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Sample translation by Rachel Reynolds

### Chapter 3

...]

Later at supper, when Dad asked what was going on at school, I simply said that I was now sitting next to Elias.

“Who’s Elias?” Mom asked.

“I don’t really know,” I replied.

Once again, wrong answer.

“Good grief, you’ve got to at least know who your classmates are,” Dad said annoyed.

“How?” I said in defense. “He never says anything.”

“In that case, you’re a lot alike. When will you dreamers finally wake up?”

“Never. I’m going to bed now,” I declared.

I wanted to go to my room because I was ticked off. Dad’s at leasts were almost nastier than Mom’s nevers. You’ve got to at least know... As if I didn’t have a clue about anything, but at least this was something that even a dork like me should know.

I had almost reached the kitchen door when Mom said: “Oh, by the way, someone named Nina called while we were at the zoo.”

“Oh,” I replied, concentrating hard on the army of postcards that were stuck up on our fridge door. “What did she want?”

“It’s on the answering machine.”

“Ah,” I said, trying my best to make this ah sound as indifferent as possible, while I studied the postcard of the ocean sunset more closely than ever before.

I then walked fairly quickly over to the phone in the hall and clicked through the old messages:

“Hi, sweeties. It’s Grandma...” Peep, next.

“It’s Dad. I’ll be home late and...” Peep, next.

“Hi there, it’s Antonia. Is Lotti...?” Oh God, just keep going.

Then finally: “Hi, Leon. It’s Nina. Just wanted to let you know that we’ll be meeting at the shack again tomorrow afternoon. Max and Robert will be there, too. Hope you can make it. Bye.”

[...]

I really wanted to listen to Nina’s message one more time, but it had gotten really quiet in the kitchen. Want to bet that all three of them were listening in? So, I went to my room.

I got undressed, stretched out on my bed, and thought about Nina again. And about how I had to make it to the shack the next day. As I stared at the ceiling, I slowly made out a dark shape in the plaster. It looked like a giant bat. And then I recalled the strange guy at the zoo. His kiosk. The bottles full of mist...

And then...

I don’t know how to explain what happened next. Because it was crazy. Still is. Even now that everything is over, weeks later: the dream shelves plundered, the bats back in the zoo, Krato’s secret factory burned, and me out of the hospital.

I can still remember how incredibly tired I felt as I stared at the shape in the plaster. How amazed I was that



my ceiling was the hiding place for dozens of fluttering bats. How suddenly the strange taste of the black gum returned to my mouth. However, what I can't recall is when I fell asleep. I also no longer know how my dream started, but I soon found myself back in that horrible scene I've been dreaming since the fifth grade. It is almost eight o'clock, and I'm on my way to school. I'm running as fast as I can because I overslept. As the school appears in the distance, I hear the sound of the gong and know: Too late! Tardy again. I then run for what feels like forever along the hedge that separates our schoolground from the street. I want to run up the steps to the main entrance, but as soon as I take the first step up the stairs, they start to silently descend toward me, like an escalator moving downward. I run and run, but the door at the top of the stairs never gets any closer. Somehow I get into the school, all sweaty and out of breath, but I still have to run down the long, narrow corridor. I can hear the sound of teachers' voices behind the classroom doors. The school day is well underway by now. The longer I run, the longer the hallway grows.

Usually this dream keeps going like this - with me never reaching my classroom and running around in vain - until I wake up drenched in sweat. However, this time, a woman appeared in the hall, walking toward me. She didn't look anything like our teachers. More elegant. Almost like a duchess or someone like that. Black dress down to the floor. And the way she moved! As if floating on air. But the main thing about her were how gigantic her eyes were. As dark as a bog. She gazed mutely at me as she moved past me. I would have stared after her, but at that moment, the door next to me sprang open onto my classroom, so quickly and loudly, as if someone had yanked it open from inside. I took a startled step backward. A man was standing at the teacher's desk, holding an open book. Not just any man, though. It was the guy from the zoo! From the strange kiosk. No way. I gulped. He glanced up from his book, gazed across at me without a word, and nodded in recognition. As if tardiness was something admirable. He slowly shut his book, and I still recall that it was completely black - not just the cover, but the pages as well.

