

Ronke's Night

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p 7-12

Hunting Stars

We pretended we were planets. Malika played the sun and all the children had to orbit her. Mercury stayed closest to our supervisor and the others followed in ever greater arcs. I picked Uranus, but before I was far enough to enter my orbit I was already caught in the heather.

I was at star camp. The entire week I was staying at the Dassenheide observatory with a group of nerds and a gigantic telescope that did nothing for me.

'You know everything about the universe, right Ronke?' Mum had said as we drove over and I sat, knees pulled up, on the back seat.

Yes, of course I knew a good deal about the universe, but that was why I didn't feel like doing this. I'd have far preferred athletics camp, for the running. But after what had happened of course I didn't dare. So my parents enrolled me in a week of 'advanced star hunting'. Meanwhile they could walk themselves stupid in the Ardennes.

'And you're a massive fan of Kent Cullers!' Dad called back from the passenger seat.

He was right about that, Kent Cullers is amazing. As a scientist at the American SETI he went in search of extra-terrestrial life, despite being completely blind. He didn't need eyes to detect signals from distant solar systems. They might even have confused him all the more.

'But Kent Cullers isn't a runner!' I screamed through the car.

Whereas I *am*.

Malika carefully extricated me from the heather, while the other children continued to turn neatly in their orbits. There was a twig stuck under one leg of my jeans. It was scratching streaks into my skin.

'Why did you pick such a distant planet as Uranus?' she rasped. 'Stay nice and close to me, girl.'

I shrugged. 'Why should I be the one to pick the closest planet?'

Malika squatted next to me and pulled the twig from my trousers. She smelled of something I couldn't quite place, a deodorant with a citrus scent perhaps.

'Okay, you can be Uranus. But I'm giving you a buddy to help you,' she said as she brought me back to my starting position.

I pursed my lips. A buddy was a school thing, I shouldn't have to have one at camp. But Malika thought it a clever idea. She was back in the sun position, turning on her own axis and firing solar flares. Whoever was hit first had to be my buddy.

Nouri screamed. I recognised his hoarse voice. He kept on saying he knew exactly how many lightyears Orion's stars were from the earth, regardless of whether anyone wanted to listen. He also clicked his tongue annoyingly when anyone said anything different from what he'd come up with himself.

Now I was stuck with Nouri for the rest of the day. As Uranus's biggest moon he began to circle me.

It made me instantly dizzy.

*

There are some things you just *know*. Deep inside I'm an athlete, I realised that as soon as I could properly run. It's just that not everyone wants to understand.

I love to run. Pounding along with the wind in my face. Or scurrying over narrow forest paths, after the hares. I do it every day. Sometimes my legs are already itching to go by the time I'm sitting at my desk at school. My toes tingle more and more. I wriggle my way through the first sums, but by the lunchbreak I just *can't* keep it up.

If I really need to run, it's best not to try and stop me.

Once all the planets had orbited until they felt thoroughly sick, we walked back to the observatory building. The woodpeckers tapped frantically at the pine trees.

The other star chasers went off to play table tennis, but I hurried over to Malika.

'Can I go now?' I asked.

Malika cleared her throat, but I was already in the corridor before she could say anything.

During the breaks I was allowed to spend a bit of time alone in a quiet spot. I needed to be able to cool off from all the stimuli from time to time, Mum felt, and the only quiet spot also happened to be the inner sanctuary of the building: the observatory with the giant telescope.

It was all the way down at the end of the corridor. We'd already been here this morning with the whole group, so I knew the way. From the dining room came a confusing odour of soup and washing-up liquid. I carried my trainers in one hand and ran the other over the grainy plaster of the walls.

In the observatory I waited until I was sure no one was following me. On the other side of the building I could hear the kids squealing. Malika called to them to quieten down. I placed my fingers on the door handle and pushed it open.

High in the ceiling a ventilation duct rustled. And if I listened really carefully I could even hear the footfall of the crows on the roof. It smelt a tad mouldy and sweet at the same time, like an overripe peach. Against the walls hung curtains so dusty they'd have you sneezing before you'd even touched them. But in that moment I didn't care about mould or dust. Every afternoon this little round room became *my* place.

