

HENDRIK F. MEYER

We Children of  
EURÓDIN



A Novel  
fólkvangr

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*For Irina*

*The Stranger within my gates,  
He may be evil or good,  
But I cannot tell what powers control—  
What reasons sway his mood;  
Nor when the Gods of his far-off land  
Shall repossess his blood.//*

*This was my father's belief  
And this is also mine:  
Let the corn be all one sheaf—  
And the grapes be all one vine,  
Ere our children's teeth are set on edge  
By bitter bread and wine.*

—Rudyard Kipling, “The Stranger”



# Part One

If only he understood the drawing! Ever since he had dreamt about it, he believed to possess with it the key to everything. 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 had to share only with seabirds and a few dogs and their owners. He used to get his best ideas here, by the German stretch of the Baltic Sea; but lately his mind had been as infertile as the sand between his feet.

It had been five years since he gave up his job as an investment banker to pursue the answer to the question that had tormented him since childhood: Was there a God? Even as a three-year-old, he had stared up at the starry sky through the skylight of his attic room and asked himself: Who was up there and what did He want from people? What did He want from him in particular? It had been the beginning of a search continuing to this day. A quest during which he finished school, studied, fell in love, got married, made a career. But the nagging question inside him had always remained.

Why did it plague him, of all people? If only he knew! Gerold Siebenthal had been brought up as a Roman Catholic but could never believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, even though, as a child, he had dutifully painted Him under the ever-watchful eye of his religion teacher riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. At least not in the sense of a Son 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 beat your own sword into a plowshare. 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 they weren't meant to also conquer and assert themselves? 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 ago buried the question of God inside him and exorcized the last remnants of his faith with the help of the famous book *The God Delusion* by the atheist Richard Dawkins. 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 in investment banking, first at Goldman Sachs, then at Deutsche Bank—convincing himself that 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 had burst out like pus from a wound. It had made his princely-paid job, his marriage to Dolores—his whole life—seem 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, Siebenthal 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 published a book about it, *The Phenomenology of God*, in which he tried to distill 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 ten thousand years ago, these gods were combined into a panel with different deities for specific functions, pantheons, which gradually were responsible not only for the tribe but also for an entire people, a culture—a civilization, even. At length, one of the gods in this pantheon was declared the main god, or sky god, and the “secondary gods” were eventually omitted

altogether. In the end, there was Abrahamic monotheism as the belief in a single, personal creator god, 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, Siebenthal encountered the first problem: obviously, not everyone agreed with this religious evolutionary story. Anyone who described idolatry as a superstition overcome by monotheism, such as Jews and Christians, 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. Siebenthal 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 him insisted that 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 that 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 he found the sycophantic, submissive natures of both Christianity and Islam too repulsive. The former believed in something as absurd as an original sin that had to be redeemed. The gaze of its 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 lords.

Muslims, on the other hand, prostrated themselves at their god's feet in prayer like their ancestors, who had been allowed only to approach their worldly ruler on their knees and with their eyes fixed on the ground. Obedient like slaves but also all the more merciless 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 throughout Asia. Meanwhile, 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 Siebenthal’s doubts. For he could not reconcile it with what he perceived as the nature of the various peoples of the earth.

In Asia, for example, adherents of the most diverse religions have coexisted to this day. They range 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 ascend 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 loving one’s enemies; in the other, through submission to God. People prayed in a community, but alone as well—and not solely for others but just as naturally for themselves.

Those who know only the present might take this for granted. But Siebenthal knew it was by no means the essence of every religion. The ancient faiths of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and Germanic tribes always revolved around 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 himself. If you asked for a good harvest, it was for the entire village, not just for your own strip of land.

But it didn’t end with that. No European would have thrown himself into the dust before his god, be it 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

afterward, yet 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 were always linked to that of the group.

