent. But in reality the prince heard his parents' thoughts, not their voices. Aron was beside himself. Anger and relief rose in him simultaneously. He had finally received a sign of life from his parents. So they hadn't abandoned him after all. The treacherous Ozelot had abducted the rulers of Nubia. For the first time in his life, the sun prince knew what he wanted and that with all his heart: to bring his parents back home at any cost. His father's warning went unheeded.

## **Dangerous Adventures**

With the energy sphere in his hand, Aron ran into the room, Miss Monti at his heels. She felt something big was going down and absolutely wanted to be a part of it.

"I'm setting out this very day in search of my parents. Let's pack just the most

necessary.”

Miss Monti was enthused. “That sounds like an adventure. I absolutely want to come along,” begged the cat. The prince sank into the big upholstered chair and took a good long look at her.

“You’re a lady and used to a pampered life. There may be dangers ahead and unpleasant things might happen. Do you really want to go with me on this uncertain journey?” the prince asked the cat very seriously.

Miss Monti got to her feet and placed her paws akimbo. She was all cat of her master. “Now, listen to me. We’ve gotten so used to each other that I’m likely to die from fear for you. And you would be lonely without a friend in a strange land. It’s agreed then. We are going on this journey together.”

“She never ceases to reveal new sides,” thought Aron who had always regarded her unjustly as a scaredy-cat. A smile appeared noticeably on his lips.

“I’m glad, my beautiful Persian,” he said and extended his arms. With a single leap, she landed on his lap and they hugged each other.

“Since we’ve clarified this, I’m still looking for a trusted companion. The journey is far. My horse doesn’t know the way to the realm of darkness, and my boots, or better my feet, I’d rather not burden them with the long march. Whom do you recommend?”

The cat jumped onto the rocking horse, placed her head on her paws and ponderously rocked for the right idea to come.

“What do you think of a unicorn?” she asked. “It’s said to have magic powers.”

“Very good idea,” rejoiced Aron. “But they are reputed to be very shy.”

“What do you have a wish official for? He’ll catch such a unicorn for us.” Miss Monti sure knew a way.

“Very good. In addition, we need useful items, for example, a blanket, water and bread, a knife and, of course, a compass.”

“What for?” asked Miss Monti. “The force of your officials is with you.”

“It ends at the borders of Nubia. What lies beyond, I don’t know. I’ve never been to another country. Therefore, we have to think through all important matters.” Just then, his gaze fell on the dancing girl on the heavy oak dresser. “I won’t go without my ballerina. I can’t forget my favorite toy.”

“I want you always with me,” the prince whispered in the dancer’s ear. Again he felt the breeze of a silky-soft thought from a submerged memory which still eluded him. The heart on the bodice sparkled. To show her gratitude, she turned once to the sound of the harp, then the sun prince stashed her into the pocket of his breeches. Meanwhile, the cat went to get her red and black striped knapsack and ran back with lightening speed, landed with one leap on the toy chest and positioned herself with crossed legs and erect upper body in front of the prince.

“You look ready to roll,” the prince noted.

“Not quite,” the cat said quickly with determined mien. “Gold dust, which we all

love, is packed away in an energy sphere. Did I get this right?" Monti ran her paw twice over her ear. She was very excited.

"Perfect. I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Right, just more complicated," nagged the cat. "There's something I love more than anything, something that you love too and, in common with us, all human beings, something that we hold dear and without which we cannot live. It is the jewel we all treasure, our life."

Aron was all ears. "You really know how to stir my interest. Now, don't leave me twisting in the wind any longer," the prince pleaded.

"It is the sun."

"Of course, all human beings love the sun. And the smartest cat lives with me," Aron rejoiced. "But what does the sun have to do with the energy spheres?"

The cat ran her paw over her ear again, then she licked the paw with her tongue. "Just think about it. We are traveling into the realm of eternal darkness. That's why it's important to always remember the sun, for me at least."

"I understand that very well," said the prince, who took his cat seriously. But then he started to make fun of her again. "And what do you think about most when you think of the sun? Perhaps lying in the warm grass and lolling around for hours?"

Miss Monti pouted her little snout. "You said that every creature has its own gold dust that is worth preserving. The sun is my gold dust, my treasure. I'd like to carry the light into the darkness," insisted the cat.

"It's all right, it's all right," the prince made nice again. A truly big wish for a little cat. "Really impressive the ideas she comes up with," thought Aron and asked the wish official to make the cat's wish come true. A trifling matter for the official. Miss Monti held the little sphere with the orange-yellow gleaming sun ball in her paws. Taking special care, she placed the energy sphere in her knapsack with a prayer for an invincible sun in the battle against the darkness.

Prince Aron then called the officials together and announced he was going on a journey to rescue his parents. For the first time, his loyal retainers were speechless. Never had they seen so much courage and determination in their prince. Despite being sad, they applauded. The news spread like wildfire through the entire land. The inhabitants were proud of their prince who was about to venture out to save his family. The wish official fulfilled Aron's last wish and caught a silver unicorn for him whose mane was braided with the golden rays of the sun. It gleamed as bright as the moon in the sky. The cat and the prince both dropped their jaw in awe.

"The unicorn is much too precious for us to ride on its back," whispered Miss Monti. The prince said nothing more. The silvery mythical creature intensified his excitement. He put the two amber saddle bags, bearing the blanket, water, bread, knife, and compass, on the unicorn and then said good-bye to the wish official, who had fulfilled his every wish. Now he was ready to venture out into the world to fulfill his dream of having a good family all by himself. Aron looked forward to what was to come with great anticipation. At the last moment, he remembered his flowers. "They will miss their conversation partner. I can't leave them in the

dark," he said by himself and ran for the last time into the castle garden. When the flowers saw the prince coming, they blushed, glad that he hadn't forgotten them.

"We heard it from the wind," they called out from afar. "We'll wait for you and your parents, then you'll tell us about the daring rescue," the flower elves peeked out from the chalices. "Until then we'll make sure that the flowers bloom and pray for your safe return." Then they bounced around from one chalice to the next, light and tender, making the drops of the morning dew tremble.

"I won't forget you, my Madonnas," the prince called out as he waved and ran away, for he was in a great hurry. He turned around one more time and the flower chalices swayed good-bye, making the sun prince feel all light at heart. But as soon as Prince Aron had disappeared, the lilies let their heads droop. The elves had their hands full cheering them up.

The unicorn and Miss Monti were awaiting the prince.

"Are you sure you didn't forget anything?" asked the cat. The prince felt his pockets, on the left the dancer, on the right the energy sphere with his parents. The golden crown, he had left behind in the palace. Nobody should recognize him. He wanted to be an ordinary boy in search of his parents. The crown would only weigh down on his thoughts. He wanted to feel light and be free.

Aron mounted the silver unicorn with the amber saddle bags. "Now all that's missing is you," he told the cat. "Then we're all set." In a single bound and as light as a feather, Miss Monti jumped straight into his arms.

"Off to the realm of darkness," commanded the prince, stroking the unicorn's neck.

"I'll take you wherever you want to go. I know all the highways and byways of this world," replied the unicorn as its welcome.

"I know," said the prince. "You're something very special. That's why I chose you." The wind started to make his presence known. "I'm always too late," he said irked. "As a general rule, he greets the flowers first, and now he's enthralled with this unicorn." He couldn't rid himself of the feeling that he was condemned to always be second class.

"I know the route too," the wind grumbled.

"Ah, the world traveler," Aron said with good cheer. "Someone who steadily blows around the corner, surely must know every thoroughfare in the world. I can well imagine. But unfortunately we can't ride on your undulating back. That's why we're traveling with the unicorn. I would be honored though if you would accompany our small party." With this the wind was pacified. The wind spirits whirled joyfully through the air until a little storm arose.

"Hold it," pleaded the little prince who was pressing Miss Monti against his chest. "I know how much strength you can muster."

"Forgive me, my air spirits got a bit out of control. I'll gladly accompany you. It's also an honor for me," said the wind with a perfect bow.

The officials stood ready for the good-bye. They lifted their golden hats and bowed down deeply while calling out: "Long live Prince Aron!" The seven peacocks, too, presented themselves. The prince hadn't seen them for a long time. Since the king's and queen's disappearance, their attention had been exclusively focused on their work in the library. The peacocks looked pale and weary as they said good-bye. However, the prince didn't fail to notice the gleam in their eyes. From the palace towers blasted the trumpets. The air spirits would have liked nothing better than to crawl around inside the instruments to create a mighty noise, but the wind gathered his windy ones around him. Finally, he had been invited to accompany the prince on his adventurous journey and none of the spirits should be missing. Miss Monti quickly mumbled a prayer for a safe journey and off they went.

The unicorn set its wings in motion. The sun made the prince's gem amulet sparkle and accompanied, together with the wind, the prince along his route. A pomegranate orchard enticed Aron to pick a fruit which he hid in his treasure chamber, his pants pockets. One never knew if it didn't come in handy some day. Miss Monti was in an upbeat mood. "Such a journey is something else for a change, better than living in the palace," she babbled.

"That's what I say," the wind drew the attention to himself. "Everything is in motion. Everything is new and exciting. The lilies would never understand this," sighed the wind. "Not even once have I seen the lilies taking off. With angelic impatience, they remain always in the same spot. How boring! I wouldn't be able to bear such a life."

"Don't worry about it," the prince calmed the wind. "Some move their legs, and others the mind. The most memorable wanderings are a gift from our fantasy. Inside. The wide world in the head, that is movement without budging. That's the lilies' principle of life. They live an interior life and they are unable to go beyond themselves. That's why I don't try to make them into something that they're not. They're flowers. It's their lot to remain in the place where the gardener has planted them. They don't miss out on anything."

"Well, I don't know," the wind interrupted the prince. "I would at least have tried it once. All the flowers have to do is pull their feet out of the ground, knock off the dirt, and start walking. Then they'll see something else for a change."

Miss Monti laughed. "Some ideas you have!" The cat shook her head. "Then, according to your thinking, trees and flowers could amble about to see the world? You can't be serious, or?"

The prince exchanged a derisive look with Miss Monti.

"Why not? A fresh breeze about the nose of the rooted of this world would do them good for a change. Don't you ever have this urge? Wouldn't you at times like to change your entire life from one minute to the next?" The air spirits flew through his fluttering coat and puffed it up considerably.

"Imagine the flowers greeting each other like completely normal people," the wind embellished his ideas further. "'How are you, Miss Mirth', the graceful jasmine might ask. 'Thank you, very well. I'm expected for an audience with the powerful

emperor's crown." The air spirits jumped with joy. They had the prince all to themselves at last and didn't have to share him with scent-stems. Prince Aron looked into the shining eyes of the wind and smiled.

"Look, there ahead. A cat. If she isn't planted in the ground." Again the prince and Miss Monti exchanged a derisive look.

The wind opened his curious eyes wide. All he saw was a mangy cat, locked up in a cage near a farm house. Somewhat uncertain, he said: "Cats cannot be planted. They love their freedom much too much. Just as I do."

"That's what I mean. Flowers don't want to travel. They would wilt from homesickness."

"Oh, it's no use," the airy one gave in, noticing that he was getting the short end of the stick. "It's not that I want to uproot trees. It seems to me that all things have their proper place. I don't mean to mix things up," said the wind with a grin. He no longer wanted to show the flowers the world. So he had all the time in the world to storm after the prince. And who knows what else he will get to hear and see.

Just then, the blue bells changed the meadows into a sea of blue. Aron seemed all enchanted by the blue that gleamed like his princely cloak. Only Monti didn't have an eye for this sort of beauty. "See there, a velvety gold bird," she whispered and asked Aron to carefully put her down. When she felt the ground under her feet, the cat drew in her tail and stealthily went on the prowl. She was just about to quickly jump up, light as a feather, to fetch the bird from the tree branch when the wind once again felt his oats: "Birds that live in arbors are pure show-offs," he said and chased away the bird with his noisy windpipe, leaving the cat empty-handed. "Their favorite pastime is beautifying the arbors to impress the females. Sounds like the swaggering of a Nubian, doesn't it? Sometimes they even hoard treasures to draw attention to themselves."

"But you aren't a braggart, right? Couldn't you play the smart aleck some other time? I wasn't interested in the living habits of this woodpecker. I just wanted to devour him," Monti gave the wind a dirty look from her ample eyes.

"At any rate, his fabulous plumes did impress you. So he's a show-off after all," puffed the wind.

"A bird has colorful feathers to attract other birds," said Aron.

"Too bad, I really liked the gold neck. Your loud chatter warned him. Now the roast has flown the coop." Monti sulked over having to forego such a delicacy.

"Babbler," she snorted at the wind.

While the prince was preoccupied with his own thoughts, the cat was mad as hell. Just then the colors of the meadows began to change. The unicorn led them now over a bright yellow dandelion carpet. As far as the eye could see the sun was unrolling a golden fleece before the prince and his companions. But there was something else even more splendid and whose excess was to impress him far more than anything he had seen until now.

"My crimson," he mumbled stunned. But it wasn't the dream coat of Phantasos which he had at times imagined to be wearing. No. It was a fiery red poppy field.

The wind opened his curious eyes wide and forgot that he had supposedly seen everything. At least that's what he claimed sometimes. A long "oooh" made the poppy field sway like a red sea.

"A good place for a rest," suggested Monti who had discovered a little brook at the edge of the poppy field. Her anger over the failed bird hunt quickly dissolved at the sight of the cool water. The unicorn needed no prodding. It drank immediately from the cool water and the cat followed suit.

"That was wonderfully refreshing." Monti dabbed her little nose, sat down next to the unicorn, and began cleaning herself.

### **The Gate of Illusion**

Suddenly a black dot moved toward them and the eyes of the wind were in for quite a bit of activity. They all stared at the black dot, which followed the path of the brook and moved toward them with great speed. The wind, the unicorn, the cat, and the prince couldn't believe their eyes when suddenly an equestrian squad, as small as a thimble, stood before them. The commander dismounted and took on normal size. The chest pocket of his uniform was prominently bedecked with a red poppy medal. He called out: "Stop, don't move. State your goal."

"I'm on my way to the realm of darkness, I swear by all that is sacred to me. I can't digress from my path," said the prince, remembering his father's warning.

The commander placed his right hand to the left of his medal: "By all that's sacred to me, the only way to the Caligo land, as it is also called, leads through the land of the clones. There's no other way. You'd better follow me," said the poppy order rider and again shrunk to the size of a thimble. Then he mounted his horse. The prince cast a baffled glance at the cat who cast a slightly fearful glance at the dot which moved away with lightening speed. Aron didn't hesitate for long and followed the unusual equestrians.

When they arrived at a tiny gate, the riders moved through, except for their commander. He again took on normal size and asked the prince to dismount. "The unicorn will wait for you here. This type of domestic animal is prohibited among us."

"That's impossible," protested the prince. "It's my travel companion."

"Rules are rules," the commander insisted. "It is not allowed to pass through the gate, and that's it."

The prince sent an imploring glance toward the clouds, but the wind just shrugged his shoulders. Laws are what they are. There's nothing to do. Who should know this better than Prince Aron. After a little while he calmed the unicorn and himself: "I'll find a way to come and get you. Until then, take a rest. We'll be back soon."

The unicorn consented and settled down next to a rose bush to await the return of the prince, the cat, and the wind.

"Now we're going through the gate," ordered the commander of the equestrians.

“What?” said the prince startled. “I could walk over it.” He stood already on one leg to lift the other one over the gate when he collided with an invisible wall. The prince rubbed his knee. That hurt. Then he felt for the air with his hands and again was met with this invisible resistance. “Well, satisfied? Nobody said anything about walking over the gate. If you want to enter the land of the clones you must get through this gate. The poppy medal rider hadn’t forgotten how to use his commanding voice.

“That’s impossible. I’m much too big. I’ll never fit through this gate.”

“I don’t understand you. I’ve heard that the prince of the sunland, and that’s you or?” the rider made certain. “Well, I’ve heard that you feel too small. If you are as small as you think, you’ll fit through the gate.”

“Yes, yes,” the prince answered quickly. “I’m small, but not small enough for this portal.”

“Then you’re big after all,” considered the rider.

“I’m big but not big enough,” the prince reflected on his own words.

“Well, what is it then? Are you big or small?”

“Depends on how you look at it,” Miss Monti added her ten-cents worth. She was at any rate smaller than Aron. The rider looked at Aron and then at the gate: “You’re small then, but not small enough for the gate for you’re too big for the portal, but in your opinion not big enough. Depending on how you spin it: you’re too small or too tall whatever fits the circumstances. That’s why I tell you, size doesn’t matter, because it’s all proportionate. Sometimes it is the height that changes and sometimes the proportion against which it’s being measured. Do simply as I do. When I want to be big, I feel big, like now. . .” And the rider grew beyond Prince Aron. “If I want to be small, I feel small, like now. . .” At that moment the rider shrunk back to his thimble size.

“Not bad,” the wind thought it was worth remarking.

“And how do I feel small,” the prince asked.

“Just whisper the word ‘PICCOLO’.” The prince and the cat had nothing more urgent to do than to breathe their ‘PICCOLO’ into the ear of the wind. To lift the secret behind the gate made it worthwhile for the prince to feel even smaller than he was to begin with. Even though it was this smallness he usually detested, his curiosity gained the upper hand over his erstwhile reluctance. In order to reach the Caligo land, he had no choice but to cross the land of clones, ergo he had to pass through this gate. The prince and the cat had hardly pronounce their “PICCOLO” when they were already as tiny as a finger tip. The rider, the prince, and the cat marched through the tiny gate.

However, behind the gate, people were big again. Thus the prince was concerned and asked the rider: “How do I feel being big?”

The wind pricked his ears for the only word with which one feels big. It was: “GRANDE” and made the rider, the prince, and the cat grow on the spot, of course, only to their original height, no more. Prince Aron felt for his arms and legs.

Indeed, he was who he had always been. "Am I glad, all is here." Then he quickly put both hand into the pockets of his breeches. Yes, they were all there too, his ballerina as well as the energy sphere with his parents. The prince's relief was clearly visible in his face. Miss Monti took her knapsack off her back and for her part checked out the sun sphere. But it was all as it should be. Satisfied, Monti flipped her knapsack over her shoulder.

"That's a strange gate you have there," the sun prince wondered.

"Whoever enters the land of the clones must pass through THE GATE OF ILLUSION," explained the rider with the red poppy medal. "Whether emperor or peasant, everybody should feel small at least once in order not to lose respect for the effort and diligence. It's as with a summit that can only be reached after crossing the valley."

"But there's a difference between being small and feeling small," retorted the prince to the poppy medal rider.

"For you perhaps. Not for me. The gate showed you, didn't it, that sometimes one feels small."

"When one is sad or has a sense of worthlessness," Miss Monti interrupted the rider.

"And at other times one feels tall," he added.

"When one has accomplished something against all odds," the cat claimed to know.

"Then even little people can achieve great things?" the prince asked the rider.

"To achieve something great one doesn't even have to be a prince. Not even a certain height is necessary," answered the commander with a hint at the prince's weakness, his shortness. Turning toward the wind, the prince shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't get around admiring his commanding stature again and again. The prince just had a weakness for tallness. He wasn't about to be dissuaded from it. He was a prince and raised for greatness in thought and action. But it wasn't the first time that the obvious contradiction with regard to his size robbed him of his reason.

### **In the Land of the Clones**

"Now that you have passed through the gate, you're in the land of the clones," declared the rider. Just then they reached the equestrian squadron who had been waiting for them, and the commander continued: "We are the knights of the order of miracle makers and we accompany anybody who wishes to be guided to the three DAYS OF MIRACLES." The wind almost forgot to blow. So many tidings in one day he thought simply genial. Aron, by contrast, was reticent and thought carefully what to make of all this. THE GATE OF ILLUSION, which was to make him forget his urgent wish for being taller, then the three DAYS OF MIRACLES, whatever that may be, sounded mysterious. But should he let himself be beguiled by all these adventures? Miss Monti looked at her master from the corner of her eyes

before she reminded him: "We're on our way to the realm of darkness and shouldn't let ourselves be distracted. One never knows how long it'll be and whether this is the right way. We won't be able to consult the compass since it was left behind in saddle bag with the unicorn. And what do we need miracles for, when it would be a great miracle to see the king and queen again."

"Good cat," thought the prince. But then he thought that there can never be enough miracles. Perhaps one could use this or that miracle on the journey into the darkness? As they continued to ride on, the prince took out the energy sphere and examined it carefully. "The evil will lead you into temptation every step of the way," he heard his father admonish him.

"What is this?" the commander wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing." The prince put the sphere quickly back into his pocket.

"Did you decide in favor of the three DAYS OF MIRACLES?" the commander asked sternly.

The prince turned a blind eye to his father's admonishment and anticipated feverishly the days of miracles. "I'm ready. Take me to the miracle maker."

The commander of the order of equestrians gave a sign. The prince received a carriage, pulled by the skeleton of a giant bird. The sight of the bones, which went smoothly into motion, gave Aron the creeps. "Strange," the thought crossed his mind but they were already underway. Miss Monti thought it disgusting to be sitting in a carriage that was pulled by a dead bird. She bravely watched the surroundings to keep from having to look at the draft animal.

The land of clones seemed to be inhabited only by well-disposed people. They smiled all the time. The road was filled with travelers who streamed in the same direction as the equestrian squadron. Miss Monti elbowed her master and pointed at a nobleman and a beggar. The nobleman leaned down to a beggar sitting at the side of the road and spoke to him: "Forgive me for having stepped on your foot. The people are crowding into the amphitheater." Then he put a silver coin into his lap and lifted his hat. The beggar took the silver coin, bit it with his teeth, thanked the man, and smiled.

"The nobleman didn't show a trace of superiority toward the beggar," the cat wondered. And the wind joshed in his own way: "The noble one knows probably that in the grave there's no difference between him and the beggar."

The equestrian squadron made its way through a noisy, motley throng of happy parents and children all moving toward one goal only. Not a single bad word was heard. Monti was the first to remark: "This must be the land of smiles."

"The land of the blissful," the prince supposed. "In the sunland, the king and queen argued all the time." The reminder of his parents made the prince hang his head. Even the thought of his dealings with his officials didn't make him feel any better.

"In the sunland the wind spirits, too, were constantly arguing with flower elves," sneered Miss Monti. The wind was not in a mood for getting upset. He was much too curious to uncover the secret of the smiling people. Nevertheless he felt stepped on his coat tails and puffed himself up: "It's always I who is put up as a

bad example. When all I want is what's best for the lilies."

"Smile," the cat urged the wind on. "Smile." The wind obeyed and showed his teeth, but all he managed to produce was a dirty grin.

The commander of the knightly order turned into a side alley. An ancient temple compound in a wonderful blooming garden spread before their eyes. The knights jumped from their horses and helped the prince descend from the carriage. The dead bird bowed and then the draft animal was gone.

The commander accompanied the prince and Miss Monti into the garden, fragrant with the most pleasing scents in the world. "Wait here," he ordered the companions who curiously looked around.

"That would be too much beauty for your lilies, don't you think?" the wind turned toward the prince, breaking the admiration. "It's a good thing that they never go anywhere, that way they spare their eyes," scoffed the wind and thought by himself: "How fortunate that I don't have to share the prince with the lilies. Sharing is supposed to be a noble characteristic. But no one like to share what one loves most. That's just the way it is."

A man in long purple garments and long violet hair rushed toward the prince through the colonnade. "Welcome, welcome to the land of clones." He spread out his arms as if to greet a good friend.

"Thank you very much," said the prince, responding to the greeting with a stiff bow. Then he introduced himself as Prince Aron of Nubia to the purple man with reserved diffidence.

"That's a very special pleasure. I'm called the miracle maker and would like you to feel at home here with us," he replied with effusive warmth. Monti strolled a few times around his legs, then got up on her striped lace boots and offered the miracle maker her paw: "Monti is the name, Miss Monti. I've the feeling of having arrived in the land of smiles. Where do the people of your country get their good cheer from?" asked Monti. The miracle maker who was kneeling down to greet the cat was quite amazed over such an astute animal. He got up and explained to the two newcomers: "In all places where people live together, also lives disappointment. Disappointments hurt and cannot be eradicated. That's why I make sure that expectations are not disappointed. And since this is sometimes not possible through natural means, I perform miracles."

"What kind of miracles are you performing?" asked Aron.

"Why don't you and Miss Monti here go to the amphitheater and have a miracle performed for you. Your parents must have disappointed you very much. Isn't that why you are here?" asked the miracle maker. Prince Aron was startled over being found out. After all nothing was written on his forehead. He quickly put his hand into his pocket and held firmly on to the energy sphere without answering the miracle maker's question. Her tail pulled in, the cat snuggled up to the prince's legs. It seemed a bit uncanny to her that the miracle maker was able to make all human beings content and happy by eliminating all disappointments. That really would be like a miracle, thought Monti.

“The amphitheater is located right behind the temple compound. Go there and you will find out why in the land of clones the people smile. Don’t take it as indiscreet, but a smile would look good on you too. See my miracles and exchange your melancholy for a smile,” suggested the miracle maker. “Your journey may possibly come to an end in a few hours,” he added and smiled. Then the miracle maker disappeared in the colonnade, leaving behind an unsure prince.

“What do you think, Monti? Should we or shouldn’t we?”

“You mean go to the amphitheater?”

“I’m all for it. But you wouldn’t have expected anything else from me,” the wind, who had found his speech again, put in his ten-cents worth. Whenever he was eavesdropping on a conversation, he played the invisible. Not a single breeze disturbs the air then, as if he was holding his breath. “I’ve nothing against a miracle that will shorten our journey.”

“It all seems to me rather mysterious, but you’re the prince. All that matters is your gold dust. It’s up to you,” Monti confronted her master, clutching his leg and playing scaredy-cat again. But this time her act didn’t work.

“A prince is not allowed to hide. I must accept the challenge,” Aron took heart. And with that, the sun prince had made his choice. “We’re going to the arena.”

The wind stumbled with excitement. This was truly after his own taste. Monti, however, jumped into the prince’s arms. There she felt secure, at least for the moment. So they mingled with the crowd and went with them to the amphitheater to look for a seat in the roofless structure.

