

If only he understood the drawing! Ever since he had dreamt about it, he believed to hold the key to everything in his hands. However, try as he might, he couldn't make sense of it.

It was early morning and Siebenthal was walking along Boltenhagen Beach, which at this time of day he only had to share with seabirds and a few dogs and their owners. He used to get his best ideas here, by the Baltic Sea; but lately his mind had been as barren as the sand between his feet.

It had been five years since he gave up his job as an investment banker to pursue the question that had tormented him since childhood: was there a God? Even as a child, he had stared up at the starry sky through the skylight of his attic room and wondered what was up there and what did he want from people? What did he want from God? It had been the beginning of a search continuing to this day. He had finished school, studied, fell in love, got married, made a career, but the question inside him had always remained.

Why did it plague him? He didn't know! He had been brought up as a Roman Catholic, but never really believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he had dutifully painted as a child riding a donkey under the ever-watchful eye of his religion teacher. At least not in the traditional sense of God, miraculously born by a virgin and awoken from the dead. All this had seemed absurd to him before he could even spell the word.

Not to mention an ethic that demanded unconditional love of one's neighbor to the point of utter self-abasement. To treat every stranger like a member of your own family. To turn the left cheek as well and forge your own sword into a plow. To love your enemies. Life as constant self-denial to be rewarded with a blissful twilight state in the afterlife. Why had God created humans in the first place if it wasn't also about conquering and asserting oneself? Then he could just as well leave every newborn in some kind of coma, and peace would reign on earth. Or he could have spared himself the trouble of creation altogether.

Siebenthal had long buried the question of God inside him and exorcized the last remnants of his faith with Richard Dawkins' book "The God Delusion". He finally accepted that there

was neither a supreme being nor a paradise nor a hell and he would simply slip into nothingness after death. Instead, he devoted himself to his career, first at Goldman Sachs, then at Deutsche Bank. Convinced himself he could be happy without religion and lead an ordinary middle-class life like any of his friends and neighbors.

At some point, however, the question still nesting inside him still had burst out like pus from a wound. It had made his princely paid job, his marriage to Dolores, his whole life seemed stale and pointless. As if there was a yawning hole inside him that he couldn't fill with the distractions that sufficed for other people.

Since then, he had been systematically studying religion and soon came across a fundamental problem that nourished his doubts anew: if there was one, and *only* one God - why did people's ideas about him differ in such fundamental ways? He had even written a book about it: "The Phenomenology of God". There, he tried to distil the image of the one and only true God from the concepts of divinity and religious practices of all human cultures. At first glance, this did not seem difficult, as there was something like an evolutionary history of religion:

It all began in prehistoric times with the worship of the souls of ancestors - the idea of an immortal soul being common to all human religions. Later, the souls became spirits that were hidden under every stone and in every river and wanted to be appeased and summoned. The spirits in turn became gods at some point, first local, then tribal ones. In the course of settling down 10,000 years ago, these gods were combined into a pantheon with different deities for specific functions, pantheons, which gradually were responsible not only for the tribe, but for an entire people, a culture, a civilization even. At length, one of the gods of this pantheon was declared the main or sky god and the "secondary gods" were eventually omitted altogether. In the end, there was Abrahamic monotheism, first as Judaism, then as Christianity and finally in the form of Islam - the highest and final stage of religion, it could be argued.

At this point, however, he encountered the first problem: obviously, not everyone agreed with this religious evolutionary story. Anyone who, like Jews and Christians, described idolatry as a superstition overcome by monotheism, logically had to accept as well that Muhammad was the last and therefore authoritative prophet of that single God – unless he was decried as an

impostor, which nobody would dare to do nowadays. Following this logic, the Jews would have to close their synagogues and the Christians their churches, and they should all throw themselves at the feet of Allah in the nearest mosque.

The Koran as the final word of God: end of story. He could have concluded his book with this - and entirely in the spirit of the Muslims, for whom Islam naturally had to rule the whole world.

But something inside Siebenthal told him this was not true. And if it were, it would be horrible for him and far worse than if there were no God at all. Then he would rather Dawkins was right, and man's innate religiosity was merely a by-product of the evolution of consciousness and religion just a figment of his imagination.

For too repulsive he found the sycophantic, submissive nature of both Christianity and Islam. The former believed in something as absurd as an original sin that had to be redeemed. The gaze of their priests was clouded, their demeanor effeminate and evading, their pride derived from penance and self-abasement. Their hands folded in prayer represented the gesture with which serfs had once sealed their servitude to their liege lord.