Siebenthal had thought about this for a long time. Was the pagan Europeans' proud character—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 shapeless thought arose in his mind. He stopped abruptly, stroked his beard, and stared out to sea. Then he pulled from his trouser pocket the crumpled sheet of paper that he had been carrying with him for several days.

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

But now he groaned and slapped his forehead.

For suddenly, he knew the answer.

## 2

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 cat 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, her feet in flip-flops; after all, she was working from home, and Anna, our cleaning woman, came only on Tuesdays and Fridays.

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. Obviously engrossed in a conversation, they spared me only a sideways glance.

I took a bag of plain and one of cocoa milk out of the fridge. From the cupboard next to it, I pulled out the jar with the mixture of Nestlé 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 three o’clock sharp!” replied Dad, looking innocently out of his deep-blue eyes. He even raised his hand as if to swear, waving his wholemeal roll topped with both (!) jam and cheese. “I truly haven’t planned any appointments. After all, it’s my lazy week. Next one, all hell might break out.”

“You say that every time,” Mom answered skeptically.

I realized the discussion was about Dad’s architect friend who was coming this afternoon to plan the conversion of our dusty, old attic. When we had moved from Denmark to Hamburg eight years ago, Dad couldn’t afford to renovate the house properly; but now Mom was three months into her pregnancy, and it would get cramped for four Weskamps upstairs.

In any case, going forward, I was to reside in the attic, while my future 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 naked floors and bare walls with a folding ruler 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, with an air of importance, I retrieved the prepared folder with the construction plan from 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 drew a plan.”

Mom almost dropped her spoonful of yogurt and diced fruit in surprise, and Dad stopped chewing. 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 pick 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 when, say, Grandma and Grandpa visit from Aarhus. Then, this dormer . . . we’ll talk about that when the time is right, okay?” 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 that followed, I spooned up my breakfast in a huff, not looking at 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,” Dad answered. “If not . . .” He jokingly ran the back of his hand over his throat, stuck 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 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 was wreaking havoc on Dad's balance sheet and even threatened to land him in jail for some unlawfully "capitalized development costs." At least, if I lent credence to his occasional tirades at the dinner table.

After graduating from university, Dad initially wanted nothing to do with *Neptune Maritime Systems* or NEMAS, which Grandpa had founded in a garage and gradually built up to what now was a worldwide enterprise. Instead, my father started working for a small company in Aarhus, met Mom there, and spent—as he often confessed—the happiest period of his life; a time also when the awestruck world first beheld *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. At first, Dad ran NEMAS's department of research and development. And since then, as he puts it, he's 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 privately.

Today, however, at least my mother 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. In that event, do we need the conversion at all?"

I looked up from my bowl and stared at her in disbelief.

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

After 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 have been solved and we might even be able to sell it—which could 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 snapped, “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 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 that 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 paternal grandma—who I had nicknamed Church Grandma, due to her obsession with Christianity—meddle in 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 about a matter of years, not 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 school 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 underappreciated conversion plan on the table, to put it in my backpack—and later to throw it in a trash 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, making a point of not looking 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” that 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 his home district Gross-Flottbek along the Elbchaussee until he reached via several highways and interstates the Moorfleeter Deich on the outskirts of Hamburg. There, on an idyllic, unspoiled stretch of the Elbe River, stood 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.

Armin steered his BMW off the road and into the driveway of NE-MAS BV—the official name of *Neptune Maritime Systems* ever 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.

Armin 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.” It was an idea of the works council, which as in every larger German company represented the employees’ interests and had unveiled the bronze piece the previous week at a formal ceremony.

