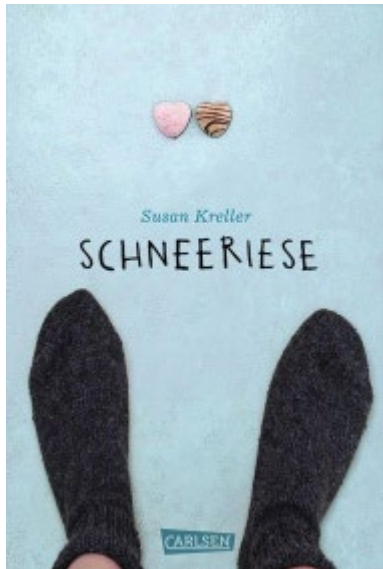


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Schneeriese

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Chapter 1

Think of it this way, he would say to anyone in search of a description or a few hard facts.

Think of the sea.

Except not the sea exactly, but something quite like it.

Not an exaggerated azure sea, not the sea on a picture postcard: more beautiful than that. Imagine clear water tinged at the edges with midnight blue, imagine the surface is warm and tousled, feel the warmth and forget about winter. See the sea, and see the old wooden fishing boats combing the surf. See the shadows of seagulls diving across the water, and near the shore, in the shallows, see the children splashing about, see the potbellied men sending stones skimming, skittering, bouncing, and everything is completely quiet, and everything is full of noise. Go on, he wanted to say when he could think of a way of saying it, imagine it – go on.

Hear the gulls shrieking high above their shadows, see how the tide chases away the storm, watch the rainbow shelter the waves.

Imagine it as best you can.

And now, he would say if he was asked for an explanation or if anyone wanted a few hard facts – and now you can begin to picture Stella Maraun's eyes.

Now imagine her eyes exactly like that and no different.

Chapter 2

One-ninety, said the voice on the phone. One-ninety, you've got to be awake by now. Adrian was reminded of Stella's clumsy way of gripping a pen. It was strange for him to be thinking of Stella's fingers wrapped all the way round a pen as if she was holding one for the first time ever: strange because he had every reason to be thinking something much grumpier. After all she had woken him up.

Stella.

How's it going?

It's kicking off, one-ninety, said Stella. Get yourself round here, grab a coat or something, get yourself round here, and hurry.

Are you OK? asked Adrian, getting up and moving unsteadily to the window. Cold. Everywhere was cold and dark, it was the dead of night, and even the snow on the pavement looked undisturbed and blank.

They're moving into the Death Trap, said Stella happily, almost without lisping. Get over here on the double, there's something fishy about this, I can smell it.

Stella Maraun could have called from Uruguay or a newly discovered planet, she could have called from anywhere in the universe, and Adrian would have been there in five minutes: he would have sprinted out of his room, grabbed a jacket from the hook by the door, raised his right hand to ruffle his hair, and jumped straight into the nearest plane or spaceship bound for wherever she was.

But Stella Maraun lived right next door, only a few paces away, so sadly things wouldn't be that simple. Glancing down, Adrian knew at once that he couldn't go like *this*, not even if he grabbed a jacket. His pyjamas were completely unacceptable: dark-blue cotton, which was OK, even though the top half had a picture of Bugs Bunny with a tipsy-looking grin. Bugs Bunny wasn't the issue: he could cover up Bugs Bunny any day. No, the iron-cast proof that his pyjamas were completely unacceptable lay in the length of the trousers, which were supposed to reach down to

the ankles but ended somewhere around his calves and were working themselves upwards night by night. And the sleeves were a disaster: they revealed most of his forearms, all seven moles, the hairs, and the long empty strips of skin where he could tattoo a name or a phrase of his choosing – if he really got tired of life.

The bad news was that Adrian was definitely lumbered with the pyjamas. The good news was he wanted to keep them anyway. Every pair of pyjamas that lasted longer than five months was a triumph as far as his mother was concerned. The fact that Adrian was still wearing the same pyjamas clearly demonstrated that he had not grown a millimetre for five whole months and consequently could not be diagnosed with an overgrowth condition, or at least not yet.

The pyjamas were the antidote to his mother's stress. Because of his pyjamas she sometimes forgot about his missed appointments with the doctor, she stopped fussing about Timber's Tailoring for the Tall, and best of all she overlooked the disconcerting fact that he stood several whole storeys above anyone in his class. In the short run, the pyjamas worked brilliantly.

One-ninety? said the voice with the almost inaudible lisp. One-ninety, are you still there? Get over here right now!

Stella?

Too late, she had ended the call. Adrian went over to the mirror that had been hanging next to his wardrobe for long enough to be far too low. He saw the smooth skin of a chin and a few centimetres of smooth belly, and between the chin and the belly, Bugs Bunny, chest rising and falling too fast. Adrian pulled off his pyjamas, tossed them on to his bed, and tiptoed through the kitchen in jeans and a hoodie that were almost brand new. He reached the door in his perfectly fitting clothes, slipped into his trainers, and stepped into the snow on the patio – all in five minutes flat.