Muslims, on the other hand, prostrated themselves at their god's feet in prayer like their ancestors, who had only been allowed to approach the despot on their knees and with their eyes fixed on the ground. Obedient like slaves and like them all the more relentless when they gained power over those even lower than themselves.

Under the sign of Allah's love, Muhammad's murdering and plundering troops had trampled through Asia. The last Scandinavians adhering to "paganism" had been convinced of the merits of the merciful Christian God with a sword at their throats.

It was this apparently despotic nature of God that had raised doubts in him. For he could not reconcile it with what he perceived as the nature of the various peoples of the earth.

In Asia, for example, the most diverse religions have coexisted to this day. They ranged from ancestor worship and belief in spirits to polytheistic Hinduism, then Buddhism, with its intangible image of God that embodies only the essence of being itself, right up to Confucianism, a purely philosophical social doctrine. And yet, all these very different systems of faith shared at

their core an image of man and God you could express like that: *thou shalt be a whole and not an individual*. Harmony and unity were the goal, not individualistic self-expression.

In Christianity, on the other hand, the community hardly mattered, and in Islam only in a minor sense. Here, as there, it was primarily about the relationship between the individual and his God. Of course, those who wanted to go to paradise also had to be good to their earthly brothers. But it was always about the salvation of one's own soul, in one case to be gained through self-denial and love of one's enemies, in the other through submission to God. People prayed in community, but as well alone - and not just for others, but just as naturally for themselves.

Those who only knew the present might take this for granted. But Siebenthal knew this was by no means the essence of every religion. The ancient faiths of the Greeks, Romans, Celts and Germanic tribes were always about the salvation of the community, be it one's own family, the village, the clan or the tribe. No one would have thought of invoking one of the old gods alone and only for themselves. If you asked for a good harvest, then for the entire village, not just for your own stripe of land.

But it didn't end with that. No European would have thrown himself into the dust before his god, be he Zeus, Jupiter, Teutates or Odin. You stood respectfully but upright before them, worshipped them, followed their rules as far as you knew them and fought for them if you had to. You may have been rewarded for this in life and afterwards, but you did not see yourself as a mere subject of God, but as part of a family. And the welfare and salvation of the individual was always linked to that of the group.

Siebenthal had thought about this for a long time. Was the proud character of the Europeans, their sense of being a people of upright equals and not just a mass of subordinates, merely a delusion, to be overcome by turning to the true faith, today Christianity and tomorrow possibly Islam?

Perhaps. But two weeks ago, when he had been about to give up, out of nowhere the drawing had appeared to him in a dream.

He was now halfway through his usual walk, between the cliffs at the western end of Boltenhagen Beach and the pier opposite the spa gardens. And it was precisely there that he began to feel a tingling sensation and a still shapeless thought arose in his mind. He stopped abruptly, stroked his beard and stared out to sea. Then he pulled the meanwhile crumpled sheet of paper from his trouser pocket, which he had been carrying with him for several days.

For the hundredth time, he studied the drawing, which he had hastily scribbled on the paper after his dream: three spiral circles inscribed with runes, the meaning of which had remained hidden from him until now.

But now he groaned and slapped his forehead.

For suddenly he knew the answer.

What would become the worst day of my life began like any other school day.

Odysseus had returned from his nightly foray and was devoting himself to his bowl of food in the corner of the kitchen. My parents were already sitting at the table. Dad was wearing plain, dark gray cotton trousers and a blue polo shirt - so he didn't have any important appointments today, otherwise he would be wearing a suit and tie. Mom had put her thick, blonde hair up in a makeshift bun and was dressed even more casually in leggings and a loose T-shirt, with her feet in flip-flops; after all, she was working from home and Anna, our home help, wasn't on duty today.

I leaned my rucksack against my chair at the table and greeted them with a smashing "Good morning!".

"Morning, Anngrit," the two of them just mumbled in chorus. Obviously engrossed in a conversation, they only spared me a sideways glance.

I took the bags of plain and of cocoa milk out of the fridge. From the cupboard next to it, I pulled out the jar with the mixture of *Lion Wildcrush Chocolate & Caramel Flakes* and dusty whole meal muesli - like almost everything in my life a compromise between what I wanted and what my old folks deemed right for me. Preparing my breakfast, I listened to them.

"I hope you're there, Armin," Mom continued the conversation I had interrupted. "Not like last time, when I ended up all by myself with the roofer."

"Mette, I'll be there at 3 p.m. sharp!" replied Dad, looking innocently out of his deep blue eyes. He even raised his hand to swear, waving his whole meal roll topped with both (!) jam and cheese. "I truly haven't planned any appointments. After all, it's my lazy week. Next one, hell might break out."

"You say that every time," Mom answered skeptically.

