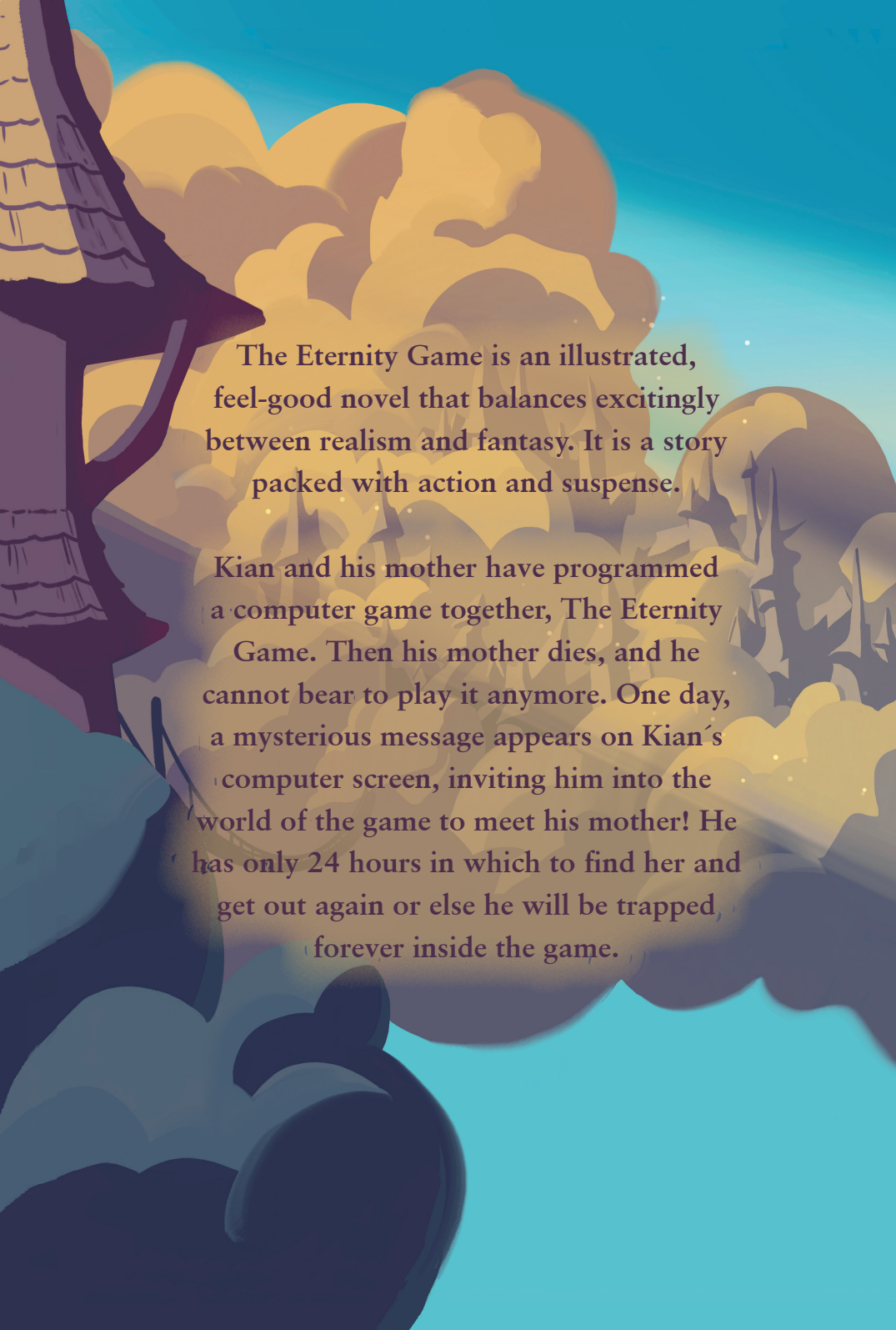


THE ETERNITY GAME



This is one of
my new favorites!
-Brage, age 10

HANNE GJERDE BUCH
JENNY SYNNOVE NAUSTAN (ILL.)



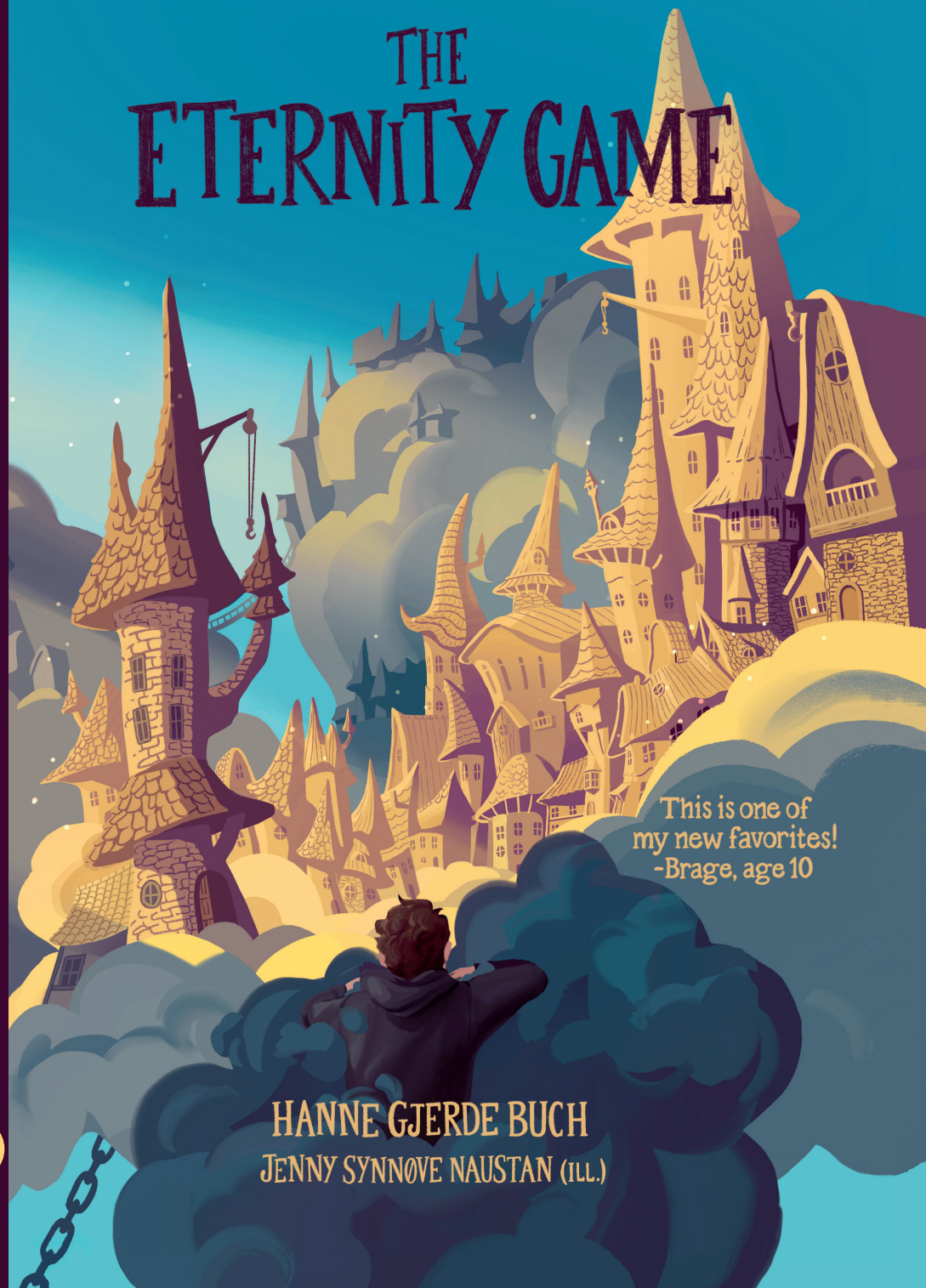
The Eternity Game is an illustrated, feel-good novel that balances excitingly between realism and fantasy. It is a story packed with action and suspense.