He then said: "You managed to find me quickly."

The man now looked much taller than he had earlier that afternoon. Impressive. Powerful. It was so silent that I could hear my own swallowing.

"What's wrong?" the man asked. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Um," I said, "my dream doesn't usually go like this."

I remember quite vividly that I was rather surprised by this sentence, because when you're in the middle of a dream, you never know that you're dreaming.

"How do you know you're dreaming?" the old man asked, as if he could read my thoughts. "Come in and shut the door."

Like at the zoo, he gazed at me strangely. Something in his large eyes was moving.

I slowly walked into the classroom. Everything was like normal - the chairs, the desks. Even the math formula Mr. Pallenburg had written on the chalkboard was still there. Right before he had made us change seats. The only difference from this morning was that now it was pitch black outside. The neon ceiling lights were burning here inside. One of them was flickering and making little buzzing sounds. The man and I were reflected in the window through which I had seen the bat this morning.

He followed my gaze and waved at me in the window pane: "Good evening, Leon. My name is Morpheus."

"Ah," I said. "Hello, Mr. Morpheus." How did he know my name?

Morpheus hadn't waited on my response, but had turned to face the blackboard. He picked up a damp sponge and started to clean the surface. Everything was completely normal, at first. The formula vanished, and wherever the sponge went, the blackboard grew dark from the moisture. But then it kept growing darker - first dark green, then black, and then... it suddenly looked as if Morpheus wasn't just erasing the chalk numbers, but the entire board.



I stepped closer because I couldn't believe my eyes. In actuality, the sponge was wiping an increasingly large hole into the board. Behind it wasn't the white wall of our classroom, but a very dark tunnel. Morpheus turned and studied me, as if trying to figure out how tall I was. At that moment, I suddenly realized why his face seemed so odd. It wasn't his large eyes. It was his irises, the light brown color around his pupils.

Something was moving inside them. Like sand, I thought. Like trickling sand.

Morpheus made the hole bigger by wiping the board to its outermost edges. I cautiously moved closer. A cool breeze came from the deep hole. It looked like the secret entrance to a mine - damp stone, roughly hewn, leading straight into pitch darkness.

"What's all this?" I asked. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to go in there," Morpheus declared.

"What? Into that dark tunnel?"

Morpheus turned back toward me and said calmly: "It just looks that dark. You'll see. It'll be light soon."

"Um, I don't even know you," I said.

"But I know you," Morpheus said, pointing the sponge at me. "And it would really help me out if you would go in there. Just as practice."

"And if I die in there, will that just be practice, too?"

"You can't die," he said. "We're deep inside your dream."

"But..." I glanced around the classroom again, where everything looked quite normal, then back at the deep hole in the blackboard. It seemed to be beckoning me more and more urgently. "But... This is all so different from my usual dreams," I said.

Morpheus smiled as he saw my confusion before saying quietly yet urgently: "Just trust yourself." He pointed the sponge at the black tunnel.

I don't know if it was clear before now, but I'm not one of the bravest kids, and in broad daylight, I would never crawl into a pitch black hole that a strange man had somehow wiped into the middle of a blackboard. Perhaps it was the calm way Morpheus had been watching me the entire time, but whatever the reason, the next moment, I pushed myself up on the lower edge of the blackboard and set a knee into the entrance. And then the other knee. Cool and damp. There was a little puddle in front of me, filling with drops from the roof of the hole. It reflected back my frightened face. I tried to stand up.

I'm not particularly tall for my age. In our class photo, I'm standing in the last row between Max and Robert. And where I'm standing, there's a real dip in our line. Tall heads to the left of me, then me, and then the line jumps back up. This is why it means something when I say that I had to stoop over in the hole.