I realized it was about Dad's friend, an architect, who was coming this afternoon to plan the conversion of our dusty, old attic. When we had moved from Denmark to Hamburg, Dad hadn't been able to renovate the house properly for lack of money; but now Mom was three months into her pregnancy, and it would get cramped for then four Weskamps upstairs.

In any case, going forward I was to reside in the attic, while my little brother or sister would take over my old room next to my parents'. So far, so good - only nobody had bothered to ask about my own ideas yet. That's why I had spent the last week measuring the dusty floors and bare walls with a folding rule borrowed from Dad's tool cellar, browsing online building catalogs and drawing a true-to-scale plan in Excel, which even boasted a chain of dimensions. I had planned a private bathroom for me, a walk-in wardrobe, a new dormer window and a separate bedroom where my girlfriends could sleep over.

I placed my glass of chocolate milk and my bowl of cereal on the table and sat down. Then I retrieved with an air of importance the prepared folder with the construction plan from the front compartment of my rucksack. I cleared my throat and said to Dad: "If I understand correctly, your friend is coming today to plan my future room. Well, I thought I could somewhat smooth the way and already draw a plan."

Mom almost dropped her spoon full of yogurt and pieces of fruit in surprise, and Dad's eyes widened to the size of his plate. Undaunted, I pulled the plan out of the folder and placed it on the table between the two of them.

They eyed it suspiciously, as if it might explode. Finally, Dad found the courage to take it up and scrutinize it. "Jesus, you *did* make an effort, I'll give you that," he said. "However, Rainer is for now only going to take measurements and assess the building structure. Besides," he continued, his tone already indicating what was to come, "you can't just claim the whole attic for yourself. We want to put a spare bedroom there, for example when Grandma and Grandpa visit from Aarhus. Then this dormer ... We'll talk about that when the time is right, ok?" He pushed the plan back to me. The matter seemed to be settled for him.

"But I *have* measured everything, and I did plan a spare bedroom!"

"Um, yes, sure, but better safe than sorry, don't you think, my little bunny?" he asked with a wink. "Now let's wait for the expert's verdict." He turned back to eating his jam-and-cheese roll.

In the awkward silence ensuing, I spooned up my breakfast in a huff, not looking to either of them.

Then, Mom abruptly broached a new topic: "Didn't you say that at the end of the week the Australians will decide whether to buy our drone?"

"That's why I have - hopefully! - only this week free time on my hands. If not ..." He ran the back of his hand over his throat, stuck grotesquely out his tongue and rolled his eyes.

It was about this *Ghostfish*, I figured. A sophisticated sea drone for the military, which my Hamburg Granddad had had developed as his last great feat before he died in a sailing accident three years ago. However, as of yet there wasn't a single buyer for the wonder weapon, which meanwhile wreaked havoc with Dad's balance sheet and even threatened to get him into jail for some unlawfully "capitalized development costs". At least, if I lent credit to his occasional tirades at dinner table.

After graduating from university, Dad initially wanted nothing to do with *Neptune Maritime Systems*, which Grandpa had once founded in a garage and gradually built up to what now was a worldwide enterprise. Instead, Dad started working for a small company in Aarhus, met Mom there and spent - as he often confessed - the happiest time of his life; a time also when the awestruck world first beheld of my humble appearance. But at some point, he moved lock, stock and barrel to Hamburg because Grandpa was less and less able to cope on his own. He ran NE-MAS' R&D department and since then has - as he put it - been stumbling from one nightmare to another. Ever since he had taken over the CEO-Position after Grandpa's death, he'd been speaking of his family legacy in ever darker terms. "Billing fraud" and "bribery" were words I snatched up from time to time when Mom and Dad were talking amongst themselves.

Today, however, at least Mom didn't seem to harbor any gloomy thoughts on the subject. "I don't know, Armin," she said. "I have kind of a hunch it could work out with Australia after all. Just assuming: do we need the conversion then at all?"

I looked up from the bowl and stared at Mom in disbelief.

Dad stopped chewing too. Carefully, as if navigating a minefield, he said: "I know what you mean, but ..."

First darting a furtive glance at me, Mom said to him: "Don't you think we should at least let Anngrit in on the possibility?"

She wanted to put her hand on mine, but, becoming suspicious, I pulled it away. Undeterred, she continued: "Anngrit, your father and I have often talked about what a wonderful time we had in Denmark. And you know it well too and love visiting your Baltic Sea grandma and grandpa. Now, your father promised me back then that we would move back there one day when the problems in the company had been solved and we might even be able to sell it - which might be possible if this order comes in. Can you imagine doing this?"