From the door I had to take ten steps forward to the crooked floor plank. There I made a half turn to my right, then another three steps.

The low platform with the telescope was now close by. My fingertips slid over the cold metal. The old-fashioned telescope was gigantic, with little buttons and dials, completely different from the modern computer-controlled devices.

I took off my sweater and pulled on my running shoes. They fitted me precisely.

I took a deep breath in. For a moment it was as if nothing else existed. Gone was the camp. Gone the ping-pong table shouting.

I braced myself.

'Go!' I whispered to myself. 'Go, go, go!'

My feet pounded the boards.

The soles of my shoes squeaked.

Off I went at lightning speed.

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If I Swallow a Star

Seaview-on-Sea, that was the name of the place we went on holiday two years ago. I still remember it precisely. How did anyone come up with such a stupid name? There were wood huts in the dunes, little shop stalls on the dike, water sprinklers to cool off and dogs, dogs, dogs everywhere.

Far from all the stalls and loungers there was a flat stretch of sand where I could run properly, without scaring Dad into a heart attack. Every day I sprinted from the dunes to the breakwater and back. Dad even complimented me on running so fast.

'You're like a meteor!' he'd called out when I zoomed past.

I was instantly glowing. A meteor is the same as a falling star, I knew that perfectly well by then, a lump from space that whizzes through the atmosphere with a flash of light.

'If you see a falling star you can make a wish!' I called back.

A couple of seconds later I crashed full-tilt into a small child.

The little girl was squatting down looking for shells. I hadn't heard Mum yell – she *had* done, in fact so loud that she was hoarse for days. I couldn't slow down and slammed into the girl. As she thudded down onto the sand I heard a bone crack.

'Don't cry, darling,' the mother had said to her child, after informing the first-aid station. 'That girl can't help being that way.'

Really. She literally said that.

'Being that way.'

When we got home my parents took me to my room. They sat on the edge of my bed, with me in the middle. Mum said I shouldn't feel guilty about what had happened. The little girl had been taken to hospital with a broken elbow, but she would heal fine.

Dad put an arm around me and said I was a meteor, after all, and some meteors burn up completely in the atmosphere, but others crash down onto our planet.

So that was what I'd done. I was a falling star who couldn't brake.

'Sweet?' Mum shook the box of Smarties we'd used to make the star map.

'Those are stars,' said Dad. 'And you can't eat a star. They're much too hot.' He pinched my leg gently, just above the spot where I'd also been hurt.

But of course I wanted one. After what had happened I wanted the whole box.

I rolled a Smarty onto my palm and held it up to my mouth. 'If I swallow a star, what'll happen then?'

Dad started to laugh. 'Just don't do it! You could get burnt.'

'You have to wet your tongue properly with saliva,' I said. 'It hisses a bit, but then it's fine.'

Mum and Dad each put a Smarty on their tongue at the same time and tried to melt it the fastest. The winner got another Smarty, and then had to compete with me.

I won time and again, although I knew my parents were letting me. They did everything they could to put me in a good mood. We played until the box was empty and our tongues were tingling from the sweets.

I didn't mention that I couldn't get the little girl from the beach out of my head.

From that day on I wasn't a meteor anymore.

I only ran on the spot.

She ran. The youngest of the seven Pleiades sisters ran as hard as she could, her arm around her beloved Sisyphus. They fled out of heaven, away from the fuss of pushy gods and demi-gods, strict fathers and their prison among the stars.

I wasn't Merope. And Nouri certainly wasn't my beloved! But we were on the run, ready to finally race to complete freedom.

There really was a gap in the fence. You had to bend down to get through, but we clearly weren't the first to do it.

We crossed a stretch of grass and came to a kind of wide street. Nouri began to cheer: 'Stardust is right! This place is great!'

I bent down and placed my hand on the ground. My fingertips slid back and forth, but I could only feel concrete. Not a blade of grass, not a pebble.

'Is this the base car park?' I asked. Because it seemed like one: an enormous expanse of concrete.

'Up until ten years ago you'd be deafened by the jet fighters here,' said Nouri.

'Jet fighters?' Now I understood. The street was part of an airport!