Kian and his mother have programmed a computer game together, The Eternity Game. Then his mother dies, and he cannot bear to play it anymore. One day, a mysterious message appears on Kian's computer screen, inviting him into the world of the game to meet his mother! He has only 24 hours in which to find her and get out again or else he will be trapped, forever inside the game.

THE ETERNITY GAME HANNE GJERDE BUCH



THE ETERNITY GAME



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To my children, Philip and Nicolai:
Thank you for all your help in
creating this story.

The Eternity Game
Original title: Evighetsspillet
© Figenschou Publishing 2022
© Author: Hanne Gjerde Buch
© Illustrations: Jenny Synnøve Naustan
Translation: Ruth Perez Øian
Publisher and editor: Anitra Figenschou
External consultant: Author Hilde Østby
Design: Chakib Azzaoui



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THE ETERNITY GAME



HANNE GJERDE BUCH
JENNY SYNNOVE NAUSTAN (ILL.)

Translation by Ruth Perez Øian

 **OPD Oslo Police Department** @oslopolicedepartment 1m

Missing: a 12-year-old boy missing from his home since yesterday evening. Description: 5ft.1inch tall, green eyes and brown hair. Probably wearing plaid pajama pants, black hoodie, and slippers. Contact the police if you have any tips. [#Oslo](#) [#police](#) [#missing](#)

The gravel crunched as the police car drove up the driveway. A man and a woman in dark uniforms got out of the car.

Outside the front door of the old brick house a man stood waiting. He was tall, pale, and wearing a worried look. The police officers immediately understood that he was the father of the missing boy, Kian.

They greeted each other and went into the living room. The police officers looked around discretely, noticed the wilted plants on the windowsill and the bookshelves overflowing with books and data games. Then they sat down a sofa that had once been red but was now sun-bleached pink.

The policewoman opened her black leather bag, took out her notebook and pen. She said:

– Shall we jump right in?

Kian's father nodded.

– When did you last see Kian?

– I talked to him yesterday evening. Around six, before I went out to meet up with some friends.

– And when did you discover that he was gone?

– When I returned home. I think it was about eleven-thirty. The door to his room was closed and it was completely quiet. So, I peeked in to see if he was sleeping, and he wasn't there.

– Is there any sign of a break in?

– No, the windows and door were closed. As far as I can see, nothing has been stolen or damaged. It's so mysterious. Like he just vanished into thin air.

– Has Kian gone missing before?

– The father shook his head and said:

– No. Never. He's not like that.

– Do you know if he has had any problems? At school, with friends, with drugs and such?

– He does *not* mess around with drugs. I'm absolutely certain he doesn't. But there is one thing you should know ...

The father swallowed hard. He drew a hand through his disheveled, gray-speckled hair and said:

– It's about Leonora, Kian's mother.
And then he explained everything.

Game over

The previous day

There was a knock on Kian's door.

– I'm in the middle of a game, called Kian

The father opened the door anyway, entered the room and said:

– Are you still sitting here in front of that screen? It's almost sunset. Isn't it about time to get out of your pajamas and find something else to do?

No answer.

– Can you turn down the music so it's possible to talk?

Kian turns down the volume *slightly* without looking up.

– I'm going out now, the father said.

– There is pizza in the freezer. I'll be home before midnight.

– OK.

– And, by the way, Daniel sent me a message. He

has been trying to reach you. He wants to know if you want to hang out.

Kian sighed heavily and stared at the screen.

He couldn't bear being together with friends now. Not even Daniel. For everyone else, life just went on as before, but not for him.

The father crossed the room, tousled his hair lightly and said:

– Wouldn't it be nice to do something with Daniel?

– No.

– Why not?

– Because.

– Things won't get any better by staring at the screen all day long. You should at least answer Daniel.

– I just want to be left alone, is that against the law?

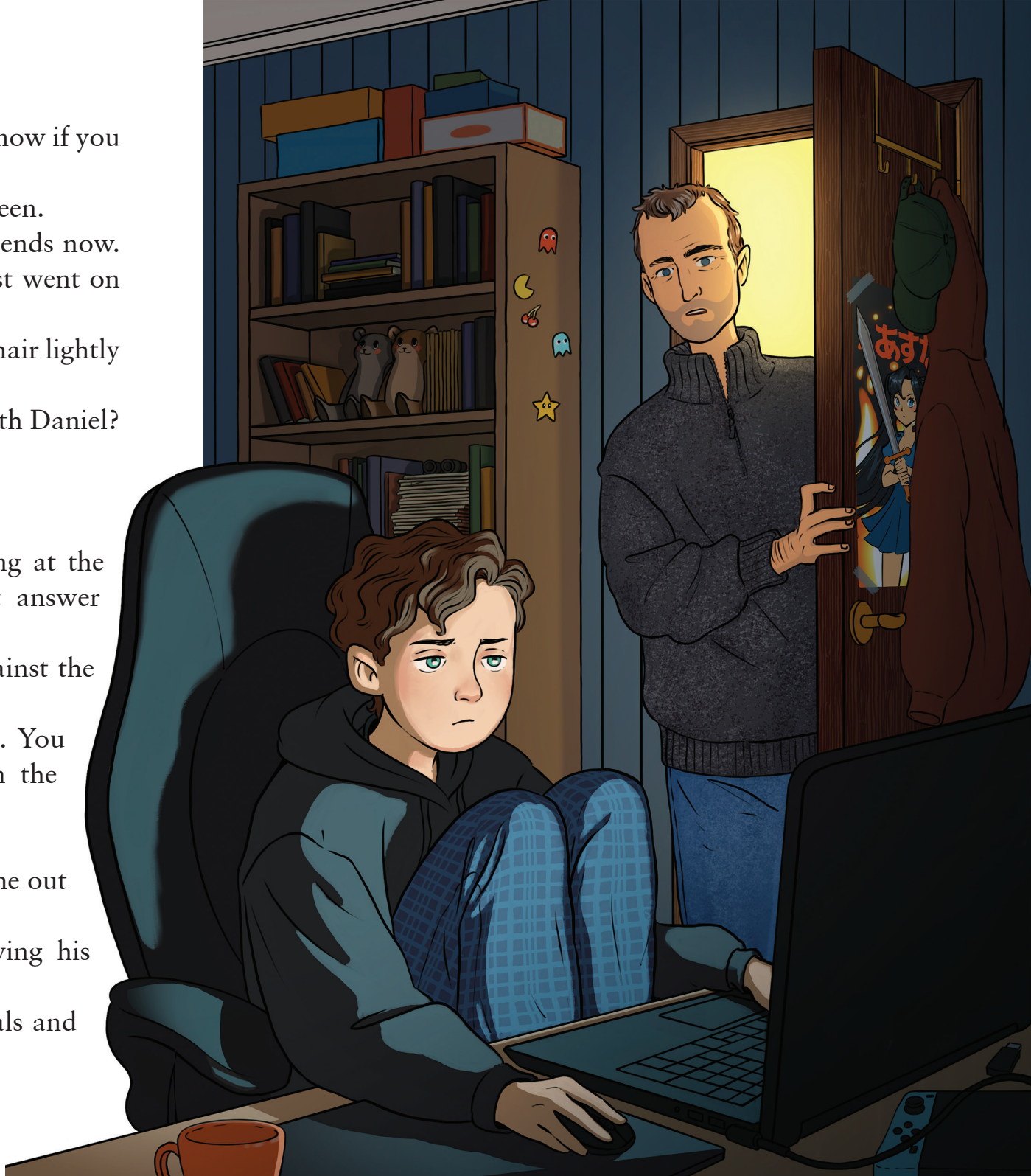
– Come on, get a grip on yourself Kian. You can't just shut yourself up in your room the whole time.