As young as I was, I understood very well the difference between a rhetorical question and a real one. It was nothing but an announcement out of the blue that I was about to lose my home. I dropped my spoon into the bowl with a clink and said: "No, I'm sorry, I can't imagine it at all!" I gave the two of them a pitch-black look. "My school is here, all my friends are here, my Scouts and my judo, and Uncle Jochen is currently teaching me how to shoot. I can spend the vacations in Denmark. But what the hell else have I lost there?"

Mom wanted to stroke my hair; however, I dodged her. "But you can find all those things there too," she said almost pleadingly.

"And just why should I look for something there I already have got here?" I replied unmoved. Was it my fault that Mom hadn't made any real friends here, which hadn't escaped my notice? And that she let my German Grandma, who I had named Church Grandma due to her obsession with Christianity, meddle into her affairs? Even *Odysseus*, who hated a change of territory like any tomcat, looked up from his food bowl in alarm.

"If I may interrupt the argument for once," Dad intervened. "Mette, I have to remind you that we're talking about the hide of a bear, which – with all due respect to your female intuition – hasn't even been killed yet. Even *if* we land the *Ghostfish* contract, and even *if* I find a buyer for the company, we're talking rather about years than months. So, in any case we'll stay here for quite some time. Basically, though," he said, now addressing me, "your mother is right. We do want to move back to Denmark at some point. But by then, my brother will hopefully have completed your shooting training, and you'll pursue entirely new plans you might realize there as well, don't you think?"

From a rational point of view, he was right. But the time horizon of a soon-to-be thirteen-year-old didn't extend beyond the start of the next vacation. That's why I just shot him an angry look.

At this moment, Marina rang the bell and put an end to the hostilities for the time being. She had stopped by to cycle to school with me, as she did every morning. "I have to go," I said. I reached for my little appreciated conversion plan on the table, to put it in my backpack - and later throw it in the bin.

But Dad put his hand on it. "Leave it there," he said quietly. "I'll show it to Rainer. I think we'll do the conversion anyway."

"Thank you." I got up and left the kitchen, not deigning to look at Mom.

I opened the door in the hallway and stepped over the threshold into a world in which I was not Anngrit, the "little bunny" no one paid the least heed, but Scha, the respected leader of a girls' clique called the String Quartet.

Marina welcomed me with shining eyes.

3

Armin drove through heavy traffic from Groß-Flottbek along the Elbchaussee until he reached via several highways and interstates the Moorfleeter Deich on the outskirts of the city. There, on an idyllic, unspoiled stretch of the Elbe, was the former shipyard that his father had bought thirty years ago when his tinkerer's garage and later the rented premises in a business park had become too small for his growing business.

He steered his BMW off the road and into the driveway of *NEMAS B.V.* – what was the official name of *Neptune Maritime Systems* since a name dispute with another enterprise, although the now mostly long-serving employees still spoke of working at “Neptune”. To his right was the small shipyard from which they launched their sea drone prototypes, to his left an ensemble of production and logistics buildings and directly in front of him a four-story administration and R&D building. Meanwhile, 1,300 people were employed in his father's former start-up, plus several hundred in subsidiaries around the world.

He stopped the car in front of the entrance barrier and nodded to the gatekeeper sitting behind the reception desk, who of course knew him and opened the barrier without checking his ID; in any case, cameras also recorded all occupants in arriving vehicles and checked them against an employee database - a precaution they had to take as a defense industry company. Armin drove on and parked in his reserved parking space in front of the admin building. He hurried up the steps, passing the recently installed plaque next to the entrance door that read “Company without racism”. An idea of the works council, who had unveiled the bronze piece last week at a formal ceremony.

In the foyer, he was greeted by display boards and showcases illustrating milestones in the company's history. Right next to the entrance was the cabinet with the *Abyss-1*, back then a pioneering towed array sonar for the navy, which had laid the foundations for the firm's success. There was still room for more exhibits, and after his father's sailing accident, the works council would have liked to place a bust of the patriarch in one of the gaps, even made at the expense of the workforce.

Armin had politely rejected the generous offer by pointing out he was running a company and not a family museum. Nevertheless, it was symptomatic. The works council and staff had mourned Klaus' death almost as much as his own family - which was probably due not only to human sympathies, but also to the fact that *NEMAS* paid above the standard pay scale and granted a generous company pension and all kinds of other benefits on top of it. All well and good; but unfortunately, his father had lately only been able to keep the cornucopia going with the help of dishonest means, from overbilling government customers to "creative" accounting and bribery.

