

Julija Lukovnjak: The Imaginary Worlds of Edgar Kaos

an excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

A summary of the Imaginary Worlds of Edgar Kaos

In the *Imaginary Worlds*, Edgar Kaos, finds himself without any memories of his past among unusual beings who, unlike himself who is a human, can use magic. This is Incrematera. Edgar discovers that a war is raging on between the creatures of magic and the *desoulers* who are forcibly separating the souls of magic beings from their bodies. Being human, Edgar does not possess a magic soul and is the only one who cannot be desouled. The creatures of Incrematera despise him for this difference but also expect that, due to his immunity and with the assistance of the young dragon Night Mær, he will help end the war. On the military base where he is being prepared for the task, Edgar befriends the elfin heiress Floria, the wizard Quint, and the mysterious Arabella. He soon discovers that there is a conspiracy brewing against him and that all the friendships he has made during his stay on the military base are most probably illusory. With his only ally and Night Mær the dragon, he begins planning a perilous escape from the base and during his long struggle for survival develops the ability to use dangerous black magic. His escape triggers the abduction of Arabella and inadvertent murders caused by the black magic he is unable to fully control. With the help of Floria and Quint, who follow him to prevent him from handing himself over to the desoulers in exchange for Arabella's life, Edgar and Arabella survive the dangerous encounter. They even manage to destroy one of the desoulers but the question still hanging in the air is who are Edgar's true allies and whether Edgar even wants to help Incrematera...

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NIMEB

Edgar

Nobody told me what being a *Scorpion* actually means. Nobody once mentioned what it means to be the *Guardian of the Primordial Being*. Nobody mentioned *desoulers*, even though I remember the word only too well. I also remember the word *voids* at the mere utterance of which Flora and Quint began trembling that day in the hallway. Why has nobody explained any of this to me?

Trust? Whatever. It is true that I now believe in supernatural beings but that does not yet mean that I believe what they say. I know very well that that idiot, General Corvus, kept a considerable part of the story from me, for he spoke about it even before the eclipse. The Defence Squad has been mentioning some kind of dark forces and battles all along, but nobody mentioned any specific enemy that I ought to be afraid of. *We are allies*, said that elf, Tulip Pervensis. *Everything fits, everything is just wonderful*, he said.

Who does he think he is fooling?

One of the possible reasons why they are hiding the truth about enemies from me could be the fact that they themselves, the Defence Squad, are my enemies. They are enemies because I am human and because I offended them with my adventures during the eclipse. Although it is true that I have already dismissed that theory, the thought that all those warnings were not just a figment of my imagination creeps up on me every few minutes. Another possible explanation is that my true enemies are the *desoulers* and the *voids*, against which the Defence Squad is fighting. And the dragon and I are not supposed to know anything about them; we might also be some kind of sacrificial lambs. Or some kind of lab rats. Or part of some kind of deal. Basically, there is still something fishy here, but without doubt I first need to figure out all these unknowns.

After our initial rather distasteful meeting I would never have expected Libras Floria and Quint ever welcoming me with open arms. They probably changed their opinion of me because after the eclipse I helped with their excuses and made sure they got off the hook without punishment. I think they have also forgiven me for taking advantage of their naivety three weeks ago in the foyer of the marble hall and turning a few natural laws of Incrematera upside down. Awaiting me on the wall of Room 151 as a token of friendliness was a shoddily made poster saying WELCOME, PATHETIC PEST. 'You see, we didn't know your name before you moved in,' Floria and Quint explain laughing. I force myself to smile. Both of them in fact seem like fairly decent people that I could get on with. Over the past couple of days, they have shown me around the huge complex of the Defence Squad base and introduced me to some of the new comrades. They mostly want to see Night Mær and I am surprised that, unlike the guides, the dragon's black colour does not repulse them in the least.

The NIMEB building is huge, and judging by the thick wall, high ceilings, old-fashioned furnishings and vaulted halls, it must also be quite old. It is one of those buildings where you can sense the flow of various times, a kind of presence of spirits of thousands of different creatures from a variety of eras. Not scary ghosts but spirits that render the place strangely comfortable. Because you too are only one of the millions of fragments among them, occupying a small part of this massive object at a brief point in time. I am surprised at how unusually pleasant smallness is amidst all these strange creatures, at the centre of life and the strangest of happenings. Perhaps the base is also comfortable because inside the temperature is pleasant and the colour scheme is soothing, harmonious, warm, dark. If I could dismiss that strange warning by the wizard commander whose name I cannot remember, I could feel almost safe here.

So far, I have managed to visit the dining room, some of the halls, the stadium, the library, the outside gardens and the surrounding area which is mostly coniferous forests, a lake, hills and mountains. No sign of any larger towns in the vicinity.

I found out that NIMEB is the Defence Squad's main and only North Incredimera military-education base, hence the acronym, though there are allegedly other military bases in the area that house a mix of warriors from all twelve – not merely three – groups. These older warriors no longer train but carry out full military duties. Unlike them, we beginners at the main bases are still only training and rarely fight for real. About the Defence Squad itself, all I was told is that this is the common military training organisation of all the nations of Incredimera. Serving in it is obligatory for all creatures older than fifteen sun circles. Of course, I did not miss the fact that by some coincidence once again I did not manage to find out what the reason such a serious military organisation even exists. If there happens to be a great war raging on somewhere in the world, I know nothing about it. But then, perhaps they just forgot to tell me. It is possible, is it not?

Putting these matters aside, I am truly doing my new way of life at NIMEB injustice by complaining. In room 151 we have three large beds, two wooden writing desks, a small bathroom of our own and two large old-fashioned wardrobes for the clothes we are given here. The clothes are otherwise rather dull: grey uniforms for Libras, white ones for Sagittariuses, black for Scorpions – and hardly more colourful standard items for leisure time. The only items of interest are the *warmcapes* and the *warmboots*, clothing that includes a heat spell making it much easier for members of the Defence Squad from NIMEB to get through the harsh mountain winters. There is no set bedtime, we are free to visit other rooms, the food is tasty, and, being on the ground floor, we can step straight out into the external stadium through our huge windows.