I set off down the middle of the dark passageway, feeling my way along the damp rock wall. After taking three steps, I turned back again. There was my classroom, a few desks and chairs with the cabinet behind them with the world map hung on it. Everything like usual. But at the front stood Morpheus, nodding encouragingly at me.

I kept going. After a few meters, I caught sight of a pale beam of light in front of me. The floor at that point gleamed blackly. As I got closer, the light grew brighter. I could make out a curve in the passage ahead of me.

It was totally silent. I tried to sing a little to cheer myself up, but my voice sounded so quiet inside the tunnel, as if the silent rocks were simply absorbing it. But it wasn't until I turned around and saw that it was utterly black behind me that I felt really scared. I hadn't gone more than ten meters down the passage, at most. No door had fallen shut behind me either. I should've been able to see the classroom or that Morpheus guy, but there was nothing except darkness and gleaming stone and - breathing. Very close to me. Somebody was breathing. Over me. Behind me. In front of me. It was if this breathing were coming from the stones that

surrounded me. Or as if the darkness could breathe. And as if the dark breathing was listening to me. When I held my breath for a moment, all of the sounds stopped. As soon I inhaled again, the strange breathing came back. I had to get out of here.

The path behind me was closed, nothing except black rock. There was nothing left for me but to keep going toward the pale glow. Through the sound of breathing that kept getting louder. As I peered carefully around the corner, I almost gasped in shock. Right beyond the curve, the corridor ended in a room.

I instantly recognized it: my room. There was my closet with the half-removed soccer stickers. My desk covered in notebooks and books, just like I'd left it this afternoon. The little lamp I usually kept on when I went to sleep. And in the corner sat my bed, with me stretched out on it.

## Chapter 4

Have you ever seen yourself? Not in a mirror - in reality. From the outside. It's a very strange feeling, a little like what it must be like if you've died and your soul is floating above your body. I stood in one spot, and not even three meters away, I was lying there in my bed. In my blue pajamas, the ones with the short sleeves that I'd put on earlier. My mouth was wide open, and I was breathing loudly - that was the breathing I'd heard in the tunnel. My hair all messy, my eyes shut, my hands stretched into the air as if I was feeling my way along something. My feet were sticking out from under the comforter, and the left one was twitching slightly.

Cautiously, hesitantly, I stepped into my room, sat down on the foot of my bed, and watched myself sleep. Boy was that weird. My left foot was maybe ten centimeters away from me. As I looked at it, it began to twitch even more. As if it felt nervous because I was watching it. I had to swallow, and saw how my sleeping self's throat also swallowed. The eyes were darting quickly back and forth behind the closed lids. Was I dreaming about what I was experiencing awake? And who was I actually right now? The sleeper in the bed who was dreaming about me? Or the person sitting here at the foot of the bed, observing everything? While I was thinking about this, I noticed that I was drooling in my sleep. A long strand of drool was running down my left cheek - that is, down the cheek of the sleeping Leon stretched out on the bed. A tiny puddle was forming beside my pillow. The drool spot was slowly growing and spreading onto the pillow, like the questions in my head: What was going on here? A dream inside a dream? Or was I awake? These questions made me feel dizzy, since I only felt half-awake as it was. But maybe there was only the dreaming Leon, who simply thought he was awake, or something like that.

At some point, I heard murmuring, there in the apartment. I stood up and slipped as quietly as possible out of my room. Everything was dark in the hallway, but I could see flickering light coming from the living room. Of course. Dad had left the TV on and had fallen asleep in front of it. Typical. He was lying on the couch, still dressed, the remote control in his left hand, his cell phone in his right. He had recently started sleeping here in the living room more often. When his head was tipped forward on his chest, he had a noticeable double chin. The broadcaster was reading his news from the bright TV into the darkness of our living room. He was talking about the people who had been disappearing without a trace. From across Europe, for the past few weeks. At first, these had been isolated incidents - here a girl from an orphanage, there a homeless person. But now the numbers were increasing. Dad was snoring in accompaniment. I can still see the end of the report, when a tearful woman in a blue cardigan was shown. She held a photo of her daughter up to the camera and said: "Just gone. As if the ground had swallowed her."