Meanwhile, the financial pressure of the *Ghostfish* project was crushing the company with the slow relentlessness of an iceberg. Against Armin's advice, Klaus had insisted on starting the development of the drone on his own initiative and at his own expense - completely unusual in the industry, where research expenses were normally sponsored by a government institution. In the meantime, *Ghostfish* had become a technically outstanding device; and yet, like an overly heavy shipload, it could bring the company to a watery sailor's grave, if Armin's efforts to convince at least one government of its qualities within the next year came to nothing.

But these were not the only reasons why he had been uncomfortable with *NEMAS* from the outset. It simply was not *his* company. Together with his brother Jochen, he basically only managed his father's inheritance; a makeshift solution because the family didn't trust an outside manager, his eldest brother Henoch had fallen out with father and subsequently with *NEMAS*, and a company sale was impossible if the *Ghostfish* issue was not resolved.

Although the workforce accepted him in the meantime, it had never become a love affair. Furthermore, there was Mette and with her Denmark. After learning the ropes for some years at a shipyard in Bremen, a sailing vacation with friends in Denmark had given him the idea of applying for a job there. He quickly felt at home in Aarhus and learned Danish. Mette and he have maintained a circle of Danish friends to this day, meeting up to go sailing, have a barbecue on the beach or go to a concert in Copenhagen. He now felt more at home there than in Hamburg, and even if his Youngest wouldn't hear of it, he believed it to be a safer and more promising home for his children.

He reached the reception desk, behind which Ms. Hußmann greeted him with "Good morning, Mr. Weskamp!".

"*Moin, Moin!*" he replied and sprinted up the stairs towards his office on the third floor.

In the anteroom, he was greeted by the pent-up heat of the previous day. The almost mid-summer weather - unusual for the end of August in Hamburg - had given way to an oppressive humidity that would only be relieved by a thunderstorm predicted for the afternoon. Cordula, his personal assistant, usually arrived before him, aired the room and watered the numerous plants. With them, she had turned the room into some kind of greenhouse since he had retired her prim and sour-faced predecessor, who he had inherited from his father, and entrusted her with the task instead. But today there was no sign of her, and her computer screen was dark, as he noticed when he walked through to his office.

Shrugging, he hung his jacket over the swivel chair and threw his bunch of keys into the top drawer of his desk. Then he opened the windows himself to let the heat escape. He used the unexpected moment of solitude to gently stroke the model of a drone set up on a pedestal in one corner. If *Ghostfish* was his Nemesis, then *Flipper* was his dream. The device, which looked like a cigar studded with countless gadgets, was, in his opinion, the future of *NEMAS*, or at least a significant part of it. Instead of sinking enemy ships, it would rescue shipwrecked people. It would be the world's first sea rescue drone and Armin had spent a good part of his time in the R&D department working on its construction, against his father's opposition, for whom it had been just a pipe dream. Despite father's skepticism, *Flipper* could meanwhile detect shipwrecked people, either remotely or automatically, in all sea conditions. It could also rescue them, but for the time being only with the cooperation of the victims. His long-term goal was to rescue even helpless victims or those who had already sunk.

Ironically, *Flipper* might even have been able to save his father, who had been caught in a storm during one of his beloved lonely short trips in the North Sea and had capsized and drowned. In any case, *Flipper* would be Armin's first choice if *NEMAS* were to be sold eventually and he set up his own small but proper marine tech company in Denmark.

Armin went back to the desk, sat down and a glance at the middle one of the three framed photos on it brought him back to the present. Between portraits of Mette and Anngrit was an ironic birthday present from his wife: a photo of a real *Ghostfish*, an elegant, semi-transparent predator with eerie, glowing eyes, lying in wait for its victims at the bottom of the deep sea.

Armin was about to boot up his PC when he heard a noise from the outer office. Cordula? He expected her to come in and greet him soon, so he skimmed through his emails. When he was finished and she was still making herself scarce, he became suspicious. Was something amiss? "Cordu, won't you stick your head in today at all and greet your old boss?"

She came from Rostock, where her parents, former shipyard employees, lived in a modest condo. After graduating from high school, she had completed an apprenticeship as an industrial clerk at *NEMAS* and then worked as a sales assistant. She was an eye-catcher, but he hadn't made her his assistant because of her looks – as many at *NEMAS* insinuated – but because she was hard-working, reliable and efficient. She even repaired a broken printer herself.

At first, she had lacked a little polish, but he had gently corrected that and taken her under his wing. They were now a perfect team and sometimes over lunch break they talked about English literature, which she read in the original, because she was more intelligent and interested than most gave her credit for. She just didn't make a fuss about it.