As roommates with whom I spend most of my day, Floria and Quint are bearable. Floria is the heir to the Elfin throne, which is probably the most unusual and hard to grasp fact because she is so unassuming. When she first mentioned it, I thought she was joking. Her full name, as she told me is Floria Everblossom Rosekeep of the Castra dynasty. I need to take care not to use the word *princess*. Floria hates being called that. She said she prefers the titles *heir to the throne* or *eschâris*, which in elfin means 'little crown'. This title is hers until the moment she will take over the throne of the Elfin Kingdom, which, as she said, will not happen for at least another hundred or two hundred sun circles. 'We elves live a little longer,' she explained. *A little longer* in this case means at least three to four hundred sun circles.

If you ignore her moments of excessive curiosity and constant asking all kinds of questions that are sometimes pertinent and at other times not, one can talk about many things with her when she is not too busy arguing with Quint. This happens so often that you'd think they were brother and sister if Quint wasn't a wizard and Floria an elf. Quint is a little harder to judge than Floria. He seems intelligent enough but sometimes what he says is a little absurd. He can be excessively adult in an instant, on the other hand he keeps playing with some dumb five-ball pendulum in which only the first and last balls bounce off the middle ones, and he sees this as some kind of supernatural creation – I haven't felt in as much awe of the dragon as Quint marvels over this worthless pendulum. All I can say about him for certain

is that he is cautious. While Floria dives into everything headfirst, Quint constantly evaluates everything he notices and carefully weighs out every option.

Wearing oversized stripey pyjamas, toothbrush in my mouth and white socks on my feet that are so big they reach up to my knees, I sleepily wander out of the bathroom when I hear Quint and Floria arguing again.

‘Do what you want, but I *will not* spend the entire night on guard outside.’

‘Are you actually a little slow or are you just pretending to be? Can’t you get it into that thick head of yours that we can’t walk around alone outside?! Or do you want what happened to you last time to happen again?!’

‘And I suppose you are fine with walking non-stop for ten hours through the forest in the dark, uh?’

‘If *you* hadn’t acted so foolishly last time, we would not even need to take on night guard duty!’

‘Come on, Quint! Each of us can stay on guard for their half of the night and sleep through the other half. We have an education session in the morning. I can’t stay awake all night.’

‘If you can attack those damned eights, you can also endure a week of night duty – *the way it has to be done* – and not your own way again.’

They don’t even notice how embarrassing it is for me with each of them sulking in their own corner, muttering as they get their backpacks ready, as if in a hurry to go outside, into the night – and without me. ‘Where are you going?’ I carefully ask.

With a deliberately fake enthusiasm, Floria hops around on the spot. ‘For a wonderful ten short hours we are going out on night duty! For a wonderful ten hours we will walk in circles round the base, have fun and gather energy for the next day’s educational session!’ In anger she is incapable of donning her army boot, so she kicks it to the wall.

‘We are on duty all week,’ Quint explains to me with a little more clarity. ‘So this week you will sleep alone in our room... well, with the dragon. You’ll be alright, won’t you?’

I nod confidently. ‘Sure.’ But for some reason the thought of having to spend all night alone ties my guts in a knot. Well, alright, I do have Night Mær.

That didn’t sound in any way reassuring.

The thought occurs to me that this is an excellent opportunity to extract some more information from this naïve couple, information that the Supreme Commander of the Northern Base had not been forthcoming with. If the Libras must go on guard duty, this means there must also be some kind of danger. ‘Floria?’ I address the princess cautiously because I have the feeling that Quint can read between the lines.

‘Yes, Edgar?’ she says as if Edgar has been my name forever.

'Will I also be on duty any time in the near future? Is guard duty just part of the punishment, or is it the duty of all Libras and Scorpios?'

'Guard duty is compulsory, but in principle it does not last all week and also not all night, and besides this, the next day you are excused from educational classes. This year you Scorpios are the last on guard duty, so you will only be on night watch towards the winter,' the heir to the elfin throne patiently explains.

Quint comments bitterly that in any case I will be on night watch a week later than was planned because their week-long guard duty has now pushed everything back.

'And what is one supposed to do on guard duty?' I enquire innocently.

'If it is internal, you walk round the corridors of the base making sure nobody enters or leaves it during the night,' Floria babbles as she ties a rather unusual wristwatch to her arm. 'When it is external...'

'Exactly the same, just that it is outdoors,' Quint interrupts her strictly with a meaningful glance. It is pretty obvious Floria had almost told me something she should not have.

Aha, I squint. So there really is something I am not supposed to know. So this is the game we are playing. But with Quint's cautiousness I cannot continue with my questions at this moment, so I simply sit next to Mær who has long been snoring on the pillow of my double bed. I stroke its belly. Quint and Floria soon take their leave. As the door closes behind them, I can hear the echo of their bickering until it dies down completely. In solitude, there is little else for me to do but crawl under the heavenly soft blanket and lay Night Mær across my belly. The dragon wakes up, I stroke its head, it purrs gently and a strange sensation that stems from deep within widens my mouth into a silly smile.

I take short sips of tea, slowly emptying the cup. Out of boredom I sleepily study the symbol of the Defence Squad emblazoned on the cup that I, like every other DS member, had received as a gift when I entered the squad. I turn it around.

EDGAR KAOS, it says on the other side. Tea is supposed to calm a wizard down but with Kaos, Chaos, mentioned on one side, something is... wrong. When I read my own name, I don't feel like tea anymore, so I leave the last few sips in the cup, reluctantly putting it down on the bedside table next to Floria's. I notice that the elf has not even touched her drink today. As she probably has no intention of drinking stale tea in the morning when she gets back, I dare take a small sip from her cup.

Floria's tea seems to be tastier than mine. I once again try my own and realise that it is downright disgusting. Bitter. Lukewarm. Murky. *Yuck*. I know that it might only seem that way because of the sudden revulsion I felt about my new name, but I still cannot help but pour the last few sips of the foul tea straight down the toilet.

Quint

I look at the countdown and notice that it is already ten o'clock – the first hour of the external night watch has passed. In fact, it wasn't that bad. Nine to go.

'I have arranged with Arabella that she will keep an eye on him all night, to make sure nothing goes wrong,' Floria tells me.

I stop. 'And how, according to you, is she supposed to do that? Sing him lullabies all night, or what?'

Annoyed, Floria turns up her nose. 'She will go in and check that he is asleep every few hours, that's all.'

I give her another of my contemptuous looks.

'What?' she pulls a face. 'What's wrong in wanting to make sure that everything is alright with the Guardian? We are responsible for him, and I want to be consistent in carrying out my tasks. You do what you want.' She gives me a cold glance as if it were *me* who had done something wrong.