In the lobby, he was greeted by display boards and showcases illustrating milestones in the company’s history. Most prominent of all was a handsome glass cabinet exhibiting the *Abyss-1*, back then a pioneering towed array sonar for the German Navy, which had laid the foundations for the firm’s success. There was room left for more exhibits, and after his father’s fatal sailing accident, the works council proposed placing 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 that he was running a company and not a family museum. Nevertheless, it was symptomatic. The works council and staff had mourned Klaus’s death almost as deeply as his own family—which was probably due not only to human sympathies but also to the fact that NE-MAS paid above the standard pay scale and granted a generous company pension, with all kinds of other benefits on top of it. All well and good, but unfortunately, in later years, his father had been able to keep the cornucopia going only through 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 developing the drone on his own initiative and at his own expense—completely unusual in the industry, where research expenses were normally funded by a

government institution. *Ghostfish* had established a reputation as 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 wasn't *his* company. Together with his brother Jochen, he basically only managed what he had inherited from his father; a makeshift solution because the family didn't trust an outside manager, his eldest brother, Henoch, who was originally supposed to succeed his father, had fallen out with him and subsequently with NEMAS, and a company sale was impossible if the *Ghostfish* issue was not resolved.

Although the workers accepted Armin, it had never blossomed into a love affair. Furthermore, there was Mette—and with her, Denmark. After learning the ropes for some years at a shipyard in Bremen, a hub of the German maritime industry, 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. He and his wife maintained a circle of Danish friends to this day, meeting up to go sailing, barbecue on the beach, or take in a concert in Copenhagen. He now felt more at home there than in Hamburg. And even if his youngest—as he jocosely nicknamed his daughter—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, as he sprinted up the stairs to his third-floor office. "Morning, morning!"

In the anteroom, he was greeted by the pent-up heat of the previous day. The almost midsummer weather—unusual for the end of August—had given way to an oppressive humidity that would be relieved only by a thunderstorm predicted for the afternoon. Usually, Cordula Möller arrived before him and aired out the room and watered the numerous plants. Since Armin had chosen her as his personal assistant—after having retired her prim, sour-faced predecessor,

inherited from his father—Cordula had transformed the room into a veritable greenhouse. But today there was no sign of her, and her computer screen was dark, as he'd noticed when he walked through to his office.

Shrugging, he hung his jacket over the swivel chair and threw his keys into the top drawer of his desk. Then he opened the windows 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 detect shipwrecked people, either remotely or automatically, in all sea conditions. It was also able to rescue them, if for the time being only by the victims clinging to it and strapping themselves in. His long-term goal was to rescue even helpless victims or those who had already sunk.

Ironically, *Flipper* might have been able to save his father. Klaus Weskamp had been caught in a storm during one of his beloved, lonely, short excursions in the North Sea. Even his extensive nautical experience was no match for the fierce wind and waves, which capsized his sailing yacht, drowning him. In any case, *Flipper* would be Armin's first choice if NEMAS were to be sold eventually, and he'd set up his own small but proper marine tech company in Denmark.

Armin sat down at his desk. A glance at one of three framed photographs 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, semitransparent 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 finished and she

was still making herself scarce, he became suspicious. “Cordu,” he called out, “won’t you stick your head in today at all and greet your old boss?”

The young woman came from the city of Rostock, on Germany’s northern coast, where her parents, former shipyard employees, lived in a modest condo. After graduating from high school, Cordula 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 whispered privately—but because she was hardworking, reliable, and efficient. She could even repair a broken printer herself.

At first, she had lacked polish, but Armin had taken her under his wing and gently corrected that until they became a perfect team. Sometimes, while eating lunch at their desks, they discussed English literature, which she read in the original language, because she was more intelligent and interested than most gave her credit for. She just didn’t make a fuss about it.

When Cordula finally appeared in the doorway, her brown curls were tied back into a ponytail with a pink ribbon. Her white summer dress was printed with a pink floral pattern to match, and the red leather belt emphasized her womanly figure. 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 wasn’t for her puffy, reddened eyes. Cordula had obviously been crying.

“Good morning, Armin.”

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

She did so and sat down on one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

“Has . . . something happened?” he asked cautiously.