This was the spot. Right here on the patio was where Adrian and Stella had grown up. Apart from a few brief interruptions of absolutely no importance, they had spent their whole childhood together on this exact spot.

In fact, the exact spot wasn't the patio that connected the two houses like a causeway between two towers: it was the middle of the patio. They had grown up together on the rusty swing seat in the middle of the patio – Adrian faster than Stella, of course.

They had overwintered there together, wrapped up in woollen blankets. They had summered there together, glistening faces upturned to the sun and a month's supply of ice-cold Coca-Cola from a factory somewhere far away sloshing in their bellies.

Stella's grandmother, Missus Elderly, who wasn't called Missus Elderly at all, had read to them from *The Snow Queen* and at the end she had always said that Adrian and Stella were a million times luckier than Kai and Gerda who had to step across a rain gutter, whereas Adrian and Stella had a patio and not just a patio but the finest array of knitted blankets to keep them warm on an ancient swing seat that continually squeaked.

[...]

The Death Trap was definitively and undeniably lethal, even though it looked harmless from a distance. The outside was the colour of leftover mop water, the rust-brown shutters had been closed for years, and the house made do without a front garden. On closer inspection, it also had a sinister wooden door from the dark ages, a roof full of holes, and the terrible habit of killing its occupants.

It was completely true. In six years the house had claimed three victims in a row: a biology teacher whose heart had stopped working for no good reason, an old woman who kicked the bucket unintentionally and well ahead of time, and a bank clerk who contracted septicaemia and died. There was no way it could be a coincidence, anyone could tell you that. The house was incontrovertibly cursed.

For years now the place had been empty. From his regular place at Stella's window, Adrian was accustomed to the sight of old women stepping off the pavement and hurrying down the road until they were safely past the murderous property. Most probably they found the prospect of dying routinely under the wheels of a vehicle more appealing than the possibility of expiring because of the curse. Everyone in the neighbourhood steered clear of the house, so there was no chance that anyone would choose to live there, not willingly. It was practically a rule that you had to be afraid of the house: you had a solemn duty to warn others not to go there, and you never – under any circumstances whatsoever – went through the front door.

You're not going to believe it, said Stella excitedly. They're actually moving in! Adrian took the binoculars she was holding out to him. Nocturnal shadows were struggling across the slippery snow with boxes, pot plants and floor lamps. It was impossible to tell how many people were helping with the move because of the ominously silent bustle outside. People were entering and exiting the forbidden building, going about their business without a word.

Adrian saw a dark-haired woman carrying a little girl of about five or maybe six who was bundled up warmly. The child had wrapped her arms around the woman's neck and seemed to be fast asleep or at any rate she hadn't moved.

It was a curious sight. There was something sad about how secret it all looked, as if no one was supposed to see, and Adrian could not imagine what would induce anyone to move in the dead of night. The people down there were in the pitch black, only the hallway and the cellar were dimly lit, everything else was dark, which seemed to Adrian like an inconvenient way of doing things.

What do you think? asked Stella. What are they up to?

[...]

Here's the thing, whispered Stella, as if she had something extremely important to reveal. I expect you're wondering why I dragged you out of bed. Well, the fact is, we're not dealing with a death trap anymore.

We're not? said Adrian, losing all hope that what was going on here had anything to do with him.

No, whispered Stella. We're dealing with a morgue.

Already? said Adrian. That's incredible! It's got to be a record!

Don't be ridiculous! snapped Stella, peering down at the street.

If it's a morgue, someone must have died already.

Yes, said Stella.

Go on, said Adrian. Who?

Stella suddenly fixed him with her gaze and the glow from the headlights of the removal van made her eyes too bright for what she was about to say. She looked at him without smiling and said very slowly: The house didn't have to kill anyone this time. They brought the body with them.

What?

Like I said, BYO: they brought their own corpse.

But when you rang me—

They were carrying in the body on a stretcher! Don't you see what this means?

Adrian gazed into the cold night that was populated by dimly lit inscrutable people and cleared his throat just a little too loudly before he said: It's obvious, isn't it?

We're living next door to a corpse!

[...]

Chapter 4

Hi, can we borrow some salt? said Stella. Hi, said Adrian, can we borrow some sugar?

The person standing in the doorway, laughing at them incredulously, was maybe fifteen or sixteen years old and at most five centimetres taller than Stella.

Adrian examined the stranger's face from the only perspective available to him: from above, looking down. Forehead, extravagantly arched eyebrows, black eyes, nose, faint downy moustache, mouth, dimpled chin. And really there was no possible way that Adrian could already have known, right then, from the moment he set eyes on the boy with the beautiful eyes and the custom-made face – there was really no possible way he could have foreseen what would happen. After all, it definitely isn't common knowledge that absolutely everything without exception can be ruined as a consequence of asking a stranger for some salt or sugar. But later he could have sworn that it was right then, at exactly that moment, that Stella, without even realizing it, had got the splinter of glass in her eye – that it was right then, at exactly that moment, that his life had come unstuck.