A strange thought occurs to me and I take a good look at Floria's face. 'Floria,' I say carefully. I look her in the eye but she persistently avoids my gaze. I know instantly what is going on and realise immediately why this idiot was taking advantage of Arabella. My blood pressure is skyrocketing. 'You didn't give him the capsulum.'

'Of course I gave it to him,' she becomes goes on the defensive.

'No, you didn't!' I shout at her. 'Why then would you want Arabella to guard him!?''

'Sometimes sleep capsulums just don't work,' she snaps at me.

This woman is crazy. *They don't work*. Of course. She didn't give it to him. 'If Corvus orders that we should put a sleep capsulum in the person's tea, we stick the damned capsulum into his tea! What do you know what a human being can do in its sleep if they remain in semi-slumber! You said yourself that today *you* would do it. Now tell me honestly, did you do what was requested of you?'

'Yes, I did,' Floria looks straight into my eyes.

But I know her tricks. '*Exactly* as was requested of you?'

'Exactly so, Quint,' she folds her arms defiantly.

I don't believe her. I would be crazy to believe her. 'So you dissolved exactly one capsulum in Edgar's evening tea?' She nods so fervently that her elf ears swing. 'When?' I continue to interrogate her.

'When he was in the shower. I did everything as I had to, Quint, there is no need to doubt me. I called Arabella just in case because tonight is his first night in our room and because we are not there.' Now I am seriously getting on her nerves. 'Stop behaving as if I am incapable!'

'Floria, I really want to know why you cannot ever do anything the way it was requested of you! What is the problem?! Are you jealous of Edgar because he is the Guardian, and you are a Libra, and you are sabotaging him?!'

'Come on?!' Floria squeaks with outrage. 'These accusations are a step too far!'

I realise there is no point arguing with her. She will never get it. 'If you didn't do everything precisely the way you should have, Corvus will kill us, just so you know. Not to mention the shit that Edgar could cause if he starts getting restless in the night.'

Floria raises her head high wanting to appear adult and mature, turning her back on me and walking on. She always does this when she has done something wrong and doesn't want to admit it. 'I did everything as it should be, and don't care whether you believe me or not.' Arrogantly she leaves me behind and continues the night watch. Grumbling, I join her.

Edgar

'Hello, Triad.' The door to room 151 opens about an hour after Floria and Quint have left for their night watch. I instantly recognise her from the sweetness of her voice. The girl with her most boring story about Triad magic who almost persuaded me to give up all my memories of life. The fox.

'Oh,' I greet her. There is no point in pretending that her unexpected visit isn't welcome. It's true, I am angry with her, but her visit is at the moment a better option than night loneliness. At the sight of Night Mær across my belly, the wizard girl laughs and slides a little closer. 'May I, Triad?' With her tiny fingers she points at the space in the bed next to me.

'Yes, of course,' I say and move aside so she can sit down. 'Besides, I am now Edgar and no longer Triad,' I inform her as she strokes Mær. 'And this is Night Mær,' I indicate at the sleeping dragon.

'Oh, so you are not *Aeon Myaava*?' she asks the baby dragon who purrs with satisfaction at her touch.

I shake my head.

'Would you do me the honour and entrust me with your full name?' The girl with long white eyelashes winks at me mischievously.

'Hmm... Edgar Kaos,' I say cautiously as if my surname was in fact a badge of shame.

Fortunately, it does not represent anything chaotic to the girl. 'Nice to meet you, Triad,' she holds out her hand.

'And you are...?' I ask curiously.

'That depends,' she says.

'Depends on what?'

'On... the context,' the girl giggles.

I frown, 'Oh?'

'Sometimes I am the first snake's head of Triad's soul.' She does not take her dark blue eyes off Night Mær for a single moment. 'But most friends call me Arabella.'

She didn't tell me her surname. 'Arabella *what?*'

'Arabella Caramella.'

We both giggle like little children. 'I am serious,' I tell her, laughing loudly.

'Arabella Tarantella,' she giggles.

'Arabella Sardella,' I add to the list.

'That doesn't fit,' Arabella laughs and in the next moment the eyes of my newfound friend twinkle when she adds, 'Arabella Salmonella!' I burst out laughing again and this wakes up Night Mær who bleats at me grumpily and then moves across to Arabella.

'You traitor,' I tell the dragon.

Arabella winks at me. 'Jealous?'

'Of your mother, who obviously has some *close friends* with funny surnames.'

Arabella giggles and boxes me in the shoulder a little too roughly. For such a small girl, she is surprisingly strong. But then I notice the dragon's threateningly mischievous gaze, clearly attracted by Arabella's dangling plaits.

'OUCH!'

Perhaps the squeak frightens it and it drops the thin white plait from its mouth. As if to apologise, it licks Arabella's face.

'Do you like your plaits?' I poke her. 'It would be nice if you told me your name, Salmonella.' Then something occurs to me that I had entirely forgotten about. 'I mean... you do also have a surname, don't you? Or did the Defence Squad not allocate you one after erasing your memory?' I ask her, confused as I recall her mentioning at the temple that we shared the same fate.

'Arabella Grimska.' She stubbornly smooths out her hair and does not say anything about erasing memories.

'I think that Night Mær has eaten my rubber band, naughty girl.'

'Mær is a boy,' I correct her. 'So naughty boy.'

Arabella stares at me. 'How do you know?'

Only then does it occur to me that I in fact do not know whether Mær is male or female. My gaze scans the beast's body head to tail, analysing its anatomy. 'A boy,' I conclude firmly.

'I think she's a girl,' Arabella doubts me.

'No, he's a boy.'

'What if I, just so we can be sure, lift its leg slightly, and you take a look?' the girl suggests.

'He's a dragon, not a dog,' I turn up my nose in offence.

'Come on, how do you think they checked you when you were born,' Arabella teases me. 'Perhaps they had to take more than one look to even determine...'

'Alright, alright,' I interrupt her and roll my eyes.

'Make sure they don't pop out,' Arabella warns me.

'Don't pop out...' I imitate her in a squeaky voice.

She stops smiling. 'Are you always this annoying?' she asks me, winking mischievously.

'I wouldn't know, I've *forgotten*.' I cannot be angry with her, however much I try. 'Because someone distracted me with a tale about a Triad and its damned soul and damned gods that never wanted anything but damned drama; why would anyone provoke me in such an obvious way and create *forbidden* magic and *forbidden* eggs? It's almost like ordering you to go and stir things up.'