When the prince asked a peasant what there was to see, he was told a strange tale: We are celebrating the three DAYS OF MIRACLES. That he had already heard from the miracle maker. But now he wanted to learn more details.

“So it’s the DAYS OF MIRACLES you’re celebrating. Sounds pretty mysterious to me. What’s the miracle that is to enter your lives?”

“Are you a stranger in these parts that you don’t know our customs?”

“So it is,” the prince admitted, while Miss Monti pricked her ears.

“It’s not that simple,” said the peasant. “Each person gets exactly the kind of family he has always wanted.”

“That I can’t believe,” retorted the prince.

“If I’m telling you.” The peasant shook his head. This golden fellow really didn’t seem to be from around here. So the peasant continued patiently: “Children trade in their parents and parents put in an order for more suitable children.”

“I simply can’t believe that. I’ve never heard that parents can select a favorite child,” repeated the prince.

“Why don’t you come along and you’ll see,” suggested the peasant and was gone. An endless stream of people entered the arena. Miss Monti could barely keep pace with the prince from whose protective arms she had already jumped

to the ground. She couldn't lose him.

"I'd never have thought it possible that there are so many people who are dissatisfied with their family," she called out. The sun prince could no longer hear his cat in all the commotion. He had found a place among the stadium seats and now he was looking around for Monti.

"There you are!" he rejoiced and lifted her up.

"I'm really curious," Aron was just able to say when the voices of the people around him fell silent.

### **The Three Days of Miracles**

The miracle maker with the long purple hair and in his purple garment stepped into the center of the theater .

"Let the DAYS OF MIRACLES commence," he said. "The world contains as many fates as there are families and that is why every angel makes a different miracle come true." Then he spread out his arms and darkness descended immediately as if someone had switched off the sun. An angelic woman's voice sang an enchanting melody. The miracle maker clapped his hands together above his head. As if a thousand torches had been waiting for this sign, they released the dancing fire fairies.

"Isn't it marvelous?" a woman sitting next to him asked the prince. Without waiting for an answer, she continued: "The miracle maker is a powerful man because he makes our dreams come true." Miss Monti was somewhat ill at ease and snuggled up to the prince. The miracle maker now raised both arms with the words: "Light, search for your angel." The torches immediately began to move. They circled back and forth until they clung to one point in the sky. At the end of the light road countless angels stepped from the sky. They were either leading a child by the hand or on each hand one parent. Then they walked through the air, guided by the light ray of their torch, into the amphitheater and lined up next to each other in the grand arena. Walking through the air while coming directly out of the sky that was a truly grandiose spectacle. Miss Monti squeaked overawed: "What a pageantry!" The exchange was ready to begin.

The miracle maker approached one of the angels and had him place an energy sphere with a number into his hand. "The DAYS OF MIRACLES opens the number three," he began the distribution. The front rows were occupied by all those who were expecting a miracle, in the seats above them was the audience. So it wasn't far to go for the parents with the number three to reach the miracle maker. "This is the child they have always wanted," explained the miracle maker to the audience and pointed to the child at the hand of the angel. The excitement made the mother's face break out in red spots and the father kept touching the tip of his nose. "Endowed with practical abilities, the child will gladly till the paternal fields and perform work in the farmyard." The angel handed the new child over to the parents, who took it into their arms brimming with joy. This child

was a clone, an identical copy of their natural child. Its spitting image that would from now on replace their own child. This one would fulfill the dream of the parents who smiled happily for they knew this one wouldn't disappoint their expectations. How could it if it went to bed with the chicken and got up at the first cock's crow. The life of their new child would be determined from now on by the farmyard, just as the farmyard gave meaning to the life of the parents. This had always been the parents' dream.

Monti whispered: "There you have it again. Parents want their children to be what they want them to be."

Aron placed his finger on his lips indicating to the cat not to disturb the proceedings. However, secretly he agreed with his cat for he had never heard that children are made of clay and can be formed completely according to order into peasants or princes.

With the next energy sphere, the miracle maker called up the child with the number seven and said: "This child will now leave forever his natural parents with the number three. Too great expectations have made it sick. It is as if this boy was wearing oversize shoes in which he slides back and forth and cannot find support, as if he had to run after his parents' expectations."

The boy looked at his feet in shoes that were actually a size too big. "Even if it is his parents' most ardent dream, he cannot be happy as a farmer. He would never be resigned to taking over his parents' farm. This boy just wants to be allowed to be what he is." A bit shy, the boy looked toward his new parents whom the next angel was still holding by the hand. "Having to do something against one's innate nature is as if a circle were ordered to become a rectangle. Therefore, fate has thought of a different route for this child, for he is a dreamer," the miracle maker continued. "He prefers reciting prose writings and loves singing rather than cleaning out cowsheds. For this child the angel has a set of parents in store who travel the country as itinerant theater performers." The child's eyes gleamed with enthusiasm when the angel presented the happy child to his new parents.

Even though they looked exactly like his birth parents, they understood his dreams and didn't expect the impossible of him. They wouldn't push him to do anything his heart abhors. He would never feel falsified. These are the kind of parents the child had always wished for—and that was the miracle.

Monti was again shooting her mouth off: "It's always the same. Parents have big plans for their children, but the children have a mind of their own." Aron didn't answer. Something seemed to bother him until he could no longer bear to stay in his seat. He jumped up and ran outside.

"Not so fast," Miss Monti protested. "Why aren't you staying?"

"I have to find out something important for me. My angel will help me with it. In the end, I may not have to continue this journey as the miracle maker already foretold in the temple garden."

"Why not?" asked Miss Monti. "Did you find your parents?"

"Who knows." Then the prince wrapped himself in mysterious silence.

“Just don’t make a mistake,” warned Miss Monti. “We’re a long way from Caligo land.”

“Wait here for me,” the prince asked the cat. “I have to get my angel’s advice.” The prince turned away and sat down under a huge tree. He asked his angel to appear to him. When he perceived the light and discovered the stellar fog, he awaited full of trust for his angel.

“What do you want to tell me?” asked the angel.

“All these miracles have enthralled me. There was so much hope and light over the theater that I’m seriously considering to wish for me the kind of parents of whom I’ve always dreamed.” As he spoke, he held the energy sphere in a tight grip with his right hand. “And everything would be much less complicated,” he defended his idea. “I could spare myself the dangerous journey. Everything would be easier.”

“Sure you could do that,” said the angel. “And it would surely be easier too. But think it through carefully whether this is really what you want.”

“Why shouldn’t I want it. The other better clone parents would look exactly like my natural parents, only they would have time for me. I would be an important part of their lives.”

“You could become a completely ordinary boy,” the angel retorted.

“That’s exactly what I would like. I would be rid of the responsibility and could lead a normal life.”

“You are a child, use your brains! Can it be that clones fall from the sky?” the angel turned away angrily.

“Wait,” pleaded the prince. “What should I do?”

“If it is that important to you, go tomorrow one more time to the DAY OF MIRACLES and watch exactly what is going on. Make your decision only then.” The angel disappeared.

“We’ll stay another day,” the sun prince tried to soothe Miss Monti. “Sorry, it has to be.”

The cat couldn’t help but wonder. “Think of your parents. We’d better keep on going.”

But the prince didn’t listen to Monti. He was elsewhere in his thoughts. “Now I realize what the miracle maker means by eliminating disappointment. He gives the parents children who fulfill their dreams and he gives children parents who meet their expectations. Nobody will hurt or disappoint the other anymore.”

“Well, I’ve never heard anything like this,” protested Monti. “Only in the land of clones! The miracle maker exchanges parents and children for perfect duplicates so that none will run afoul of the other’s expectations. And then he calls that a miracle. And a miracle it truly seems to be, for in reality doesn’t everybody try to follow his own dream?” Monti put her knapsack down next to her. “Then the land of clones is truly the land of well-contented, smiling people.”

“I knew right away that there was a secret behind the smile,” stated the prince. He

was completely taken with the idea that the miracle maker was able to intervene in life and bring parents and children together who share the same dream in life. The prince found that incredible. He took his ballerina from his left pocket, had her dance to the harp, and smiled. Suddenly he was confident that he could arrange the matter about his parents.

The next day the prince didn't linger for long. He was among the first to arrive at the arena. And since much time passed until all seats were occupied, he started a conversation with the woman who was just sitting on the hard stone next to him. "It must be a good feeling when parents are happy with their children. Did you ever experience such happiness?" Aron asked pretty nosily the complete stranger next to him. But she didn't seem to be offended and freely told her story as if she had only been waiting for someone to at last showed any interest in her: "All the hopes my father placed in me, I could never fulfill in life."

"But why not? What happened?" asked the prince taken aback.

"The circumstances mitigated against it," the woman answered simply. "And yet, everything I did, I did with dedication. I gave my whole heart to my family and my roses. I'm just a simple cultivator of roses. But loved what I was doing. I would have loved to become the right daughter for my father for he had big plans for me. Meanwhile he has died. But my roses are being torn from my hands. Isn't that crazy? Some expectations are fulfilled only late in life and some never. But are we therefore the less desirable children, only because we follow our own dreams?" she asked. The prince guarded a shocked silence. Could it be that the expectations he had of his parents were too lofty?

"Maybe we should just leave ourselves as we are?" the prince retorted.

". . .to follow our longing and just be happy?" the woman sank into her thoughts. Then she added: "Doesn't matter what my children become. Main thing is they are good human beings." But before the woman and the prince were able to go deeper into the subject, the angels began to hover over the amphitheater to bring hope to the disappointed families.

The father of twins stepped into the middle of the amphitheater and the miracle maker began his story with the words: "This man will now be especially happy. The angel presents him with the wife he lost so tragically." The man looked from the corner of his eyes at the woman on the side of the angel and his knees weakened.

"This man and this woman," continued the miracle maker, pointing at both, "loved each other very much. They saw their divinely ordained destiny in the baking and distributing of bread. They were so preoccupied with fulfilling their life's task that they failed for years to wish for a child. Only when they were almost too old, it came to them like a revelation that they had missed what was most important in life, namely to wish for a child. But the Eternal blessed them and gave them twins. When the news reached the father he was almost mad with bliss. As fast as his legs would carry him, he stormed from the bakery to his wife at home. But before the woman was able to embrace the twins and the man she loved, she was already dead." A murmur of sympathy went through the audience. "This family is only complete with the mother and that is why the angel gives you back your wife."

Tears filled the father's eyes when he touched his wife's hand. Even though it was only a duplicate, it didn't seem to bother the man. "How I missed you," he whispered. The audience in the galleries went wild with compassion. Some had tears in their eyes.

"The events today are similar to yesterday's, only the stories change," the sun prince wondered why his angel had asked him to come again to the amphitheater.

Miss Monti reassured her master: "Wait and see. Angels live in heaven. They can see everything."

"If you say so," answered the patient prince. The prince kept a close eye on what was going on. The man embraced his wife. She tolerated it and then extended her hand to her husband to greet him.

"Did you see that?" whispered the prince. "The woman behaves like a stranger." He leaned further forward to look into the woman's face. Her gaze made Aron shudder. The prince grabbed his cat by the scruff and stormed from the amphitheater. He ran as fast as his legs would carry him. Breathless he called out: "For nothing in the world will I exchange my parents. I love my parents the way they are and I will get them back. Do you hear my angel? I want only my own parents. They are absolutely unique. They are irreplaceable," the prince, who had run away from the dead gaze, screamed full of despair.

"You are a good child," said his stellar angel who appeared at the moment the amphitheater disappeared. "Feelings cannot be duplicated. Even if people resemble each other like one egg the other, their feelings for each other are not the same. The perfectly reproduced people, which are called clones here, first have to learn to love their family."

"They will never be able to love their family because they are dead," the prince got terribly upset.

"How did you come to that conclusion?" asked the angel, impressed by the little prince's wisdom. "I looked into the mother's eyes. These eyes were lifeless. Two big white eyes stared at me. I had no doubt: this creature was dead and that's why I ran away in panic," the prince screamed as in a fit of insanity.

"Don't worry." The angel's little bells jingled softly in the wind. "You discover a person's soul in the eyes. But because the clones don't have a soul, the woman looked at you with dead eyes. But that is no longer your problem. You made the right decision."

Just then, Prince Aron saw the purple creator of miracles rise into the air and gradually turn into Kofur. The malicious eagle described three circles over the angel's head, as if to threaten him, and then disappeared into the sky. The prince felt the shock deep down to his bones.

"Where is the amphitheater?" he asked startled. "It's all Kofur's invention in order to test your love for your parents."

"What? The amphitheater and the DAYS OF MIRACLES were not real?" the prince questioned the angel.

“It all took place in your head only,” the angel explained.

“You mean to say that the equestrian squadron, the gate of illusion, the temple compound of the miracle maker, the amphitheater, the three days of miracles, and the smiling people— all this, I imagined?” asked the prince, apprehension in his voice.

“That’s right,” confirmed the angel.

“Then I should worry about my mental condition,” concluded the prince.

“Don’t worry about it. I am with you in your fight against evil. This was an attack from Kofur, who never forgave you his fall from the third castle tower. Beware of him for the land of clones was an elegant method to lead you off the straight path. Kofur took over your thoughts in order to entice you with a kind of happiness that will never exist on earth. Like a butterfly that flutters before your nose and proclaims eternal beauty and freedom, Kofur wanted to encourage you to wish for soulless fake parents. Parents stuck in the same skin as your natural parents, but who live without the beat of their heart. It would be easy for Kofur to seduce you with a perfect copy of your parents. If you had gone along with the game in order to be rid of the disappointments your parents had been for you, then the whole family would have collapsed. Kofur would have seized you by the scruff of the neck and dragged you into the realm of darkness. So you would have seen it sooner than you would have liked.”

“And in all that, the miracle maker wanted to make me believe that I could spare myself the dangerous journey. His staging at the amphitheater then served only one purpose, namely to awake in me the desire for these perfect clone parents. I would finally have gotten the loving parents I had always dreamed of and the purpose of my journey would have dissolved in air. What a monstrous plan to deceive me. For the opposite would have occurred. Those who break the rules get faster into the realm of darkness than he can imagine. No clone in this world can replace the natural parents, that much I know now for certain.”

The angel nodded and ascended into the dizzying heights.

“It was the dead eyes that opened my eyes and permitted me to see that a copy can never be as good as the original. What stupidity to wish for different parents,” the prince admitted.

And the angel reassured him: “Despite many disappointments, there is nothing in this world that can change the love between children and parents. It is divine like a single breath that lasts a life time.”

“And why, despite it all, are we doing things that hurt us in our soul?” the prince inquired.

“Because you are human, because you are not infallible, because each of you chases after his own dream which the other doesn’t want to understand or simply cannot understand, and because you find it difficult to keep peace with each other. Only when you humans learn to accept the other in his imperfection, then the soul will smile.”

“And why are parents the way they are?” The prince took the opportunity to

question the angel further.

“If you want to find out something about your parents, put yourself into their shoes, then maybe you’ll get to the bottom of it. This time I shall help you. If we ask the question together why parents are the way they are, one of the possible answers would be: Because parents always want the best for their children, because they want to be the best parents in the whole world, but also because they want to be happy too. And sometimes parents can only be happy with all their heart when their children become what they secretly have wished so often. Then it can happen that children have one image of life and parents have another. The images just cannot be made to match. They simply won’t fit together. When parents and children do not have the same image of life then the dream doesn’t add up and it begins to shatter. Nevertheless, it will all be well for the rain is always followed by the sunshine, it’s as simple as that,” the star-like angel was absolutely certain.

For you up there perhaps, thought Prince Aron, but for us down here this is pretty difficult. And Aron had to admit that his parents were very happy as king and queen. Even if they fought sometimes, they loved what they were doing and took care of their country with good intentions. But the prince also admitted to himself that he often thought about whether he wanted to follow his father as king. It is true that apparently parents and children try their best, only to go in different directions, pondered the prince. He knew all too well that basically he wanted to escape the responsibilities so he wouldn’t find himself in his father’s shoes. My dear swan, thought Aron in Monti’s language, things there are between heaven and earth. . .

The angel disappeared leaving a speechless prince behind. The wind, who as always loitered nearby but didn’t make his presence felt, seemed impressed as well for he didn’t make a sound. He really didn’t want to interrupt the conversation between the angel and the prince, only eavesdrop on it.

“I thank you, my angel. Without your warning I would have fallen into Kofur’s trap.” These were Aron’s words before he opened his eyes.

He was lying on his back next to a gleefully gurgling little brook. The cat sat on his chest and was shaking him.

“The poppies probably fogged up his head. Well, finally. The prince is waking up,” proclaimed Miss Monti all excited.

“It’s about time. My feet have already fallen asleep. I need to get some movement,” the windy one added, as always, his ten-cents worth. The red poppies swayed mysteriously in the wind. Aron sat up somewhat dazed, took a deep breath, and after a while mounted the unicorn with Miss Monti.

“We were waiting for you half an eternity,” the cat admonished her master. “It’s hard to believe that one can sleep so deeply.”

The prince looked at his cat as if she came from another world.

“I was full of thoughts that didn’t belong to me,” Aron said more to himself. “And you,” the sun prince asked Miss Monti, “do you remember the knights of the order

of the miracle maker, the amphitheater, and the DAYS OF MIRACLES?"

"What's an amphitheater?" asked the cat whereupon the prince remained silent. He looked toward the sky and knew, angels always say the truth.

"Tell us about the days of miracles," begged Miss Monti. "Then the time will go by faster."

### **A Gray World Between**

The sun filled the land with warmth and light. Along both sides of the road masterfully laid out terraced fields grew toward steep heights where orange and lemon trees flourished.

"What a wonderful world, my angel," raved the sun prince. Just then the angel sent a glittering rainbow so that the Seven Treasures could wander over the bridge from this world to the next.

"We're now leaving the sun land and enter the gray world between," announced the unicorn as they flew into the rainbow. The prince was still astounded over the soaring unicorn, but his joy was soon to leave him. After only a short time, a fog cover spread over the landscape making it grayer and colder. He started to freeze.

"As soon as the sun is gone we begin to long for her," the cat vented her uneasiness. The prince opened the saddle bags and pulled out a blanket to protect himself and Miss Monti against the cold.

"See there," the cat wondered. "I've never seen so many fairies, hobgoblins, and nymphs all at once. Their faces have a frightened and deeply sad demeanor. They seem to be fleeing from something. They are coming toward us as if they were aiming for the sunland."

When they left the rainbow, the fog began to lift. Not a single breeze was felt. All around reigned complete silence, uncanny and menacing as if a ghostly hand had turned all animals to stone.

"Are you with us?" a miserable prince asked the wind who wanted to be sure of the support from such a powerful companion.

"I'm always with you," breathed the wind. "What you experience, I immediately blow into the sunland. So people, flowers, and animals tell each other the adventures of their prince who went forth to rescue his parents."

"It's good so," said the prince subdued but relieved at heart. He had never been in another country. Aron missed Nubia's gentle serenity. He missed "the land of gold and blossoms," as his mother lovingly called Nubia. He missed his parents and all that was familiar. He even missed his officials. From a distance he viewed his problems with different eyes.

All that had once moved him now lost its meaning. Everything was strange and unaccustomed. The prince felt unprotected and exposed. Beyond the borders he

was ordinary, nothing elevated him. Only insecurity. He looked around with a timorous heart. He had never seen anything like this. The world around him was gray and dreary, the plants drooping and wilted, the trees bare. No bird sang. No leaf swayed. Misery wherever the eye wandered. The landscape was exhausted and washed out. It seemed as if this world had stopped breathing. Starved, emaciated creatures skulked past them with lowered gaze. The condition of suffering animals in need aroused Miss Monti's attention. She discovered a young half-famished cat that had pushed its head carefully into the wide open mouth of a cat of prey to lick off some food remains.

"Look at this," whispered Miss Monti, holding her breath. "She could be eaten up any moment. Her head is already in the mouth of the other." Monti had to avert her gaze. "These are your kind. They bear a heavy lot," the prince whispered back. Surrounded by hopelessness and hunger, he looked as if he came from a different planet in his gold glittering beauty on his silver unicorn. Miss Monti in her striped ankle booties and the striped knapsack, she too resembled an exotic beauty who could only have fallen from the sky.

The cat jumped off the unicorn and crawled in crouched position through underbrush. Her fur stood on end with fear and yet she wanted to find out who or what caused this great suffering. Aron saw her back suddenly forming a huge hump and her hissing too was not a good sign of what was to come. It almost took his breath away when he saw his cat confronted with a lion. Admittedly a pretty bedraggled one, but nevertheless a lion.

"Please don't harm her. It's my cat," pleaded the prince. The mangy lion didn't dignify Miss Monti with a single glance. Due to her strange appearance, he didn't regard her as a cat. He didn't even look at her. He had other worries. Quickly, Monti jumped into the prince's arms before the lion began to speak. "The terror bird is our doom," the miserable lion lamented. "I was the king of the animals and we lived together in peace until one day the terror bird invaded our land. He's fifteen feet tall and nobody can stand up to him. The terror bird pursues ruthlessly all other kinds of animals. He brutally devours everything he can get. The animals of our land suffer. Once there was a divine plan, there was a balance because each animal was food for another. But then came the terror bird. He does not live with nature, but off nature," said the unkempt lion, who couldn't foresee what the terrible event that was yet to happen. "Since then we have been massacred, one after the other. Nobody puts any limits on the tyrant. Nobody is above him. Nobody devours him. When our Lord God distributed heart and reason, the terror bird must have been asleep. His only interest seems to be his craving. The terror bird knows no constraints or limits. He thinks only of himself. He is evil and underhanded. Taking from others, he thinks is his right. That's why this insatiable animal only waits for another animal to bring in a prey. Then this bloodsucker gets the roast without having put in any effort of his own. We are permitted to naw on the bones so that we know how good it tasted to him," the lion denounced the terror bird. The number of the terror birds is increasing more and more, and we become fewer and fewer," the lion continued his accusation.

"Strange," the prince worried, "the sunland too is losing more and more people to the realm of darkness."

Then the lion added: "We are living at the edge of the world. Here, with us, everything is between something: between light and shadow, between hunger and thirst, between hopelessness and misery, between life and death. But you are so beautiful like creatures from another planet. Where are you coming from and are you carrying something against hunger with you?" asked the king of animals.

"I am Prince Aron of Nubia, ruler over the sunland." That made the lion even sadder.

"The sun left us a long time ago. Her heart was so heavy and the sorrow made her weak and sick. She had to leave us to avoid falling from the sky due to weakness. Now even the nature spirits are leaving us. The all work in their own way for the continued existence of the earth and they protect nature," stated the lion who was close to starvation. "But there's nothing left to protect. A gray world makes for gray souls."

Aron came to realize something. The elves, gremlins, and nymphs fled because they had been deprived of their habitats in the plants, the earth, and the sea. His sympathy aroused, the prince whispered into the unicorn's ear and asked for something edible for the lion. Unicorns are said to possess all kinds of magic powers. Thus Aron had to try for he didn't carry any lion food in his saddle bags. But he couldn't just leave the lion with his hunger and despair. The unicorn moved a bit sideways behind a deplorable looking shrub. When it came back, it carried on its horn a big, meaty raw bone. Just the way lions like their meat best. The unicorn lowered its head and the lion greedily pulled down the meat. The sun prince was happy as a lark that he had been able to help the lion.

### **Terror Birds**

Just as the lion was tearing a hefty piece of meat from the bone and was about to devour it with gusto, the earth began to tremble. One of the terror birds had picked up the scent of the meat. The unicorn, aware of the danger, levitated immediately to get the prince out of harm's way. The prince got a good view of the terror bird and could not help but admire him secretly. He was big and strong, and he was intimidatingly beautiful. The giant bird carried the colors of summer meadows in his feathers and his majestic neck was fanned by a feather ruffle. The giant, well-fed bird, with a beak as sharp as the point of a rapier, landed a blow on the head of the emaciated lion weakened by hunger and made him stagger. The lion was weak, much too weak to defend his booty. A stab into the lion's neck from the tip of the bird's beak would inevitably have meant death. The lion knew he didn't stand a chance in this battle and so it ended as it always did. The terror bird ate the bone and the lion crawled away defeated and hurt. Once again the terror bird had proven his sovereignty. Nobody barred his way. He was the greatest.

The terror bird's all powerful size made the sun prince wince. And since size was a sore point in Aron's life, the little prince asked himself: "What does he have that I don't have?" Only to answer himself immediately: "It's his height which makes the

terror bird, in contrast to me, unassailable.” And as if she had read his thoughts, Miss Monti said: “It’s not being big, but having greatness. True greatness is a matter of the heart. It has nothing to do with body size.” “For me it does,” thought the prince. He was a ruler and used to things big and great.

As the unicorn, together with the prince and Miss Monti, fled the scene under cover of low-hanging clouds, Miss Monti espied a huge terror bird colony casting nets on a murky ocean. They pulled bulging nets from the sea with the most beautiful fishes who were begging for their lives. The fishes gleamed in colors of turquoise, orange, red, and yellow, but all their beauty was of no use to them. The giant birds emptied the nets and piled up the fishes high on the shore. Then they fell over them and devoured them one by one. Their gluttony was boundless. They rubbed their bellies, fought over one or the other fish and reveled in a jolly good time together.

“The terror birds are even eating the sea empty. Just look at this, Monti, now they are slurping up the sea water to boot. ” The prince rubbed his eyes in horror. The gorging binge was followed by a guzzling binge.

With shrieking clamor, the terror birds ran to the edge of the beach. There, where the rocks began, was a mountain of tree trunks. Each one grabbed a tree trunk, then they formed a long bird chain along the beach and placed the trunks like straws against their beaks. The tree trunks were apparently hollowed out for the birds soaked up the sea water into the inside. With each gulp the water table of the sea sank lower. After this especially sumptuous meal the terror birds gave no sign of pausing or even stopping. They guzzled and guzzled and prided themselves for taking not a single break. They even made a bet on who could gulp the longest without gasping for air. The sea was not yet filled with ill foreboding. But when the terror birds betrayed no thought of putting the tree trunks away and continued drinking, it became alarmed. The sea reared and six white horses competed in flinging their manes of foaming aquatic crowns around. They made their entry pulling behind them carriages decorated with wreaths of sea weed and assorted sea plants. Poseidon’s and the mermaids’ faces bespoke sheer panic. Their minds were fixed on one goal only. Away from here before the sea ceased to exist!