'East Wing had its own runway for fighter planes,' said Nouri. 'Now the site's too small, but the runways are still there. They flew from here to the Middle East or to the Balkans. A jet fighter like that can transport up to 900 kilos of heavy bombs, did you know that?'

We ran along the old runway. Nouri had assured me there was nothing I could stumble over. He stayed close beside me and his breathing reassured me.

I thought of Dad on the beach at Seaview-on-Sea, how cautious he was. He'd have liked to hold onto me with both hands when I ran over the loose sand. But now I didn't feel like caution. I sped up and pulled Nouri along.

'Come on!' I called. 'Let's go as fast as we can.'

I pushed myself on, but Nouri held back.

'You have to do it alone,' he said. 'That's what we came here for.'

Dad would never let me go so soon when it came to running. First we'd explore the whole distance together and only then was I allowed to take a couple of steps alone.

'Go on then!' Nouri panted.

I let go of his wrist.

Don't stop and think about it, I thought, above all don't give it too much thought!

But that was already too much thought. It was quickly starting to look like a brisk walk rather than real running.

'Now it's up to you,' Nouri called after me.

I was back in Seaview-on-Sea. But this time without Dad who was so keen to keep hold of me. And also without small children randomly wandering into my path.

The runway was the beach. They weren't crows but seagulls squawking high above me. The wind roared over the dunes and blew the sand into my face. I heard the lapping of water, and further off the waves booming rhythmically against the breakwater.

Step by step I gained speed. I opened my arms, as if walking towards someone I wanted to embrace. I spread my fingers and flapped my elbows.

'You're doing great, Ronke!' yelled Nouri. 'I'll scream if you go too far to the left or right.'

But Nouri didn't need to scream. There was enough space. For the first time in years I was running completely alone again.

After ten paces I left him behind. And after twenty paces I couldn't even hear him anymore.

Running is a kind of flying, I thought.

Running is flying for humans. Except you keep your feet on the ground.

*

At the end of the runway was an old bunker. When I was completely out of breath and my legs really didn't want to go on, we went there. The soldiers could hide in the bunker, if East Wing were ever to come under attack. Now the concrete structure was overgrown with ferns and brambles. Saplings whipped at my face.

Against the side of the bunker hung a metal ladder by which we could climb onto the roof.

'Just your thing,' said Nouri when I was halfway up. 'Secretly entering a military base and then climbing onto a bunker.'

I couldn't help laughing and felt hot and cold at the same time.

We sat on the bunker and ate all our emergency rations in one go. We opened the last XL pack of crisps and drank the cola as if it were divine nectar. Nouri did his best to crunch the spicy crisps as loudly as possible and I couldn't help joining in. The crumbs shot back and forth.

It was perfect: we were completely content from the running, with nothing around us other than the crunch of crisps and the scent of the heather.

Until Nouri started talking about his mother.

'It's been three hours. She's sure to know by now.' He crumpled the empty crisp packet into a ball and then let it go with a crackle. 'She drove to the observatory to pick me up, but I wasn't there.'

'Neither of us were there,' I said. 'Malika must be worried to death by now!'

'Your buddy abducted you!' It sounded like a joke, but Nouri was serious. 'And no one will ever think we're here.'

I thought of Jenny B and the emergency button on my phone. With two taps I could warn Dad and Mum, if necessary.

Nouri drank the last sip of cola and squashed the can with his foot. He grabbed his phone, turned it back on and tapped nervously at the screen. Even now he couldn't get that Stardust out of his head.

'No reception,' he sighed. 'What do you expect in such a remote spot?'

'Do you want to try mine?'

Nouri sniffed, but he did take my phone.

'One message.' He turned away from me, as if he thought I'd peek.

But he hadn't anticipated Jenny B.

'Star Crash Ro...bots... use coo...kies,' she said, haltingly.

'Shut up, man!' shouted Nouri and he immediately switched the sound off. 'Failed anyway. The signal's too weak.'

So that emergency button was no use to me here either.

It began to rain and I hid my face between my knees to avoid the wet wind.

'How long do you want to stay here?' I asked. 'We really do have to go back now. You won't get to your plane anyway.'