'Listen,' I say in a tone of suspense. The girl looks at me expectantly and with every passing moment of silence waits more eagerly for what I will say. Then I quickly call out, 'Don't touch your plaits!'

Arabella instinctively shakes her head. 'Why shouldn't I touch my plaits?' she asks me in confusion as she grabs the dangling tufts of her white hair.

'See, just what I was saying!' I smirk with satisfaction.

The girl giggles and giggles and her mischievous laughter soon grows on me. *I have a friend*, I think to myself with excitement. I am grateful to her that she is keeping me company and that I am not alone.

Oh, golly.

'Told you she was a girl.'

'Right, shut up.' No, hang on, what's that there?

'Oh, no, false alarm. He's a boy.'

'Of course he's a boy. What did you think?'

THE WRONG CAPSULUM

Floria

'I can't go oooon.'

'Floria, we've only been walking for four hours. Another six, and we're done.'

'Shut up, Quint.'

It is past midnight and we are walking down the circular forest path that leads round the wider area of NIMEB for the seventh time. Apart from a bunch of nymphs, diligently doing their jobs, there is not a soul around. The night is calm and our countdowners have not beeped even once, which undoubtedly points to the fact that there is no danger in the vicinity.

'Flo, hang on,' Quint peers cautiously around.

I skilfully pull my bow from my back and place an arrow in it with perfect precision. 'What is it?' I ask with excitement, getting my bow ready for a shot, wildly turning around, checking the surroundings.

'I will go for a pee somewhere here. Wait for a moment'

I squint at him, fed up, and drop the bow from its battle-ready position back to my side. 'You went halfway back this last circuit,' I mutter with contempt after Quint had already long disappeared behind a thick bush. 'Is the volume of that bladder of yours really no more than a damn teacup?' I grunt to myself, impatiently walking round in circles. 'No, this is mental. You can't even last half a damn hour...' Suddenly I fall silent. I think I can hear something. I crouch close to the ground. I try to act professionally though unbearable fatigue makes it pretty obvious I am struggling. 'Quint? Is that you?' I whisper cautiously through the bushes. I get no answer. My fingers reach for the arrows in readiness. With inaudible steps I approach the source of the sound, slow, keeping low, carefully as I was taught, but find nothing suspicious. The longer I walk, the more it seems I was just hearing things in my tiredness and lack of sleep. I stop and put my weapon away with relief. If there had been a void or some other monster nearby, the countdowner would have alerted me anyway. There is no reason for panic.

Arabella

I wait until Edgar is fast asleep. By now his capsulum for sleep without night-time illusions should long have had its effect, and, judging by his peaceful breathing, Edgar has already sunk into a deep sleep. When I arrived, his mug of tea into which Floria had dissolved the capsulum was empty, so Edgar must have drunk it about two hours ago. He fell asleep thirty minutes ago and is entirely peaceful in his sleep, so now I can assume that the capsulum is taking effect.

I deliberately make a little noise and when Edgar does not react, I can be sure I don't need to worry.

I gently pull back the blanket from his left hand and lightly turn it up to check that the dark blotch covering spell is still working. Over the past weeks I have managed to secretly renew it every second day. I discovered the times that the healers left the unconscious Edgar alone in the hospital room and visited him, performing the same spell five times in a row, so the marks faded entirely for a day or two. The last time I renewed the spell was three days ago and I think I am getting more effective with it. At first glance Edgar's marks are not noticeable and it is only when one looks more carefully that the vague grey outlines on his hands are visible. If I want to keep Edgar alive, I will need to keep renewing the fading spell regularly, but I am reassured by the idea that its power is increasing and that it will need to be renewed less and less often.

I carefully lift Edgar's hand a few centimetres.

Night Mær's tail twitches. I freeze. What if the dragon is not asleep? I wait for a few moments and when Mær doesn't move again, I continue; softly I place my fingers on Edgar's faded mark, and as quietly as I can, clearly utter, '*Signo fadelis.*' The mark becomes less noticeable until it totally disappears. I place his hand gently back on the bed, cover it with a blanket once again, and breathe a sigh of relief. I reckon that I will need to renew the spell in about a week's time. Until then, he should be safe.

Floria

Quint seems to be doing his business a suspiciously long time.

I decide to go and find him. I swing my bow clumsily as I make my way through the thicket and only with difficulty reach Quint whom I find squatting on the forest floor. I turn my gaze away so as not to see anything I don't need to. 'Quint, you said you were going for a pee, not...'

'Hush!'

Hush? I prick up my ears attentively when I realise that Quint is observing someone or something from behind the bushes. He indicates I should keep low and crawl up towards him. His confused gaze tells me not even he knows what he is in fact looking at. I once again remember that foul void I had fought with not long ago. I feel sick but remind myself that our countdowners would long have beeped if they had detected one's presence nearby. I quietly creep up to Quint. Without saying a word, he points towards a small gap in the bushes. I lean forward and look through it.

Hidden beyond the bushes is a large forest glade and running across it is a tall figure coming from the direction of the Defence Squad's Northern Base. With a black hood pulled across its face, there is no way of recognising who it might be. Quint reaches for the magnifying glasses from my backpack and hands them to me. Clumsily I don them and look again towards

the strange apparition. I can now see it clearly, as if it were standing right next to me. Although I can't see beyond the hood, I notice something threatening in its hands.

I gulp. 'Quiiint,' I squeak in a trembling voice.

Arabella

Edgar moves suddenly and kicks his legs in agitation. At first I am worried that I have woken him up but then I discover that the Guardian is in fact still sleeping. With interest I look upon the unusual scene of the roving sleeping being. The state of dreaming, which is nocturnal restlessness, can only occur during sleep, when the soul does not separate from the body, and this happens only to beings who no longer have a soul in the form of a magic animal. Instead a strange unnamed thing, which is certainly not the soul, stays within them throughout the night. We, creatures of magic, release our souls from our bodies whilst we sleep, so that our bodies rest empty while our souls in the form of magic animals feed on stardust brought to them by the night nymphs. This way we always wake up in the morning cleansed and reborn. Unless, of course, our souls are in the meantime attacked by a blood spectre, but that's a different story. None of us have ever experienced either dreams or nightmares.