“We’ll be back. Our heart remains here,” the water nymphs promised. The sea wept. It couldn’t just walk away. It loved its inhabitants, the fishes, the water sprites, and water nymphs. The sea had to stand by and see all those who could walk flee the scene.

“Isn’t there something in this world that can stop the terror bird?” the prince called out horror-stricken. He felt the suffering of nature in his heart.

“Such misery,” sobbed Miss Monti. “This must be the land of misery. By the way, how do we know we’ve chosen the right way?” the cat asked in desperate hope that they could leave this place.

“The angel sent us the rainbow. Only angels can build this kind of bridge,” the unicorn chimed in.

“Angels never lead us down the wrong path,” the prince assured the cat. “This

must be the right way.”

The prince held on tight to the unicorn's neck for they were still riding through the air. He didn't want to crash, for the wind, who normally rummaged unhurriedly behind them, was getting all worked up about the reign of the terror bird.

“Who gives you the right to exterminate the fishes,” he thundered in his grumpy way at the terror birds. “And who gives you the right to destroy the habitat of the sea dwellers? Who do you think you are that you dare to disturb the peace of god's creatures?”

As he was speaking, the wind spirits rose ever higher causing the wind to turn into a storm. Seeing that, the terror birds immediately put down the tree trunks and made their getaway. There was nothing they could do against the wind for they had long lost their ability to fly; for this they were much too fat. For the first time, they were annoyed about not being able to fly. But from whom should they have been fleeing. To the world at large, the gray world between seemed a forgotten place. Thus the terror birds were the overlords.

“Where in the world does this blown up storm come from?” they wondered. Never before had a storm lost its way and wandered in here. Let him go back where he came from. The terror birds considered how they could combat the wind. Their nets were long gone. The storm had carried them away so the birds couldn't catch the wind.

The wind roared: “If only I had come earlier, then the sea would still be here!”

“You can't be everywhere at the same time,” the terror birds mocked him. Hearing that, the wind became unstoppable. He twisted and turned into a whirl. Now he resembled a spinning top, pointed at the bottom and wide at the top. In between it blustered, howled, whistled, roared, whirled, and raged. The wind's strength intensified with his ire as he kept the insatiable terror birds in his sights. Fit to be tied over so much brazenness, his indignant wind spirits charged ahead without needing to be whipped into action. The prince and the cat on the unicorn whirled dangerously through the air. Everything around turned until Aron lost sight. The danger of a crash was great for the prince was caught in the midst of the raging air spirits. He held on tight to the unicorn and called desperately for help, but the wind didn't hear anything. Once his ire was up, he could not be tamed until his wind spirits calmed down, and that could take a while.

Monti too screamed: “You're our friend. Don't cause a mishap. Come down, otherwise we'll be down before you!” The unicorn stretched its front legs straight out as if doing so it could put the brakes on the wind's fury.

“Moderation, for god's sake, we are crashing!” the prince shouted with all his might. Just then it seemed to the wind that he was hearing a little voice. And since he paused, the unicorn was able to escape the next wind gust. It caught itself and then continued to ride through the air as always. The first thing the prince did was check his pockets. He noticed with relief that the energy sphere and the ballerina were in their place. The prince grumbled: “Are you completely out of your mind? You should have known we were in the air!” The cat too was beside herself: “We could have crashed. You're so impulsive.”

The wind took a leap as if he was coming from another planet. "Where have you come from?" he asked confused. Whenever the wind forgot himself, his spirits raged out of control.

"That's what we would like to ask you," said the prince.

"I came to the aid of the wounded lion and breathed on his wounds so they would heal faster. Thus I saw too late what the terror birds had wrought. But I can't be everywhere and the lion needed my help."

Fortunately, the wind had calmed down so the prince was able to go on floating leisurely on his unicorn. The cat called out: "See there, this is what it looks like when the wind is angry!"

The prince and the cat looked down and discovered a clearing the wind had cut in a nearby forest.

"Fly back," the prince told the unicorn. "I want to see what became of the terror birds."

"Reluctantly. I fly reluctantly near the terror birds," confessed the unicorn. Still, it obeyed the prince's command. Aron and Miss Monti held their breath. They saw them walking along the beach. Some of them had burst on the cliffs. None had escaped the wrath of the storm. But the surviving terror birds were dragging the dead behind them and were piling them up on the beach. That seemed to be a custom among the terror birds. Piled up on the beach were mountains of fish, tree trunks, and now the dead relatives. But one thing had changed totally and seeing it from above, a cold shudder ran down the prince's back. There was no more ocean. It was as if the earth had swallowed it up. The prince caught the wind by his beard just in time and looked into his hysterical eyes.

"Please don't get all worked up. Not again and not now. We have to move on. Please stay with me, you promised," the prince asked his companion. "The right moment will come for your return to avenge this ruthless devastation."

Reluctantly, the wind refrained from carrying out his design. After the unicorn and the prince had gained enough distance, the wind could not restrain himself from making a little display of his power. He once more vented his indignation with booming force. When the storm subsided, the dead giant birds lay again strewn over the beach and the prince noted that there were more of them than before.

Finally they flew on. Again, fog obstructed the view. It seemed to the prince then that he saw indistinctly a figure that reminded him of his mother. "This can't be," the prince reassured himself. It was clear to him that his eyes were playing tricks on him. But his heart sounded the alarm, first disbelieving, than increasingly stronger until he couldn't bear it any longer. He had to penetrate the fog in order to recognize the figure.

"Could you do down just a bit?" the prince asked the unicorn with trembling voice and eyes which he didn't trust.

"It is dangerous. The terror birds could pick up your and Miss Monti's scent." Nevertheless, the unicorn lost some height.

## Fata Morgana

The veil of fog became thinner. Aron squinted his eyes as if to pull the figure closer toward him. "It's my mother," the prince called out beside himself.

"What nonsense. All I see is a burlap bag," was all the cat had to say not very kindly.

"If I tell you. I should be able to recognize my own mother. Admittedly, she looks wretched and miserable, but we don't know what happened to her. Seriously, Monti, what do you see?" the prince asked the cat.

"It's the queen all right," the cat conceded.

"It makes me happy that you see what I see."

"I must go to her," the prince ordered the unicorn.

"That's too dangerous," replied the unicorn.

"Probably another one of Kofur's nasty tricks," warned Miss Monti. Each time she got excited, her fur began to gleam fox red and the fur around her neck stood on edge. "Just to be on the safe side, why don't you ask your angel," Monti suggested.

"No time, by then we'll have passed her," the prince urged on.

"It's your funeral," said the unicorn.

"Not to worry," the wind puffed himself up. "After all I'm still here too. When things get hairy, I'll lift you immediately high up into the clouds."

But the prince was unaware of the wind. All Aron saw was his mother's eyes. They were indeed her eyes. Aron was just about to fling himself into her arms when an invisible hand held him back. Aron hesitated. The mysterious gesture had broken his determination. With the memory of the land of clones still fresh, he began to wonder whether this might be just another one of Kofur's deceits. Thus rendered helpless and doubtful whether he should trust his eyes, the prince asked with trembling voice: "Is it really you?"

But the mother didn't seem to have heard his question. "Give me a piece of bread," she begged. Her profoundly sad look made Aron's doubts dissipate.

"Don't give her anything," Monti pleaded with her master. "Don't be deceived by appearances. I'm sure the demon Kofur is behind this again."

"You may be right," agreed the prince, who felt confirmed in his considerations. He knew meanwhile that Kofur appeared in myriad forms and since the episode at the amphitheater there was no doubt that he was able to influence his thoughts and make him see things that didn't exist in reality. "My parents are in Ozelot's realm, not in the gray world between. That I know for sure," pondered Aron.

"Let's go already," cautioned the unicorn. "Another terror bird colony is approaching."

The mother pleaded: "My dear son, give me a piece of bread."

Hearing that, Prince Aron turned around once more and ran back. "For mercy's sake! I won't deny my alms to someone in need, no matter in what the shape she might appear," the charitable prince said more to himself. And then he added mumbling: "To own something and not share it, doesn't further happiness."

He gave the beggar woman bread and threw himself at her chest. "Mama!" There was nothing in the world the sun prince wanted to believe more than that he had found his mother again. He had enough of distrusting all and everything. The prince wanted to be able to again put his trust in what he saw. And what he saw was his mother. Whom else should he trust if not her? His own mother would never in her life betray him.

But suddenly, the little prince began to feel faint. A sense of queasiness seized his stomach even though he had not been binging. "Am I hungry?" he wondered. Why should he feel different than all the other miserable creatures in the gray world between? All he had was this little piece of bread which he had been sharing with Monti and now also with his mother. Just then he became aware of the flapping wings of a gigantic bird sinking its claws into his shoulders. Dazed with pain, Aron thought he was in the power of a terror bird. But the unicorn and Miss Monti had to watch as the prince's poor mother turned into the demon Kofur. He began hacking with his two beaks at the sun amulets, hitting first the sun images and then Aron's arm. The pain robbed the prince of any reasonable thought. At the last minute, he remembered what his father had taught him on his ninth birthday about the use of the amulets. Desperately the prince attempted to clash the amulets on both wrists together. It was all he was able to do in this moment of terror. But Kofur twisted the injured arm back in order to open the clasp with his powerful claw. Faint with agonizing pain, Aron sank to the ground. He was no longer aware of the fiery tongues that were advancing against Kofur. The sun rays, which were lodged in his amulets met the danger by turning into firearms. Good fortune had not abandoned the prince. The power of the sun still protected him. Kofur's attack had ended in failure. He had not been able to either steal the amulets or destroy them. Powerless in the face of the power of good, Kofur loosened his hold on Aron and disappeared into the sky.

"Well, what a mess. How do we get Prince Aron on your back?" the cat asked the unicorn. "Look here, he is bleeding," Monti noted.

"Let me take care of this," howled the wind. Taking special care, he pushed the air spirits under Aron's back. They swelled to a whirl and lifted him onto the unicorn.

"That was perfect," the cat said appreciatively. The unicorn turned its head around and blew some of its unicorn breath on the little prince's injuries. A layer of silvery moon dust spread over the wounds of shoulder and arm and healed them. Miss Monti clapped her paws in praise of the unicorn: "You're a great medical magician. You healed the prince."

The wind yowled: "And I, didn't I do my part?"

"You, of course, too. You are both saviors of the prince." With that, the wind was satisfied and pulled back. The unicorn took immediately off into the air to avoid a

real encounter with a terror bird.

“What happened?” asked the prince as he was starting to come to.

“The sun amulets decided the battle in your favor. Kofur was surprised by the power of fire, so he preferred quitting the field. As he ascended into the sky, he yelled: ‘I may have lost this round, but the battle isn’t over yet by far.’ The unicorn and the wind healed you. What would we have done without those two,” the cat babbled on.

“Calling my angel,” Aron remembered.

“Only you alone can do that and you were unconscious. Besides, we had to get away as quickly as possible to avoid being detected by the terror birds.”

“Why didn’t my angel help me? After all, he’s always with me.” For the first time, the prince doubted his angel’s love.

“Because you have to endure life’s tests by yourself. And this was a test. I can protect you and give you advice, but one thing I cannot do and that is make your decisions. You alone make the choice. That’s why you children of man are such rich creatures,” said the angel.

“What do you mean by rich?” Aron was again unwilling to be impressed by his angel.

“You are rich in experiences because you distance yourself more or less from the path of your life due to the choices you make. Every time you deviate from the path and take a detour, the Eternal teaches you a lesson to learn from your mistakes. And for this you need to undergo tests. They force you again and again to make choices so you will grow through them. Only thus will you be able to find the true path.”

The angel beamed down on Aron. When the prince heard his favorite word “growing,” he was immediately wide awake.

“I will grow after all,” the little prince rejoiced.

“But of course. You are already growing day by day.”

That sounded mysterious, for Aron didn’t have the feeling that he had grown even the slightest bit. But he didn’t want to bother his angel any further. The prince knew exactly that the angel would disappear when his questioning was getting too much. That’s why he didn’t press the matter any further but exercised patience, only to ask after a while: “And what was the test about?”

“Kofur wanted to test your compassion and chose the form of your mother for this purpose.”

“But any child would follow a mother’s pleas and wouldn’t let her starve. Kofur should know that I have a good heart.”

“That was exactly the crux of the matter,” the angel tried to explain to the prince. “Only a cold heart would have been useful in his design to defeat you and carry you off into the darkness.”

“What made him hope for a cold heart,” the prince asked the angel.

“Since the land of clones, which was a perfect deception, you had to assume that not everything you see is genuine. The demon was absolutely convinced that he had sown enough doubts into your heart that you would take your mother for a deception and that you wouldn’t help her,” the angel explained the demon’s treachery to the prince.

“Then it wasn’t you who held me back when I looked into my mother’s eyes?” the prince asked the angel.

“Of course not. It was Kofur. He had to keep you from dispensing alms; for doing good is a virtue. Only, he was concerned that you would deny her the bread. You shouldn’t share the little that was left to you for that would be noble and caring but not heartless. For if your mother was as inauthentic as the land of clones, Kofur hoped to exploit your bad experiences, and you wouldn’t help her. But since helping and sharing rank foremost in the High Order of Nubia, a cold heart would have been a gross violation of the laws. Kofur could have taken you prisoner because such a violation is punished with the realm of darkness.”

Aron’s face turned pale: “What a logic,” he mumbled.

“The logic of evil,” replied the angel. “The power of evil knows no limits. It penetrates the thoughts before it destroys the soul.”

Then he spoke with urgent tone: “Never doubt me. I returned to the damaged eyes of the sun amulets their original power which they had lost in the attack. For here is how it works. The clashing together of the wrists revives the sun spirit. It gets so enraged about this that it filters the sun’s rays through the eyes of the images of the sun, which, due to its anger, turn into flames. Thus it protects the owner of the amulets if he gets into trouble. Kofur apparently knew very well how to destroy the power of the amulets for he was aiming at the eyes. Thus the sun spirit lost the decisive energy it needed to turn the sun’s rays into flaming fiery tongues. At that moment, I stepped in to strengthen the sun spirit’s energy. The sun turned into fire to defend you against the demon. Always remember: I guard your way through my love.”

Then the light disappeared. The little prince lowered his head. “Instead of losing confidence in my angel, I’d better watch out for Kofur’s traps. He’s really dangerous,” concluded the prince.

Monti moaned: “I gave you the wrong advice. Through my fault, the evil one almost defeated you by a hair. Forgive me please. I would never deceive a friend. You must believe me.”

“I know.” The prince stroked Monti’s chin until she began to purr. Then all was good again. However, Aron was left with an uneasy feeling. Life’s events are sometimes so unpredictable, pondered the little ruler. Nothing is as it seems. One really can’t believe all the eyes see and ears hear. That much he had learned on this journey. Thus it was not usual for a prince to wish for sufficient wisdom in order to distinguish truth from deceit.

After floating about for an indefinite amount of time, the unicorn became restless and looked frequently down at the earth. It searched for the entrance to Caligo

land. When it finally spotted it, the unicorn's task was fulfilled. At the start of the journey, the prince had given the order "to the realm of darkness" and now they had arrived. Aron asked the unicorn to wait for his return. He would never have had the heart to expose a creature as pure as the unicorn to the eternal darkness. The little prince had to go the rest of the way alone, relying on his own devices.

With Monti in his arms, he jumped off the unicorn. At last firm ground under foot! The little prince felt relieved and pulled the energy sphere from his pocket. It was good that he always carried his gold dust with him. Never would he forget his parents. With time their memory would begin to fade, but not so with the energy sphere. Fascinated, he looked the sphere over. Aron put it against his ear and heard his parents' voices. He saw before him a big, black gate with an inscription. That's what his father must have meant. "The entrance, the only way to enter the realm of darkness." The prince pointed at the gigantic, black gullet that threatened to devour everything. Somehow Monti didn't look very happy. "This is where we want to go? Then you'd better say good-bye to your favorite toy right now!" Monti's voice was filled with horror as if she was ready to give up so close to their destination. Rather than saying good-bye, the prince wanted to calm down. He wound up the toy clock and listened to the harp while the ballerina dance until her silver heart glittered. Then he pressed her against his ear. Again there was a mysterious throbbing.

"A living heart under a wooden bodice. Who should understand this," said the prince and shook his head. "It's good that you are with me, as familiar as the sun palace which I miss."

The prince stroked the dancers hair and stored her again in the left pocket of his breeches. Then Monti took her energy sphere from her knapsack. The little sun shone beautifully, the light which Monti intended to carry into the darkness.

"Hide your gold dust," Aron warned Miss Monti. "Who knows what lies ahead."

The prince and the cat were aware of great dangers awaiting them. But they walked toward the gate with a brave heart without being able to say good-bye to the wind. He had disappeared without a trace.

"I wonder where the air spirits may be hanging out. But now is not the time to wait. Now is the time for action," said the prince. He reached for the knife in his saddle bag and stashed it in his cloak. Now only his angel could still protect him.

### **The Beginning of All Evil**

Then Aron and Miss Monti found themselves in front of the terrible black gate. To the right was a plaque fashioned by the demon's own hand, which read:  
"Everything permitted—lying, cheating, stealing, killing. Kofur"

Just as his father had told him. When the prince looked up, he spotted a two-headed stone eagle on top of the gate. The stone came alive: "What do you

know, so little and yet so brave," cawed the eagle and greeted the uneasy prince with a mighty flap of his wings.

"I've been waiting for you. Come in. Ozelot will receive you," said Kofur. The prince's heart almost stopped as he and his cat entered the land of darkness through the black gate. At nightfall fear beset his heart. Miss Monti was no better off. Her limbs quivered so violently that Aron had trouble holding her.

Nothing but darkness surrounded them. All Kofur said was: "Follow me" and flew on ahead. Burning braziers, set in regular intervals, lit the winding path. The silence was uncanny. From time to time shadowy figures streaked past them. Then Miss Monti would moan: "Hold me tight. They might steal me." And Aron held his cat tighter in his arms. The prince felt for his knife to encourage himself.

"What kind of creatures are these?" Aron asked the eagle.

"These are shadow spirits. Once they were human beings for whom being good was too boring. They broke the rules and the lord of darkness took them into the realm of shadows. Their numbers are constantly increasing."

Aron knew only too well that more and more sunlanders had been falling for the realm of darkness. The power struggle between the king and Ozelot had long ago been the topic of his parents' last argument. That's why they wanted to do something. But instead of fighting Ozelot together, they fought each other until they first lost their speech and then their entire human form. Once again Aron was pained by his parents' discord.

But this was in the past now. He had boldly embarked on the road to Caligo land. The energy sphere had given him the courage not to doubt himself but to fight for his gold dust—the love of his parents.

A shudder came over Aron as yet another shadow spirit streaked by. His cloak fluttered almost inaudibly.

"Did you see the knife blinking?" Miss Monti's paws began to tremble again. "Killing is allowed here too. Take care."

"Be quiet," whispered the prince.

"Are you afraid?" Aron heard the voice of his angel.

"Thank God, you are here," the prince replied with relief. "I'm not afraid," he forced himself to be brave.

"Your thoughts are with your parents?" the angel probed the prince's thoughts.

"I miss them so very much." The angel was walking two steps behind Aron when he said: "You are afraid to lose them forever?"

"I'm not afraid," Aron replied steadfastly. But his teeth were chattering.

"You have to make a decision to either fight or flee, but don't be afraid," said the angel gently. "Try to accept it. With fear you would have no limits. Carelessness could make you fall for every trap. Fear is an important part of you and it will set off an alarm at the right time to warn you of any danger."

The angel erected an invisible wall of light around the prince to protect him from

evil.

“With whom are you talking?” asked Miss Monti.

“With my angel. He’s with me and protects me.”

The prince forged ahead bravely along the path lit by the fire spirits and Miss Monti mumbled to herself. “No music, no pictures, no books, no light, no fragrance, only darkness and gloomy silence. In the realm of darkness, all light has gone out. Long live the sun,” she grunted subdued. The cat’s knapsack was now strapped around her stomach so she could hold it with her paws and better protect her gold dust. She was nestled in the prince’s arms, tucked away under his cloak. Then she whispered a bit more audibly to the prince: “Isn’t it a golden land we live in?” The prince gave a silent, mechanical nod.

### **The Heads of the Evil Seven**

Just then a huge, sinister castle appeared before them in the faint glow of thousands of blue light stars.

“Come in. Ozelot is waiting for you.” This cold, unnatural cawing in Kofur’s voice made Aron shudder. But if he wanted to free his parents, he had to overcome his panic and face Ozelot. He was the lord of darkness, the ruler over all that was evil, and he held his parents imprisoned.

“What’s your weapon of choice?” Kofur’s rasping reached Aron’s ear. An ice-cold shudder ran through Aron’s entire body. As in a dream he heard himself say: “I fight with the blade of reason.” Kofur gave off a hollow, metallic cackle. Never would Aron forget this repulsive laughter. Miss Monti now didn’t move a muscle. Just once did the prince hear his cat mumbling: “We got ourselves into a real pickle now.” Then she nestled again stone-like in Aron’s arms.

With every bit of courage he was able to muster, the prince entered into a torch-lit, vaulted chamber—Ozelot’s huge throne room. The sight literally took the prince’s breath away. It brought home to him once more painfully his diminutiveness, for Ozelot’s throne room was of such gigantic extent, it had to be a hundred feet high, at least in the prince’s estimate. Aron needed the eyes of a lynx to penetrate the darkness for the hall was only sparsely lit. The wall consisted of genuine snake scales and fiery tongues daubed it in a gleaming green. While the prince held his breath as he walked toward the throne, his eyes espied horrifying things. Seven gates supported by twice as many pillars formed an even heptagon in the large hall at the upper end of which was the mighty Ozelot awaiting his guest. Slowly, almost gingerly, the prince approached the throne. He passed black holes, which were apparently entered through seven stone gates, and was almost startled to death. An animal-human on stilts with terrible horns peeled itself from the first pillar and threatened him with a sword. Wrathfully, he pointed the blade at Aron. As the prince retreated, the inscription SUPERBIA blinked at him. Undaunted, Aron placed one foot before the other. He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead to

avoid looking the fable creature in the eyes and was already approaching the next creature. A spitting cobra on horsehoes tried to hit the prince with a long, fine poisonous spray. Her slippery snake body was marked by the letters INVIDIA. Silver threads swayed mysteriously in the gate. The glittering veil was licking so mysteriously that Aron was unable to resist its pull until he stood directly in front of the gate. The black hole Invidia was guarding seemed bent on sucking the prince in. It breathed icy cold, making the blood in Aron's veins freeze. A repulsive shower overcame the prince from which he immediately tried to escape, but the next monster was already lurking in the wings, even more malicious and wild—an armored war dog. With a horrendous howl he emerged from the pillar, intent on doing the sun prince harm with his exposed choppers. And again, the icy cold tried to pull him through the gate into the menacing, black uncertainty. The black veil spread a magic, silver light and worked its spell on Aron. Step by step he got closer to the gate. Aron wanted to explore the black hole to see with his own eyes what was behind the gate. Fascination with the mystery drove him forward very slowly and he became so weak-willed, he just let it happen. A moment of deadly silence. The prince hesitated. Then it seemed to him that he was hearing a voice: "Enter. Show them all that you are the greatest. Prove your courage." Aron moved a step closer. The lure of the unknown seemed to be stretching an invisible bow to the breaking point.

"Over the threshold!" ordered a voice. "Over the threshold!" Aron hesitated. "Don't be a coward," breathed the ice-cold voice. "Show them all that you are the greatest," beckoned the voice. And then it happened. Prince Aron of Nubia stood with one foot in the realm of shadows. He was just about to cross a line when he recognized the abyss. Within a second the gate to eternal night opened and Prince Aron saw what he never wanted to see. Through the tunnel of darkness he looked into the eye of evil. A picture of horror. Cold and hostile. The abyss of the soul. It seemed to him that something was creeping up inside of him. But that wasn't all. Suddenly he felt something he couldn't see was jumping from behind onto his neck. A beast with withered, ice-cold legs clasped his neck and choked him. A hellish fear overwhelmed the prince of Nubia. He shook with disgust as if death was sitting in the nape of his neck. Then he heard the buzzing of wings close to his ears. With lightening speed, Aron brandished his knife from under his cloak and began stabbing wildly with his right hand in all directions. With the other arm he held on tight to Miss Monti's warm body. Never would he have forgiven himself had he allowed any harm to come to the beautiful Persian. He had to protect her at all cost. For Aron had not only brought danger upon himself but on his companion as well. With a whistling sound, the menace plummeted into the depth of the abyss and a silvery rope leading to the eye of the evil one gave Aron the impression that something was hanging on the silk thread intent on pulling him into the eternal darkness. Seeing that, Aron was cured forever. Panic before an apparition seized the prince and as he ran away as fast as he could, he saw the letters IRA blinking at him from the spiny armor of the hell hound. Now the prince ran as fast as his legs would carry him for presumably it wouldn't be long before the monsters with the strange names would all come after him. Miss Monti felt the fear in her master's heart and needed no infecting by it. She was still nestled like a stone in his arms, completely invisible under Aron's royal blue cape. The next ogre

was already lying in wait for the prince. A bit more portly than the others, a colossal gaoler lumbered from the pillar. His scream reverberated in the huge hall and with his clanking chain, which he swung around ceaselessly, he drove Aron onward. The word ACEDIA on the blinking metal made Aron take flight. Again, the prince felt the blast of the terrible cold from the black abyss that guarded the gate. The dark formed his energy into a ghastly muzzle and sucked on the prince's cape with such force that it required great effort to counter it. Suddenly the magnetic pull of the frosty black hole lessened and almost made Aron fall backward. The sun prince's heart seemed to freeze into a bloc of ice and the blood had drained from his face.