– That's none of your business.

– Yes actually, it is. And if you don't come out soon, I'll have to switch off the internet.

Kian turned toward his father, narrowing his eyes, and said:

– Why don't you just run off to your pals and



leave me alone?

– Now just you wait a min ...

– Zip it! GET OUT! shouted Kian and pointed to the door.

The father let out a sigh of resignation and left the room.

Kian slammed the door shut; a bit harder than he intended.

– Stop slamming doors! The father yelled

– GO AWAY! screamed Kian.

– I am so sick and tired of your behavior! Said the father. For heaven's sake get a grip. You're only making it worse for yourself.

His steps retreated down the stairs. The front door was closed and locked. Silence.

Kian fumbled with his mother's striped hair elastic he wore around his wrist. His eyes welled up with tears. How could his father just go out with friends, as if everything were completely normal? Nothing was normal anymore. And it would never be normal again. Not ever!

The screen flashed “Game over”.

Kian blinked away his tears, turned the music back up and closed the game.

He went downstairs to the kitchen and fetched

chips and soda.

On returning to his room, he jumped. On the screen, there was a new screensaver, taken from his pc. A picture of him and his mother.

Kian's legs turned to mush, and he sank down into his gaming chair.

The Eternity Game

The picture on the screen showed Kian leaning into his mother while she read to him. They had the same green eyes, and the same unruly, dark curls. He could still remember the scent of her hair. Sweet, like coconuts. On his lap, he had his favorite teddy bears, Biffen and Boffen. He was four, maybe five?

Mother had round, rosy cheeks, as if she had just come in from outside, so the picture had been taken before she got sick. Around her neck hung the pendant she always wore. The one she had had made after Kian was born. A silver heart-shaped locket you could open. Inside the heart, the word “Kian” was engraved in cursive letters. Mother said that it was because she loved him with all her heart.

Kian knew exactly where the picture had come from. Mother had collected pictures of his childhood into a folder on his pc. But he hadn't been able to bear looking at them. It hurt too much. Seeing them

together. Happy. Before.

It felt like his stomach was full of glass shards. All the trouble she had gone to, collecting the pictures. To no avail.

Kian stroked his index finger over his mother's face on the cold, sleek screen. If it were only possible to conjure himself into the picture and feel safe and happy again.

Mother had wanted Kian to live as normally as possible, despite her illness. He should continue going out with his friends and having fun. He tried. Once in a while, he managed to block out all the sadness. Briefly. But now he regretted it. Terribly. What if mother hadn't understood how much he loved her? Kian wished so much he could tell her, but now it was too late.

He moved the mouse, making the screensaver vanish. Then he resumed his game.

After a while, Kian glanced at the clock. Quarter to eleven. His eyelids were heavy. But he didn't want to go to bed. Every time he lay down and turned off the light, his head became a sponge, sucking in all the sad thoughts. About all the never agains.

Never again would mother say she loves him.
Never again would he tell her all about his day at school.

Never again would she console him when he is sad.

Never again would all three of them have supper together.

Never again would he get a goodnight cuddle from her.

Never, never, never.

Kian just *couldn't* understand it. *Wouldn't* understand it. So unfair! Why did it have to be his mother that died?

If he could only erase all the thoughts and pictures in his head, he might be able to feel normal again. Not even when he slept, could he get any peace. He always had the same nightmare, like an endless loop. He searches for mother in a dark forest and hears her calling him. But he can never find her.

Kian's eyes scanned the screen. Hunting for a game that could take his mind off of everything. The green logo of The Eternity Game caught his eyes. The game he and his mother had created together. At first, only his mother had done the programming, and he had

decided the game's layout. Eventually, she had taught him how to code on his own.

They stole a lot of ideas from his favorite games, mixing them together into a game they would never get tired of playing, as there would always be something new to do and discover. They would use two pickaxes to build new areas and houses out of blocks, just like in Minecraft. They would jump onto toadstools and try to avoid being devoured by flesh-eating plants, like in Mario. They would guide the serpent Snake into eating the windfall apples on the ground making him grow gradually bigger. And they would hurl birds that would explode on landing, just like in Angry Birds.

Kian thought the most fun had been in deciding how the different figures should look. He made a copy of the cute manga-girl on the poster in his room. And even though it was rather childish, he made copies of his favorite, stuffed teddies from his childhood, Biffen and Boffen. He made boodles of villagers. Most of them with the same face, to save time.

Kian could still remember the tingling feeling he had when they had completed the game. All their lines with numbers, symbols and letters had created a magical universe.

After his mother fell ill, they often played The

Eternity Game together when he came home from school. They had sat next to each other in her bed, with pillows at their backs and laptops on their laps. They would travel to gaming world, a place where everything is possible, and where they could embark on adventures together. Each with their own pickaxe, they would build new areas. A village, lakes, rivers, and mountains. A grotto hidden behind a waterfall.

But then everything had changed. Mother was rushed to the hospital. Before they could say goodbye, she was gone. Since then, he couldn't bear to play The Eternity Game. What was the point without her?

Suddenly, Kian was torn from his thoughts. A message box popped onto the screen on which it was written:

“You have a new message from Aronoel”

He gasped, his eyes opening wide.