Edgar stops tossing and turning, so I decide that I will stay with him until the end of his dreaming. It occurs to me that he might be soothed by conversation. I know he is asleep, but for as long as this strange thing is inside him, at least a part of his consciousness will certainly hear me.

'You people need too much sleep. I read that your sleep minimum is seven hours a day which is almost a third of your time. Even though you live such short lives, you sleep through a third of it. Out of about seventy-five sun circles, you sleep through twenty-five. I couldn't sleep that much even if I wanted to. For magicians, four hours a day, which is only a sixth of one's time, is more than enough. Elf can manage with only two, but Floria likes her sleep and does so for about five hours a night, when she is not on guard duty, of course, and nymphs sometimes don't sleep for several consecutive moons. I think that you people sleep so long because you first spend a few hours in the first stage when your sleep is not deep and tranquil, whereas we can pass into deep sleep the moment we close our eyes.'

I know that these were things Edgar didn't know before, so talking about the bright sides of creatures of magic paradoxically makes me feel extremely useful, even though Edgar is still running wild in his sleep.

This is getting a little suspicious now – Quint and Floria gave him the sedative. By now he should be sleeping like log.

Quint

'What?' I whisper to Floria with concern. The tone of her voice doesn't sound promising. 'What can you see? Who is it?'

‘No... I don’t know who it is...’ my friend stutters and turns towards me. Her face is pale. Her hands begin to shake. She is breathing shallowly through the mouth, as if she is feeling very sick. ‘Quiiint,’ she squeaks and stumbles.

I quickly support her. ‘What’s wrong?’ I am worried because she is behaving as if she is about to drop dead. I help her sit on the ground and offer her some water from the backpack.

She refuses it and barely manages to stutter, ‘Edg... Edgar...’

I take a look around. That figure was certainly not Edgar. It was far too tall to be him.

‘I gave Edgar the wrong capsulum,’ Floria cries out, burying her face in her hands.

I kneel down next to her. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The... the person running across the meadow... coming from the direction of the Base... he was holding in his hand the box of capsulums that had today been waiting for Edgar on the shelf at the surgery...’

‘Waiting on the shelf? Weren’t you given those capsulums in person by some healer?’

‘There were no healers there... only the box of capsulums with a green paper attached to it saying *Room 151. 1 per day before sleep,*’ Floria rattles on. ‘I took one capsulum from the box and left the box in the surgery so Edgar wouldn’t find it by chance in the morning – I did everything exactly the way Corvus had instructed me. Then I did only what was written on the box.’

I glared at her. ‘What the hell, Floria?!’

‘I didn’t know that...’ Floria’s dewy eyes pleadingly stare at me when she asks whimpering, ‘W-why would someone leaving NIMEB fully disguised in the middle of the night holding the box of Edgar’s capsulums? T-this is n-not alright.’

‘Surely it can’t be the same box...’

‘But I saw it! Quint, I’m an elf and my vision is much better than yours, and I had the magnifying lenses... yes, it was the same box, the one and only...’

‘Come on, don’t panic!’ I am certain that Floria, now nervously trying to get up, is once again exaggerating. ‘Even if both things, Edgar’s capsulums and the odd stranger are suspicious each in their own way, this doesn’t mean that they are also connected...’

‘Quint!’ Floria shouts almost top loudly. ‘I have absolutely no idea what I gave him! Perhaps it was poison, Quint! Perhaps I poisoned Edgar!’

‘What are the chances of...’ I think aloud with uncertainty. It should be impossible that someone would be carrying Edgar’s capsulums, the very ones we were supposed to give him, through the forest in the middle of the night. This would be highly unlikely.

‘The yellow box with the green note.’ Her eyes were glassy with fear. ‘Do you think this is the work of... *their* spies?’

'N-no,' I start to worry. 'Not on the Base...' I shuffle my feet uneasily. 'Well, I don't know.' I grab hold of my head. I stop. The fact that Floria's idea could be true kicks me in the stomach and gives me a lump in my throat. 'What...' I give the pale-faced Floria a scared look, '...should we do?'

Floria stands up, starts running back towards the Base. This was certainly not what I had in mind. It would have been wiser if we had used the countdowner to ask Arabella whether anything suspicious was going on with Edgar, or send a message to the base that they should keep Edgar under strict surveillance tonight because we cannot be certain that we carried out our task the way we should have. I most definitely did not intend to abandon the night watch without informing the Base about it.

Damn. I run after her and I think we have never run this fast in my life. It could be a matter of life and death for Edgar. I don't know, I don't have time to think about it. I simply run after the determined Floria. It seems she is thinking for the both of us this time.

'How could they have found out about Edgar so soon? And how did they know he was taking sleep capsules when not even he knew that?!'

I can barely keep up. 'An enemy within,' I pant.

Edgar

I am awoken by the sound of a thousand deafening alarm clocks. The cuckoos in them are singing away madly, chime bells are ringing so loudly that their sound pierces through my chest. I cover my ears but move my hands straight away. There is something oozing from them, slimy and sticky. I try to get rid of the nasty substance but can't. It is slowly penetrating my skin, the acid causing it to become looser and looser.

I close my eyes.

Suddenly all the clocks fall silent.

I open my eyes to see what has happened but all I can see is darkness. It makes no difference whether I have my eyes open or closed – darkness. I try again and again, but everything is always pitch black. I can feel a breeze through my head, in place of my eyes I seem to have two holes.

Using my hands, I try to touch my eyes but am losing control of my limbs. They seem somewhat longer than usual... somehow rubbery. As if they had no bones. I have the strange sensation of my arms sliding down the side of my body, like honey running from a spoon. Then a cold shudder., and it seems as if the tips of my fingers have reached the floor.

I cry out. Helplessly I try to control the movement of the two flaccid fleshy offshoots that were once my arms.

I open my eyes again and once again I am in the white room. I am panic stricken. How could I be here again?!

My arms turn heavy and I know that, were I to move, they would tear from my body. I pray without as much as twitching. But just then one of the cuckoos from the alarm clocks chirps again, even though there are no alarm clocks here. 'SEVEN SUN CIRCLES OF WOE! SEVEN SUN CIRCLES OF WOE!' it shrills annoyingly. In that mirror I notice that in place of my eyes I have two orifices through which a wooden cuckoo peeks out every so often.

So what am I actually looking with?