Dad kept snoring quietly through all this.



I turned around and went back into the dark apartment. My sports stuff was strewn around the hallway, as well as Lotti's small green slippers. In the master bedroom, the moon was shining onto Mom and Dad's bed, which was empty. I found Mom over in Lotti's room, on the large mattress she had set up on the floor of my sister's room for the past few weeks. The white bandages on Lotti's temples glowed in the darkness. Mom had draped her arm protectively across her stomach. She hadn't come to my bed in years. "But you're already big," she always said whenever I asked her to stay with me as I went to sleep. Even in my dream, I thought that wasn't fair.

I wanted to get closer to the mattress, but one of the boards in Lotti's floor creaked as I took a step. I didn't want to wake up the two of them, so I slowly backed up into the hall. At least, I thought that was what I was doing. But as I stepped through Lotti's door, I heard a deep voice behind me: "So, you've come back." I turned around. My classroom. The chairs and desks. The cabinet with the world map. The neon lights. The buzzing lamp in the corner of the room. Morpheus was now lying in a black hammock that was suspended from the blackboard and the wall of windows. He seemed to have been reading in his thick, dark book. As soon as he caught sight of me, he snapped it shut and studied me with raised eyebrows: "And? Where did the hall take you?"

My knees felt weak, so I first sat down where Elias had been sitting this morning. I was so confused that I started my story backwards. With how I had seen Lotti and Mom. Dad sleeping in the living room. The TV with the vanished people.

Morpheus nodded encouragingly at me the whole time. He had placed his arm behind his head and was slowly rocking his hammock back and forth with a foot - that looked really comfortable. But when I started to tell him about seeing myself, he abruptly stopped rocking. He sat up and stared at me, almost as if he were mad. Deep lines dug themselves into his forehead, and he slowly got to his feet. As I explained my confusion and described how I had sat on my bed and watched my twitching foot right beside me, he grabbed my shoulder. "You didn't touch your body, did you?"

I was startled by his intense reaction.

"Did you touch your body?" he cried as he shook me excitedly. "Your dream self? Did you wake yourself up?"

"N-no," I stammered.

"And he - I mean, you - didn't wake up on your own?" he asked, staring at me hard.

"No," I repeated. "He just swallowed when I swallowed. And his eyes moved extremely fast beneath their lids."

Morpheus released me, sat down on the teacher's desk, and exhaled deeply.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You're the one who sent me in there. Was something wrong?"

Morpheus said quietly: "You had a Moebius dream on your very first night." He ran his hand over his face as if he needed to brush away invisible spiderwebs, and murmured more to himself than to me: "We were lucky."

He then looked back at me and said with a worried smile: "I had no idea you'd be such a fast learner. Our meeting at the zoo was obviously fortuitous."

"Mobile dream?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"It was a Moebius dream," Morpheus explained. "A dream loop."

He paused before continuing: "Don't look at me like that. Dream loops are dreams in which you can see what is going on outside your dream. You dream about what you would actually see if you were awake. It's fairly complicated. And especially complicated if you see yourself as you're dreaming that you're watching yourself. Or vice versa: If you dream that you're watching yourself as you dream."

It was too much for me. I must have looked at him like a moron.

He laughed quietly and said: "Be patient. You'll learn everything."



“And why do you call that a... mobile... Moebius...?”

“Good grief,” Morpheus sighed and mumbled more to himself than to me: “Children. Why do I have to teach a child again?”

He pulled a leather bracelet from his wrist, held it up before my eyes, and slowly turned it. On the bracelet stood the words: “... a story that began with the sentence: once upon a time, there was a story that began with the sentence: once upon a time...,” etcetera. On the inside of the bracelet were the words: “... a story that ended with the sentence: once upon a time, there was a story that ended with the sentence: once upon a time...,” etcetera.