Aronoel ... It was mother's username in The Eternity Game!

The Message

Kian's heart beat faster. Had his mother sent him a message before she died that only just turned up now?

Kian moved the mouse and readied himself to open the message. Then he stopped. What if the message hadn't sent by his mother. What if someone were trying to hack him, and a virus would be installed in his computer if he opened it? But if it really was his mother that had sent the message, he *had* to read what she had written. There was only one way to find out...

Kian took a deep breath and clicked on the box.

A message appeared in the middle of the screen. It said:

To Kian,
I am in the game we created together. Can you come and visit me? I would love to see you again. And could you please bring one of the magical pickaxes?

Sincerely Leonora

Kian's heart sank. This couldn't possibly be a greeting from his mother. It didn't make any sense. She couldn't be inside The Eternity Game. She was dead. And why should the message only turn up now? And besides, she was never that formal, signing with her name. She was always just “mom”.

Kian could feel anger growing inside him, like a water balloon about to burst. Someone had stolen his mother's username. They knew his mother was dead and were trying to trick him. Who could be so evil? Was it someone he knew or was it someone who had tracked down the information on the web?

A whirlwind of questions swirled around in his head. How could anybody else know about The Eternity Game? Not even the people she worked with, that she made data games together with, knew about it.

Someone must have hacked his computer and gotten control over everything he had stored there. Would they threaten to delete it all if he didn't do as they said?

A chill ran down his spine. The file with all the pictures his mother had collected. And The Eternity Game. All of it deleted. All the memories. Everything he and his mother had made together. Gone forever. It

can't happen. It mustn't happen.

Kian rummaged around in a drawer. Dug out a memory stick and plugged it into the pc. He must make a back-up. How stupid that he hadn't already done it.

He marked the files and tried to copy them over. It didn't work. Error! He tried again. And again. The computer was jammed.

What to do now? Should he call his father and ask him for help?

Kian sighed as he imagined what his father would say: “What! You opened a message that contained a virus? How could you do that? How many times do I have to tell you that you must NEVER open a suspicious message?”

No, he couldn't take a scolding now. He had to find a solution on his own. Had to find a way to get rid of the virus.

All at once, he got an idea. What if he started the game and filmed what happened on the screen so he could study the film afterwards? That would make it easier to discover what sort of virus it was, and how to get rid of it. Perhaps he could give the film to the police, and they could find out who was behind it and stop them before they hacked others?

With trembling hands, Kian picked up his cellphone, opened his camera app and pressed “play.”

Chapter 4

The Black Blotch

Kian aimed the camera at himself, brushed the unkempt bangs off his forehead with one hand and said: “Today is Saturday, October 14th, and I have just received a message I think contains a virus. The message asked me to go into The Eternity Game. Let's see what happens when I open the game. Hang on ...”

He placed his cell on the shelf behind him, aiming the camera at the screen and supporting it with a book so it wouldn't fall down.

Then he pointed the mouse over The Eternity Game icon and double clicked.

The opening melody he had illegally downloaded boomed from the speakers. The Imperial March, Darth Vader's theme: “*Da da da dadada dadada.*” As dramatic and cool as ever.

A text box popped up:

“Do you want to enter the game?”

Kian pressed “Yes”.

A new message appeared on the screen:

“The portal will open soon. It is vital that you exit before 24 hours have elapsed. After that, the portal will close forever. “

What on earth does “The portal will open” mean? And that it will close forever? Could it mean that the hacker will delete the game and everything on his pc after 24 hours if he doesn’t do as he's told?

Suddenly, a little black blotch appeared in the middle of the screen.

– What the heck! Kian blurted out.

The blotch throbbed, like a heart. Slowly but surely, it grew and grew.

Kian stared in dismay at the screen. A virus must have been activated when he opened the game. Now it would destroy everything that was on his computer. Why had he been so stupid? He should have turned off the pc and waited until his father came home. Too late now.

Kian felt his eyes welling up with tears. There was nothing he could do. The blotch was as big as a fist now.

Suddenly, he was blinded by a harsh light. He

squinted. Was someone shining a flashlight in his eyes? Then just as suddenly, the light was gone.

Was someone lurking in the woods outside his room spying on him? Maybe a burglar wondering if someone was at home? Or could it be the same someone that had sent the message on his pc?

He turned off the light in his room, went over to the window and peeked out from behind the curtains. It was completely dark outside. Impossible to make out if someone were hiding amongst the trees.

Kian drew the curtains closed. The room was pitch black.

As he groped for the table lamp, the room was filled with a white light. It came from his screen. Thin rays of light streamed out from the black blotch, like rays of sunlight breaking through a dark cloud. What on earth was happening? Had the screen cracked?

Kian leaned closer to get a better look. That was when it happened. He was drawn towards the screen like a piece of metal towards a gigantic magnet.

The room vanished.

Flashes of light and color.

He fell and fell.

Thrashed with his arms and legs.

Tried to find something to grab a hold of, but there was nothing there. Only air.

– PAPA! HELP! Kian screamed.

But it was if he had no voice. Like it had been swallowed into the vacuum around him. He no longer knew what was up and what was down.

Stomach turned inside out.

Then complete darkness.

Chapter 5

The Portal

Something cold and soft tickled Kian's neck. He opened his eyes.

He was no longer in his room. He was lying in a meadow. Above him towered a big tree with quaking leaves. Only it didn't look like other trees. It was rectangular, as if it were built out of blocks. It resembled a Minecraft tree.

Two plump, black birds sat on a branch and cackled. They hacked at each other with their beaks, tails bobbing furiously. Suddenly, sparks flew out from the top of their heads, like someone had lit two fuses.

BANG!

Kian jumped.

Smoke and flames billowed out from where the birds had perched. The birds had exploded like two bombs! Exactly like the birds in Angry Birds. Kian sat up dazed. His whole body ached. Like the time he had been thrown

over his bicycle handlebars and father had driven him to the emergency room.

He looked around. Where the heck was he? The colors were so bright they looked fake, as if a little child had gone amok with his painting box. The meadow was surrounded by woods and high mountains. In the distance, he heard the rushing sound of a waterfall splashing down a mountainside. Large, red, toadstools with white polka-dots poked up from the deep grass. Exactly like the toadstools in Mario. It all looked so familiar, and Kian knew why. It resembled the game world he and his mother had created!

Kian shook his head slowly.

Was he going crazy? Had all his gaming and longing for his mother made him incapable of discerning between what was real and what was unreal? Or had he fallen asleep while playing The Eternity Game, and was dreaming now?

He pinched himself in the arm. Ow, that hurt! It couldn't hurt like that if he were sleeping, could it?

Kian stood up and shouted:

–Papa! Can you hear me? Hello? Anybody here?

Complete silence. Kian felt his throat tighten. He kicked the tree trunk and hollered.