I stagger and my arms tear away at the elbows. Two long bloody snakes fall to the floor. On its bloodied end, the ripped limb sprouts a row of spiky teeth, arranged in a circle, out of the fleshy middle of which extends a serpentine tongue. It burrows through the air, as if it is looking for me. Two flesh-eating worms are quickly closing in on me. There is nowhere I can escape to because there are no doors. The first worm wraps itself round my legs and I fall to the ground.

'SEVEN SUN CIRCLES OF WOE!' the cuckoo sings into my ear.

Then I find myself in a marble hall.

That woman with a needle is pricking my skin. 'You are one of us and will be marked as one of us,' Corvus neighs and when Tulip Pervensis also approaches, he pricks me in the shoulder with a veinprick.

'The enemy is closer than you think,' a bald lieutenant says to me and leaves. 'Welcome, pathetic pest,' says Floria. Quint is playing with his five-ball pendulum and it looks like the two on each side – the two that are the only ones bouncing away – are my eyes. 'Careful they don't pop out,' Arabella says scornfully.

'Have you ever heard of desoulers?'

'It's true that we will have to start afresh.'

'You'll be alright, won't you?'

'Did I not mention that I want the human to remember everything?'

'Until then it is better that you are deactivated.'

'Today we came across a void in our forests who almost got us.'

'It's even worse than I expected.'

'Tell me, damn it, if you know what being a Guardian of a Primordial Soul actually means?'

'You are chaos.'

'Sometimes I am the first snake head of Triad's soul.'

*Each of the twelve people sticks a veinprick into one of my organs, even though I don't know whether I have that many. They all toast with cups with the name **EDGAR KAOS** shining on them.*

'You are chaos.'

'You can pick peace, you can pick chaos.'

'You are destruction.'

'Chaos.'

'Chaos.'

'CHAOS!'

'CHAOS!'

*'**CHAOS!**'*

'Edgar Kaos, you are in danger. Come to me urgently as quickly as possible and take care not to be seen by anyone. Come to my office in Tract E and don't tell anyone where you are going. Under no circumstances leave the dragon alone – bring it along with you. I will try and get you out of this mess, if it is still possible. If you have already been provided with a NIMEB countdowner, DO NOT WEAR IT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. Come as fast as you can.'

Boris Ranulfov, Lieutenant of the Defence Squad.

14

THIS THEN, IS A VOID

Arabella

'Edgar!'

His round black eyes open wide and glance around the room. He is shaking, out of breath, as if he has run ten miles. The thunderous beating of his heart can probably be heard through the walls of the room. When he notices me he instinctively jumps away.

'Calm down!' I reassure him. 'It was only a nightmare.' Mentioning the nightmare, he glances at the bed, nervously looking for the dragon which had moments earlier disappeared beneath it.

'Where is Night Mær!?' Edgar cries out. He looks at me hatefully as if I had stolen his dragon, not stolen, as if I had killed it. Does he even recognise me?

'Crawled under the bed, stop shouting,' I remind him quietly. 'Stop it, you're awake and your bad dreams are over. Everything is fine.' I try to comfort him but Edgar continues to shiver like a leaf, staring emptily ahead, as if he has not even seen or heard me. 'Edgar?' His gaze stops at a non-existent point from which he clearly has no intention of moving for a while. Suddenly I am not entirely convinced that Edgar really is awake.

Edgar

WELCOME, PATHETIC PEST.

I stare at the welcome poster on the wall and the poster stares at me. I hate it. I try to stand up, stagger and Arabella supports me, but I push her away and pull myself two steps along, avidly ripping the poster off the wall and tearing it into tiny pieces. I tear away at it because I hate it that much.

Quint's pendulum is on his writing desk. I grab it roughly, violently tear all the hanging spheres from it and open the window. Day is breaking. The sunrise is beautiful, truly magnificent, and I stare at it almost dreamily. Then I throw the damned balls out of the window.

The first snake head of Triad's soul watches me worriedly but due to my hysteria does not dare move in case I turn on her. Better for her.

Next comes the cup with EDGAR KAOS written on it. I throw it against the wall. Arabella cries out and calls my name. She is telling me that the nightmares are over and that I have long been awake, but I know that they aren't and that she is just a plain lying snake.

Hands shaking, I search for the scissors on Floria's desk so I can ruin my haircut, but searching for them I forget what I am looking for. When I spot Floria's pink child-proof scissors, I grab them and run towards the mirror. Arabella now pounces on me, trying to pull them out of my hand. I want to shake her off but she clings to me like a leech. She is shouting into my ear that it was all just a dream and that I should calm down, that everything is fine, but I know it isn't. Then she forcibly turns my head towards the mirror.

I am surprised to see that my eyes are still where they should be. For a moment I calm down. They are here. I don't just have holes. I have eyes and everything is fine with them. No holes, no draughts. There is something mad in them, but they are here. I look at my hands and also establish that they are still attached to my body. I lift up my palms and wiggle my fingers. They work. And there is no slime oozing from my ears.

Arabella moves back as soon as she sees I am conscious. I look around; the room is trashed. I become infinitely sorry; this was just a nightmare but I had totally lost it. I feel out of breath

with remorse and shame. Why did I do this? Why couldn't I control myself? It was only a bad dream! What the hell was all this?!

When I see Arabella's eyes, still full of horror, I feel even more regret and infinite shame. The witch does not even know me and has seen me in a state I had never seen myself in. But, before I have a chance to explain that I did not want to harm her, it occurs to me that I had forgotten something. Momentarily I cannot remember what, but then I recall the unusual message from Lieutenant Ranulfov. It turns out that my dreams were far from irrelevant. Usually real people do not give me precise instructions in my normal dreams such as, for example, *the office in Tract E*. I push Arabella off me. Without hesitation I get on my knees next to the bed, feel under it for Mær's tail and pull the dragon out. I hold it in my arms and rush out into the corridor. I will find Ranulfov so he can protect me from all these monsters.

Mær slides out of my arms for the eleventh time, so for the eleventh time, I skilfully pick the dragon up without losing a second's time. I pull him from the floor by his tail and hold him back against my chest, rushing on without hesitation. It is not hard to see that Mær does not like being handled like this; the dragon continuously squeals, unable to comprehend that I am unable to offer him any greater comfort on his journey in my arms, but fortunately he cooperates as much as he can. Although he only hatched a few days ago, Night Mær understands a surprising number of things and this time also senses that we are on the run. I run through Tract B, then through Tract C, hoping that the tracts on the base are in alphabetical order and that, without any hidden passages, I am only a few minutes away from Tract E. I try to guess the shortest route, making sure I don't slow down at all.