What were these evil forces intent on pulling him against his will into black holes from which breathed an icy coldness? Before he was able to pursue his thoughts, he was already exposed to the pull of the next gate. This time it breathed icy ankles. Little icy needles pricked him even in the calves. It was simply ghastly, for the seven gates gave off their best to present to Prince Aron his own dire condition. There was no time to rest, for AVARITIA, GULA, and LUXURIA were in every way as mean as the shrieking ogres who preceded them. The prince would have liked to send these wild creatures to the land where the pepper grows. But pepper only grew in another distant world in which the sun was shining. So the prince ran for his life. Like someone in danger of drowning he sought to reach Ozelot's throne, as if he could find refuge there. "This must be the seven plagues of which my parents spoke," Aron thought horrified and just then he had reached the throne.

### **The Dragon Throne**

His dark Highness, the black baron was enthroned high above him in his dark cloak. His boots gleamed. His face was masked by a knight's helmet, only two dead eyes stared at the prince through the slits. The throne was elevated by countless steps so that the lord of darkness was better able to humiliate his subjects and Aron was made to feel tiny as a mouse. Above Ozelot's head wiggled the most powerful snake while the two snakes on its right and left side looked no less impressive in malevolence. When the dark ruler perceived the deathly fear in the prince's eyes, he pretended courteous kindheartedness: "You needn't be afraid. The Seven Deadly One are my favorites. They are the beginning of all disaster." Ozelot pointed at the monsters who were gesticulating wildly with their sabers at the prince.

"Because of them, human beings forget their virtues. Take SUPERBIA, for example, the primal root that nourishes the tree of evil. This tree germinates only highly poisonous flowers. Arrogance is the most beautiful of all flowers, the worst of all evils and therefore the darling of my darlings. Those of you among the Nubians who make the mistake of thinking themselves better than he is, will find that pride

will one day be their downfall. Overweening pride leads to loss of respect which leads to loss of moderation and ultimately to self-deceit. How bad, for moderation brings order into human affairs. It enables you sunlanders to realize the good and reach your goals. But those who have lost all moderation, better yet, those who have lost the enduring inner order and take themselves for so important that they don't think even in their dreams of entering the skin of another and subsequently will commit the vilest transgressions. My dear, evil arrogance," scorned Ozelot. "Once Superbia gets a Nubian to look at another with arrogance that one won't shy away from any evil deed. Then his life has become worthless. I love SUPERBIA," raved Ozelot who couldn't stop praising all the poisonous fruits of arrogance. "Arrogance is pure pride. It loves stepping on the souls of others. It all begins with claims to knowing all. Arrogance fancies itself to be the ultimate and actually takes itself to be the Eternal. Superbia knows everything better, can do everything better, butts in everywhere, and considers herself peerless. Feeling for the other is alien to her. She is capable of doing anything that will advance her above all others as if she were sitting on top of a ladder. There she delights basking in the sun and considers herself to be the greatest. Wonderful. For up there only she is worth anything. She lacks any respect for what others hold sacred."

"To compare oneself to the Eternal without being the Eternal is the dumbest conceit and the most dangerous impudence," the thought crossed Aron's mind with regard to the terror bird. He too had forgotten how to see the world with different eyes. With the eyes of the fishes, the sea, and the land animals. Would that he had never attacked other species with such ruthlessness. But greed had extinguished the giant's inner light. Moderation was lost for all time.

The black baron was in his element and rattled on ceaselessly. "Gold princes like you, with a fluttering coat as the one you wear, are a thorn in Superbia's eyes. You are not one of us, you are much too small, and you hide your cat under your coat. How embarrassing. That's why you have to go."

Prince Aron was white as a sheet under his glittering cover and he pressed Miss Monti even closer against his body. With a trembling soft voice he tried to defend himself.

"Haven't you ever heard anything about a healthy pride, of self-consciousness and self-confidence, all the important building blocks that give my people a strong will? Nubian hearts look with pride on what they have achieved. And that really hasn't anything to do with arrogance."

The young prince has courage. How bravely he fights with the word and what an alert spirit he has, thought the black ruler with appreciation. Never before had anyone dared to speak like that with the black baron. Nevertheless, he was his enemy and he decided to be polite to gain his trust. Ozelot, the master of deceit, knew very well that trusting souls are easily wrapped around the little finger. He, therefore, put every effort into hiding his malice.

"You mean to make me believe that Superbia also has a good side? Forget about it. Self-confidence, readiness to take risks, and curiosity, which are presumed to give wings to your fondness for discoveries, should be savored with caution. Curious people are willing to try everything because they succumb to the secret of

evil. Please, don't tell me such fairy tales. You escaped the devilish IRA only by a hair. You see, it's not particularly healthy to try out everything, really everything, at least not for you sunlanders."

Ozelot leaned slightly forward to get a better look of the prince.

"My eyes are weak. I want to see the one who dares place himself on the same level as I and enter into a dialogue."

Thereupon he gave a sign. "Fire!" ordered the lord of darkness with a movement of his hand pointing in Aron's direction. At this moment the snakes, who decorated the throne, awoke and spit fire from the terrible pit of their throats just as if they were dragons. Aron was almost knocked over. But he quickly caught himself. The snakes weren't out to get him. One by one, they were lighting circles of fire to brighten the throne room. The most powerful of the snakes above Ozelot's throne set off a circle of fire in the cupola, the one to the left, a circle of fire on the walls, and the one on the right, finally one on the floor.

Only now did Aron see that the throne room was round and that Kofur sat next to Ozelot on the throne, though at a measured distance. He was swinging back and forth on a pole which wasn't attached to anything. It seemed to the prince that nothing was as it should be anymore and that the ground beneath his feet was moving. He, nonetheless, observed his uncannily beautiful surrounding with keen interest. The green shimmering light, the many glittering snake scales on the walls, the dragon-snake-throne, the Seven Deadly Creatures, and three circles of fire shifted Aron's brain into a special state of extreme alertness. But Ozelot's depravity surpassed once more his power of imagination. A gigantic chalice, supported by three live hyenas, stood not too far from the steps to the throne. By the light of the circles of fire he made out the repulsive animals.

"Step a bit closer," Ozelot commanded him with thunderous voice. Prince Aron set his foot with trembling knees on the steps to the throne. But the lord of darkness had already changed his mind. He rose to meet him and snarled: "I need poison. So see that you get lost."

The sun prince almost fell as he ran back down the steps. From up above he was able to catch a glimpse of the hyena's chalice. What he saw was disgusting. A huge, green sea of live snakes were whirling around in the vessel. Arrived at the bottom, Aron turned around. Ozelot had meanwhile descended from his throne. He reached into the chalice and held a wriggling snake above his helmet, whereby he leaned his head back into the nape of his neck. Then he dropped it and snapped at it, though his face was hidden. Aron's face expressed pure horror. But Ozelot wasn't interested in that. He stuffed his pockets with snakes before he placed his arm fatherly on Aron's shoulders. Miss Monti smelled the animal and still nestled like a stone in Aron's arm under his cape. Now that he had swallowed the snake, Ozelot felt better. He pulled himself together and tried politeness. He wanted to accompany Aron back on the way from which he had come. But the prince was rooted to the spot. Not even seven horses could have moved him to take on the monsters once more. He'd rather disappear under the earth's surface like Rumpelstilzkin. When Ozelot noticed that Aron's body felt as stiff as a stick, he pushed him forward with fatherly concern. "I can unleash, you can tame."

The prince gave Ozelot a skeptical look: "How's that?"

"Try it. Think of something," ordered the lord of darkness. In his distress and to his own surprise, Aron extended the pointer and little finger of his right hand forward and bent the middle and ring finger inward. In this position, he used his exposed fingers like a sword and directed them alternately at the Evil Seven. With each strike, he produced a "tjee, tjee, tjee" sound, which presumably meant *tenere lontano*, to ward off the evil spirits and prevent them from entering his soul. Prince Aron didn't know where this formula came from, all he knew was that he had to protect himself. And the impossible came to pass: Ozelot's darlings gave off a brief howl and then fell silent. The evil had been banished. The Deadly Seven no longer threatened the prince. They were no more than statues hewn of stone which kept the pillars company.

### **The Logic of Evil**

When the dark ruler's seven favorites were peacefully asleep in their gates, Ozelot spread out his arms with great satisfaction: "Just look at them, my darlings. It's just wonderful how each one behaves in a human body. Each sin has another trick up its sleeve of how to defeat the virtues and worm its way into the human soul. Once they get a human to grant them entry, they can set to work, in peace and quiet, slowly poisoning the body until the soul is destroyed. I love the Evil Seven. That's why they have a place in the throne room," Ozelot addressed Aron. The prince remained silent. An agonizing chill rendered him almost immovable. Mechanically, he continued on his way.

"Let's take for example IRA. Anger changes the human character into that of a dog. The annoyance of a human who suffers from bouts of anger becomes first recognizable by a deep crease forming on his forehead. Next, he gets so incensed that he clenches his fist until he can no longer control himself and he starts screaming. Just as a dog barks ceaselessly, so the aggressive impulse in the human increases more and more. Until the anger has poisoned his senses that the dog bites and the human kills," the black baron stated triumphantly.

"Unless, the fit of anger can be broken," Aron countered. "No soul is so weak that it loses absolute power over its passions. A burst of anger can be broken," the prince insisted. Ozelot just laughed.

"Why don't you try it some time. When someone boils over with anger, when he sees nothing but red, he's no longer able to think. Then his heart seethes and fumes like a volcano, then it overflows with anger. Didn't I deliver a marvelous proof of the effect of IRA through the conflict between your parents? In the end, they were blind with anger and incapable of finding their way back to each other. A true artistic masterpiece, come to think of it, that anger can lead to blinding. True, it took a while before anger was able to make its entry into your parents'

souls, but this was balanced out by a sinister ending, just as I like it." Ozelot grinned craftily and made fun of the Nubian rulers' fallibility. To Prince Aron it seemed like a blade was cutting through his heart. But Ozelot took no note of it.

"The volcano IRA is powerful. Just as powerful as the poison of INVIDIA. A slow-working poison for which there is no antidote. Once infected with ENVY, it will rampage through the body. It destroys all joy, paralyzes, eats at the heart, and calls up other vermin like hatred, for example, because one begrudges another what one doesn't own oneself."

"It all depends on one's perspective," the prince tried to make the best of it. "For it might very well be that one doesn't envy someone for his intelligence but admires him for it. Then envy can turn into inspiration. Let's presume that I don't envy his intelligence but I look up to this person as a model, as someone to imitate," Aron was thinking of his father as he spoke. "One can envy a king or desire to become one. What do you say now?"

The prince delighted in having come up with such good thoughts as a challenge to Ozelot. But he just laughed out loud that the throne room reverberated.

"Look at me," said the lord of darkness and spread out his arms. "I'm clever, so that makes me a paragon too."

The sun prince was startled: "Then there must be good paragons and bad ones!"

"There you have it again. All that glitters isn't gold. It's up to you alone whether you can distinguish between the two," said Ozelot. "But you would have to be really smart. Show me a human being smart enough to always be able to distinguish between right and wrong. Your laws," and with that he meant the laws of the High Order, "are after all nothing but guidelines originating in infinity."

"We need these guidelines," the prince defended the sunlanders' way of life.

"Whether you like it or not, they are like stars in the universe. Without them the night would have no light. Stars light up the darkness and give us direction. They shine as bright and clear as our virtues."

"Your virtues are much too strict. That's why nobody follows them," scorned the darkling.

"They aren't strict. They are our protective shield, our armor against evil. Our virtues are our strength."

"And even if your virtues were covered with gold, I can't stand them," the master of dark forces spit over his left shoulder.

Aron spoke bravely against his fear: "Anybody can be guided by them along his way or at least try to, even if we again and again grope in the dark. Their brilliance is of eternal beauty. We love the stars above us and the divine order in us. The starlight endures through the ages. One can depend on them just as one can rely on the virtues," the prince spoke as with tongues of angels.

Ozelot interrupted Aron with a shark-like smile. His helmet disappeared halfway and revealed the gigantic mouth of a beast-of-prey. "This sounds like a sermon. Only the gullible would fall for this. In this world everything changes. Nothing

remains the same. Even stars come and go. They rise up and they burn out. There's no relying on anything or anybody. Or do I have to remind you of your parents? Wasn't it they who cared for nothing in the world anymore but the noble character of their people? In the process, the overwhelming task they set for their lives destroyed their own noble characteristics."

Ozelot enjoyed his wickedness. He loved behaving in a spiteful way, especially when he was able to touch a person's most sensitive spot. Then the fire of meanness glowed in his eyes. And all this talk about brilliance and endurance of the stars which light up the night, he didn't care for that at all. For Ozelot, order was grounded in disorder. Stars that light the way were an abomination to him. Only darkness reigned supreme in the black world of his.

"Don't take this personally, but to be virtuous in order to serve the good is simply boring! Believe me, the good cannot be coerced," Ozelot hid his true character and put on an act of courteousness. If he wanted to get Prince Aron of Nubia on his side, he had to play the role of the sensitive one. "People learn rules, only to break them at the right moment. They like to cross limits. Humans are just plain bad. It's not worth to believe that they are good at heart. But don't let this grieve you, my golden prince. You must face the truth. The kind of unbridled temper outbursts I'm able to stage creates suspense. A friendship could fall apart, a person could get killed. There's no telling how it will end," Ozelot flashed a hypocritical smile.

"You shouldn't entertain elusive hopes, Aron. A grudger will always be consumed with envy. He never looks up to the one whom he begrudges his intelligence, his beauty, his talent, or his friends. Why, I ask you, should he make an effort to win friends and further the growth of his intelligence when it is much easier to nurture ill feelings? To pour tar on a swan's snow white feathers so that he will finally get his comeuppance, can only be the desperate idea of an ugly little duck. To rejoice over the dirt under someone's fingernails, that's the disease called INVIDIA with which I afflicted him. You see, these deathly creatures are nothing more than bad diseases which poison the inside of the body, weaken it, inflict pain, and sometimes even lead to death, but at any rate into the realm of darkness."

Prince Aron had heard enough of this. Slowly it dawned on him how much need there was to guide the Nubians toward different thoughts, toward good thoughts. As they were about to cross the throne room, the hyena chalice filled with abominations scurried after them in order to serve His Sinister Highness, the black baron, his favorite dish. Prince Aron noticed that he actually snacked on a large number of snakes. But who would be surprised? He was no less smitten with GULA than with the rest of the detestations. After all, Ozelot was evil personified and thus he never even dreamed of moderation whether in eating or in anything else. He never made a choice between too much or too little. Excess in eating was the kind of fun he wouldn't want to deny himself. Prince Aron remembered disconcertedly that he too enjoyed stuffing his face. Only a bad habit, so he thought, to help him deal with the loss of his parents. In reality, GULA had already raised her head with the intent of poisoning the prince's soul. A gorgon never has his fill. For voracious gluttony it made no difference whether a person indulged in overeating out of sorrow or frivolity. Main thing is that it reached its goal and delivered the soul over to eternal darkness. Bad food poisons the body, but bad

thoughts poison the soul, the prince remembered the words of the official for good thoughts. They are like a virus that invades us and we cannot shake. Meanwhile, Ozelot polished off unperturbed and without pause, from the chalice that never seemed to be empty, here a living snake, there a lustrous snake, thus poisoning the dark ruler's dark soul while they continued on their walk along the seven gates wherein dwelled the seven evils.

Overwhelmed with fatherly pride, Ozelot introduced a particularly cunning and vexing member of the family.

"ACEDIA, indolence is the gaoler who fetters the mind. This is the beginning of indifference," he raved. "Her trick is to drain the beautiful, colorful world of its bright hues. When life loses its beauty then one sees everything gray in gray and it is not long before one becomes indifferent toward everything. And when one doesn't care anymore, then one turns into something like a rotten apple and gets used to boredom until all air has escaped. At this point, endless boredom turns into deadly boredom. Those who suffer from it destroy themselves because they do nothing against stemming the gradual seeping-away of the spirits of life; for everything depends on their staying in circulation."

"And where does this insolence of the heart come from?" inquired the prince seeking to find the cause of this paralyzing effect.

"Acedia encircles the soul until the world stands still."

"But idleness is the beginning of all vice, every child knows that," the prince retorted.

"Knowing, true. But idlers seem to care little about your nuggets of wisdom. Even though nobody wants to admit it, idleness is very popular and makes people willing to accept indolence. Once accepted, it freezes people's actions into a block of ice and delivers them cravenly and weak-willed to their fate until they throw their entire life away. Indolence reaches the souls of the sunlanders quickly and without delay because human nature doesn't like expending any effort. This deathly evil has a special place in my heart," the dark ruler couldn't hide his admiration, "for it hinders, in such a simple way, the unfolding of virtue so that I can pick up lazy sunlanders in droves."

The sun prince had a hard time believing this for he knew only diligent sunlanders.

"Indolence and boredom are crimes against oneself. The world is full of possibilities. Isn't it true that everybody has plans and ideas, desires and dreams. The mere thought of not wanting to do anything or not strive for something is deadly to my mind," Aron vented his indignation.

"Exactly my point. A sunlander who lazes about in the sun and rests on his laurels stops fighting. But whoever stops fighting, for love, for a dream, for a goal, will wilt before blooming. He withers away like a flower without water. The divine principle wills it that way."

"You are talking of divine principles?" Aron replied horrified.

"But, of course. You and I are two sides of the same coin. You're the light, I'm the darkness. We belong together. You can't have one without the other. It's just a

matter of disturbing the balance between us.”

“To the contrary. This is your version,” the little sun ruler waxed indignant. “It’s a matter of keeping the balance between good and evil so that the order of the universe is preserved.”

“Holy cow! Don’t make me laugh,” Ozelot’s coarse voice echoed in the throne room. “My dear enemy, since you see everything in terms of black and white, of right and wrong, permit me to get you a little more off balance. The best thing for you to do is post a piece of paper inscribed with “good” or “evil” to make sure that your sunlanders won’t get things mixed up. But watch out, behind which inscription, do you think, are my deadly creatures hiding? For what’s wrongdoing to you is virtue to me.”

If I’m to survive here, I’ll need all my will power. I can’t permit it to be dissolve in air by that defeatist Acedia, was all Aron could think before Ozelot beguiled him once again.

“AVARITIA, I almost forgot to introduce one of my most powerful favorites,” said Ozelot, pointing at a horrifying monster seated on a treasure chest. Prince Aron was aghast. The darkling acted as if these seven deadly creatures were well respected, esteemed citizens, the cream of his state. In all this, he praised one abomination after another among whom honesty was a totally alien concept.

“Avaritia has many talents. She can awake the miser in you sunlanders. Why should one share I ask you, Prince Aron, when one can be stingy? I have great respect for greed for it nourishes the insatiable side in you. Show me the Nubian who doesn’t want to have at least what his neighbor has. Still a bit more would, of course, be even better, Avaritia makes you think. And when you feel the throbbing in your temples: want to have that too, want to have that too, then you have become the sucker of greed.”

“Not wanting everything is also a decision,” the prince believed to know his people better.

“No one can escape the wheel of craving once Avaritia has her grip on a heart.” Ozelot always knew everything better. The good thoughts had to struggle hard to come to the little ruler’s mind at the right moment.

“Everything has two sides,” Aron wasn’t about to give up. “If one isn’t satisfied with one’s achievements, then one puts in extra effort in my country to advance further. That’s what I call diligence.”

“What I’m talking about is greed,” the black baron thundered quite incensed.

“You seem to know a different kind of Nubian than I do,” replied Prince Aron without batting an eye.

Brave, brave, this little prince, Ozelot had to admit once again. Aron wanted to reproach the dark ruler with the fact that to his mind his evil seven were vile, mean creatures, but he preferred to keep quiet. He felt it was safer not to provoke the evil too much.

## The Masks of the Seven Gates

Ozelot found the discussion at any rate very straining for Aron stood his ground on even the thorniest points of the exchange. Taking care not to lose his temper, after all he was out to gain the prince's trust by stealth, Ozelot quickly devoured one slippery snake after another. The poison seemed to calm him down for after the last bite he turned once again with great equanimity toward his companion.

"My darlings are not at all as depraved as you think," was Ozelot's answer to a reproach Prince Aron had not spoken out loud. "At least not as long as I'm the caretaker of their reputation. For I do my best to conceal their true nature from the world. Everyone likes to appear in the best of lights, even my evil seven. That's why it's an honor for me to disguise their wickedness. No one discerns their true nature because no one can look inside of them. It's all in the outward appearance. That's why I drape my darlings in the mantle of harmlessness so that your clueless sunlanders don't regard them as particularly worrisome and certainly not as dangerous. Generally, the evil seven are being dismissed as excusable weaknesses, bad habits, or quirks. That's exactly my ruse. I want my darlings to be taken as naïve. This serves them well in their task of pulling the wool over your eyes. Furbo, furbissimo! Ain't that damn clever? The effect appears to be minute and inconsequential. No one recognizes their terrible power. No one realizes how he is slowly drawn into a world from which there is no return," divulged the secret seducer.

"In times gone by, yes, back then, my darlings were still hiding under the dark cover of night because they were afraid to be found out. But that has long changed. Now they carry on their misdeeds in broad daylight and nobody gives a damn. They get bolder and your Nubians ever more gullible because they are no longer able to distinguish sins from virtues." Ozelot's sides were splitting with laughter which resounded thunderously from the walls of the throne room. "Some even take the deadly ones for virtues. And that's how it should be for it makes it easier to lure you onto the wrong path. Far off any virtues, the evil seven are able to spoil characters and dissolve the order between heaven and earth. Isn't that fabulous?" asked the black ruler without waiting for an answer. "Your sunlanders have learned to see the world through my eyes in the process of which they are being taken for a ride by the Flying Spider."

"That's ghastly." Aron instinctively felt for his neck. He still felt the cold breath and the thin, prickly legs. "Everything you say is ghastly. You distort and obscure the facts to a point where one gets dizzy and no longer knows what's right and what's wrong. You see the world the way you want to see it. I see the world from a different perspective," Prince Aron fought back with disgust.

"I don't exaggerate. It's all even much worse than you have ever experienced in your darkest dreams. Not for a minute do your dim-witted Nubians suspect that they are swallowing a bait with which I will drag them through the seven gates into

the black holes. There they will rot through all eternity as shadow ghosts. Isn't that ingenious?" Ozelot was overcome with infernal glee. He pounded his armor twice with his fist, making it rumble.

The prince wanted to protest and tell him what one regards as dim-witted, another calls well-meaning, but the lord of darkness babbled on brazenly: "Don't think that your sunlanders are coerced into swallowing something they don't want to swallow. They do it completely of their own free will. Your virtues have failed. They didn't succeed in educating the Nubians in the most basic matters. Sunlanders should know that not all that tastes good is good for them. They should also know that they are running a great risk if they let the evil seven sidetrack them from the righteous path and disrespect all limits. Even when Superbia has managed to drag a soul as far as the gate, they could still turn back. Is it my fault that your people lack the backbone to say 'No!' Saying 'No!' is your strength, but you take it for weakness. The cowardliness of the good is the power of the evil. There's nothing anyone can do about it. Do you get it now, Prince Greenhorn, with what kind of adversaries your nampy-pampy virtues are faced? It's your curiosity, your desire to see and experience the worst and that's exactly what breaks your neck," sneered Ozelot as he laid out to Prince Aron the painful reality of his people's weak character. "Each of you is free to decide what actions to take, be it right or wrong. You have the freedom and the power to cast your lot with the evil seven."

"Or with the noble seven. We always straddle good and evil. The choice makes the difference," the sun prince countered bravely.

"Sure. But believe me, nobody has ever been infected by truth and morality. What's right for one mustn't be valid for another by a long shot. My darlings know very well that ill feelings hold true power over the likes of you. Reason and sound judgment take second place among you. But whoever surrenders to his destructive impulses loses control of himself and the situation. How easy it is to ensnare your people and how little can be done against it. That's the true artistry of my darlings. When my darlings' camouflage has by and large been successful, your people with all their gullibility succumb everywhere. That's just the way you are. Between heaven and earth, you simply want it all. You are unable to deny yourselves anything. I'm telling you, my gold prince, you don't need any of this. For, once someone is hooked, he will encounter the last, black secret of his soul before his ultimate downfall. He'll march ineluctably toward his fate, for the evil seven are in reality the grim reapers. They lead you off the straight and narrow path toward traversing a perilous threshold. All in all there are gates through which you should absolutely not pass," the black baron made fun of the sunlanders' unwariness. "Those who don't recognize the limits and fall victim to the evil seven, destroy their own life and that of their parents. Their suffering will go on forever. I rejoice over every Nubian who gets to feel personally that the deadly seven rightfully bear their name," Ozelot painted the artistry of his favorites in the darkest colors.

"What a ghastly lesson. But each one of us is familiar with these burning sentiments," Aron countered. "Arrogance, anger, greed, all these are part of human nature. When someone bursts with anger, when he gets boiling mad, he still doesn't turn into a murderer by any means. For deep inside of us is a dividing

line we won't cross. This guardian rings a warning bell should we tend toward something dishonest. Even if we turn against our inner voice, it gives us the proper advice. This authority, which stands even above the crown and is higher than the law, was instituted by the Eternal himself. It is our conscience that guards us against harm, the harm that your evil seven inflict because they hide their true intentions."

"Believe what you want. The human conscience has long abdicated. Who's still plagued by a bad conscience nowadays? Who still listens to that inner warning voice? Your guardian has lost all power because my darlings are stronger! Your weaklings can't resist the secret of evil. When barriers begin to crumple, the enemy will pass through. We are your enemies. But who among you recognizes us? Many Nubians never give it a second thought when they act unjustly. They have forgotten that which really counts in life. They don't care about having someone on their conscience because they are unable to control Avaritia, because they can't stuff themselves enough, and they will step over dead bodies for Nubian gold. Your miserable, meek-voiced conscience has nothing to offer to counter my brilliant darlings. The evil seven push you into a high of desires because, most of all, you always want more. They make you forget how velvety soft a clear conscience feels. They make you forget all that you deem good and noble. They render you deaf and blind toward your insipid virtues."

"My dear enemy," Aron cited his opponent in his mind, "all you have are these lousy seven. I for my part, however, can amass an entire people. They all carry the virtues in their hearts and each one of them hears the warnings from his conscience about your cutthroats. The evil seven will never tip the balance in their favor, that I can guarantee you. Plenty of sunlanders have an honest hide and don't constantly push the limits."