Morpheus opened the bracelet’s silver clasp, twisted the two ends of the band around each other, and clicked it back shut. “See that?” He dangled the bracelet in front of my face again before placing it in my hand. It looked like the number eight. The inside of the band twisted to the outside and then back inside. Now the words read: “... once upon a time, there was a story that began with the sentence: once upon a time, there was a story that ended with the sentence: once upon a time, there was a story...”

As I slowly turned the bracelet over and over again, it felt as if the contorted sentence was going to bore itself into my brain like a spiral.

“Let’s stop with this,” Morpheus said. He reclaimed the bracelet. As he opened it, draped it over his wrist, and then shut the clasp, he said: “The inside becomes the outside becomes the inside becomes the outside - and so on, forever... That’s a Moebius strip. It can drive you crazy.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “What does your crazy bracelet have to do with my dream?” I ran my finger over the bracelet. Old leather. It felt nice. Dry and soft.

“You don’t have to understand,” he said. “We’re just incredibly lucky you didn’t wake up in the dream.”

“What for? What would’ve happened?”

Morpheus twirled a few of his beard hairs and declared very seriously: “I’m afraid you wouldn’t be standing here now if you had.”

“What?” I jumped up, pointing at the blackboard. “Are you saying I could’ve really died in there?”

I felt myself growing furious, but at that moment, a quiet sound started. A very light hissing noise. Or trickling. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. I looked around, but couldn’t tell where it was coming from. I was about to lunge for Morpheus - that’s how angry I was - when I caught sight of my classroom’s window sill, which was right behind Morpheus. It was made of smooth, pale stone. Now sand was pouring out of it. Like water. The same thing was happening to the curtain hanging beside it. It looked like it was dissolving into sand. I watched the curtain shrink from the bottom to the top, as sand gushed out of it. The sound grew louder and louder. Everything in the room seemed to be rapidly turning into sand and collapsing. In my anger, I had unknowingly grabbed the back of Elias’ chair with both hands. I still remember how strange it suddenly felt. The hard, smooth, solid wood started to melt away between my fingers, and all I was left with was gritty, dry sand in my hands. It felt so weird that I yanked my hands back as if I’d been shocked. The back rest was completely gone, but the seat and legs also crumbled to the floor, as if they were melting in a time-lapse film.

When the trickling sound started, Morpheus quite calmly unhooked his hammock from the wall and gathered up his black book. He then pulled his old, silver watch out of his jacket pocket, the one I had seen at the zoo.

“So,” he sighed, “Tempus fugit, like we used to say. Time flies so fast. We’ll have to resume this tomorrow.”

As he spoke, the parquet flooring also turned into sand. The entire floor, which had just been stable and solid, began to buckle and move in the middle of the space like a rubbery pudding stuck inside a funnel or sinkhole that was sucking everything down. We were standing ankle deep in this sand, which kept slipping past us and into the funnel.



And the classroom windows grew larger. They now seemed to be merging together into one continuous glass surface as the solid walls and curtains trickled away. On the other side of the glass was the impenetrable black night. After about a minute, the two of us were standing alone on top of a large, round glass vault. Were we inside a giant hourglass? In one of those bottles I had seen in the kiosk? Was this another part of my Moebius dream?

The craziest part was yet to come. Suddenly a gigantic eye emerged from the deep darkness and drew close to us on the other side of the glass. An ancient, wrinkled woman's face peered in at us through the glass wall, grinning. I felt like a tiny fish in an aquarium, like the one people gape into at the zoo. The giant old woman with her crater-deep wrinkles turned her face aside into the darkness and said something. The head then retreated, vanishing into the blackness of the night. Whoa. It was like a hungry T-Rex searching for food. "Really annoying," Morpheus murmured as he stood next to me in the sand. "I've been doing this for ages, and I still manage to lose track of time." He then sent me sharp look and said: "Tomorrow night, back here. Be on time, alright? I urgently need your help."