Then he drew a deep breath. His father always said that there is a logical explanation for everything that happens. What was it that had happened before he had woken up under the tree? He had been sitting in front of his pc. Gotten a message from someone that had stolen his mother's username. Opened The Eternity Game. Filmed with his cellphone. Gotten a new message. Then a black blotch had appeared on the screen. The next thing he remembered, he had been falling.

Could the black blotch have been the portal into The Eternity Game? It seems completely crazy, but it would explain his surroundings.

Kian thought about the message he had received, the one about the portal closing in 24 hours. An icy chill spread throughout his body. Now he understood what the warning meant. If he didn't manage to get back home before 24 hours had elapsed, he would be trapped in the game. Forever.

A vision of his father flashed through his mind. He got a knot in his chest. What would he think when he discovered that Kian was gone? That he had run away from home in anger? That burglars had kidnapped him, or something even worse? He had to get back home.

Kian opened the stopwatch function on his watch and punched the start button. 23 hours and 59 minutes



left – and counting.

He gazed out over the countryside. How was he going to find the portal?

Just then, he noticed something twinkling in the grass. It looked like it was made of metal.

He went over and squatted down. It was a silver, heart-shaped pendant. It looked exactly like his mother's silver pendant.

Chapter 6

The Silver Heart

Kian picked up the silver heart. The pendant was cool and heavy. He carefully pried the clasp open with a fingernail.

As the locket opened, it felt like his chest was struck by ten thousand bolts. His name was there, on the inside of the pendant.

This couldn't be a coincidence. It had to be his mother's pendant. But how on earth had it ended up here? He and his father had decided that she was to be buried with it around her neck.

Then, Kian remembered the message he had received from his mother's username, Aronoel: “I am in the game we created together.” Could the message have been sent by his mother after all? No, that was too farfetched. She was dead. But if her pendant was here, that must mean that she was here too? And, if *he* was inside the game, wasn't anything possible?

His heart hammered. That must be it. Both he and his mother were inside The Eternity Game.

Kian glanced at his watch. There were 23 hours and 47 minutes left until the portal shut. He had to find mother before the time ran out. He gazed out across the endless meadows, forests, and mountains. Where should he start looking? It was going to be as difficult finding her as fixing a virus in someone else's game.

It would take way too much time to do it all by foot. He had to find a faster way to get around. His gaze fell upon the polka-dotted toadstools poking up out of the grass. Of course! The Mario toadstools!

Kian drew closer. Red, flesh-eating plants grew between the toadstools. They swayed back and forth and snapped at everything within their radius. *Snap! Snap! Snap!*

He heard a low buzzing sound. A little bumblebee flitted past. One of the plants opened its mouth, unrolled a long, scraggly tongue, and whoosh, the bumblebee was gone.

Kian looked down at his feet. The sloppy, old slippers would make it impossible to jump accurately. He kicked them off and stood barefoot in the damp grass.

He carefully placed one foot upon a toadstool, then the other.

– Yuck! Kian cried out as his feet sank into the slimy, gushy toadstool. Chilly water trickled between his toes.

Kian straightened his back and prepared himself to jump. He had done this hundreds of times before in Mario, so it shouldn't be a problem. As long as he didn't stumble ...

He cautiously bounced up and down on the toadstool. It was buoyant, like a trampoline.

Kian clenched his fists. Aimed for the nearest toadstool, squatted, and jumped.

The Deep Chasms

Each time Kian landed on a new hop-toadstool, he was propelled onwards with superspeed, higher and higher across the meadow. As if he had an invisible jetpack on his back. The flesh-eating plants snapped at him with their sharp teeth, but each time, he managed to pull in his legs just in time. He swung his arms to keep his balance. It felt like flying.

Grazing sheep, cows and pigs raised their heads and stared at him in astonishment.

Finally, Kian arrived at a green lake. At the far end of the lake lay a small village. Kian smiled when he saw a red brick building with two, lofty towers looming over the village. It was the city hall he, himself, had built. A copy of the city hall back home in Oslo. He had even made a belfry at the top of one of the towers that chimed a melody on the hour.

He knew where he was now. He and his mother had built the village. Maybe his mother was there, or



one of the villagers had seen her? He had to check it out.

Just outside the village, Kian suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. A deep, dark chasm wound through the countryside, dividing the village in two. The ground had split open, like a fissure in an iceberg. There must have been an earthquake.

Kian went over to the chasm and peered down the precipitous walls. He couldn't see the bottom. He took a stone and threw it down. It disappeared into the darkness without a sound. His stomach churned.

He walked slowly into the village. Listened. The streets were empty, it was completely quiet, like a ghost town. Several skateboards lay strewn, abandoned, in the middle of the street. The only sound was the echo of his steps on the cobblestones. Most of the houses were wooden and had flower boxes outside the windows. All the windows were dark, and several doors stood wide open.

Kian took a deep breath and shouted:

– Hello, anybody there? ... Mom?

No answer.

Kian looked about nervously. He felt like someone was watching him, but he couldn't see anyone.

The gardens in front of the houses were well-kept and profuse with flowers, so it couldn't have been that long ago since someone had been here. In one of the gardens there was an apple tree. A ladder was propped up against the tree. A basket of apples lay overturned on the ground. The apples spilt out across the lawn.

It looked like the people who lived here had fled in haste. Was it because of the earthquake?

All of a sudden, loud music filled the air. Kian started, then smiled, relieved. It was the chiming of the bells in the city hall. He had chosen the song himself. It was an oldie-but-goldie his father used to play for him. The Final Countdown by Europe. How weird to hear it here.

Kian walked to the village square. The city hall loomed in front of him. It was even bigger than he had imagined. The broad metal door stood wide open. Kian went up to doorway and shouted:

–Hello?

Utter silence. He entered the hall. The ceiling was lofty. Tables were set up in rows. Several chairs lay knocked over on the floor. In front of the tables was a bulletin board with a drawing. Kian went closer to inspect.

It was a drawing of a city plan. It looked as if the city was situated on a cloud. A chain reaching from the cloud down to the ground was attached to a giant anchor. Had the villagers built a city in the clouds to escape earthquakes?

There was a rough sketch of the countryside beneath the cloud-city. Kian immediately recognized the towers of the city hall he had built. It must mean that the cloud-city was nearby. Perhaps his mother was there, together with the other villagers?

Kian jogged out of the village, back to the toadstools and raced across the meadow. As he rounded a tall hill, he braked. In front of him lay a giant anchor, exactly like the one in the drawing. A thick chain attached to the anchor disappeared into the dense cloud cover. It had to mean that the cloud-city was directly above him.

A small, white cloud floated noiselessly down to the ground and hovered in the air in front of him. Did

it function as an elevator, like in Mario?

Cautiously, he placed one foot on the cloud, then the other. His feet sank. It felt like he was standing on a fluffy, eiderdown quilt.

The cloud quivered, then sailed noiselessly upwards. Kian clung on for dear life. It felt like his stomach was still on the ground.