When she finally appeared in the doorway, her brown curls were tied into a ponytail with a pink ribbon. Her white summer dress was printed with a pink floral pattern to match and the belt, which emphasized her womanly figure, was made of red leather. She was wearing high heels and the subtle scent of her perfume wafted over to him. An appearance that would have bathed any grubby Hamburg day in radiant light - if it weren't for her reddened eyes and puffy eyelids. Cordula had obviously been crying.

"Good morning, Armin."

Her brave tone did not deceive him. "Come in and close the door," he said, concerned.

When she had done so and sat down on one of the two visitor chairs in front of his desk, he asked cautiously: "Has something happened?"

"No. It's just ... It's over between me and Robert."

In truth, Armin was relieved, as he had feared worse. "For good?"

"Yes."

Her tone left no doubt and he now noticed that the fancy ring on her right hand was missing. It had been set with a tiny Mercedes star made of diamonds, a gift from her boyfriend, who worked as a master mechanic at a Mercedes dealership in Rostock. After starting work here, she had taken an apartment in Hamburg, expensive and tiny, like everything else in the city these days, and only went home at weekends. Her boyfriend, on the other hand, was a true ladies' man, he had concluded from a photo she had once shown him. And now, he suspected, what happened in such cases had happened. As a former naval officer with a failed marriage, his own brother knew a thing or two about that.

"I'm really sorry to hear this." Armin realized something that had been bothering him for a quite some time. Perhaps it was time to address it. "Listen, Cordula: you've been with us for, what, six years now?"

She nodded and he continued: "And all this time you have been commuting back and forth between Rostock and Hamburg. That doesn't go well in the long run, in any respect, I can tell you that. My brother, for example, ended up losing his wife because of his long deployments at sea. Maybe," he said cautiously, "you should ..."

"But I like it here and I can't find anything comparable in Rostock!" she cut him off.

"That's not what I mean either. If, how can I put it, Muhammad doesn't come to the mountain ... I think half of my male staff would marry you on the spot. You won't end up an old spinster, I'll bet you my share of the company."

She blushed and seemed flattered at the same time. "But I loved him," she protested.

Nevertheless, it sounded merely dutiful to his ears. She would get over it quickly. Perhaps it was rather the hurt pride than the loss of the supposed man of her dreams. He raised his hands. "It all takes time, of course. And it's none of my business either." He cleared his throat. "Shall we go through what's on today?"

As soon as they were finished and he was alone again, the phone rang, which he only switched to Cordula when he wanted to be undisturbed. Jochen, he recognized on the display and picked up immediately.

"*Moin*, Armin!" his brother called out breathlessly.

As a long-serving soldier and most recently commander of a corvette, he usually possessed an almost uncanny self-control and calm. So, the excitement in his voice alarmed Armin even more.

"There's news about *Ghostfish*," Jochen continued, before Armin had a chance to speak. "Can I come over?"

"Yeah, sure."

Jochen hung up and Armin jumped out of his chair and wandered around the room. One reason why he had persuaded Jochen to abandon his military career and help him clean up the mess at *NEMAS* was that he had valuable contacts in military circles and moved in them like the proverbial fish in the water. He was flesh of their flesh, while he himself had always remained a stranger to that dashing, at the same time meticulously laid out world with its own rituals and customs. Jochen even happened to know the official in the Australian Ministry of Defense who oversaw the drone procurement project from a joint maneuver. Of course, this wasn't the deciding factor, there were at any rate too many people involved, but still Armin had entertained certain hopes.

What could have happened to make his brother act like a headless chicken? They had submitted the final documents months ago, since then they have been scrutinized along with those of their last remaining competitor, a British consortium. The Defense Minister's decision was due on Friday. Until then, they weren't supposed to hear anything ... So Jochen's call didn't forebode well at all.

At this point, Jochen rushed into the room with red spots on his face, something Armin had never experienced with him before.

"What's up?" he asked gruffly. "Are we out of the race early?"

"But no," Jochen stuttered. "The British have been disqualified for bribery. We've got the order!"

After that what he considered to be his first revelation, Siebenthal immediately rushed back to his house directly behind the dunes. There, he hurried into his study. He swept aside a copy of his "Phenomenology of God" lying on the desk, as well as folders full of printouts and unfinished texts. Then he pulled the sheet with the drawing out of his trouser pocket. He smoothed it out carefully and spread it out on the now free surface. Sitting down, he looked at his dream image with completely new eyes:



The separate elements he had previously identified right after his dream: they were runes of the Elder Futhark and a triskele; except that the latter was upside down, because usually the single circle was at the top and the two parallel ones at the bottom. The rune at the top left represented an Othala, which stood for an "O". The two runes at the top right read "VE" and the two at the bottom center "VI". He had already assumed the Othala to be representing the god Odin. At least, it was used that way by several neo-pagan groups.