Even so, my distrust of the Defence Squad due to the nightmares, Ranulfov's warning and the apparent concealment of key information is ripping my stomach apart and at the same time giving me the strength to run faster.

I keep telling myself that the painful uncertainty will end the moment I find Lieutenant Ranulfov who will answer all my questions and carefully reveal every detail of the truth that they have been hiding from me. I only need to find him, before someone from the Defence Squad prevents me from doing so.

Once and for all, I want to clarify, who here is on my side and who isn't, and I want to know what it is that they are hiding from me... and why.

I want to know who I am and what desoulers are. What are voids and why is the Defence Squad lying to me. I want the truth, however terrifying it might be.

Floria

Edgar had supposedly taken the capsulum seven hours ago, so he could now be long dead or drugged or kidnapped or mutilated – at the thought of this I almost trip over the root of one

of the final trees, before the huge grassy meadow opens up in front of me wherein stands the mighty building of the Northern Base. I estimate that we will reach Edgar, if he is still alive, within three minutes.

My countdowner pings but not with a warning signal. Someone is writing me a message on it. I don't pay attention because glancing at it would slow me down.

'Who is writing to you?' Quint calls out behind me, slowly running out of breath. I don't reply. Answering him would also slow me down.

'Perhaps it is Arabella!'

I make sure I keep the same tempo and pull out the small double-sided device that looks like a watch of my pocket. The back of it has letters instead of numbers. I glance at the hands spelling out a message. It really is Arabella. I feel a cramp in my stomach. Especially since I have already missed half the message.

SULUMS DID NOT WORK, EDGAR WAS RAGING IN HIS SLEEP AND HAS NOW GONE SOMEWHERE, WHERE

Before Arabella writes the rest of the message I grab the key for winding up the countdowner and, hands shaking, spell out the letters: **WHERE DID HE GO**

I DON'T KNOW

LET NIMEB KNOW HE IS GONE, I once again interrupted Arabella's message. **E NEEDS TO HAVE HIS STOMACH CHECKED**

'Or be sent to the mortuary,' Quint standing behind me adds.

FIND HIM, MEET YOU AT THE MAIN ENTRANCE IN ONE MINUTE, I spell out. I don't wait for Arabella's reply but put the countdowner straight back into my pocket, rushing with an even faster pace towards the main entrance of the Northern Base.

Edgar

I soon realise that Tract E is the name of the most remote and abandoned section of NIMEB. I cannot decide whether this reassures me or frightens me, for there is not a living soul around to notice me but on the other hand I also can't count on anyone's help were something dangerous to happen to me.

I don't understand why Ranulfov, who is supposed to be Corvus's lieutenant and therefore an important member of the Defence Squad has his office in a hole like this, but as promised, I find it at the end of the long corridor of Tract E. The sign on the dusty door says *Boris Ranulfov, Second Lieutenant of NIMEB*, so I decide it is probably Ranulfov's former office now no longer in use. Yes, that must be it, because Ranulfov's title now is *lieutenant*, I am convinced of that, and not *second lieutenant* as the sign on the door says. Alright, most certainly nobody will find us here.

I put Mær down on the floor. Worried that knocking on the door could be heard by the wrong ears, I decide, just in case, to skip the courtesies. With the palm of my hand I push on the metal door handle to the former office of Lieutenant Ranulfov and all of a sudden I am no

longer convinced that I would like to know who or what are desoulers, voids, or even the Defence Squad.

Floria

Arabella turns out to be an excellent guide as she leads me and Quint to the remotest area of the Northern Base. I didn't even know this tract existed. She turns towards a dusty staircase and without hesitation rushes several floors deeper.

'I think this is the old part of NIMEB,' Arabella guesses as she runs along. 'If I remember correctly it has been abandoned for about ten sun circles. I don't know why Edgar would come here...' she peers with confusion along the broad dark corridor at the bottom of the dirty stairwell.

'Are you sure you are taking us the right way,' Quint asks coughing, allergic to dust.

Arabella nods and runs off into the dark.

Edgar would certainly not come to this place of his own accord – nobody in their right senses would find anything of interest here. The only possible explanation for Edgar's visit to the abandoned part of the base is that something had dragged him here, perhaps something that got into his head because of the capsulum and is now forcing him to behave in this mad manner.

The second possible explanation is that we are all wrong and he is not even here.

Quint shines his light into the dark space which turns out to be much deeper than we thought. 'There is no point in this,' Quint says desperately.

At that moment, my countdowner beeps a warning. Arabella's and then Quint's also beep.

50.

What? But we are on the base...

Quint and Arabella look at each other with fear. This can't be true, can it?

Because if the countdowners are right, there is a void only about two hundred metres from us. Somewhere in these rooms, within the base. Is Edgar close to it?

My countdowner continues to count down. So this is for real.

'To flee or to fight, this is now the question,' Quint bites his lips as he gazes, fear in his eyes, into the deep darkness before us.

'Fight,' Arabella says before me.

'Fight.' We nod at each other with determination and run off into the dark.

Edgar

I finally pluck up enough courage to push open the door to Ranulfov's office, then breathe a sigh of relief when I spot the bald creature. Undoubtedly this is him, although he has his back turned towards me at first. I glance over the abandoned office which, apart from the broken shelf with a few extinguished calmers and a discarded lighter, is entirely empty.

Ranulfov had clearly not heard me open the door, for he stands there still turned towards the wall. I clear my throat and with Mær by my side decide to enter the office. As soon as I move, I step into a puddle of thick black slime.

'Oh, yuck,' I exclaim loudly and try to get rid of the sticky sludge from my shoe. Ranulfov finally moves. It is as if he is slightly deaf and has only now realised that he is not alone in the office. Slowly he turns towards me and Mær. Observing him carefully, I realise that his fingers are unusually long and that something is dripping from them. In fact there is something also dripping from his trouser legs, spreading in front of him into a small black puddle, just like the one I had just stepped into.

I look more carefully at the wizard, his neck seems slightly bent. I blink twice and suddenly his anterior trunk is facing the opposite way to his head.

I feel sick.

Boris Ranulfov's face is totally smashed up.