But Prince Aron was smart enough not to express his thoughts out loud for his desire to bring back his parents trumped all else. Only they were important and worth of Nubia's gold, his parents, his gold dust. For them, the prince exposed himself to all the dangers of this world. For what would he be without his parents?

"My darlings have an array of talents with which to muddle your head. You can hide behind your 'armor,' your inner uprightness, as you call it, all you want. We'll get you in the end," Ozelot continued to spin his tale. "For if one always wants more without consideration for others, it can happen that in a moment of rage one kills inadvertently the person one claims to love most. At such a point, one has long lost all conscience, one takes without giving, and be it a life. Then there's no going back, the threshold has been crossed. Most sunlanders recognize too late what Superbia or Ira has made of them and the deadly rightfully deserve their name. They destroy your character, undermine the divine order, and eradicate all human love." Ozelot couldn't rejoice enough in his favorites' accomplishments. Malice flickered in his beast-of-prey eyes.

"Then the evil seven are the seven gates to our dark side?" Prince Aron, who mustered the firmness of a tree, made sure he got it right. And he needed it in order not to waver for he wanted to get to know every aspect of his opponent. Only those who know the sound of the evil one, who see through and understand his character will be able to protect themselves against him. That much became

clear to him at that moment.

“Let’s put it this way,” Ozelot continued his boasting, “at the doorstep of darkness live seven blackguards in seven gates. They do all they can to give the soul a wrong direction so that it will encounter its own shadow. In the end, it will be devoured anyway.” His eyes filled with horror, Aron turned away from Ozelot.

“Come on,” the dark ruler tried to make nice again. “I’m not as bad as you think. We all take care of our families, and my family are the evil seven. They too need to eat every day. It’s a dog eat dog world. My darlings eat souls, what’s the big deal? The only reason why you want to right everything is for you to strengthen your power. So you see, I too want to strengthen my power by weakening yours. That works best if I stalk your souls and poison their good thoughts. It’s the fatal poison of my family that spreads its effect in your hearts. Worse than all outward symptoms are the changes they wreak primarily in the innermost being. Thoughts are like threads one follows. The poison of the deadly ones makes sure that the good thoughts get off their usual track and turn toward arrogance, anger, envy, and greed. The evil seven determine your decision long before you meet them. For sentiments are stronger than reason. They are your advisers, who lead you astray . . . Toward the bad.”

“Hopefully toward the good,” Aron held out under the evil thoughts. They gave him an inkling of why it was so difficult to be a good person, and even more difficult to remain one.

Again Ozelot flashed his shark grin whereby his knight’s helmet disappeared partially, but right away covered the ghastly mouth again. “We understand each other. We are cut of the same wood, for we are rulers.”

The black baron, in the spirit of comradeship, slapped Aron’s back with his claw almost causing him to collapse. If we are supposed to be of the same wood then you are made of coal, but the sun prince kept his thoughts hidden from the ruler of the world of darkness. To destroy an opponent from inside was simply abhorrent to the brave prince. For Ozelot it was nothing more than the art of war which since the beginning of time has fought for the evil side in man.

The ugly in Ozelot had put his cards on the table, had blurted out all his tricks and depravities. Never before had the lord of darkness given away all that takes place behind the scenes. This was not a good sign, but Aron was inexperienced in these little games and therefore it escaped his notice. Ozelot’s plan, his strategy of putting the mask of naïveté on the evil seven to make them look like harmless vices filled Aron with disgust and admiration at the same time and even his fantasy was germinating ghastly, black flowers. How rotten must someone be to purposely mislead a soul and devise its undoing. The thought made Prince Aron recoil. No wonder many sunlanders don’t recognize the danger and wander obliviously into Ozelot’s fatal snares, he made excuses for his subjects to himself.

Suddenly the sun prince became aware of the true extent of his parents’ arguments and how they had permitted themselves to be devoured by the deadly power of IRA in their concern for the continuance of the good thoughts. He knew now that even a king and a queen are not infallible. They desired the

good and did the bad. They too probably did not recognize how dangerous IRA could be and failed to drive out these bad feelings, these intruders. The absence of fortitude and vigilance had been the undoing even of my parents. If I ever get out of here alive, the prince swore to himself, I will do everything to fight evil with good. The odds of this power struggle with the lord of darkness were not in his favor. Then the prince asked rather valiantly: "Is there anything else I should know?" even though he had already seen and heard more than he could stomach.

"You know what," Ozelot rumbled on through the throne room, which to Aron seemed to have no end, "keep an eye out on the sunlanders and you'll recognize my darlings' fine art of seduction in their bad nature. The evil seven turn into convivial buddies with whom one enjoys having a boisterous good time. Little transgressions turn into malicious monsters."

Instinctively, Prince Aron took a step to the right as if to duck an invisible cudgel Ozelot was swinging at him. This Ozelot was really the most cunning and unscrupulous beast he had ever met. He would have liked nothing better than to wish some kind of scabies on him or to see him suffocate in his own wickedness. But the virtues in him kept the upper hand. They didn't permit the ruler of Nubia to slide down the path of ill sentiments. When Aron noticed Anger starting to seethe in him to seal his fate forever, he heard Wisdom asking him just in time: "With what do you fill your heart: with hatred or love?" Sharp as a knife, his mind recognized that Ozelot had only been waiting for this one moment. The prince forced himself to think for a moment before acting. Thus he saw through the black baron's trickery of deliberately filling his heart with hatred so as to turn him into something ghastly and erratic. Wisdom saved Aron from his anger. IRA abated and Aron thought furtively: somehow furbo, furbo, furbissimo—as clever as a rogue, this black ruler, and an ice-cold sensation drizzled down his back. The prince had been saved, at least for the moment. He retained control over his own feelings. The darkness had not been able to find an entry into his soul.

### **The Green Elixir**

"But now to you. We've been expecting your arrival, Prince Aron. We are familiar with the reason for your journey to the Caligo land." Aron didn't mind. This way he could cut to the chase and demand the release of his parents. But Ozelot turned the conversation in a totally different direction.

"I admire your courage and will show you the flask with the life elixir. Only I possess this magic tincture which will make you grow immediately. Come along," he commanded. The prince became weak in the knees. Of all people, his greatest enemy was ready to fulfill his heart's greatest desire. The wish which all others had left unfulfilled. Even the wish official was powerless in this matter. And now, along comes the lord of darkness to make this dream come true. Was it a ruse? But the prince's heart was jubilant: to grow, to grow, to grow at last! He heard and saw

nothing else. Aron looked feverishly forward to the magic potion. He already had blown all good intentions to be vigilant to the wind. Ozelot had been crafty enough to uncover the prince's greatest passion. He touched him in his most vulnerable spot and the prince forgot himself and all caution. Ozelot had long brooded over how he could get at the prince for he had withstood Kofur's trials surprisingly well. He wasn't as easily misled as Ozelot had thought. No, this prince had a stronger will than his parents. Kofur had sewn discord into the hearts of the king and queen.

They weren't strong, at least not strong enough to notice the changes. So the squabbles ate at their souls day after day until they were no longer able reach each other. Deliverance meant reconciliation. But they had long become blind to each other. Before they could agree on how to prevent the flight of their subjects, they had become themselves prisoners in the realm of darkness. Ozelot was very satisfied. He knew that parents and children belonged together. At least that's what Kofur had told his master about life among the people in the sunland. So if he didn't let the king and queen deteriorate into shadow spirits, but kept them only as prisoners, it would be only a matter of time before the prince thought of searching for his parents. Ozelot's calculations proved correct. Aron embarked on his journey and Ozelot sent out the demon Kofur to meet him.

But the steadfast prince wouldn't be misled by the demon, leaving Ozelot no choice but to hit Prince Aron in his vanity. To grow had been the prince's desire for a long time. So Ozelot didn't even have to bother persuading him to look at the life elixir. The prince ran eagerly after Ozelot to take a look at the magic potion. The memory of his parents faded like ink on a dusty piece of paper. All the prince wanted was grow and that, as quickly as possible. Ozelot, with Kofur on his shoulders, ran down the stairs into the cellar. Widely dispersed torches made the thick wall appear even more massive. A moldy odor hit Monti's sensitive nose and she was glad to hide under her fur coat and Aron's cape from the damp-cool breath of the old walls. She would rather not be in her master's skin just then.

In one room was a cabinet as old and black as the castle. Kofur came flying in with the key and Ozelot opened one of the dust-covered doors. Ever so careful, he took out a little flask with a green gleaming liquid inside.

"That's it," said Ozelot. Aron took the flask and beheld the liquid with great interest.

"A tiny sip alone will make you grow," thundered Ozelot's deep voice through the cellar vault. Then he put the flask with the liquid back and locked it up. The little prince noted the exact spot where Kofur kept the key.

"We'll discuss the matter tomorrow. Until then, be my guest," said Ozelot before Kofur showed Prince Aron to his night quarters. Finally they were alone. Miss Monti trembled again with fear.

"But I'm with you, don't be afraid," Aron stroked the little cat though he was sick to the stomach himself.

"It's so dark and cold and this eerie silence reminds me that we are in the land of evil forces," the cat warned her master.

“Tomorrow we’ll make sure to get away as quickly as possible. But before I’ll take a sip from the magic potion. Ozelot needn’t know about it. He’ll rant and rave afterwards, but by then I’ll be his equal in height. It’s ingenious, isn’t it?” Aron asked Miss Monti. “I took note of the exact place where Kofur keeps the key.”

“I don’t trust this peace. Remember the shield at the entrance portal. Besides we have to find your parents. Somewhere around here they are being held captive.”

“What would I do without you, Monti? I almost forgot about my parents. That’s impossible. I should have taken the official for good thoughts with me.”

“You know very well that he has no power here. Here, it is only your own will that counts,” answered Miss Monti.

“It’s good to be in such wise company.” Aron caressed Miss Monti little head. But the cat arched her back and tucked her tail between the hind paws. She too couldn’t shake her fear.

“Once I’m big and strong it will be easy for me then to free my parents. That’s why I absolutely have to get my hands on the elixir. But let’s drop the subject. Sometimes walls have ears. We’d better get some rest.”

The cat took her energy sphere from her knapsack and checked to see the degree of brightness with which it glowed in the dark. In the ominous darkness, the light made her feel safe. The prince and the cat bedded down to rest together. Aron waited until Miss Monti was asleep. Then he got up quietly, tiptoed through the cellar, took the key, and opened the cabinet. Ozelot and Kofur watched Aron’s secret exploits from the throne room intently. Kofur was busy tightening the air to an image between his wings which showed the prince in the cellar vault. Ozelot, who was now transformed into a true ozelot, a cat of prey, sat attentively in front of the image. When he saw Aron holding the flask in his hands, he hissed and made a triumphant gesture with his paw.

“In a moment we’ll have made it,” said Kofur, who, by means of fanning the air, produced a clear picture of the cellar.

“I love your ideas. How about giving this dolt another surprise?” Ozelot asked the demon.

“Nothing easier than that, Master,” said Kofur and turned his attention back to the fan image.

“When I take the flask, I will finally grow,” Aron told himself. And as if he had asked his parents for permission, he heard his father’s voice, which the mischievous Kofur imitated. He moved both of his beaks and said with the king’s voice: “Take a big gulp. The more you drink the taller you’ll get. Ozelot won’t let us go willingly. That’s why you have to be able to stand up to him.”

The prince was happy he wasn’t doing anything wrong. Why else would his father be giving him permission? Just at the moment, when the evil was closing in on the prince, his angel appeared but without revealing himself. He was taller than Aron and held his protective hand over him. The entire room was bathed in light. Aron pricked his ears into the darkness for the unearthly beauty remained invisible to him. Was there something? he wondered. He was just about to stuff the flask into

his pocket when he touched an object. Aron took it out. It was the energy sphere with his parents. The prince held the little flask with the elixir in one hand and the sphere with the connection to his parents in the other. The black baron sat mesmerized in front of the air draft which produced the prince's image. Which way would he take? He now needed wisdom more than anything in the world. The evil pulled, the angel did his best to reach Aron: "Conquer the evil in you." But Aron was only aware of his most fervent wish. He saw the flask: "To finally be big and strong."

Then he saw the energy sphere and heard his father's warning: "Don't come to this place. The black powers will defeat you." The prince was baffled. Just a while ago his father had encouraged him to take as big a gulp as possible of the magic potion. Was that perhaps foul play? Now the scales fell from Aron's eyes. He wanted to take his parents home and the potion was to make him big and strong for this task. As little as he was, he would never be a match for Ozelot. He didn't stand a chance. Again, the prince cast a leftward glance at the flask. He felt really too small and weak to challenge the lord of darkness to free his parents. The energy sphere warned to be vigilant. The elixir will help me to free you, he pondered. And again he had doubts: Should I or shouldn't I? I would be a thief. But I would use the elixir for a good purpose, the prince reassured himself. He glanced again at the flask and Ozelot hissed: "Yes, yes, take it already! You're the prince of the sunland, the guardian of the good-at-heart."

"Doing good I do too—but preferably for myself," Kofur's evil thoughts made fun of the noble ruler of Nubia. The black baron went on: "You never violated the rules. You wouldn't even draw outside the line if you could help it. I watched you at the castle pond imprinting the image of your parents on the canvas. No, you are an exemplar of uprightness, you always paint within the line. You are some kind of moderate," Ozelot shook his body.

"A real good guy this gold prince. Disgusting," Kofur too shuddered at the thought. "Not even the plain fun of trying something would make him scribble outside the line. Prince Aron of Nubia's decency is real cause for alarm," Kofur agreed with his master.

"And are you happy?" the darkling probed further even though he remained invisible to Aron. "No living soul wants to be just good all the time. Just for once it's okay, go ahead, steal something and run wild. Just for once you can break the rules of the High Order. Then you're lost. Then I've got you. Then I've got your country and your people. Then the power of the sun will be broken forever."

"Long live the world of darkness," croaked Kofur.

Just then, from far, far away, the voice of the angel came closer: "Make the right choice." Was there something, Aron pricked his ears to penetrate the silence. "Remain strong!" Did Aron sense the breath of a faint voice that tried to remind him of something important? The prince startled himself and only now was the angel able to enter his mind. Quickly, Aron put the flask back in its place. Through the jitter, a few drops of the elixir spilled on the floor and a rat eagerly licked it up. When Aron turned back once more toward the vaulted room, he saw the rat lying dead on the floor. Kofur's words came to his mind in which he spoke of the

shadow spirits, all of whom used to be human beings who had broken the rules. Therefore, Ozelot was able, in the name of evil, to take them into the realm of shadows.

“I’m the ruler of the sunland. I’m a paragon. Ozelot won’t draw me to the side of evil,” Aron recognized himself.

Ozelot was furious: “Now, he’s actually putting the bottle back into the poison cabinet. We almost had him trapped.” Ozelot foamed with rage. He screamed and bared his saber teeth. But he didn’t give up yet. Now that Aron had finally come to free his parents, now he, Ozelot, wasn’t going to throw in the towel so quickly. He’d been waiting for this day far too long. The battle over the sunland was not decided yet.

The prince shook Miss Monti until she woke up. Then he told her about the life elixir which actually was a flask filled with poison.

“Ozelot has let the cat out of the sack.”

“Nay,” the cat yawned. “I’m still in here.”

What Monti liked best was curl up in her knapsack which expanded easily and thereby provided more space. She felt safe inside.

“Besides I told you right away that anything goes here.” Unfazed, Monti went right on sleeping. Cats can’t be disturbed in their sleep, thought Aron. Then he too packed it in for some rest. Kofur’s warning came to his mind: “You can bet your life on it.” Overwhelmed with exhaustion, the prince’s eyes fell shut.

Aron slept tight, woke up, didn’t know where he was, and fell back into the lap of illusion. The thundering of hooves made him presume the coming of the dream god. For a long time he hadn’t heard from him, but during this night the dream made the blood freeze in his veins. From the splendid purple cloak shone the fish heads of his parents. As the prince tried to move, their image vanished. Only clouds moved through the cloak. The magic mirror revealed one more time his destiny, but Aron was still unable to interpret it. Besides he wasn’t interested anymore in finding out more about himself. All he wanted was his parents, nothing else. Phantasos rode thunderously through his brain and vanished, not without leaving behind a pounding headache a few seconds before Aron was waking up. The prince sat up straight and felt his head when suddenly the wall began to move. The wall opened like a door. The prince jumped from his cot in the belief that he was still dreaming. The headaches were forgotten. Driving by curiosity, he stepped through the opening in the wall. A long stairwell led even further down into the earth.

“I hope only for my own best sake that this is not the fissure to the world beyond and will lead me to Ozelot’s ancestors,” the prince shuddered. But his thirst for adventure won out over his common sense. Carefully, he placed one foot before the other. The stairs were firm. Now that he was already here, Aron wanted find out what awaited him at the other end of the stairwell.

## The Mysterious Grotto

Arrived at the bottom, a mysterious grotto opened up before Aron's eyes. A muted light bounced off the rocky walls. From the crevices spiraled cone-shaped formations of various sizes, growing either from the ground up or from the ceiling down. Wherever the prince's eyes wandered, he saw fantastic, multi-colored sculptures of solid rock— bodies, hands, fingers, noses, towers, and a castle with a petrified waterfall. The prince hesitated to go on. He was all alone and the sight of the hooded, black man leaning against the wall, seemingly waiting for him, rather gave him the creeps. Aron thought what would happen if Monti woke up and didn't find her master. But then his curiosity got the better of him. With halting steps, the prince traversed the cavern until he reached the edge of an underground lake. The water was a bright green. In the middle floated a small island. Again Aron rubbed his eyes. On a throne in the center of the island sat suddenly and unexpectedly no other than Ozelot.

"How did he get here?" Aron wondered. He hadn't heard or seen anything. Even though Ozelot still had his human form in part, yet because of his malice he still retained his beast-of-prey head. Ozelot gave Aron a long, glowering look until he finally said: "I put you to the test. The flask with the life elixir did not contain any poison." And as if to proof his claim, the rat that had been lying dead on the floor before ran over Aron's feet.

"All I wanted was find out whether you would forget your good principles. But you showed discipline and mental fortitude."

Those were Ozelot's words, but his thoughts bespoke a different language: "What a golden heart this Aron has. I'll avail myself of it now." Fortunately, the prince, he couldn't read thoughts. That's why he believed what he heard.

"You have a truly royal character and I shall reward you for it. I'll propose an exchange," the lord of darkness continued his speech. Did Ozelot mean what he said? Aron again rubbed his eyes. Then he pinched his arm. That hurt. Now Aron knew that he was wide awake.

"An exchange then," repeated Ozelot. He rummaged around in the pocket of his cloak and pulled out the flask containing the bright green liquid.

"Maybe Ozelot really just wanted to put me to the test and it isn't poison after all," the bad thoughts tried to take possession of the prince.

"I'll leave the life elixir, which will immediately make you big and strong, here for you. In return you will give up your parents." Ozelot's beast-of-prey eyes stared for long time into Aron's honest eyes.

At this moment the shadow spirits entered. Quietly and like an impenetrable mist hovering above the water's surface, they formed a line around the lake. They wore black capes with hoods pulled deep over their faces. The shadow spirits spread bad thoughts all around and tried to shake Aron's love of his parents once and for all. Their voices were indistinct and soft at first, then they swelled, getting

louder and louder: "Forget your parents. They abandoned you. They never loved you."

Aron stood rooted to the spot. "They only think of themselves; they didn't comfort you when you were alone; they didn't protect you against the dark of night," the bad thoughts continued to plague him. Ozelot flashed a grin. Aron covered his ears.

"I don't want to hear any of this!" he screamed. But the shadow spirits had no mercy, they kept on babbling: "They treated you like their dogs. All you were supposed to do was obey; they never took you into their arms."

"Yes, they did," screamed Aron beside himself with despair. "They did too take me into their arms!"

"And did your father go horseback riding with you?" asked the heartless shadow spirits.

"No," Aron lowered his head.

"And did your mother ever read you a story?" they asked furthermore.

"No," Aron lowered his head even further and warm tears rolled down his cheeks. "They never had time," he whispered.

"They had no time for you because they didn't love you," concluded the shadow spirits. The pain he caused Aron made Ozelot burst into malicious laughter.

"Stop it!" Aron screamed. "Parents always love their children."

The shadow spirits scorned: "Is it love to never take any interest in your dreams? If they punish you with indifference? If their self-interest is greater than their dedication, and if they argue over every stupid little thing?"

Again Aron's eyes filled with tears. "I have special parents. They are the king and queen. Maybe they know better what is good and believe that a nanny can replace the parents," he attempted a defiant defense with firm voice.

"Don't entertain false hopes. Everybody thinks his parents are special. In reality, all they are in the end is ordinary people," was the shadow spirits' verdict. "They don't know you at all. Or did they ever listen to you? Frankly, you must admit, all they ever did was order you around. Forget about them. You won't miss them. A love that never existed can't be missed."

Aron howled like a wounded animal. Filled with rage and despair, he put his right hand in his pocket clenching his fist. Just then he noticed the energy sphere with his gold dust, his wish for a good family. He clutched the energy sphere tight when he heard the shadow spirits ask: "What's it going to be? The life elixir in exchange for your parents. Everything has its price! Decide or you'll never see the sun again!"

"I won't pay with my parents' lives. Nobody pays with this parents. I'd rather stop growing," Aron yelled at the shadow spirits. Ozelot could no longer conceal his true nature.

"Let's put the cards on the table," the dark ruler screamed. "For the last time. The elixir or your parents!" Impatiently, he held up the flask to Aron and the shadow

spirits began to chant a lament. They had disseminated enough bad thoughts. But the little prince wasn't intimidated. He saw through Ozelot's cat-and-mouse game and yelled with all his strength: "And I still love my parents, now and forever, no matter what!" He wouldn't exchange his parents and were it for all the gold in the world. Not for a clone as the miracle maker had attempted and not for the elixir. He took a stone from the ground and flung it at the bottle with the bright green magic potion. Again, the angel's colossal figure stood over Aron, his hands held protectively over him. The bottle in Ozelot's hands burst and landed in a thousand pieces on the ground. The good thoughts had finally carried the day. While the shadow spirits around the lake were engrossed in their song, the battle neared its end.

Ozelot was fit to be tied. How much time and endurance he had wasted on this hopeless venture, he now came to realize. All his ambition, all his bad energy, his grandiose plan for the conquest of Nubia, all had been for naught. This little nincompoop of a prince remained undeterred, and thus the house of the lord of darkness was bound to collapse. Yes, if it had only been a matter of the prince, in that case Ozelot might have been able to reconcile himself to the loss. But what counted for Ozelot was always the grand scheme. It was all or nothing. At stake was total power over the sunland. A single, tiny weakness on the part of Aron would have sufficed to land the decisive coup. Now the little prince had thwarted his bold plan and Ozelot was going stir crazy.

The wild animal howled unrestrained until the thunderous decibels echoed from the rocky walls. Sparks of hatred flashed at Aron from Ozelot's beast-of-prey eyes. To avoid being hit by them, Aron, in his anguish, clapped the two sun amulets on his wrists together twice. Once again Aron had to awaken the sun spirit. And once again he shot through his eyes the sun rays transformed into fire. The sun's energy ignited into licking flames all around the island and the fire fairies encircled Ozelot. When the flames threatened to devour the island, Ozelot howled for the last time. The evil of an entire life burst into unimaginable hatred. Ozelot's scheme to poison the prince through evil had failed. Now hatred poisoned his own heart. IRA turned against her master. As if pierced by an arrow, the lord of darkness sank to the ground. The fire fairies jumped over him and the black baron faded away like a star in the sky. In his malevolence he had completely wasted himself. Ozelot had turned to ashes. The reign of evil had collapsed. All that was left was an island swimming in a ring of fire.

The shadow spirits rose up and shattered on the rocky walls.

## **Goldfish**

Aron pressed the energy sphere against his still anxious heart. Just then, in the interior of the island, right where Ozelot had been sitting on his throne, erupted a twenty-five-foot high water jet in glorious colors that put out the fire of hatred. Aron's gaze was fixed on the fountain with fascination. Suddenly he spotted two

goldfish dancing high on top of the water sprays. Night seemed to be turning into light as his heart began to jump with joy. It was filled with restless foreboding and anticipation. Aron was unable to explain his excitement. He was still rooted to the spot like a pillar of salt, his energy sphere pressed against his heart. His hands were cold. As he was watching the two goldfish, the energy sphere not only warmed his hands but his heart as well. Mesmerized, the prince stared at the goldfish who abruptly crashed and sank into the fountain. In the process he got real frog's eyes and all simply because he believed to perceived a familiar silhouette. Two figures detached themselves from the water jet and his heart almost burst with joy. A beloved voice called out: "ARON!" At this moment, nothing could hold him back anymore. He jumped into the water and waded toward his parents for the water reached only to his knees. Now his parents stepped out of the fountain hand in hand and Aron lay in both their arms.

"My mommy, my daddy. I thought I'd never see you again," was all Aron was able to say.

"Solino, my little sun, my one and only. Your love set us free." The queen fidgeted with her eye, claiming that an insect kept her from seeing.

"My precious boy. As father it is my duty to look after you," the king reproached himself severely. "But fate turned everything upside down. Now you are our rescuer," the father admitted, "even though we should have protected you. It was the first time in our life that we were unable to hold you and keep you. A difficult trial for us." The king hunched his shoulders.

"We love you very much," Aron's mother stammered overwhelmed.

"I love you too." Aron almost burst with happiness. He felt wrapped in his parents' love as in a cover, warm and light. At long last light, just as he had always longed for. His hope of being reunited with his parents had been fulfilled.

"You are the best thing we own," the king stated with pride.

"Help! Help!" they heard a desperate call. All three of them were still standing in the water, unable to let go of each other. They embraced again and again. When they finally looked toward the shore, they discovered Aron's cat running restlessly back and forth. Miss Monti felt the need to be a part of the royal family's happiness. She too wanted to celebrate the great moment. But, then again, her joy wasn't quite great enough to make her go into the water for it.

"Miss Monti wants to greet you. She has been my loyal travel companion," Aron told his parents.