He could have sworn that he had had a bad feeling straightaway, as Stella stood next to him, staring at the stranger as if he were someone worth meeting and not a suspicious character who had moved into the Death Trap in the middle of the night with a corpse in tow.

What do you want? asked the boy, standing in exactly the right place to block out their view so that even Adrian from his vantage point could not see into the house.

Then they heard the voice of a little girl, and the boy said over his shoulder: Nino, go to Dediko, I'll be there in a second, and after that the voice of an invisible woman said: Dato? And the boy slammed the door in their faces. Adrian could hear raised voices and the slamming of more doors. Stella still looked as if she had seen a ghost and Adrian was furious and relieved, furious about the boy and relieved about the door. Let's go, he thought, let's get out of here, nothing's happened, let's go. He said firmly: Come on, we're not taking this crap, let's go.

Stella seemed to be recovering slowly, she nodded without saying a word, walked off, sighed, and strode along next to Adrian through the snow. They had almost crossed the street when Adrian heard someone behind them call: Hey you!

HEY YOU.

Adrian stopped in his tracks, while Stella whipped round far too quickly and yelled back loudly and clearly: What?

And the boy with the custom-made face shouted back to them in all seriousness: Are you guys coming in or not?

Then Adrian shouted back to him in all seriousness: Not in a million years! Or at least he wanted to shout back something rude, preferably adding some colourful insults that would have impressed even Stella. But he didn't say anything, he stood there in silence while Stella in an embarrassing show of courage and shyness shouted: You bet! And the day was definitively over. It was wretchedly cold, he wasn't wearing a jacket, it was nearly dark already, and pathetically peaceful smoke was rising from the chimneys above the houses. And she was standing there, her averagely tall shadow quivering under the streetlamps, and he was standing there – there he was, Adrian, standing there, digging the tip of his trainer into the snow and kicking it up angrily, showering snow like an avalanche that you should definitely avoid, but the bench outside the Death Trap didn't notice and neither did Stella.

We're about to eat, said the woman. Are you hungry?

Adrian and Stella sat at the kitchen table together with the boy and the little girl that they had seen on the night of the move and whose eyebrows were also arched extravagantly. Her face was so pretty and dark-eyed it almost hurt to look.

We have to go home, said Adrian, just as someone kicked him gently under the table and Stella said with her good-girl voice: Dinner would be lovely!

Dinner wasn't part of the plan, the plan was completely different, but Stella was acting as if there wasn't a plan at all. When Adrian had asked under his breath if this was the moment when he should ask to use their toilet, Stella had whispered back impatiently that the situation had moved on, they could look for the body another time. She was acting like the whole point of them coming here had nothing to do with the festering corpse that had been shoved in a corner somewhere out of sight. She was acting like it was the most normal thing in the world to walk straight into the Death Trap. She had chatted in the hallway without even bothering to look around, despite the fact that the two of them had been speculating about the inside of the murderous building for years. They had imagined properly gruesome rooms with bloodstains and black wallpaper and ghosts in the form of a dead biology teacher, standing in the doorway and smiling. They had imagined a house straight out of a horror film – and now?

Adrian found the brightness of the hallway almost offensive: the walls were painted yellow, old-fashioned and not remotely scary. It smelt of freshly laundered clothes and a teeny bit of hospitals, although maybe that was just his imagination. But one thing was absolutely certain: there was nothing sinister about the hallway, nothing at all. And now they were sitting in the kitchen which was equally lacking in anything the least bit macabre. The furniture had seen better days: once upon a time the table and chairs must have looked modern, but now they were crushingly ordinary.

Everything was crushingly ordinary – except of course the wooden portraits of saints staring sourly at them from the wall.

The boy drummed his fingers quietly against the tabletop and seemed to be laughing to himself. The little girl asked Adrian: Why are you so tall and what are you called, please?

It was the right moment for Stella to tell her usual story about how his father was a famous scientist and how as a small boy Adrian had come into contact with a highly dangerous liquid that made him grow and grow – and how he was actually a superhero but never wore his costume because it no longer fitted him anymore. Stella

always protected Adrian with her story, but not this time. This time she said: That's Adrian and I'm Stella.

Adrian: it sounded dire. She never called him Adrian anymore.

The little girl nodded sagely: I see, I see, well, I'm Nino, and that's Dato and that's...

She pointed to her mother who was standing at the stove: That's—

Dediko, said Adrian loudly and everyone laughed. They must have been pleased that he had remembered her name. He was surprised that he could remember it, but it was good to see Stella's happy face, it was good to laugh with them and to feel for the first time that he wasn't completely out of place in this strange house – until Dato stopped laughing abruptly and said unsmilingly: That's Georgian. Dediko is Georgian for mother. It means mum.

Why had Stella laughed? It wasn't as if she could speak Georgian any better than he could. Adrian felt a rush of anger and tears, a sob stuck in his throat, and the little girl chatted on, chatted and chatted, and the sob was still stuck, and he wasn't go to cry, he definitely wasn't.

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