I forget to breathe. I forget to move. Mouth open, all I can do is stare at the savaged remnants of the face of lieutenant Ranulfov that bears little resemblance to anything like a wizard's face. Stinking blackened flesh on his forehead is peeling, his nose is elongated almost as far as his chin and his small mouth has stretched diagonally across his whole face. His eyes are completely white. Oozing from them is a black slime that is slowly covering his torso and dripping onto the floor, his limbs melting like lard falling away from his body. As if Ranulfov's skin had been overstretched and is loosely hanging from his arms.

But he is not dead.

With rigid steps he begins moving directly towards me.

Night Mær hides between my legs, growling indignantly at the approaching pile of rotting flesh and rubs his head encouragingly against my knees, as if urging me to do something while I continue to stand there, staring at Ranulfov's body barely able to move. With every step his decomposing arms swing grotesquely and slap against his torso.

I cannot scream.

I cannot move.

I no longer feel anything.

I stare at him unaware of anything else around me. My body huddled in the corner, consciousness floats away from me in fear.

Night Mær relentlessly nudges at my legs, telling me for god's sake, get a move on, but when that is not enough, he bites my ankle as hard as possible. The pain forces me to return to my body.

Confused, I look at my feet. I realise I am here and I also realise that within moments I will no longer be here or anywhere if I don't do something immediately. My hand grabs the only object I can reach – a small lighter from the wooden shelf. I get ready to set alight the monster with all its dropping off pieces if it leaps on me before I can reach the door to the office.

Night Mær jumps towards the freak's legs and hangs from them by his teeth, without any serious effort tearing off a piece of rotting flesh. As if not feeling any pain, the corpse pays

the dragon no attention. No blood gushes from the wound and the body continues approaching unhindered. Mær tries to knock the freak over but all he manages to do is tear off another piece of its rotting flesh and fall hard onto the floor with the piece still hanging out of his mouth. I now press the lighter with determination and point it at the monster's face.

Suddenly I feel sick. Very sick. I can hear a low buzzing sound in my head.

Everything in my field of vision begins changing colour.

Then shapes begin to change.

I feel dizzy. Perhaps I really am... only hallucinating...?

Floria

15.

When we reach the very end of the dark corridor, my countdowner beeps a second time. Arabella calls out for me and Quint not to stop because she is certain that Edgar is very nearby. This can only mean that he has become engaged with a void and that the void is about to kill him.

13.

We both place protective plugs in our ears and don protective glasses on our noses.

10.

I send the Squad another signal that we are in the basement of the Base and in trouble, but any help cannot reach us in such a short time.

8.

'Here they are!' Arabella convincingly points to the door of Corvus's lieutenant's old office.

6.

Behind the door I can clearly hear Night Mær's growling. And then the sound of a void.

5.

The countdowner beeps for the last time. Quint gives me a questioning look, as if he is not entirely sure about this encounter with a void.

4.

With my gaze I let Quint know that this is a battle for life or death. We cannot allow the void to kill the Guardian and the young dragon end up in the hands of the desoulers. Fighting voids is the duty of all Libras, even if we can die doing so. This is war.

3.

I pull the bow I am still carrying across my shoulder from the nightwatch. I do not know how close the void will be when I open the door. All I know is that I have to get it on my first attempt – or all four of us are dead.

2.

Unless Edgar has once again made sure we have another surprise. I kick the door.

1.

'EDGAR!'

Edgar

'EDGAR!'

Floria suddenly appears outside the door to the office. Her image is distorted. I think she is shouting something but I cannot make out exactly what. '...over....our....rs!'

'What?' I ask faintly. The room spins around me and the figures in it thicken into a foul mix of colours

'COVER YOUR EARS!'

Why... why should I... I finally cover my ears with my hands. And the spinning room stops. I look at Floria who is no longer distorted. And then I look in the other direction –

Terrified by the scene of the melting body hunched over me, I scream at the top of my voice and try to slip past him, but the heavy body of Boris Ranulfov rolls onto me too quickly and knocks me down onto the hard floor.

I scream, waving the lit lighter around, that the monster knocks out of my hand the following moment. 'Floria!' I cry out even though I am not certain which side she is on. I twist to try and pull myself from under Ranulfov's body, but the rotting corpse is simply too heavy. As it sucks out my life energy, I become dizzy and dizzier. I can hear Floria shouting that I should push him off me so she can shoot him, otherwise her arrow will go right through me as well.

So, Floria is on my side. And this then, is a void.

I gather all my strength and push the gurgling apparition, but it is holding onto me leech like, and I collapse with exhaustion. Tears come to my eyes. Floria grabs her head, as if she has suddenly got a terrible headache. She convulses, shouting that I need to kill the void or we will all be paralysed and then de-souled. Only then do I notice Quint and Arabella, kneeling weakly on the ground with their hands over their ears.

My strength abandons me and with horror I realise that I have very few chances of survival. Arabella and Quint are under some kind of spell, I cannot reckon on their help at all. My only hope are Floria and her bow, aimed straight at me and the monster on top of me. If she shoots, I have a half chance of being saved, a half chance of being shot. Heads or tails.

'Shoot,' I barely manage to utter.

'What?'

'SHOOT, BUT TRY NOT TO HIT ME,' I shout.

Floria

'I can't,' I stutter. 'I cannot risk your life.'

'WHAT?!'

'I would ruin the balance!'

'FLORIA, WHO CARES ABOUT THE DAMNED BALANCE!'

Perhaps Edgar is right.

Might chaos in extreme cases be the right choice?

No, of course not. I must not break the strictest promises of Libras and risk the common goal of all the beings of Incrematera. Instead of establishing peace, I would definitively ruin it. *'I understand, Ms Castra,'* I can hear Corvus's voice in my head. But even if the three of us sacrifice ourselves and I do not shoot the void, that does not mean that Edgar would necessarily survive. *'I understand, Castra,'* I once again hear Corvus's voice. It would be most logical to protect the Guardian's life and sacrifice your own, Quint's and Arabella's. But is it really worth it? Is Edgar really the kind of Guardian that will manage to save Incrematera? I look at the friend whose last drops of life are being squeezed out by the void. I try to think what we will all be like if we become de-souled. *'I understand, Ms Castra.'*

Quint has already reached for the poison capsulum in his pocket so he would not become a void. *'I understand.'*

Sod your damned reasoning.

'Edgar?'

'YES?'

'I'm sorry.' I shoot the arrow.