They waded together through the water back to the shore. Monti bowed before the royal pair and then she scolded: "This caterwauling woke me. Did these eerie songs come from the shadow spirits? I was looking for you, Master. What I found was an opening in the wall and a staircase down into the underworld. It's a good thing my energy sphere provided light. Where are we anyway?" asked Miss Monti, holding the light in one paw and the other against her hip. "And how did the king and queen get here? Does it perhaps have something to do with the life elixir? And where is Ozelot? Why do the most important things have to take place when

I'm asleep," the cat said annoyed. "Now, I undertook a long, dangerous journey with you and in the end I slept through it. I just can't believe it." Miss Monti behaved as huffy as the wind.

"But at least you've carried the light into the darkness. Your wish has been fulfilled," the prince calmed the cat. The king and queen bent down and patted Monti. "I hope she doesn't get ill. Maybe all this was a bit much for her," the queen said concerned.

Aron took the little cat into arms and pushed his parents to leave the rocky grotto and the black castle.

"Let's leave this murky place as quickly as possible behind us, now that I've finally found you again," Aron urged his parents on.

"By all means let's get away from here," babbled Miss Monti. "I'm freezing! Besides I don't like this terrible silence. Just to be lying in the sun again soon!" moaned Monti. She recalled a sunny day with Aron at the castle pond as the swan family was rocking by and Aron imprinted his gold dust on the canvas for the wish official to encapsulate it in an energy sphere. These hours of leisure and warmth, Monti longed to recapture as soon as possible. Since the king and queen had now been liberated, there should be no further obstacles in the way of her wish to go home. They all climbed the stairs. At the top, the prince used all the strength of his will power to remember the way. He ran along the cellar vault, the nagging cat in his arm, and followed by his parents, until they reached the room in which Ozelot had stored the elixir.

"Don't touch anything. This is Ozelot's poison cabinet," the prince warned. The cat let out a shrill scream.

"Calm down. Ozelot doesn't exist anymore."

But the cat pointed upward. There, at the cabinet's end, sat the demon Kofur with his two heads. Malice looked from his six eyes down on them. To none of them was the demon a stranger. But fortunately, the wicked eagle too had turned to stone. He was no longer able to make mischief. And that was good so. They continued on their way until the prince found the stairs from the cellar directly out into the open.

A miracle had taken place for the sun received them with light and warmth. The cat placed a paw over her eyes. She first had to get used to the brightness. Then she stored her energy sphere in her knapsack. The little light had been of good service.

The cat looked around surprised. Not a trace of the black castle, no more darkness, no coldness, no shadow spirits, even the throne room with the dragon throne was gone. Again the king and queen embraced their son.

"How I missed you, every day, every hour," the prince confessed to his parents and nestled against them.

"At last sun. How I missed you," Miss Monti mimicked her master. With an impish smile toward her master, she spread out her forepaws as if to embrace the sun.

At this marvelously perfect moment, the prince noticed something. As if robbed of his senses, he dashed back down the cellar stairs and into the black cellar vault. He just heard behind him his mother's voice: "Please stay here! It's too dangerous."

But the prince didn't heed the warning. He had to rescue his ballerina. The toy clock had slipped from his pocket without him noticing it. Meanwhile the vaulting cavern began to rattle, cracks appeared, and it was on the verge of collapse. With crazed eyes, Aron searched the ground. But she was nowhere to be found. So he had no choice but to descend once more into the rocky grotto. He ran as fast as his legs would carry him until he spotted his ballerina at the edge of the underground lake. And one thought rushed through his mind. It hadn't been Miss Monti who had cried for help when he stood in the water with his parents. No, it was his dancer to whom no one had paid attention since the sun prince believed she was safely with him.

"Forgive me, my beauty. I wouldn't let you rot in this murky cavern. You're my joy, you're the only one who knows how to dance on the sun's rays so airy and tender."

The prince's heart opened up. It was love that made his heart light up in the deepest darkness. With the tip of his fingers, the prince stroked gently the ballerina's tiny hand. He was so engrossed that he was unaware of the crumbling cellar vault around him. He was still kneeling at the edge of the lake, adoring his dancer when suddenly the earth began to shift under him. At this moment, Aron awoke from his enchantment. He grasped the figure and ran for his life. He ran to reach the earth's surface before the collapsing cellar would bury him and his ballerina. His short legs barely managed two steps at a time. But he had to make it for the stairway was already breaking up behind him. Above ground, his mother and father were kneeling down, extending their hands toward him and calling out: "Faster, faster, you'll make it!"

Miss Monti shrieked hysterically: "I'll miss you even more than the sun. You're my friend!" She already saw him crashing into the black abyss of the cellar. Then she shrieked further: "Be brave, hold out! I'll call your angel even if he doesn't listen to me!" Miss Monti folded her paws together and sent a miserable glance heavenward. "I'm calling the prince's angel. May he hold him and guard him wherever he goes. Wherever, do you hear? Especially on the stairway."

Nevertheless, the last rungs gave way under Aron's feet and he tumbled inexorably into the deep. His father and mother, who were still holding out their hands, issued a horrific scream. Just then, something was lifting the prince up and they all deemed to perceive the fluttering of wings. Aron heard his angel: "I am guarding you with my wings."

"Thanks to the heavens and to my angel that I can be with you safe and sound." Aron was lifting his hand to his forehead when he noticed that he was holding his ballerina with an iron grip. He was shocked. "She is so delicate. I shouldn't squeeze her too hard."

"All this because of her. You're crazy," stated Miss Monti in her catty way. "After all, it's only a toy."

“It’s my ballerina. She is so fragile and she has a soul. I would never have left her behind,” Aron defended the death-defying rescue of his toy clock.

“You’re a good child,” said the queen.

“I’m proud of you,” the king agreed with his wife.

The wind spirits danced with joy to see the sun prince again safe and sound.

“You airy one,” Aron greeted his loyal friend. “Long time no see.”

“Important business has kept me in the gray world between.”

“What might that have been?” Aron made fun of the wind.

“You don’t believe in me,” the wind puffed himself up insulted, “you never believe in me.”

“Don’t be so sore again,” Aron calmed him. “Tell me what happened.”

“The terror birds are no more. The gray world between is safe. The gray counts were able to return to their land which they had lost to the terror birds,” the wind blurted out the news. Aron could well imagine who might have defeated the debauched gluttons and he was not a little astonished. “Go on, I’m on pins and needles,” Aron encouraged the wind who readied to take a rest again.

“It was very taxing,” the wind pitied himself. “Well, okay. I’m sure you remember that the terror birds in their excesses had actually forgotten to stop drinking. They completely emptied out the helpless sea. The earth’s soul cried out when it had to stand by and watch the terrible disaster without being able to do anything. All the terror birds did was laugh, but after some time they got terribly thirsty. All they were able to find was water without taste. But what they needed for their own survival was salt water from the sea. Recognizing their stupidity, they ran to the sea shore and begged the sea to come back. In their own defense, they claimed to have acted out of ignorance, without considering the consequences. But the sea could never come back. Even though their large size would allow them to live without water for a good while, they could not escape their fate. In the end, not even the salt of their tears which they licked off each other’s cheeks could help them. One by one they died of thirst. The terror birds brought about their own downfall. There where the earth had been drenched with their tears, the former ocean bay is now lined with salt shrubs.” And enraged, the weary wind added: “The terror birds just didn’t get it. They took themselves to be something better when in reality they were part of the a whole, part of a truth. And this truth says: all creatures belong together because we live in one world. We all dangle from one and the same thread. That’s why they got what they deserved!”

Prince Aron suggested while thoughtfully furrowing his brow: “Superbia’s villainous face gazed too deeply into their soul and made them believe that they would be able to get along without respect for nature. But it wasn’t arrogance alone. It was their own immoderateness that was their undoing. One might say that they siphoned off their own water supply. At any rate, they shattered on their own greed. Avaritia saw to it that they never had their fill, never gorged themselves

enough. It was their greediness that killed them. They were giants in body, but dwarfs in mind."

"Better small, but smart," said the wind. He let the air out of his spirits, made himself scarce and looked for a pair of spare legs in the absence of the lilies' stems. He tried it with Miss Monti's feet who didn't quite know what to make of it. After all she was not in the mood to buzz around the air like a balloon in case the wind forgot his manners once again.

"And how is the lion?" asked Aron.

"He's gradually regaining his strength like all the animals and plants. I had to whip up the rain clouds and get the sun to return," the wind explained the reason for his fatigue.

"You really accomplished a great feat," the prince praised the wind. The air spirits began to dance joyfully in a circle. Aron squeezed his ballerina and the cat flew with one leap to the side. She protested: "I knew it. Clever, my foot. One never knows what to make of you. You'd better get away from me and bed down someplace else."

The wind made a long face: "What is it I did wrong this time, Purri?" he asked innocently.

"Either you are faking it or you really don't know why you always get into a fix," Monti kept on griping. "Besides, I must have misunderstood or do you really want to make an ordinary alley cat out of me? It seems you don't know with whom you are dealing here." Monti raised herself up onto her hind paws, threw her head back quite stylishly, and proffered her right paw. A gesture which could make the wind only laugh for he had never kissed anybody's hand before. Not even those of the virtues whom he really admired.

"Why don't you just get along," said Aron sternly and praised the wind in the hope that he would forget about his fatigue and get immediately on the way to the sunland.

"What would we be without you, the one who blows all news over mountains and into valleys, from valleys into squares."

The wind was greatly impressed by the sun prince's praise which he took this time for himself alone. He now said quickly good-bye and hurried to reach Nubia in advance of the prince and his family in order to spread the good tidings of their return. He no longer felt like resting. The road was long.

The ballerina almost flew from Aron's hand. "That the wind always has to be so stormy," he said to her and sought refuge under a tree. "She will now recuperate and warm herself in the sun. How afraid she must have been when we left her behind in the cellar vault all alone." Deeply concerned, Aron patted her hair over and over again. "Be calm. You were so preoccupied with the thought of helping that you were willing to risk your life. But it all ended well this time. You saved your ballerina from disaster and eternal darkness" Miss Monti soothed her master.

## The Name of Yearning

In his sublime nobility, the king took his son aside and spoke: "On our return to the sunland, I shall give a grand fete only in your honor." The queen, at the side of her husband, beamed with happiness. "And I shall have a coin minted in celebration of our crown prince, the savior of Nubia."

The prince, in his modesty, lowered his gaze. "Isn't that a bit too much homage?" Aron asked his father. "And am I the savior of the sunland? I always wanted only one thing, save my family. That's why I gained my dear parents' freedom since I missed you so very much. That's all."

"That's exactly not all," said the king. "The stakes were about much more, my son, than just about us. It was a matter of the welfare of all our people, whose undoing Ozelot had schemed."

"I don't understand this. Of course, I had to pass many a test, but only so I wouldn't end up myself as a shadow spirit in Ozelot's realm. It never occurred to me that our country was at risk."

The prince's bewilderment increased even further.

"You do remember your ninth birthday, don't you?" the queen

asked her son. Prince Aron nodded. "On that day your father and I had an argument about what should be done to prevent the loss of more sunlanders to the lord of darkness. But, as you know, we did not come up with a solution since Ozelot had already abducted us."

The king made a pained face, then he continued: "Our abduction was already part of his plan. Ozelot had designed this plan with utmost care, the way one designs the building of a house. Stone upon stone he fit together. First he sowed discord in our hearts and waited long enough until we had missed the chance for reconciliation. When our hearts were so blind with anger, they no longer wanted to have anything to do with each other, his time had come to get us. All Ozelot had to do then was to wait for you to embark on your search in order to send out the demon Kofur to meet you. Your soft heart would drive you into Ozelot's arms. In the land of clones and in the gray world between, he took possession of your thoughts to elicit the wrong decisions from you. But your will was strong, stronger than Ozelot's sinister plan. It drove him almost to the point of distraction. That's why he had to introduce the matter of your greatest desire, namely your wish to grow taller, in order to confront you again with a choice. This is how he constructed his plan for the conquest of the sunland. Us, he already had. If you had just once taken the wrong action, the ruling family would have been destroyed and the fall of the sunland would have been sealed. For a long time past, Ozelot had not been satisfied with just getting an individual sunlander here and there. His mind was set on bigger fish to fry. What he wanted was conquer the sunland in one fell swoop, not piece by piece. That was much too slow for him."

The prince was more than bewildered: "And how do you know all this?" he asked

his parents. His mother looked at him: "Ozelot held us captive as goldfish in the stone gardens of the underground lake in the rocky grotto. Every day, at the same time, the lake was fed from the petrified waterfall with fresh water. At that time, the petrification dissolved and fresh water bubbled into our lake, creating beautiful water pearls. Every time the pearls sank into the water, we quickly swam toward them to concentrate on our question, for after all we were mute. The water pearls always revealed an answer to us. Only when Ozelot was nearby, we didn't dare to make contact with them. Thus we heard about your journey and Ozelot's plan."

The prince started to pace back and forth. The thoughts swirled about his head like an incensed flock of swallows. "In that case I bore the responsibility for our entire people?" the prince thought out loud.

"From the very first step on," the king confirmed his consideration.

"And I always wanted to feel easy," thought the prince. "But it wasn't all as hard as I always thought," he puzzled.

"No, it is never as hard as one thinks. It only becomes hard if one takes it hard. Then it gets to be really hard. You carried the burden without knowing it, and it was easy. Had you had even the slightest notion of the grave responsibility resting on you, you might have been overwhelmed. As it was, it was quite natural for you to do every day what had to be done for the family and for our people," the king said to his son.

"It seems to me that it's up to me whether I take a matter hard or not," the prince presumed. And suddenly, it became easy for the prince to make a hard decision.

"So if a responsibility isn't a burden or I don't feel it as such, which had always been my greatest concern," said the prince, "then I would like to serve our people loyally, for what I learned on this journey is to help."

At last Aron was able to give the longing of his soul a name: to help. He finally knew for what he had been born. "Yes, I would like to serve my people. This is what speaks from my soul." When the prince was finally ready to embrace his destiny, his responsibility, and his country, he had become a different person.

At this moment, the king was faced with his successor: "Each of us has a destiny, a mission in life. You just found yours, my son. What good fortune. To serve mankind is a truly noble task in life, for the root of being a king is serving and you will be a truly royal servant," he said to his son who had accepted the challenge. "I see you as a wise and just man. A king must incorporate the highest values and that is why I shall prepare you for your great task in life."

Once again a place in the order of the universe had been filled. Just then the little prince heard the ringing of thousands of little bells. Gold dust rained down on him. He looked up toward the sky, seeking to recognize his angel, but the sun blinded his eyes with its golden rays. Aron couldn't see him. The angel was sitting on a sun ray and let gold stars rain down on the prince.

He spoke: "Every journey begins with the first step. Many steps along the way have made you wiser. Now you know: the way to light leads through darkness first. The danger of being seduced by evil is great. Often it is only a small step. But you

fostered the good side in you. Thus you discovered the sun in you, made it to shine, and gave the longing in your soul a name: serving. Those who want to rule must learn to serve. You served your family and your country. In the end you became the one who was in you. Now the time has come to fulfill your most ardent wish."

Aron felt for his knee because he was overcome by a great pain. In that magical moment, his parents retreated a step in astonishment. Prince Aron grew all by himself filling him with boundless happiness. His mind had grown with his experiences. Now his body was growing too. The little prince was finally big.

Aron was dizzy with joy. He had regained his family. He knew to whom he belonged.

"Yesterday a black fortress still stood here, the darkness concealed the stealing and cheating and I was an orphan. Now the sun is shining, the fortress is destroyed, and I have found my dear parents again. It's a miracle."

"This miracle we owe to you," said his father not without pride. "Your golden heart liberated us. You showed true greatness by not deviating from the path of righteousness. This one can do only with a good heart, my son."

"And you were brave and courageous enough to confront the uncertainty and the darkness," the queen chimed in. "You protected the High Order of the Nubians and you didn't doubt our love for you. With that the victory over Ozelot was assured and the realm of darkness destroyed."

All of a sudden it started to thunder. They all looked toward the sky but only Aron recognized Phantasos. For the last time, he held the magic mirror up to the prince. When Aron looked at it, the dream god said with resounding voice: "Your fate was determined from the beginning." It was only now that the sun prince understood the meaning of his dream image. Mounted on a high horse, the reins firmly in hand, he was finally ready to take on the role of future king. The journey was a mere preparation toward this great end. The decisions have led me toward following my destiny willingly and to assume the place that is rightfully mine, he thought.

"I understand!" Prince Aron called out to the dream god. "With enthusiasm shall I serve my people and accept my obligation," he promised from a pure heart. "I shall finally learn the art of horseback riding, for I am already adept in floating through the air," he added. The eyes of water and earth smiled. Then Phantasos scurried away, his crimson cape fluttering, amid foaming ocean waves and rustling tree branches.

"With whom are you talking?" asked the queen, who sensed an approaching thunderstorm.

"Did I say something?" Aron wondered. Again he didn't know whether it was his imagination or really the dream god whom he had seen riding through the sky. A bit absent-minded, he added: "I've just found myself."

"Why, did you get lost?" Monti asked about her master.

"I think so," answered the prince lost in thought.

## Flammula- the Fire Fairy

Since there was only one thunder clap and no lightening followed, the mother of the prince regained her composure. But another eerie feeling beset her. Somehow she sensed the presence of a being and she pointed to the tree where Aron's ballerina was resting. Meanwhile dusk was setting in.

"There is something," said the queen. A rustling sound was heard. Aron went immediately over to the tree to fetch his ballerina, but she wasn't there. It was as if the ground had swallowed her. A distinct flowery scent wafted about his nose. He stood still as if he was numbed. The king, the queen, and Miss Monti stood rooted to the ground and looked at the tree. Not far off from him appeared a silvery flicker. A silver mist, which spread out more and more, took away their breath. Prince Aron peered, as if mesmerized by a magic spell, into the fog.

"Flammula?" he asked. A sudden flash of lightening quivered through nature. In the blinding beam Aron actually perceived the fire fairy. She looked like a blazing flame displaying constantly changing colors. The flame flickered yellow, then orange or red along her body. Then the fire fairy vanished quickly from his stunned gaze. Fire spirits are beautiful like unicorns and shy; they like to remain invisible. Guided by the necessary respect, the prince stepped closer. He knew that one should never approach the fire spirits heedlessly for they were unpredictable and could become wild. So Prince Aron moved carefully a step closer toward the apparition. A shudder ran down his spine as if he wanted to play with the fire. The lightening flash had meanwhile divided the silvery mist and out of the flames, led by the fire fairy's hand, a creature of ravishing grace and charm came into view. With timid steps, Aron approached the figure. But the prince couldn't believe his eyes: a red bodice with a gleaming silver heart that reached to the waist, a tulle frill on the arm, and a crown formed by the rays of the evening sun. It was all so familiar and yet so strange.

"My ballerina," whispered the prince. His heart raced. How often had he wished that she would come to life. Now she was of flesh and blood and filled with ardor for him. Flammula placed a full-length, gossamer cape on her shoulders and, with her fiery tongue, changed her ballet shoes into knee-high, glittering silver boots. The dancer was now ready for the long journey back to the sunland. The fire fairy with the burning body vanished. In turn, the prince had caught fire. He took his beauty by the hand and immersed his gaze in her eyes as in a fathomless ocean. Having forgotten the world around them for a while, the prince felt his body getting very hot. Impulsively he felt for his chest. When he pulled back his hand, the flame of his heart blazed in his hand.

"I believe I'm dreaming." He extended both hands toward the dancer with the embers of his love. She put it down in the place where the black gate was. "As a souvenir," said the ballerina with sparkling eyes and a radiant smile.

"You were my favorite toy, my beautiful fairy. But you were always surrounded by a

secret, a riddle, I couldn't solve. And somehow I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that I knew you. What happened that you have come to life?"

Without waiting for the answer, Prince Aron ran, with the dancer at his hand, straight to his parents and Miss Monti. The ballerina lowered her head before the king and queen and extended her hand toward them with deep curtsy. Filled with joy over their son's unexpected happiness, the ruling pair embraced the dancer. Then the prince took the gracious Miss Monti, who betrayed a soupçon of jealousy, in one arm and his ballerina in the other.

"I'm glad to be in the company of such a noble cat. One could think that one is faced with a fire cat," the dancer offered up an honestly meant compliment. When she realized the cat's surprised mien, she added: "Fire cats are born in flames and can read fire sign, the messages of the fire spirits."

Monti was flattered and felt placed on a pedestal even though she had never heard of such signs. The cat sat erect in the prince's arm, stiff as a poker. "Monti, Miss Monti, fire cat," she bowed her head graciously in all directions as if she had just been awarded a title. She liked this so much that she rehearsed this ceremonial immediately over and over again so she could introduce herself correctly the next time.

The prince gave his dancer an admiring look. He knew Miss Monti couldn't read fire signs, but it was an unusual idea on the part of the ballerina to make friends with Monti.

"I must admit that I had seen in Your Grace never more than a toy. My master's secret love for you eluded me completely. Please forgive me." The dancer smile and tendered her hand at Miss Monti.

"Never again a home without parents," beamed the prince. Then they embarked together on the road to the sun palace. The unicorn was awaiting the ruling family. It stretched out its back so that all five could be comfortably accommodated. There was only one question that moved their spirits and which the dancer evaded mysteriously. "How can a toy turn into a real girl?" All the ballerina said was: "It's an odd story. But there's no time for it now."

"Then tell us at least your name," begged the prince.

"Call me Papillon. Do you see the sign of the butterfly on my forehead?" The dancer only increased the prince's curiosity.

"It looks like a fire sign," Aron said startled by the discovery. But Papillon only laughed.

### **Invincible Nubia**

The unicorn gleamed silvery in the bright light of the moon. They floated all night: the king, the queen, the prince, the ballerina come to life, and the graceful Miss Monti. After a long while, the colors of the sky began to change. "The sun is rising," Monti ripped her paws enthusiastically upward. The prince too waved greetings at

the sun. "It's good that she always rises again," he murmured and pulled his ballerina closer toward him. He never wanted to lose them again, neither his ballerina, nor the sun.

Aron rubbed his eyes as he looked down. He believed to recognize the colors of the rainbow for the earth was blazing ember red, then golden yellow. But when a blue carpet appeared below, he called out: "Bluebells, we'll be home soon!" And true enough, at long, long last, they saw the golden roofs of Aurum and the three towers of the sun palace. Dreamland Nubia, thought Aron, but this time he knew for sure that he was not dreaming. Filled with anticipation, Aron looked forward feverishly to seeing his officials, his beloved lilies, and, yes indeed, also the wind who had promised to spread the news of the return of the ruling pair. What a triumphal reception it was! The air spirits had done a good job. All of Nubia seemed beside itself. From every nook and cranny, the sunlanders stormed toward the palace. They waved sun banners and motioned wildly with the radiant wreath of the sun which they carried on a pole. The wind blew mightily to make the banners flutter. What a sea of flags!

"Didn't I tell you," he laughed with his low voice at the prince. It seems that an entire country has been awaiting your return. They all know that Prince Aron is the rescuer of his parents and of all sunlanders. It was an honor for me to blow the good tidings through the entire land."

At this moment, the unicorn stopped swaying for the wind had abated. With every step that brought them closer to the sun palace their excitement increased. The tower trumpeters sounded their horns as the unicorn landed on the sun ornament in the courtyard. Miss Monti jumped with a daring leap off the prince's protective arms and scurried past the line-up of officials directly toward a tree. Buoyed up by high spirits, she was hanging within a moment on the trunk at a dizzying height. Cautiously the cat looked down. The way down seemed hopeless. In her daring-do, she had gone up too high. Monti sank her claws deep into the bark of the tree to keep from falling. Then she ventured two steps downward before she jumped off at a reckless height. Cats always fall on their feet. They have seven lives.

"Finally at home," she meowed making nice with the official for roast pigeons. The thought of a meal of stinking fish heads stuck in her head and she begged: "Tasty fish heads, please."

But the officials were putting their heads together again and spoke softly: "A boy who has endured as many adventures as Prince Aron becomes a different person. So the venomous little devil has turned into a veritably lucky devil," the official for roast pigeons couldn't hold back a little side jab at the former life of the prince. Then he laughed benevolently until his fat stomach started to jump and the official for good thoughts smilingly agreed with him.

"Did I not make myself clear enough?" Miss Monti was annoyed over being pretty much ignored. "I'm hungry as a wolf," the cat buttonholed the official.

"Why didn't you say so right away? Off with you into the kitchen. We have fish today, your favorite dish."

"Well then, works after all," grumbled the cat and disappeared in a single bound.

Now the king and queen too, with the prince and the ballerina, set foot on the soil of their homeland. The return to the security of their golden city had been pulled off. Of course, everybody was eager to see the little prince who had become the guardian of Nubia. That's why the officials' gold hats shone bright for the ruling family to see from afar. They saw them putting their heads together and walking with lively tread. Splendid and mysterious these hats. The entire officialdom was quite surprised when they stood opposite the prince who had grown so tall. A satisfied smile appeared on Aron's face. He was now able to look them straight in the eyes as he reviewed the line-up of officials whom the little prince had plagued with his incessant tantrums and demands. Before the officials were able to bow down to him, he took the hand of each one with thanks for his patience. He first took the hand of the benevolent official for roast pigeons on whom he had played many a nasty trick; then the one of the official for velvet and silk. When the pursed lips were about to scold him for his incorrect attire, Aron glanced at himself and had to admit that he looked like a little bum. The treasurer extended his little hand with the two amber rings toward the prince. "Somehow he looks relaxed," it occurred to Aron. "Well, the third tower is resting so his gold thaler worries can rest too."

Then the prince approached the wish official with special warmth. He knew how much he owed to him and he looked for a long time into his eyes. The outline of dark shadows seemed to have vanished. And then there was the official of good thoughts, the good soul of the palace, who had governed the land in the absence of the ruling family. The official pressed the prince's hand until Aron's heart opened up. And they both understood why. The reign of good thoughts had carried the day.

The king and queen assumed their son's generous gesture and extended their hand to the officials. In the end, the officials took off their mysterious gold hats and bowed their heads so deeply before the rescued royal pair and the crown prince, they almost touched the dust. But when they lifted their eyes, their gaze became fixated on the unknown beauty whose arm was holding the unicorn's neck embraced.