He gazed out over the lush, green countryside. It was crisscrossed with dark areas. They resembled the deep chasm he had seen at the village. There must have been several major earthquakes. What if there were more quakes and his mother couldn't manage to escape in time?

Kian glanced at his watch. Just over 21 hours left until the portal shut.

Kapittel 8

Investigating

Oslo

Kian's father placed three mugs of steaming, hot coffee on the table. The policewoman blew on her coffee and took a small sip before she continued the inquiry.

– The first thing we must do is trace Kian's movements and with whom he has recently been in contact. Do you know if he took his cellphone with him?

– No. that's what's so strange, said the father. It was in his room, and he never goes anywhere without it.

– Do you know the password?

– Yes, it wasn't hard to guess. It is Leonora's birthdate. I've checked. Kian hasn't called or texted anyone for several days. He received a text from Daniel, his best friend yesterday. But he hadn't opened it.

– Do you think Kian has taken any money or bank cards with him?

– No, I don't think so. His wallet is where he usually keeps it, on his dresser. With his bank card and cash. And nothing is missing from my wallet.

– Have you contacted his friends?

– Yes, I contacted Daniel, but he hasn't seen Kian since after school on Friday. Daniel checked with all their friends and classmates, but no one has seen him.

– OK. Can you tell me a bit more about what you two talked about when you last saw him and how he seemed?

– He seemed the same. He was gaming. I tried to convince him to get out of the house and meet up with some friends, but he got angry.

– Go on. What did he say when he got angry?

– Well, he didn't exactly *say* much. But he told me to get out of his room and slammed the door behind me.

– Does he usually behave like that?

– Slam doors? No, I can't say he does. He's been very moody lately.

– That's understandable. It must have been tough for him to lose his mother ... Has he seemed depressed, do you think?

– Depressed? No more than one can expect. I mean, it's normal to be sad and angry when one is grieving, isn't it?

– Yes of course. It's *completely* normal.

The policewoman took another sip of coffee before she continued:

– Have you noticed anything else out of the ordinary lately?

Kian's father thought for some time before he answered:

– No, I can't think of anything else.

– And you are quite certain he was wearing his slippers?

– Yes, his sneakers are in the hallway.

The policewoman nodded, exchanged looks with the policeman and said:

– Before we leave, may we examine his pc and cellphone?

– Of course. They're in his room. Follow me.



Chapter 9

City in the Clouds

The Eternity Game

The little white cloud glided noiselessly upwards towards the thick, white cloud cover. Kian became engulfed by white fog. He could barely see his hands in front of his face.

Kian stretched out a hand to touch the cloud, but it slipped right through. His skin became damp and cold. In the far distance, he heard music and the buzz of people conversing.

Suddenly, the clouds dispersed. The harsh sunlight made Kian squint, and it's warmth felt good on his face. He opened his eyes and looked around. He was in a square surrounded by tall buildings. He had arrived at the city in the clouds.

The houses had tall spires and rounded, undulating walls decorated with strange designs. Music thundered from the speakers hanging on the walls. Kian dug the



unfamiliar music and bobbed his head in time with the rhythm.

Above the square, small clouds swayed, drifting back and forth. They were held down by chains anchored to the main cloud. Ladders and skateboard ramps crisscrossed from one cloud to the other. It thundered whenever someone set out on his skateboard.

Kian jumped off the little cloud and set out for the middle of the square. His legs bounced involuntarily, like he was walking on a gigantic air mattress. The square was swarming with villagers. They all looked to be about his age. No one had the same clothes or same hairstyle.



It looked like they were all desperately trying to have their own individual style. As soon as Kian saw their faces, he understood why. They all looked alike.

His heart sank to his stomach. It was his fault. He hadn't bothered taking the time to make a different face for each one.

When the villagers noticed Kian, they froze. They stared, gawked, and pointed at him. Someone turned off the music, the silence was deafening.

A boy with a red skateboard tucked under his arm took a few steps towards Kian and said:

– Who are you?

– My name's Kian.

– Where are you from?

How was Kian supposed to answer that? He couldn't say that he was from another world, they would think he was crazy.

– Um ... I'm from the other side of the mountains.

– Wow! Cool! said the boy. – But why did you come here?

– I'm looking for my mom. Have you seen a woman that looks like me, with dark, curly hair?

– Nix. If she were here in the village, we would know. But perhaps Leo has seen her on one of his trips?

The boy gave Kian directions to Leo's house:

– Just follow the signs to “cartographer”, and you'll get there.

Kian thanked him for his help. As he left, he heard excited murmuring behind his back.

Kian followed the signs to the cartographer.

In the middle of an intersection, stood a girl dressed in a flowered pantsuit. She wore the largest sunglasses Kian had ever seen. Every once and a while, she blew harshly into a whistle, pointed firmly to the right and shouted:

– It's not safe to go that way today. The wind has changed direction.

Kian stopped in front of a sign with an arrow pointing straight downwards and the word “Danger”.

He leaned forward and peered in the direction of the arrow. His legs turned to jelly. There was a huge hole in the cloud. He could see all the way down to the green meadow. The enormous anchor looked like a tiny, dark speck.

Frightened, he backed away and continued on his way.

Suspension bridges had been constructed connecting the clouds to each other. Building cranes moved

upwards and downwards, maneuvering the bridges according to the movements of the clouds. As Kian stepped onto a bridge, it swayed ominously. He clutched the railing and forced himself to stare straight ahead.

On the other side of the bridge, was a little, red shack with a window. Kian thought it resembled an old-fashioned phone booth. On the wall hung a sign: “All you want, money not needed”. He looked down at his bare feet. Maybe he could get himself a pair of new shoes?

Kian opened the door hesitantly and entered. The door immediately slammed shut behind him. In front of him was a chest of drawers with a small screen on top of it. The screen suddenly lit up, displaying pictures of all sorts of clothing, accessories, and shoes. Kian scrolled until he found some cool sneakers. He pressed the button.

A message appeared on the screen: “Place your feet on the glass plate.” Kian looked down at the floor and discovered a glass plate in front of the chest of drawers. He stepped onto the plate.

There was a glaring flash, like a blitz of lightning. The chest of drawers started to vibrate. Then a new message appeared: “The shoes are finished. We hope

you will be satisfied. Welcome back.”

Thud!

Kian opened the bottom drawer. There lay his new sneakers. He slid his feet into them. It felt like they were molded to his feet. Perfect fit! The shoes were black, with gold stripes, and much cooler than the worn-out sneakers he had at home. And best of all, they were for free!

He might as well get himself a new pair of trousers as well while he was at it, so he wouldn't have to go around in pajama pants? He chose some black jeans with a brown, leather belt to match his hoodie.

After changing his clothes, he left the shack and resumed following the signs to the cartographer.

Kian's head strayed from side to side as he walked. There were so many exciting things to see. Unfamiliar and sweet cooking aromas wafted through the open windows.

He came to a stop in front of a crooked house so covered in flowering vines, that holes had been cut around the windows. A big sign flashed on the rooftop: “Cartographer”. He had found Leo's house.