However, the meaning of the other runes and the triskele had remained a mystery to him. Until just now, when a few inconspicuous lines from the Edda, which he had stumbled across some time before without attaching any importance to them, had appeared in his mind. He stood up again, walked to his bookcase on the opposite wall and pulled out a copy of the Nordic lore book.

He leafed through it feverishly until he finally found what he was seeking: it was in the Gylfaginning, part of the Younger Edda. It tells the story of the Swedish King Gylfi's journey to Asgard in the guise of an old man. There he wanted to find out what the mighty Aesir, the gods of the Norse pantheon, were all about - which Odin explained to him in a question-and-answer game. What Siebenthal was looking for specifically was in the sixth chapter:

"His Name was Burri. He was beautiful in appearance, big and powerful. He begot a son called Borr. He married a wife called Bestla, daughter of the giant Boltborn, and they had three sons. One was called Odin, the second Vili, the third Vé. And it is my belief that this Odin and his brothers must be the rulers of heaven and earth."

While he had already associated the "O" with Odin, he now realized that "VE" stood for the god Vé and "VI" for the god Vili. This alone didn't have to mean anything; after all, Norse mythology knew hundreds of gods. But now he looked at the world map hanging above his desk and combined it with the symbolism of the triskele: the circle at the top left, he realized, obviously stood for the West, i.e. Europe, the one at the top right for Asia and the one at the bottom for Africa, including the Orient. Odin was therefore the god of the Europeans, Vé that of the Asians and Vili that of the Africans. Nevertheless, the circles were connected, because all human races and their cultures once originated from the same prehistoric African people.

But this was not the crucial point for him. Rather, he now knew the answer to his question about the true God: *he did not exist. Instead, there were three.* For this reason, and for no other, the religious concepts of Oriental, European and Asian cultures differed so fundamentally. They reflected nothing other than the character of their respective gods: Vili's nature resembled that of an oriental ruler who expected unconditional submission. Vé demanded devotion and becoming one with the whole, the dissolution of the ego.

And Odin? Of course, he as well demanded allegiance. But submission? Siebenthal shook his head. No, he was sure that wasn't true. *He* was concerned, he felt, with the pursuit of a common salvation, but through proud free men, not slaves. It all became clear to him now. How blind he had been all this time!

He sat down again, his thoughts whirling through his head, and he first had to organize them. Three gods instead of one. This explained some things but raised new questions either. For example: why wasn't there just one God? And why three of all things? He didn't understand that yet. Almost all religious cosmogonies were based on a single creator god. If there were several, the additional ones were more like sidekicks to the One and True. According to the Edda, however, the three brothers governed heaven and earth together and were therefore equal.

Could this as well be understood to mean they divided the world into three kingdoms, each of which they ruled separately?

Siebenthal leaned back in his chair, sighed and looked through the window of his study at the sea, which seemed to be brooding like himself. What initially had appeared to him as a solution as well posed new problems. But one thing had changed: until now, his search had been a lonely one. Now he felt he was no longer alone. His God had heard him, He had told him something and they would walk a path together that was only just beginning. This filled him with a warmth and contentment he had not felt for a long time, perhaps never.

And who was his god? Odin, of course. After all, he was European and not Asian or African. But when he thought about it, two problems arose: Odin was only *one* God, albeit the main one of the Germanic pantheon. But what about all the others he was familiar with? For example, the goddess of love Freya, the weather god and protector of mankind Thor or Tyr, the god of war and guardian of justice? If he interpreted what he now saw as his revelation correctly, it could only be a misunderstanding. They had to be merely incarnations, or rather emanations of one and the same god. In each of these, He embodied a different role assigned to him by humans. Odin remained Odin, whether He was wearing the veil of the goddess of love or the helmet of the god of war.

Or was this just a guess? Siebenthal did something he always wanted to do from then on: he listened inside himself. Because there, somewhere in the depths of his consciousness, or his soul, He was within him. Perhaps not always or often unnoticed, but he had to look for him there and ask for a signal as to whether what he was thinking was true. And he now heard a kind of approving hum.

Siebenthal had never thought about what a religious revelation would feel like. His intention had been to approach the divine solely through the gathering of knowledge and the work of his mind. Suddenly he realized how all the stone tablets, the voices from burning thorn bushes, the flaming inscriptions on walls and archangels entering the cave at night for holy dictation were just hocus-pocus, intended for a superstitious audience. Genuine revelations always

represented a silent - often, he suspected, laborious - dialogue between the mind, the soul and the God who was a guest in it.