"Your Majesties," said the minister for good thoughts, "we welcome you from the bottom of our hearts. We were all deeply concerned. But if you would, please step out on the balcony now. Your subjects are besides themselves with joy." So the king and queen forgot to introduce Papillon and her presence remained a mystery.

Aron ran back once more to the unicorn and caressed its neck: "We thank you for your loyal services and hope to see you again someday, you beautiful silver moon." Aron said good-bye and gave the unicorn a light pat so it would run toward the wish official. Suddenly the wind made himself felt, creating a slight whirl that sucked up the unicorn. Before you knew it, it disappeared inside the wish official's sleeve.

"Put it down gently in the valley of tears," the prince instructed the wish official, who realized that from now on the heavenly peace was a thing of the past.

As the official of good thoughts was about to return to the palace to accompany

the ruling family to the balcony, the prince took him aside and asked with muted voice: "Were the peacocks able to uncover the riddle of the golden hats?"

"Yes and no," was the answer. "Solving the riddle requires long drawn-out research. The peacocks repeatedly compared the number sequences on the four hats. After much back and forth, they came to the conclusion that it must be the matter of a calendar which depicts the various reigns of the sun kings."

"How wonderful! But why does the hat grow?" the prince couldn't hold back his curiosity.

"The 'why' is still in the stars. But at least we know now when the hats grow. Namely always when the time of a sun ruler, and with it that of his officials, has run its course. This can be determined by the notches in the cones that interrupt the number sequences. In growth period, the golden cone shows no ornamentation at all. The calendar begins counting again only with the new ruler. No wonder that after nine sun rulers, the hats are unusually long. Somehow their aim is set high into the sky, but whereto and for what purpose is still hidden behind the symbols which twine around the hats. So say the peacocks who have put much effort into decoding the letters and numbers. Giving it much thought, the scholars also have come to the opinion that the underside of each hat may display a name. They are working feverishly to uncover the secret of the gold hat."

"That's a pity. I should have thought the peacocks had made more progress by now," said the prince disappointed.

"Well," the official of good thoughts said haltingly. "There's a certain idea which the peacocks are pursuing. Some of them think that the growing of the hats may be connected to a certain event. This event they say lies in the future. But the scholars want to first find proof for their premise before broadcasting it to the world as fact. That's why they keep quiet about it while they continue their investigation."

"That all sounds rather mysterious," commented Prince Aron, whose eyes wandered off in search of Papillon in order to accompany her to the palace. The gold hats weren't all that important. And who knows, perhaps they were just ordinary head coverings without endowing their owners with special powers.

From the balcony the ruling couple, an unknown beauty at their side, greeted the sunlanders. And what they saw made their hearts flow over. It wasn't hundreds, but thousands of people who had gathered around the palace, carrying sun banners, wreaths of sunrays, simple golden discs, celebrating the blessings of the divine sun, palm leaves, and olive branches. The children only listened to the nickname "rainbow children" and, in honor of the virtues and the victory over evil, they wore seven capes in the colors of the rainbow. In between it all were more and more energy spheres flitting up into the sky with the people's good wishes for the ruling family. The wind got himself together once again especially for this event even though he was suffering a severe lack of energy. In days past he had worked himself too hard. Now he set his air spirit in motion for the last time to give good speed to the good wishes and carry the messages aloft with each flutter of the

flags.

“See there, the good wishes of our people are ascending into the sky,” the king pointed at the energy spheres flitting by before he placed his arm around the queen’s shoulders. “Happiness, health, a long life, wisdom, and goodness,” the queen squinted toward the sun so as to read the wishes.

“Our thanks to Aron!” was the inscription on one beautiful red energy sphere. Then again “Aron, the Invincible,” “Aron, the Courageous,” also “Aron, the Incorruptible” or “Aron, the Honorable,” and even “Aron, the Great,” the inscriptions gleamed at the prince in royal blue. Another sphere read: “Long live Nubia!” and “Sol invictus” —invincible sun.

The ruling family was overwhelmed. “We thank all Nubians for this moving reception and we thank the official who maintained the rule of good thoughts during our absence,” the king opened his speech. “To show our gratitude and good cheer over our happy return home and the victory of virtue over the realm of darkness, all native sunlanders will receive a light thaler. The coin will show a candle and the imprint of the declaration: ALIIS INSERVIENDO CONSUMOR—in service of others I am consumed—just as the light in the candelabrum consumes the candle. This declaration means nothing but that the crown prince places himself in the service to his people. Prince Aron of Nubia deserves gratitude and honor. He is the savior of our golden land.”

The prince felt a warm sensation rise in his body and his face turned glowing red. Now the jubilation was not only for the sake of his name, but because now he was a hero who enjoyed the people’s unconditional affection. The king added: “The gates of the palace are open to all today on this light-thaler thanksgivings feast. Bring your children. The children are our true treasure. They are the greatest.” Hearing this, the sunlanders could no longer be reined in. They danced with joy and cheered the ruling pair and Prince Aron over and over again. A sea of golden discs gleamed toward the ruling family.

Following the reception, the wish official accompanied Papillon to her chambers which he had completely renovated to her taste. She shouldn’t lack anything and her every wish was to be anticipated; so the king had decreed. As for their son, the king and queen requested his presence in the throne room. The crown prince went quickly to his chambers to place the crown on his head. He paused for a moment for it was a sacred act. As he beheld the crown, he saw its beauty for the first time. And what do you know, the despised crown was as light as gold dust. Rather than weighing on him, it gave his thoughts wings. All he had to do was let his heart play with the crown. All parents give their children something to take along, no matter how much they resist it, the thought suddenly crossed the prince’s mind. And be it a crown, he derided himself. All of a sudden he loved the sense of responsibility that, with the crown, took hold of his entire being. He looked forward to being able to fulfill his duty. And thus the crown was no longer heavy as lead, but landed with a light hand on his head. Aron knew now: his role as crown prince would never be too great. All he had to do was grow into it. Behind him appeared suddenly Miss Monti and disappeared again just as quickly, but not without uttering the words: “Your Highness has earned the laurels fair and square.” Bowing to him, she

bounced away with exuberance. The cat was just as excited as her master. The joy of being at long last safe and sound back home again almost robbed her of all reason. Seemingly out of her mind, she gamboled through the palace chambers, swept down the corridors with ears tucked back, clicked her heels like a rabbit, and made fun of whoever she just happened to run into. Life was wonderful, especially in Aurum, the golden city.

The radiant sun over the portal to the grand throne room laughed at Aron already from afar, for she liked the crowned prince very much. When he opened the door, which wasn't easy for him, he saw his parents were sitting on the throne chairs, just as if nothing had ever happened. The water pyramids displayed the most gorgeous fish. The rose pyramid dispensed its sweet aroma. The birds and butterflies flew in and out of the open roof cupola. Behind the king and queen, the golden ivory fountain was just awaking with the glockenspiel, and the virtues embellished the flowery waterfall with a rainbow. The prince crossed the red carpet and saw all the familiar things with fresh eyes.

"What wonderful splendor," he thought at the sight of so much beauty. "I was living in paradise, but didn't see its beauty." Since Aron had found out that one can feel miserable in life and that even to survive requires effort, he felt richly blessed and secretly thanked his angel.

### **The Scholars of the High Order**

But suddenly he halted his step. When he had come close enough to the throne chairs of his parents, he seemed to recoil from something odd. As usual, the peacocks had lined up. "We greet Prince Aron. You pursued a noble objective. Invincible as our sun, you return home." It wasn't the peacocks, whose countenances he remembered as a bit pale from all the studying, no it was the prince himself who now turned ashen. For from the peacock feathers, he saw human heads looking at him. They wore white powdered wigs and a delicate embroidered kerchief around the neck. Prince Aron fought to keep his composure. When the peacocks noticed it, the first one in line began to speak: "Didn't you know that we become turn ever more human with increasing learnedness?" Aron shook his head. He had a hard time gathering his wits about him. Seven pairs of human eyes had their gaze fixed on him out of seven peacock bodies. On their heads they still wore their feathery crowns.

"You were away for a long time. We used the time during your absence to study the High Order, just as we have always done. Now we have reached the highest level of maturity and overnight our peacock heads have become more human. This is for us the greatest reward."

The seven peacocks smiled mildly, as if to give their words more emphasis, and left behind a most learned impression. But Prince Aron had to get used to those strange hybrid creatures. At least he had regained his speech meanwhile: "But you've grown too."

“You should know all about that. With experience comes growth. While you were out saving the sun from eternal darkness, we traveled through the wonderful book of the High Order.”

Then one after the other bowed down before the prince: “Pavo I,” said the first one. “Pavo II,” the next one and so on, until all seven peacocks had introduced themselves with their new names because before then peacocks were just peacocks and were called that. Now each one had his own name and was indeed exactly as tall as the prince.

“What a surprise,” said the prince, who now for his part congratulated Nubia’s scholars for attaining their high rank. He pressed the hand, pardon, the wing, of each and found no end marveling over them.

As the prince’s gaze followed a butterfly all the way up into the cupola, he made another discovery. Two huge golden discs were hanging rigid, without being attached to anything, at some height above the throne chairs. They expended a lustrous warmth that gave the impression that the sun itself had descended from the heavens.

“Everything is so familiar and yet so different,” the prince marveled.

“The truly greatest change, however, you can’t know about. Please give us an opportunity to speak with you about it,” requested Pavo I, who always spoke first. The king and queen nodded their agreement even though their time was limited on this first day back at the sun palace. Nevertheless, it was important to hear what the scholars had to say, for the king wanted to know in a timely manner what had been going on in his realm.

“During your majesties’ absence we studied not only the High Order, but we pursued, at the same time, a scientific question.” Now Pavo III, who was apparently the specialist on this subject, began to speak. “One day, as I was walking through the castle garden I could hardly trust my eyes. At the edge of the pool I spotted something gleaming. It looked like a gold coin, or something, and it occurred to me that the prince, who often kept company with the lilies, might have lost it. I scratched the ground with my beak, at that time I still had one, and low and behold I actually came upon a lump of gold. So it wasn’t a lost piece of jewelry belonging to the prince. I immediately presented my finding to the other peacocks.”

Pavo I butted in: “It was as impossible to find gold in this spot as it is for gold to grow on trees.”

Pavo II, who didn’t like being interrupted, took up the story again at this point: “We immediately examined the gold closely to determine its origin. For this we had to dissect the lump of gold into its minutest parts. When we finally achieved this, we were able to read the soul of the gold kernels. In the end they told us their entire story which sounded rather adventuresome. There actually are plants whose roots extract gold from the depth of the earth. A strenuous, protracted procedure, as the gold crumbs assured us, which we, of course, wanted to trace. Thus we found out that very specific plants have the ability to dissolve gold in order to make it flexible in the ground. A trace of gold is then sucked up by the plant’s roots and

pushed above ground. Right under the earth's surface, in the tangle of a tree's roots for example, the gold kernels are deposited and reconstituted into lumps."

The prince was reminded of a story the lilies once told him about how they transport tiny crumbs of the earth's wisdom via their long roots through their stems enabling them to participate inwardly in life without having to move. This was a fact that had been a constant thorn in the side of the air spirits. Aron also remembered that they had revealed this, their greatest secret, only to him. Could there be a connection between the lilies and the lump of gold? Therefore the prince asked Pavo III: "Did you find out which plants search for the gold in the earth in order to then place it at our feet?"

Pavo I was raring to tell their majesties about the result of the investigation. This triumph he would forego. "It's the lilies," he blurted out.

"What a surprise!" said the king and queen with one voice. Only the prince said nothing.

"Following our painstaking research, we determined that your majesties dispose of enormous gold resources in the castle garden. It is true that our lilies cannot produce gold but they certainly are veritable gold diggers. They fetch it from distant earth levels only to collect it for you." And with a twinkle in the eye, he added: "It is true that gold doesn't grow on trees, but it does in the ground like potatoes."

"But gold is a metal. It is much too sluggish to move. How can such delicate beings corrode an object as hard as this, carry it over long underground routes, lift it to the earth's surface, and reassemble the minute gold parts?"

"Why should they do this? There has to be a reason for this," said the prince to the learned birds.

"We asked ourselves the same question," Pavo I replied hastily. "We already conjured up a picture of lily growers all over the land furthering gold. That's why we asked an ordinary farmer to lay out a field of lilies in the hope of finding a rich gold deposits. But nothing happened. It's only the lilies in the castle garden which search for gold, gather it, so that you, Prince Aron, can find it."

"A gift for me?" Aron asked bewildered.

"They are your friends. The rest, you have to find out for yourself," suggested Pavo III.

Prince Aron, who knew nothing about any of this, was baffled: "This sounds pretty fantastic, doesn't it?"

The king spoke: "We shall examine the investigations of Nubia's scholars for its truth content. Immediately after the feast, the castle garden will be searched for the presence of gold. Such a discovery would be a great boon for the sunland. We, therefore, thank in advance our scholars, whose knowledge is alive like a library for us to rummage in to our heart's content. You have done us a great service." The king's recognition made the human eyes in the peacock bodies shine.

"Now to you, my son," said the king sternly. But he didn't mean it the way he said

it. It was the aura of a king whose lips bore a trait of determination. When Aron saw his parents smile, he was reassured.

The prince's heart beat louder when his mother said: "Today you are to receive the present that has been for so long been your most fervent wish." Excited, Aron tried to figure out what it might be. His father took out an energy sphere from under his cape. His curiosity aroused, Aron took a step closer.

"Do you remember the Christmas when you wanted to know how to draw time?" the king asked his son.

"I remember it as clearly as if it was today," conceded Aron, who as little prince had wanted nothing more in the world than be allowed to spend time together with his parents. His wish was so great that he almost doubted his parents' love for him.

"This is our gift for you—time, which we shall pass together." The king extended his hand holding the energy sphere toward his son. Inside glowed a wonderful sundial whose rays were surrounded by an inscription in golden letters: TIME FOR PRINCE ARON. THE KING AND QUEEN. The prince's eyes gleamed. "The gift of time from you, how much I always wished for it and now my wish has been fulfilled," the prince could hardly believe his good fortune. "Time together with you, I can never get enough of. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The queen too had a surprise for her son: "There's one more ardent wish we would like to fulfill for you."

"You already did fulfill my greatest wish, anything else would be too much," the prince protested in modesty.

"We asked the wish official," the mother hinted, "but only with the treasury official had we gotten to the right address."

Prince Aron thought it over briefly until he remembered the third tower. His face lit up once again.

"Yes, you're on the right track. You will complete the construction of the third tower. And as a sign of your maturity it is to surpass all the other towers in height. Just as you always dreamt it to be."

They handed the prince the second energy sphere containing the blueprint of the third tower with the inscription TOWER OF GROWTH.

Prince Aron hardly dared to look at his parents when he asked: "And what does the treasury official say to it all? I hope he won't get gray hair on my account."

Maybe the lilies have really been digging for gold, which would change everything, thought the prince. But he quickly regained the ground of reality, for he'd rather not count on such a miracle. And yet, the thought still tickled his fancy. The scholars really made a credible case for their research. However that may be, the prince was not able at this moment to think it all through.

"Don't worry," his mother tried to allay his concerns. "The sunlanders will be happy to contribute a few sun thaler for the tower of growth. And later on, they will show it to their children and talk to them about Prince Aron, the Steadfast, who saved

his family and his country.”

A sense of self-respect overcame the prince. With a newly gained self-respect and boundless joy in his heart, he stood there holding both energy spheres, which he handed to the ubiquitous official of good thoughts. Then he pulled his own sphere from his pocket. “And this is my gift for the two of you.” He handed it to his mother with a furtive smile.

“Oh, how wonderful,” exclaimed the queen flabbergasted. The king too looked at the sphere. Both recognized themselves as well as the horse, the sword, the book of fairy tales, the elves, fairies, and goblins.

“This is my dream of a good family, my gold dust.” The king and queen looked at each other. They understood, even without words.

“You know something,” the king suggested. “Let’s go back out on the balcony and add our three energy spheres to the memory of the universe. What do you think?” asked the father. The prince became very excited and without answering he ran down the stairs and along the hallways of the palace toward the balcony.

“Not so fast,” shouted his parents who could hardly keep up with him. Masses of people were still gathered before the balcony in the hope of catching a glance of the king, the queen, and the prince. As soon as the royal family appeared again, a surge of ear-shattering applause rose up all around.

### **Gold Dust**

The queen spoke: “Our hopes and dreams are what keeps us alive and moves us forward. We, therefore, make known today, the light-thaler thanksgiving day, to the world soul our aspirations for future generations.” She had the energy sphere inscribed TIME FOR ARON. THE KING AND QUEEN launched for all to see. The people went wild. The queen’s energy sphere, TOWER OF GROWTH, which she launched next, was likewise accompanied by jubilant cheers.

When the prince sent his gold dust, his dream of a good family, toward the sky, the queen accompanied it with the words: “In aeternum—for all eternity. Once upon a time there was a little prince who longed for nothing more fervently than a good family. Perhaps one day there will be another prince or princess who will feel the same way. May their wish be fulfilled wherever they may be living. For everywhere in this world, children are happiest in their families.”

The sunlanders held their breath for a second before bursting into raucous applause.

Miss Monti stormed onto the balcony in the nick of time, took out her energy sphere and launched the lustrous little sun sphere into the sky. The prince accompanied it with the words: “The light in the darkness. The energy sphere with the gold dust of the royal cat Miss Monti. Gold dust draws its energy from the sunlight. When the sun dies, the dreams will vanish as well. Thus our brave Persian lady carried the sun into the darkness and established a sign.”

Monti felt very much honored. The award of the title "Royal Cat" was just after her taste and outshone at this moment the just previously bestowed honor of "fire cat." She bounced cheerfully on to the parapet, startling the sunlanders. Suddenly there was dead silence. Nobody wanted to see the royal cat hurtle into the depth. When Monti placed her right paw on her heart and bowed in all directions, she too received wild applause.

Then the prince took heart and began to speak for the first time to his people: "It is up to us to decide what we believe and what to we aspire. Preserve your gold dust just as the energy spheres safeguard the gold dust, and just as the world soul safeguards the energy spheres. For the true gold dust is that which is really important to us in life, that which has immeasurable value for us—like the gold dust so to say, like this family." The prince pointed at his parents, the king and queen. "And the people of this land who carried the virtues in their heart." As he spoke, he spread out his arms wide and stepped close to the parapet. "I am proud of my country and I shall represent it to the best of my ability."

Hearing this, the Nubians' enthusiasm could no longer be contained. Again and again they cheered the prince and the royal couple, waving sun banners, palm sheaves, and wreaths of sunrays, and had their children wave with olive branches. Prince Aron was happy that he didn't have to give a long speech for he was still very inexperienced. Patiently, the ruling pair received for a while longer their people's homage. Then they bade farewell in order to make last-minute preparations for the evening's feast.

As Aron was descending the stairs, he told his parents: "There's so much I'd still like to tell you, how my angel protected me and . . ."

"I am glad you found the way to your angel," his father interrupted. The king and queen scurried behind their son. Aron really seemed in hurry.

"What?" The prince turned around and slowed down. "You believe in angels?" the prince now wanted to be reassured.

And the king said: "Your mother and I not only believe in angels, we have an angel. Our angel, too, protected us in the time of darkness. He is always with us." The prince was quite surprised. The king and queen believed in the heavenly blessing of angels! He would never have thought this possible. A something likewhiff of appreciation floated through his thoughts. The prince thought it fabulous that his parents were not all reason to renounce all the wondrous mysterious aspects.

"By the way, how is it you know about the energy spheres?" the prince asked his parents. "I had no notion of their existence until I entered the valley of tears," Aron added. They were just crossing the knights hall where a fire crackled in the hearth.

The king began to speak: "I too was once very unhappy and took my pain to the valley of tears. When my soul had been purified, I asked my angel how I could defeat the evil in the world. He gave me a simple answer: strengthen the good thoughts, give your official for good thoughts more leeway to act. Though some people have lost their faith in the dominion of good thoughts, they are of inestimable value for our existence. For the memory of the universe feels showered

with gifts when the energy spheres with good thoughts rise into the sky. Yes, that's how it was on the eve of your ninth birthday. I felt greatly relieved and had made a mental note to speak with the official immediately after the festivities. But it wasn't to be for this awful dispute destroyed everything. I resented your mother for giving me the same advice as my angel. I was always resentful about everything and often felt that I was being patronized. I saw her as an enemy who was out to fight me, while she saw the enemy in the evil against which she sought to do battle jointly with me. Now after all this time, we know about the discord Ozelot had sown in our hearts and which impeded any rapprochement between us. Discord is a poison that saps our energy and renders us incapable of thinking about anything else. And yet, it would have been easy to overcome all anger, for your mother's battle was always directed against the evil, never against me. To recognize this, however, I would have had to be more astute. Astuteness would have triumphed over the anger. But IRA was stronger and had already filled our hearts with hatred. The good thoughts were too weak to overcome hatred with astuteness. Therefore, our family and our nation deserve to work in common for the cultivation of good thoughts. For you must know one thing Aron, evil can never be totally eradicated. It is a part of us. Another Ozelot will rise one day and attempt to threaten us. The battle between order and chaos will ignite again."

Fright struck the prince's heart. In his mind's eye, he saw Ozelot's hate-filled eyes before he was destroyed by his own hatred. But then he regained his composure: "We'll have a lot of time until then to increase the governance of the good thoughts."

On this their first day back home, he didn't want to have any worries even if his father's prophesy was right. There are no Ozelots growing in the sunland, the prince was sure of it. But then the prince's thoughts had already wandered along a completely different path. He excused himself from his parents for he had to take care of a matter of the heart.

Not much time was left until the evening to say hello to the lilies, those lovely, innocent creatures in the castle garden.

"It's enough to burst into bloom, it's enough to burst to bloom!" The flower elves found no end in reveling with delight and jumped exuberantly up and down in the lily chalices. But the tone of their voice changed. "Prince Aron," they murmured, "we bow before your greatness."

The flower elves had to take care not to bend their heads too far down so as not to damage the blossoms. The prince felt flattered. But suddenly the lilies furrowed their brows sorrowfully: "We worried a lot about you," they confessed to the prince. "You were still so small." The lilies covered their mouths with the leaves because the wrong word had escaped them inadvertently. "We don't mean small, of course we meant to say young. You were so terribly young when you left us. The only defense strategy to resist the dark thoughts could only be the hope for your mind to grow as quickly as possible. But in reality there was no counting on it. In reality, the fate of our entire land was in the hands of a little, spoiled prince whose only concern was his own size."

Again the lilies placed the leaves over their mouths. Had they gone too far? But one should be able to tell a friend what one thinks, even if he's a prince. Especially if he's a prince, the lilies took heart. But the prince didn't hold it against them. Why should he? They were only speaking the truth. "Strange," thought the prince, "everybody except I myself seems to have been aware of the drama of my life. It's good that I was so out of touch."

"We feared that it was only a matter of time before your unstable character would be misled and the downfall of us all would be sealed. We simply couldn't imagine that you had the necessary mettle for the battle against evil. We misjudged you. That's why we bow down to your greatness," repeated the lilies.

"What sorrow I caused you, my dear lilies. Please forgive me and listen to me: I wasn't without fault and got to feel the black ruler's superiority. There was a moment when I had dispatched my soul into the eternal night."

"Nobody is perfect," the lilies consoled him.

"Without my angel I wouldn't be here today. He comforted and shielded me and gave me fortitude and strength in the battle against the lord of darkness. I owe him our fortunate return home."

"In the end it all turned out well and that's all that counts. You returned to your roots. We wished for nothing more fervently than that the compass would lead you back home," the flower elves beamed at the prince. Who could say it better than the flowers who are nourished by their roots.

"Yes, I returned home though our good fortune hung on a silken thread. What would have become of us without my angel?" The prince recognized the true worth of a heavenly creature. "A compass shows the right direction, but an angel knows the road along the way."

"You see, you almost didn't believe in him. Some things cannot be explained, like this light." The lilies looked to the left and the prince too turned his head. "And yet, it is there."

The prince bowed humbly before his angel who made himself known in his unearthly beauty only to go out again immediately like a candle.

"I thank you, guardian angel of the sunland," the prince called after the angel. Didn't the lilies just speak of roots, it occurred to the prince. The word "roots" set off a certain curiosity, fostered by the scholars, in Prince Aron. And indeed on closer look, the lilies stood on a carpet of gold that was hidden under all kinds of leaves and underbrush. Prince Aron, who saw the gold sparkling in the sunlight, picked up a crumb. He felt the noble, the eternal, saw the everlasting splendor, the sun-like beauty. Inquisitive and completely incredulous he fixed his gaze on the delicate creatures. They too were interwoven with gold threads as they glistened with quiet modesty in the sunlight. The lilies lowered their gaze. They answered without Prince Aron having asked: "For your loyalty," they said and nothing more. It was their way of thanking their best friend. Now Aron lowered his head before the lilies but was unable to say a word. He wanted nothing more than embrace each one of them. Their generosity put the prince to shame. Loyalty was something he had taken for

granted. For in whom should one put one's trust if not in a friend? Suddenly, a rattling sound was heard, the leaves started to dance, and the lilies swayed to the melody of the wind: "At long last. He's back! He's back!" The delicate flower elves became quite animated. "Yes!" they all chimed in. "We too! We too! We too would like to be as free as the wind."

This was music to the wind's ears. "And I would like to be as beautiful as a flower, as beautiful as my lilies," he returned the compliment. Hearing this, the lilies' flower chalices began to ring out like bells. Never had the wind spoken such wonderful words. Had the prince heard right? These were completely new sounds. It seems these bickerers have finally come to recognize what they had in each other, was the thought that popped into Aron's mind.

Then the lilies resumed their familiar place in the life of the prince. "Tonight we'll celebrate the great light-thaler thanksgiving feast at the palace. After the fireworks, you'll meet Papillon, my come-to-life ballerina," the prince roused the lilies' curiosity. "Papillon will tell us her story."

"Oh, that's wonderful! We love to hear stories. We'll look forward to seeing you," the lilies were elated.

"Of course, Miss Monti will accompany us," added Aron.

"Of course, of course, I'll be there too," the wind invited himself with pouting mien.