He went up to the front door and knocked.

Chapter 10

Leo

– Come on in, door's open! a voice called from inside.
Kian cautiously open the door and entered.

A boy with buoyant gait came walking towards Kian, his tawny hair bouncing. He was so tall, he had to stoop so as not to bump his head on the ceiling lamp. He looked like he was a few years older than Kian.

The boy looked at Kian with his clear, blue eyes and said:

– Welcome stranger. I'm Leo, the municipal cartographer. How may I help you?

Kian told him that he was looking for his mother and described how she looked.

Leo thought a bit, shook his head, and said he was sorry, he hadn't seen her, but he would keep a lookout for her. Then he added:

– I was just to about to eat. Are you hungry?

Before Kian could answer, Leo clapped his hands twice.

WHOOSH!

Kian started. Instantly, the long table in the living room was chock-a-block full of food and drink. Leg of lamb, baked ham, and cooked vegetables. And bottles of lemonade so cold and chilly, the glass was beaded with condensation. Kian's mouth watered, and he cried out:

– What? How did you do that?

– Oh, that's nothing, Leo replied. – Everyone here can do the food-clap.

Leo looked curiously at Kian and asked:

– Don't they do the food-clap where you come from?

– No, Kian replied.

– How weird! So how do you get your food?

What should Kian say? That most of the people in his world buy their food in stores with the money they have earned? No, he surely wouldn't understand that. So, instead he said:

– We make our own food.

– Weird. I prefer our method.

– Me too, said Kian smiling.

They sat down at the table and began eating.

– Yum! This is the best meat I've ever tasted, Kian exclaimed. – It's so tender it melts in my mouth. Even the vegetables are tasty.

– Just wait until dessert, Leo said, clapping his hands thrice.

Instantly, four large cakes, decorated with icing and berries appeared on the table.

After stuffing themselves, they sat down on the sofa with a bottle of lemonade each.

On the coffee table lay a stack of books. Kian picked up the one on top entitled: “Life in RW, reality or fantasy?”

– What does RW stand for? Kian asked

Leo's face took on a solemn expression and he said:

– RW stands for the Real World. My girlfriend wrote it. She is convinced that another world exists out there somewhere which is more real than the one in which we live. And she is desperately searching for the entranceway into that world.

Kian's eyes opened wide.

The Forbidden Book

Kian quickly leafed through the book on RW. The cursive handwriting was difficult to read. His heart beat faster. He tried to appear calm as he asked:

– So, what's this book actually about?

– It maintains that we live in a fictitious world, said Leo.

– That we are all just pieces in a game, and that a foreign power determines our lives.

Why did she believe that? Kian asked.

– She claimed that it was the only explanation for all the mysterious things that keep happening around here. Like a grotto or house suddenly appearing without any of us having built it. There was almost a riot in the village after she had written the book. A lot of people thought she had gone mad. And the village council believed the book was dangerous and banned it. That's why all her books were collected into a big

pile in the middle of the square and burnt. She became thoroughly agitated when she witnessed it, poor thing.

– I can understand that Kian said.

– But why did they believe the book was dangerous?

– They thought, that if the people believe their lives are determined by a foreign power, it could lead to them not taking any responsibility for their own lives. And that nobody would lift a finger to make our society function.

Leo took a big gulp of lemonade before he continued:

– She was very upset when no one believed her. Not even I. So, she decided to prove that what she believed in was true. She wanted to go to RW, her fabricated world. She tried to convince me to accompany her, but I couldn't pretend to believe in her wild theories. The day she left we had a terrible quarrel. And I haven't seen her since. It's incredibly sad because she's the love of my life. I still search for her every day and I'm never going to give up, even though I realize that I will probably never see her again ...

Leo's voice broke, and he fell silent.

– I hope you find her, Kian said.

– I do too, said Leo, and smiled at him gratefully.

Kian glanced at his watch. Less than 19 hours left. He cleared his throat and said:

– I should get going, I have to find my mom.

– Hang on, I'll get you a map. It will make it easier to find your way.

Leo went over to his desk and pulled open a wide drawer. In the drawer were rows of rolled-up parchments tightly squeezed in next to each other. The scrolls were fastened with shiny, silk ribbons.

– Are all those maps? Kian asked.

– Yes, replied Leo.

– New, exciting things are always turning up in our world. New tunnels, roads, and grottos. So, the maps have to be constantly updated.

Leo picked up a map with a red, silk ribbon and said:

– You can borrow this one.

The Black Territories

Leo loosened the red, silk ribbon and unrolled the map on the desk. He placed his hands on either side, to keep it from rolling up.

Kian didn't think it looked like a map at all. It just looked like brown cardboard paper. But then, something strange occurred. Things *sprouted* up from it.

Kian gawked. Miniature versions of trees, plants and mountains sprang up from the brown cardboard paper. It was like watching a video on how The Eternity Game was created on fast-forward.

– Wow! How do you do that? Kian asked.

Leo smiled slyly and replied:

– That is a cartographer-secret.

Kian leant over and studied the map. There were so many details. Trees swayed in the wind. Small creeks spilled down the mountainside joining together into

foaming waterfalls. He could see the village he and his mother had built.

– You are here, said Leo and pointed to a red, blinking dot.

Kian noticed several black territories that wound their way, crisscrossing across the map. It looked like someone had drawn them in with a dark marker. He pointed to one of the black territories and inquired:

– What is that?

Leo let out a deep sigh before replying:

– Those are the territories Snake has destroyed.

– Snake?! You mean the serpent that eats apples?

– Yeah. Only now he doesn't just eat apples, he devours everything he comes across. Plants, trees, and soil ... Leo snapped his fingers and said:

– Gone forever. I fear that is what could have happened to my girlfriend ...



– But that's awful! Kian cried.
– Can't he be stopped?
– No, not possible. He's too strong. He lives in the dark forest, and no one dares to go anywhere near him. It's important that you follow the map, so you don't fall into one of the black chasms.

Leo pointed to a purple square at the bottom of the map and said:

– If you swipe your finger over this, the map updates itself and shows you the latest regions of destruction.

Leo swiped his index finger over the purple square. Like watching a film in slow-motion, they saw territories, lush with trees and plants wither up and vanish. Everything left behind was flat and black.

Kian looked up in alarm and said:

– But if Snake continues carrying on like this, the whole world can be destroyed!

– Yeah, that's a definite possibility, said Leo.

Kian stared at Leo in amazement. How could he be so calm?

– But aren't you afraid of ... you know, to be gone forever?

– It doesn't help to worry about things you can't do anything about, said Leo and smiled.

– What happens, happens. One can only try to

make the best out of each day.

Kian fell silent. What if the whole gaming world and everyone in it vanished forever? There must be a way to save it, but how?

The Video

Oslo

The father followed the two police officers into Kian's room. The laptop and the cellphone lay on the desk between a couple of empty bottles of soda and a bowl with potato chip crumbs.

– Let's start with the phone, the policewoman said.