His thoughts returned to the content of that inner dialogue. So just a god, not a pantheon. Well, everything else would have surprised him. But what should he call him? "Odin" was just the later North Germanic name variant of the god the South Germanic peoples called "Wodan" or "Wotan", which was still preserved in the English "Wednesday". However, it turned out not to be just about the Germanic tribes, but about all Europeans. Zeus had been the main god of the Greeks, Jupiter that of the Romans. For the Celts probably Teutates, the name of a Slavic god wouldn't spring to his mind just now. So how could it be made clear that Odin was the name of the only God for all Europeans? "Ozeujutes"? No, this sounded terrible. Then he had an inspiration. As so often, the solution lay in the obvious: Europe and Odin - "Eurodin" he said aloud to himself. How did that sound? He listened into himself again and heard no contradiction.

He was just about to write the name down on a piece of paper when a meow distracted him. *Fortuna* had sneaked in through the patio door, which was always open in summer. That's what he had named the animal because he didn't know its owner and its real name. The petite creature with the black and white spotted fur visited him from time to time and let him cuddle her and take her on his lap. That he did now and said: "You've brought me luck, little kitty. In return, you'll get a piece of fish."

He carried her in his arms into the kitchen and took a defrosted piece of pollock out of the fridge. He put it on a plate and left *Fortuna* to her unexpected treat.

Back in the study, he wrote down the new name of his god and realized something was still missing - and it had to do with the stress. "Eurodin", emphasized on the first syllable, sounded more like an EU authority than a god. Then it occurred to him how often a diacritic acute appeared in the Old Norse original of the Edda to determine the stress of a word. So, he added a "´" above the "o", resulting in "Euródin". This not only looked better and gave the name something unmistakable, but it was now pronounced "Eurodin", or preferably "Juroudin" - after all, English was the language of modern-day Europe and not German.

And what did He have to say about it? Someone inside him seemed to shrug. He probably didn't care as long as He knew He was meant, and it didn't sound disrespectful. After all, all "names" for gods merely paraphrased the nature of the divine. *Odin* meant "the inspired one" or "the angry one" depending on how you read it, *Yahweh* "the one I am", *Buddha*, although only a human being, "the awakened one" and *Allah* was simply the Arabic word for "God".

Siebenthal leaned back once again and allowed himself another sigh. The god he had been searching for so desperately since his childhood at least had a name now. Even if there was still a lot he didn't understand about him.

The ringing of the front doorbell snapped him out of his contemplation. A hawker or a fundraiser, he assumed. Otherwise, no one visited him unannounced, which was why he usually didn't answer the door at all. But in his current exhilaration he waived that principle. Perhaps luck had knocked on his door a second time today.

However, when he opened the door, a middle-aged lady he had never seen before stood in front of him. She wasn't selling frozen food or magazines but said: "Hello! Is my cat with you by any chance?"

That embarrassed him. He had never thought about the fact that *Fortuna* must have an owner who was missing her. There was no point in denying it, because the object of inquiry was already sneaking towards the door between his legs, still licking her mouth clean from her meal. She had probably recognized her owner's voice.

The lady lifted her from the floor, cuddled her in her arms and stroked her. "*Jasmin*, there you are, my little vagabond!"

He had liked *Fortuna* better. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that! She comes into the house via the patio door, and I give her a bit of milk or fish now and again. I hope you don't mind."

"Good gracious, no! We're just a little spoilt, aren't we?" She looked into her eyes a little reproachfully and cuddled her. Then she looked at him: "As long as I know she's with you, it's not so bad. My name is Jensen, by the way, and I live up the street in the yellow house."

Siebenthal had been living here for several years and now he realized once again how hermit-like his life was. He didn't even know the neighbors down the street. His marriage had been over

for several years, and the wine trade in nearby Wismar he had tried to make a living with after leaving Deutsche Bank had never really taken off because he did no networking. Now, he had given it up and was living off his savings.

He held out his hand to his visitor. "Well, Ms. Jensen, nice to meet you! Perhaps we'll see each again now and then on feline matters." It would be a good time to invite her for a coffee and ask her about *Jasmin*, alias *Fortuna*, for example. But not right now, when ... If he was honest, not even later. He was afraid she would waste his time with trivia about an ex-husband, a son, a back problem or whatever. Well, that was just the way it was with him.

"Yes, definitely," she replied. "Well, then have a nice day," she said with some disappointment in her voice.

When he was alone again, this time even without a cat, he sighed and went back to his study. There he created a new Word document on his PC and gave it the title: "The History of Gods and Men."

Because the hot feeling of anticipation in his chest he had felt on the beach this morning had returned.