"Sorry about that, world connoisseur. I thought you might be too exhausted and I meant to be considerate," Aron tried to soothe the wind. At any rate, a brilliant feast was to take place in the evening. Any kind of storm would therefore be a catastrophe. The wind gave off a few more irritated puffs in all directions and then reined himself in again. "Well then. After the fireworks, here with the flower elves," the wind made a date with his companions.

"It's a deal," the prince said in a hurry now to see his ballerina.

## **El Dorado**

In the evening, the bells rang out the opening of the light-thaler thanksgiving feast and every sunlander carried a little bell that reinforced the din. The sun banner billowed above the palace and grew high into the sky when Prince Aron rode on a glass steed from the palace gate straight into the crowd. Sitting perfectly erect as if he had been born to the saddle, he guided his horse, the reins firm in hand, despite the fact that he had never been taught. The sunlanders moved back a step with admiration, murmuring: "Ooh!" For there was a special story behind the glass steed. Inside its transparent body floated countless energy spheres with the most genuine gold dust imaginable. Filled with curiosity, the Nubians craned their necks to find out which fates for the future their neighbors had at heart and what they wished above everything. They saw the energy spheres with gold stars and inscriptions floating in the glass body of the horse. The sun belonged, of course, to the gold dust, just as a lion was a symbol of strength. Rings and hearts, the language of love, had turned to gold dust as well as an ancient, sealed book that

seemed to have been close to someone's heart or was to be elevated to symbol of knowledge. Venerable old measuring instruments, among them a magnetic compass and a hinged drawing compass, a sextant, and a sundial made the heart of all explorers and discoverers leap. In some of the energy spheres could be seen raging seas or mountain meadows sated with flowers, others had taken in the sound of music and whirled notes and clefs about. From the musical scores emerged a girl playing the clarinet. Then appeared the fervent wish of an artist who sought to enchant people with his paintings. His energy sphere was awash in a lavish array of colors and a brush was busy mixing new combinations of hues. Furthermore, cats, birds, and even an elephant that had turned to gold dust floated about in the horse's glass body. Some people seemed to be dreaming of health, for medicinal herbs were mixed in with the energy spheres as well. For others, in turn, it was all about beauty for whose sake a mirror was racing through the glass horse.

"Wisdom!" a child called out and pointed at one of the seven glittering rainbow delicacies whom they all venerated as their virtues. They floated about star-like as wondrous gold dust spheres and expressed the deep human longing for being good. But mostly the sunlanders seemed to aspire to love, hope, and faith, for as hard as they tried, these remained the most beautiful and greatest gifts of the Eternal. No one could buy them or merit them.

"Gold dust is what's best in us," somebody called out enthusiastically. "Gold dust is the gold in us," another agreed. A wave of jubilation rose up. The people applauded and bowed before the Nubians' favorable side. And on it went as they followed all the gold gleaming spheres with abated breath. Someone had discovered a feather that was hard at work with writing down a text on a never-ending roll of paper. Some other seemed to feel no greater desire than to be a poet. A scale rolled through the horse's body. It represented the Nubians' eternal aspiration for balance between order and disorder. Then the people rubbed their eyes for in one of the energy spheres they saw a coat that fluttered one moment and was gone the next. "Just see. The family's invisible coat that envelops us," cheered the children who were having a ball watching the magic gold dust. Suddenly laughter broke out because a frog king was flying through the glass horse. Was there indeed someone waiting to be woken with a kiss from a prince? All these happenings were so interesting, the Nubians had a hard time deciding where to look first. Then the horse opened its mouth with a joyous neighing over so much attention. A small gleaming gold dust cloud issued at this moment from his nostrils so that all the good wishes and hopes could be inscribed into the memory of the world. What a horse! What a rider! He was practically bursting with gold and splendor. A child called out astounded: "El Dorado!" And all chimed in with cheers of: "El Dorado! El Dorado!" swamping Prince Aron of Nubia, their hero, with adulation. The

sunlanders had never seen their prince in such a flamboyant state. Aron's majestic appearance radiated like the sun high above the Nubians' heads. Enveloped in a lustrous sheath of finely ground gold, he seemed molded in gold. And again the people called out: "El Dorado! El Dorado!" and bestowed on him the most beautiful sobriquet he could have wished for. For inside as well as outside, their

prince was pure gold. A great paragon for the sunland natives who cannot be weighed in gold. He wore silk trousers interwoven with threads of pure gold and over it a gold glittering ankle-length coat. Though it wasn't crimson and neither was he the dream god, but somehow he felt like the "gilded one" in the fairy tale. Aron had placed his bet on the right horse. He was the golden rider. Fantastic that his father should have given him this heavenly steed although Aron had never let out a single word about his dream. What a gift! A glass steed replete with gold dust had never occurred to Aron even in his dreams. The king's gift elevated Prince Aron to the position of guardian over the dreams and hopes of his people. He felt the strength which gives hope. He saw the spark in the eye when a dream becomes reality. He saw the good core of the Nubians, the virtues. And Aron recognized the one golden truth: gold dust is the element that keeps mankind together. From now on, he vowed, the way would be open for every Nubian to follow his dreams. Just as he himself had followed the gold dust.

Aron believed in gold dust as the source of energy that endows him, his people, and all mankind with fortitude. The kind of fortitude one feels when a fervently desired wish comes true. To further and forever protect this human resource was to be his mission from now on. Gold dust was to bubble over until the end of time bringing happiness to all. Whoever was without gold dust and felt his inner élan flagging would be urged to set out on a quest for it.

"A people without gold dust is like a heap of ashes in which the last spark of hope has gone out," the official for good thoughts had said once. These words echo like a warning in Prince Aron's ears. A terrible vision. No wonder that the idea of the glass steed had originated with the official. During the long absence of the ruling pair, Nubian commoners came daily to the palace to convey their good wishes for a providential return. In the process they were not remiss in putting in a request for their own families, their friends and neighbors, or for themselves. As soon as they had expressed their wishes, an energy sphere placed itself around the gold dust in order to make all good things come true. In the course of this long period, the official for good thoughts collected them and barely knew where to put them all for they multiplied more and more. It was then that the wish official requested an unbreakable, glass steed wherein to safeguard the dreams and hopes of the sunlanders. It absolutely had to be transparent so that he could check and make sure that the myriad wishes felt comfortable. In moments when the good thoughts felt crowded, when they yearned to escape into the world to put their longing for adventure to the test so as to grow and to come true one day, then the official saw to it that they could leave their abode through the glass horse's nostrils. Only thus did they become one with the eternity of the universe. All he had to do then was pat the horse between the eyes and unlock his mouth with a silver key for the gold dust to rise up and leave the throne room through the open cupola.

Upon the return of their majesties, the king asked the wish official to have an unbreakable vessel turned into a real horse. That he would thereby be fulfilling a long-held aspiration of his son's, he, of course, had no way of knowing. For the wish official it was an easy feat to endow the glass horse's body with the toughness of metal. But when Aron leaped onto the glass saddle, it gave away and the prince sank into it as into a soft pillow. Aron was the guardian of the source. The steed

neighed again and a gold dust cloud with guardian angels escaped through the nostrils in order to provide a shield over Aurum during the greatest celebration of all time.

### **The Light-Thaler Thanksgiving Feast**

Then came the great moment. Prince Aron led his ballerina to the party. The treasurer had ordered lustrous light-thaler of pure gold be brought in to brighten the festival hall like a bonfire. But when Papillon entered the hall, the sun rose. Her fairy-like aura shone brighter than the light-thaler and, literally, took the sunlanders' breath away. A gossamer fabric, strewn with tiny, gold butterflies, quivered like delicate, glittering wings about this unique figure. A diagonally folded ribbon of shiny white silk was draped over her body and right leg. Her appearance gave the impression of an encounter with a two-legged butterfly. An exquisite tiara crowned her gleaming black tresses. A gold-rimmed saffron crocus of uncommon beauty sparkled on the precious

headband. Larger than any crown, it became all the rage among the Nubians. What a spectacular entry. Papillon conquered the sunlanders' hearts by storm so they had only eyes for her. The effect of his ballerina did not escape Prince Aron's attention and his cheeks glowed with pleasure. Papillon drew the people's gaze toward her like a lamp attracts a moth to its light. Thus it was hardly surprising that she overshadowed even the prince in his splendid Solino attire even though the official for velvet and silk had taken great care with last-minute adjustments to make it fit the prince's now larger size. But who would have known? The ballerina fanned herself constantly with a peacock feather, a clever way of intensifying her mystic.

"Who is this mysterious beauty at the side of the prince?" the curious found no end wondering.

The king with the queen at his side opened the great light-thaler thanksgiving feast in the festive Apollo hall. The seductive splendor of the sun palace made the heart beat faster. From the ceiling streamed a painting depicting the sun god Apollo, who is seen traveling in his stallion-drawn chariot from the east sea to the west sea to proclaim his glory. The wall panels, strictly sectioned by pillars and doors, were emblazoned with magnificent ornaments in the shape of seashells. The long tables were liberally laden with the finest fare. The official for roast pigeons had wielded a mighty effort so all the aromatic culinary creations were, it was hard to believe, were daubed in gold. A more opulent table the sunlanders had never seen.

Behind all these refinements was the hand of Papillon. She had let the official in on her mother's recipe, who would, on special holidays, cover the dishes with a lustrous yellow mass of saffron thus giving them a golden look. Anyway, it seemed that Papillon was especially fond of saffron, for her butterfly dress gleamed "red gold" and she had even rubbed her body in a saffron salve. However, the particular mystery bond that tied Papillon to saffron she still kept to herself. The right

moment would come soon enough for her to disclose this secret. The official for roast pigeons was elated over the ballerina's gracious gesture. As a sign of his affection, he placed cinnamon ice cream and cinnamon stars, the dancer's favorite dessert, on the superbly decked out tables. The king was very pleased with the official for roast pigeons.

During the meal, he leaned over to his son, who was now always at this side, and said: "I shall establish a foundation that will be my legacy for posterity. You know we have much to lose: our wisdom, our bravery, our justice, and our moderateness." Aron was eager to hear more and did not interrupt his father. The king continued: "Before a new Ozelot will be able to threaten our land, I shall increase the good thoughts just as my angel had enjoined me to do a long time ago. For we need courage of the heart and mind."

"And how will you go about it? Thoughts are free," said Aron, who was puzzled over how to solve such a problem.

"I shall dot the sunland with ivory fountains as if with a protective shield. Then the sunlanders will admire the virtues in every hour; they will come to love their enchanting visions and call them by their names. For virtues are the fruits of angels. The heavenly joyfulness will always reverberate in the collective memory and inhabit the human heart. The Nubians will internalize their most precious qualities so that, at the decisive moment, they will side with the virtues against the deadly forces. Then we shall have won. The citizens won't be virtuous merely for fear of punishment anymore, rather they will do good without thinking twice because they see the good that is done every day.

"It's that simple? You sow the angel fruit in the heart of men to endow them with even more steadfastness against the antagonisms in life?" said the prince astounded. Suddenly, Ozelot's dragon-snake throne room appeared before his mind's eye. He had gotten to know the effect of the evil seven. He knew what awaited those who get involved with them. And he remembered how the evil eye brushed against him at the abyss of the soul and he swore in his despair, if ever he was to see the light of day again, yes, then he would quell evil with good for all time to come. And it was exactly this oath which his father was about to put into action. What a papa, what a king, Aron marveled.

"We have to do all we can to resist an even more powerful Ozelot." Aron thought it prudent to ban the evil right away as a precaution and he guided it with his pointer and little finger into the ground so it couldn't do him any harm. "One day it will be big enough and try to subjugate the sunland. When this day comes, we Nubians will be ready. We, therefore, must further all wisdom especially in our land, for it ranks most highly among the nations. Wisdom is the virtue of virtues. Only those who are wise can also be brave, just, and moderate. A moderate person would never violate the laws because they keep the precise balance between good and evil. I am sure you can imagine that, can't you?" the father asked his son. Although normally his respect for the king did not permit him to be facetious, this time Aron mocked: "I presume they place every decision on a golden scale."

The father overlooked the son's remark and stated: "Of course, they don't carry a scale around in their pockets, but certainly in their hearts they do. Seen this way,

what you say is true. For those who tend toward exaggerations also tend to forget moderation and will be beset by the dangerous seven."

Then the king continued: "But the best example we have is you, yourself. Without wisdom you would not have been brave enough to withstand Ozelot."

"How do you mean?" asked the prince as he heartily tucked in the food. "I only know that I frequently had to make decisions and was often unsure I was doing the right thing. Ozelot had many tricks up his sleeve with which to hoodwink me."

"He thought of ever new ruses," Miss Monti chimed in while slinking around Aron's legs. In the heat of the conversation, the prince did not hear her faint little voice.

"For if one wants to make the right decision, one first has to know what would be the wrong one," Aron considered.

"Wisdom is the art of doing the right thing. You mastered it because you have the ability to form your own judgment from which you derive your decisions." From the king's words spoke pure pride of his son. But rather than hoard the recognition for himself, Aron wanted to pass it on to a higher being. "It was my trust in my angel that guided me in making the right decision."

"All the better," the king praised him. "You permitted yourself to be guided by good and not be misled by evil. Only that counts. People who are wise have an easier time in life. They use their reason before letting themselves be swept away thoughtlessly, and later rue the day. Once you have tasted the fruits of the angels you will gain strength in the battle against temptation. A strong character protects against the impressive deception the evil seven present and their it's-not-all-that-bad mask. That's why ivory fountains against forgetfulness will be set up all over the realm to help the sunlanders make wise decisions. An art that will reach its the highest flowering in our land," the king laid out the plan for his foundation. He was absolutely certain that his seed would bear fruit. The sun king already saw the virtues rushing through the flower waterfall and magically conjure up a magnificent rainbow. This created such enchantment that the sunlanders' heart beat faster. A twinkle flitted through the king's eyes.

"Lucky fountain alleys will shoot out of the ground like mushrooms and will give each town a buttress," the king embellished his plan further.

"This will be a challenge for wish official," the prince gloated.

The king took a sip of fine wine, then turned to prepare Prince Aron for the essential.

"A sun king's noblest task consists in protecting the High Order. But you also must know, my son, that it is impossible ever to achieve the virtues in their most perfect form. Yet, it is a matter of life and death for our people to strive for them. A seafarer may not reach the North Star, but he needs it to chart his course. Even I made mistakes," added the king. "But there is one I shall never make again, that is, disregard the path of the virtues. I endangered not only our family but the entire sun realm."

Aron gave his father a respectful smile. The lights of the heavenly bodies were not unfamiliar to him, but the lights of the mind he encountered for the first time. His

father had ignited them. The prince was happy that his father took the time to let him see the world through the eyes of a king.

“One more thing, my son. I shall enrich the High Order with what is most august.” Aron sat on pins and needles. The king lowered his head somewhat mysteriously. Then he whispered: “The Golden Rule, my son, the golden rule, the soul of the High Order. It represents everything for which my heart beats.”

“What does it say?” Aron wriggled impatiently in his chair. The king spoke slowly and thoughtfully, deliberately choosing every word: “Treat others the way you would like to be treated. That’s what I call imperial wisdom.” These were truly royal thoughts which were always only guided by the good. This king had greatness. Prince Aron esteemed his father and the wisdom of a king.

But after that, Aron had only eyes for Papillon who just then sent a longing gaze over the rim of her open fan in his direction, which meant: “I miss you!” Prince Aron was completely enchanted by Papillon. This delicate figure, the likeness of a butterfly, where do I know you from, my fairy, the prince once again racked his brain. But the fuzzy soft thought left Aron’s memory without revealing its secret. The king asked for the guests’ attention to introduce the comely stranger as far as possible for not even the sun king was able to uncover Papillon’s secret. Now everybody was waiting for this moment with abated breath. But Papillon took her time. She wanted to tell her story only to Aron and his companions, as they had agreed upon. The slight fluttering of her closed fan underlined her intention: “I shall keep my promise!” Papillon had complete command of fan-speak. But about her own life she wouldn’t speak so easily. So the sunlanders had no choice but to wait.

Only Aron couldn’t wait any longer. He swept his ballerina off her feet and ran with her to the lily pond. Arriving there out of breath, he wished for a bridge over the little lake. He led Papillon to the only lantern and, to her surprise, he pulled out a padlock on a golden thread from his pocket. He opened the latch and espied in a split second the bottom of the soul of his princess. Then they both clasped the keys with their hands and whispered as in a single voice: “Forever and ever!” They locked up their vow with the padlock and tossed the key into the pond so that no one would ever find the key to their hearts. Prince Aron hoisted the sign of their love on the lantern for all the world to see. The lilies held their breath in complete silence. When the two embraced, they sank into a cloud of sweet cream. Nobody had missed them at the banquet. The world was still turning and yet, for a moment, it had stood still.

What a glorious evening! Gold mirrored in the candle light and recreated the light of the sun. Exquisite, colorful gleaming veils, redolent with cinnamon and jasmine oil, streamed through the castle garden. The air weighed heavy and light at the same time, the scents and sounds mingled in a magic way. An oboe, a harpsichord, and a flute released their harmonies into the balmy evening wind. Harps were plucked and viols caressed. A gondola swayed in the water and savored the sweet scent of Madonna lilies only to vanish forthwith in the water labyrinth. Sparkling glasses in hand, the guests ambled past bubbling fountains. Enchanting Aurum! This is how the triumphal return of the ruling family was

celebrated. The wish official made sure that after the lavish banquet everybody found a light thaler in his coat pocket. It wasn't long before the fireworks began.

Rockets shot up into the sky and painted white lilies, the prince's favorites, onto the night blue roof of the earth. Gold-spraying suns and glittering waterfalls plummeted onto the people below, giving the impression of a thousand gleaming stars falling from the sky. Suddenly all held their breath and stared into the sky above. A larger than life image of their crown prince lit up the dark night.

"Viva El Dorado! Viva El Dorado!" Shouts of enthusiasm set the mesmerized throng into motion. The prince blinked one eye whereupon his beaming eyes rained down a mass of light thaler. Two gold gleaming streams of light thaler poured over the Nubians who couldn't extend their hands fast enough toward the sky and gather up their skirts wherein to catch the gold rain. Then a golden heart rose into the night from Aron's glittering crown. The sunlanders couldn't get enough of any of this. Lustrous sun wheels gushed forth from the towers of the palace and spilled onto the gleaming roofs while the palace was daubed in sparkling crimson. Above the unfinished tower flew a banner in the gold rain: "Tower of Growth." Bangers competed with the sunlanders in leaping over the pavement causing a huge ruckus. But that wasn't all by any means. The wish official, out of pure zeal, had a fire dragon sweep over the palace whose hot breath spit out a spray of light thaler. Shouts of "ah" and "oh" or "bravo" and wild applause filled the air. Children searched the ground for light thaler; each wanting to do the other one better. They took them to their parents, stroked the candle with their little hands so their wish would come true. And since the wish official was no longer plagued by sleeplessness and was so overjoyed by the return of the prince, he decided to do something nice this time for the common children of the sunland.

Accompanied by exploding crackers, a terrible chaos broke out. The poor parents hardly knew what was going on. Shepherd girls rode on the fire dragon over the palace and poured out torrents of light thaler. Fisher boys chased barefoot over the surface of the castle pond and stuffed their pockets with huge goldfish. Some children had heard about cold white rain in the north land, which is called snow. Suddenly it started to snow in the castle garden. The lilies were so shocked they covered their eyes with their leaves and shivered in the cold. But the children asked for furs, boots, and mittens. They built snowmen and slid on the bottom of their pants down the avenue. It was all great fun and, still incredulous, they let the snow run through their fingers again and again. When it got too cold for them, they ran into the palace to warm themselves. What a surprise! The west wing overflowed with toys so fabulous most children could only dream of. But the best was that each child was allowed to take his favorite toy home with him. The sun palace kindled the children's fantasies in the most varied ways. Many set their sights on the prince's fineries. Just once to slip into the leggings and capes, to feel like a prince, what a sensual high that would be. All dignified they pranced about moving a step closer to the stars in their noblesse.

They asked for rattles and mallets, firecrackers, and anything that made noise. The parents were the ones who suffered the most from the noisemakers. Some of the children jumped about on the keys set in the ground so the sounds of a harpsichord tumbled about randomly. But the children were unperturbed and

squealed with each new sound. Other children asked for pocketsful of candies until they walked crooked under the weight. The wish official endowed those who seemed forgotten by the crowd with brilliance, admiration, and a proud gait. To make the children's happiness complete, school was canceled the next day. And all those who were shy and modest for once had a chance to deride the bullies and the arrogant.

Then the game was over and everything returned to what it was before. Except for one thing: sunlanders who gently stroked their light thaler to make a wish, didn't exist before. Since it strained the strength of the wish official, the wishes of the commoners remained unfulfilled. But the day came when the Nubians decided to collect the light thaler and fulfilled their own wishes. Yes, the sunlanders were a really clever bunch and that was due to the ivory fountains.

The story of their prince, which was the talk of the land since the light-thaler thanksgiving feast, had shown them that all the treasures in the world couldn't bring him happiness. And thus, the sunlanders had the amazing idea that what was important in life was not to get rich but to be happy. From then on in, they resolved, they would unfold their lives like a flower. The Nubians discovered their own talents by asking themselves for what their hearts beat most fervently and the official for good thoughts made sure that each one was put to use according to his individual gifts. What a joy it was to see the Nubians expressing what was best in them. And they felt good in their land which the little prince had so bravely saved from perdition. The sun king was more than satisfied with the state of his people's mindset, which he, of course, attributed to his generous foundation.

"The ivory fountains have served their purpose. Our subjects are refining their character day by day because they have internalized the beauty of the virtues," raved the king. And thus it was in reality. The sunlanders had long taken the good thoughts to heart. They were well on their way to doing good without giving it a second thought because they always saw only good around them. The lucky fountains made sure of it. In the end, the Nubians found their happiness in the virtues. Wherever they turned, the seven gifts blossomed and enriched life. Nubians who felt with their head and thought with their heart were honored as wise even by the learned peacock. They found the world's riches in a noble soul.

### **The Divine Miss Monti**

It was during the night when the light-thaler thanksgiving feast was coming to a close that three shadowy figures were stealing across the inner courtyard of the palace. The grandiose fountain, with its adornments of water-spewing statues, was strewn with light thaler for the sunlanders had heard that if one tossed a thaler into the fountain one would always return to the place. And since the festivities had been so extraordinarily pleasant, they all wanted to return one day.

But the prowlers in the inner courtyard had only one goal: the castle garden.

“Here we are,” said the prince, “just as promised.”

Aron acquainted his ballerina come-to-life with the elves. Then the prince, the dancer, and Miss Monti sat down expectantly next to the lilies.

“Just one more moment. Does anyone here belong to the hoity-toity clan of lilies?” the wind spun his pranks of which one never knew how they would be received. Whoosh, and he promptly wound himself around the flower stems. The lilies pressed their leaves to their mouths and giggled. They really had missed the wind, his excitement, his curiosity, and his flattering. His shenanigans they had forgotten.

“Next we’ll go up in the air,” the flower elves faked indignation while wildly rolling their eyes in wind-blowing manner.

“But only together,” yelled the wind spirits, who slipped from under their master’s billowing skirts and embraced the elves.

“My beloved lilies,” tootled the wind quite tame against his usual habit. Encouraged by so much exuberance over their reunion, the youngest did not hold back and then still remembered the good old days: “To hold different opinions and remain friends, that would truly be a heroic feat,” they teased their formidable companion. And immediately thereafter, the most delicate among them exclaimed: “I want to be a hero, no me, but me too.” The wind was amused. Who’d ever seen such diminutive heroes? And he promised to be one too. It should still be possible to work out for the evening, he was pretty sure.

Miss Monti begged: “Please Miss Papillon, why don’t you start telling your story? I’m bursting with curiosity.”

“Hang on a while longer,” replied the prince in Papillon’s place and pulled a pomegranate from his pocket. From where else? He preferred carrying all precious items around with himself. This treasure, which he had guarded since the beginning of the journey, had almost forgotten it and now rediscovered it, was granted a brilliant entry: “A small thank-you for great services rendered, my noble Persian.”

The cat gave the pomegranate a leery look that said: “What on earth am I supposed to do with this?”

“Break it open,” the prince answered his cat’s unspoken question with a voice of mystery. He had pulled off the surprise. The cat did as she was told and from the pomegranate poured red fruity pearls to the ground. Monti felt that she had been had and, disappointed, was about to let the fruit fall when a tiny sun throne rose from the pomegranate. Everybody around let out an astounded “Ah!” Enraptured, Monti tried out her throne. “What an incomparable gift!” she said gratefully. Sitting erect with legs crossed, she looked outright majestic. The golden suns on her black velvet boots and the long velvet gloves sparkled in the pallid light of the moon. Her head was crowned with a wreath of sun rays, held together by a headband—a crown that poured blue blood into the royal cat’s veins. At least it seemed that way. But in reality, all children had been wearing this head dress on the light-thaler thanksgiving day.

Miss Monti pulled up her throne right next to Aron and Papillon, sat down, and

waited with a certain haughty demeanor for the dancer's story. The prince cast an amused look at his cat and knew that this gift accorded with her status, for in ancient Egypt cats were venerated as gods. A fact Monti never seems to have forgotten.

Finally, everybody was ready to hear a new story: the story of the butterfly. Papillon recounted how it all began: how she was born into a family of pearl fishers, why she was called Papillon, how she came to Hydraonia, the circumstances surrounding the sorters of human beings and push ostriches, how the Innocent Eye gained magical influence over humans, how the barbaric fiend changed her life in such a painful way, how the fire fairy Flammula saved her from the worst, and how the prince liberated her through his love and gave her life. Papillon recounted all the wondrous things of which the prince, the cat, the lilies, and the wind had never heard. Well yes, maybe the wind did. After all he liked roaming about the world. The companions snuggled up against each other, for the night was cool, as they listened attentively to the vagaries of the dancer's life . . . But before the adventurous story revealed Papillon's secret, the ballerina pulled from her splendid cape a heart of gold adorned with a crown of thirty-six rubies. "Le Cœur Royal, the royal heart for a royal soul," she said and placed it into the hands of her prince. It sparkled so bright that even the angel, looking down from the clouds, was astounded. He never slept.

The queen too was unable to sleep and thought: "A kingdom for a family."

And all was well.