Nouri snorted. 'Until she gets it.'

'Your mother already got it ages ago.'

'Why does she want to force me to come then?'

'It's your only chance to see your grandad! So it's not surprising if she insists.'

'Stop it!' Nouri jumped up and ran to the end of the bunker.

I shuffled after him. The bunker was four metres or so tall, Nouri had said. If one of us fell off we'd really be stuck here.

'Perhaps it'll all turn out okay,' I said when I reached him. 'Your grandad's not dangerous, is he?'

'Of course he's not dangerous. But...' Nouri shrugged. I didn't see, but I'm pretty sure.

'What is it then?'

'I don't understand him. Darius has never been interested in me. And now I have to go and visit *him*? He might just as well be an alien. An alien in a different solar system.'

'Did your mother ever say anything else about him?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Just because, to find out what kind of person he really is.'

'He plays the saxophone in an orchestra, she once mentioned.'

'Oh?' I said.

Nouri went completely mad. 'What do you mean, "Oh"?''

'Your grandad's an alien,' I say. 'An alien with a saxophone. Perhaps we can hear him.'

*

That afternoon I made up a grandad for Nouri. And of course he was a grumpy old man, with a moustache and glasses and coal shovels for hands. But I couldn't bring myself to make up someone as unfeeling as Nouri claimed he was.

'He plays the saxophone,' I said. 'So he must like dragonflies too.'

'Dragonflies? What do they have to do with a saxophone?'

'He likes those gleaming little wings and the way they tremble like a reed.'

'Now you're just rambling!'

'And he likes to wear men's shoes with a heel. A saxophonist wouldn't choose rubber wellies.'

'You're making him out to be more handsome than he is,' said Nouri. 'Darius is no elegant musician who likes dragonflies.'

'But it would be nice, right?'

At that moment we could hear him. From high above the airport a song drifted towards the bunker. It was the tune Nouri had been whistling on the bike earlier. And someone was blowing it slowly and shakily on the saxophone.

'I can't see him,' whispered Nouri.

'Of course not,' I said. 'We made him up ourselves.'

'But he sounds real.'

Nouri's grandad played louder and louder and he made the notes quiver with cold.

'Now it's up to you,' I said.

Nouri scraped loose pebbles from the bunker with his shoe. 'I'm no good at making things up, you know that.'

'Making things up is like touching, hearing or seeing, but in your head. Imagination is a sense, remember? Your however-many-eth sense. So you can do it too!'

Now we couldn't hear the saxophone anymore. The crows were bunched together in a group above the bunker again and squawking at the tops of their voices.

'Grass,' said Nouri then. 'That's the only thing I can think of.'

'Grass?'

'On the one photo Mum has of Darius he's standing amongst tall, fluffy grass.'

'Right,' I yelled over the crows. 'You have a grandad of grass.'

I'd only just said it when the herbal aroma of grass floated over to us.

'And he looks like my father: tall and wiry, but older,' Nouri continued. 'With glasses and an enormous moustache, like you said!'

I tried to imagine Nouri's grandad, but it wasn't necessary. Even before Nouri had quite finished speaking, he was suddenly there.

Men's feet soaked in the pools.

We heard coughing and heavy breathing.

We'd made it all up, we were sure of it, but it sounded so terribly *real*.

Nouri's grandad was just standing there at the end of the runway. And he smelt like an old, grassy grandad, precisely as Nouri had imagined him.

'He's there,' Nouri whispered. 'He's too far to see, but he's there. I know it!'

'Perhaps he wants to tell you something,' I said.

Above our heads the wind blew a wild song, wild like I'd never heard before. I took a couple of steps back, so as not to disturb Nouri and his grandad. But Nouri grabbed my hand and pulled me back again.

'Stay,' he whispered.

I did as he asked and stood close to him.

Nouri gulped.

And his grandad gulped back.

Gulp.

Gulp.

Gulp gulp.

It was the shortest conversation I'd ever witnessed, but also the most beautiful.

'Sorry, Darius,' said Nouri softly. 'But I'm not coming to visit with Mum. And it's best if you leave right now. Off you go then, please. Go away!'

And he pinched my hand so hard I almost cried.