Kian's father picked up the cell, punched the code, and gave it to her.

The policewoman scrolled through the messages. Nothing stood out. No unknown senders.

The same day Kian had disappeared, he had received four messages from Daniel:

12:33: “Want to hang out?”

13:20: “The guys are meeting up at school in half an hour to play soccer. You in?”

15 46: “Yo, bro! Pizza and movie at Frans' tonight. Coming?”

17:15: "Gotten my messages?"

But no reply from Kian.

The policewoman opened the folder with pictures and videos and said:

– Kian hasn't taken any pictures in the past few weeks, but he has made a new video ...

She pointed to the date and the father exclaimed:

– That was filmed yesterday!

The policewoman nodded solemnly and said:

– Do want us to take a look at it first?

– No, I'd like to see it together with you, the father replied.

– Sure about that?

– Yes. I'm sure.

– OK, said the policewoman.

She opened the video and pressed "play".

Kian's face filled the screen and he said:

– Today is Saturday, October 14th, and I have just received a message I think contains a virus ...

Kian told about how he had received a message asking him to enter The Eternity Game. They saw him place his cell on the shelf next to the desk and start the game. After a while, they saw a black blotch on the screen. Then the video was abruptly cut off.

– Oh no! the father cried out.

– What happened!?

The policewoman examined the video closely before replying:

– The video is only a minute long, so that was it.

The father's eyes teared up and he said:

– But why did it end there? It didn't look like he pressed stop.

– I don't know. Maybe the battery died?

– Yes, that's possible. I did have to charge it earlier today.

– Kian mentioned that he had received a message he thought contained a virus, the policewoman said.

– I'll see what I can find on his pc.

The Furry Animals

The Eternity Game

Kian borrowed a rucksack from Leo to carry the map in. After saying their goodbyes, Kian walked back to the square and took the cloud ski-lift down to the ground.

He used the hop-toadstools across the meadow and flew past the green lakes and grazing animals. He stopped several times, checking the map to avoid the deep chasms that wound through the landscape.

Suddenly, he heard laughter. Two animals tumbled out of the tall reeds at his side. One covered in brown fur, the other in gray. Both with white bellies. They were claspng each other tightly and rolling around. They looked like bear cubs playfighting.

Kian's eyes popped. He recognized them. They were the copies he had made of his favorite stuffed animals, Biffen and Boffen!

Biffen and Boffen sprinted to opposite sides of the field, turned toward each other and called:

– Biff! Biff!

– Boff! Boff!

Then they curled up into two balls of fur and rolled towards each other.

They ended up crashing into each other. But with all the fur, they just bounced apart. They lay sprawled on their backs, kicking and laughing.

– Again! shouted Boffen.

Just then, they spotted Kian and went bounding

towards him. They tilted their heads to one side and stared at him with big, brown eyes. Their shiny, black snouts twitched up and down as they sniffed the air.

– Boffen recognizes the smell.

– Biffen too.

– It's Kian! exclaimed Boffen and hopped up and down.

– Yes! said Biffen.

Kian raised his eyebrows and said:

– How do you know my name?

– Biffen and Boffen played a lot with Kian when Kian was a little two-legged, said Boffen.

Kian's jaw dropped. Boffen took a step closer and added:

– Boffen remembers that Kian's mommy got sick. Kian cried so much,



Biffen's and Boffen's fur got soaked. Is Kian's mommy all better now?

– No, unfortunately ...

Kian's voice broke.

Kian didn't know what to think. Did Biffen and Boffen remember things that had occurred in the real world?

Boffen took another step closer to Kian and said:

– Kian needs a cuddle.

Then he reached his paws around Kian and rested his head on Kian's stomach. Biffen did likewise.

Kian was smothered in fuzzy, soft fur. They smelled of forest and moss. A cozy warmth spread through his chest. When he was little, he couldn't fall asleep without Biffen and Boffen in his bed. His biggest wish had been that they could somehow come alive and could play with him and talk to him. Now here they were. It was totally nuts.

When Biffen and Boffen finally let go, Kian pulled out the silver heart and said:

– I found mom's pendant, and I think she's here too, so I'm trying to find her. You haven't seen her, have you?

Biffen and Boffen tilted their heads and fell silent.

Suddenly, Boffen hopped up and down and said:

– Boffen remembers something! Biffen and Boffen saw a couple of two-leggeds. Many sunrises ago, but Boffen still remembers.

– Yes! Biffen remembers too! They were far away, but she had long dark fur. Like Kian's mommy.

– Can you show me where you saw her? Kian asked.

– You betcha! Answered Biffen and Boffen simultaneously.

Then they curled up into two balls of fur and rolled across the meadow. Kian ran after them.

After a while, they came to a marshy area. It gurgled underfoot, and Kian felt water seeping into his sneakers.

Boffen stopped, waved his paws, and shouted:

– Over here! Pawprints of two-leggeds.

On the ground were imprints of two pairs of shoes. Kian's heart raced. Two people had gone past here. What if one had been his mother?

The Footprints

Kian crouched down and traced the footprints with his fingers. The clay earth was hard and cracked, so the prints were most likely old. How could he find out whether or not his mother had been here?

All at once, he got an idea. He and his mother had the same size feet. He placed his foot alongside the footprints and compared their sizes. One set of prints was smaller than his, but the other set was exactly the same size.

- It might have been mom, said Kian.
- Let's follow the tracks and see if we find her.

Biffen and Boffen ran on ahead, sniffing along the ground. After a while, they slowed down, crouched down into the grass, and laid their ears back. In front of them was a massive wall. It wasn't until they got closer, that Kian could see it was made of trees.

- The dark forest, whispered Boffen and trembled.
- It's where Snake lives.

The footprints disappeared among the trees. Kian peered into the darkness and shuddered. This place reminded him of the nightmare he had had every night since his mother died. In the dream, he searched for his mother in a dark forest. He could hear her calling him, but he could never manage to find her.

His hands turned cold and clammy. What if it *hadn't* been just a regular dream, what if his mother actually *had* been trying to contact him and ask for help? What if she were inside the dark forest right now?

Kian glanced at his watch. There was a little over 17 hours until the portal shut. He wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers, turned to Biffen and Boffen and said:

- I must go into the forest.
- Now!?! Kian mustn't do it. It gets dark soon and Snake destroys mostly at night.
- I can't wait. If mom is in there, I must find her.

Biffen and Boffen looked at Kian with large, sorrowful eyes and shook their heads.

- Don't do it Kian, said Boffen.
- It's dangerous.
- I know, but I have to try, said Kian.

- Boffen doesn't want to go into The Dark Forest.
- Not Biffen either. Biffen wants to play and have fun. Not become a meal.

– I understand, said Kian, and ruffled their fur.

– You don't have to follow me. I'll go on my own.

Biffen and Boffen stood up on their hind legs and gave Kian a tender goodbye hug. They whimpered unhappily as Kian walked into the dark forest.

**If you want to read the rest of the book
please contact the publisher: Figenschou at
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