“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 noticed now 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 in the city these days, and went home only at weekends. Based on a photo of Robert that Cordula had shown him, Armin instinctively pegged him as an incurable ladies' man. And now, he suspected, what happened in such cases had happened. His brother Jochen, a former naval officer with a failed marriage, knew a thing or two about that. During his long absences, his wife had sought solace in the arms of another man, and this had caused his marriage to break.

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

She nodded.

"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 hesitatingly, "you should . . ."

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

"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. 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 he was alone again, the phone rang, which he only switched to Cordula when he wanted to be undisturbed. Jochen's name lit up the digital display and he picked up immediately.

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

As a long-serving soldier and most recently commander of a corvette, a mid-sized naval vessel, Jochen usually possessed 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."

After hanging up, Armin jumped out of his chair and wandered around the room. One reason why he had persuaded his brother to abandon his military career and help him clean up the mess at NEMAS was that Jochen had valuable contacts in military circles and moved in them like the proverbial fish in water. He was flesh of their flesh, while Armin had always remained a stranger to that dashing, yet at the same time meticulously laid out world, one with its own rituals and customs. Fortuitously, on a joint maneuver between the German and Australian navies, Jochen came to know the Aussie Ministry of Defense official who oversaw its drone procurement project. Of course, this wouldn't be the deciding factor—there were many other top brass involved—but still, Armin entertained certain hopes.

So, what could have happened to make his brother act like a headless chicken? They had submitted the final documents months ago. Since then, NEMAS' offer had been scrutinized along with that of its last remaining competitor, a British consortium. The defense minister's decision was due on Friday, and they weren't supposed to hear anything until then. So Jochen's call didn't forebode well at all.

At this point, his brother rushed into the room red-faced, something Armin had never experienced with him before.

"What's up?" Armin 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 what he considered to be his first revelation, Siebenthal immediately rushed back from the beach 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 folded-up drawing from his trouser pocket. He smoothed it out carefully and spread it on the table. Sitting down, he looked at his dream image with completely fresh eyes:



The separate elements he had already identified right after his dream: runes of the Elder Futhark—the earliest version of the ancient Germanic alphabet—and the three arcs of a triskele; except that the latter was upside down, because usually the single arc was at the top and the two parallel ones at the bottom. The rune at the top left represented the sign Othala, which stood for the letter *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 stand for 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 ancient lore book 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 famous collection of Nordic myths.

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, the heavenly home of the gods, 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 Buri. He was beautiful in appearance, big and powerful. He begot a son called Borr. He married a wife called Bestla, daughter of the giant Bolt-horn, 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 Siebenthal 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, or Europe; the one at the top right for Asia; and the one at the bottom for Africa, including the Middle East. 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 knew now 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 African, European, and Asian cultures differed so fundamentally. They reflected nothing other than the character of their respective gods: Vili's nature resembled that of a Middle East 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. Odin was concerned, he felt, with the pursuit of a common good, 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, and he had to first organize them. Three gods instead of one. This explained some things but raised new questions, too. For example: Why wasn't there just one God? And why three, of all possible numbers? 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 also be understood to mean that they divided the world into three kingdoms, each of which they ruled separately?

Siebenthal leaned back in his chair, sighed, and looked out the window of his study at the sea, which seemed to be brooding, like himself. What had appeared to him initially as a solution posed new problems as well. 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 Siebenthal 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. Or 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 on his part? Siebenthal did something, which he vowed to do always from now 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 gathering 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, the 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 one god, not a pantheon. Well, everything else would have surprised him. But what should he call Him? “Odin” was the North Germanic name variant of the god the South Germanic peoples called “Woden,” which was still preserved in the English word *Wednesday*. However, it turned out to be about not just the Germanic tribes but all Europeans. Zeus had been the main god of the Greeks, Jupiter that of the Romans, and 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 Siebenthal 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 down the name 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 Siebenthal had named the animal, because he didn’t know her owner or her 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. He picked her up affectionately and said, “You’ve brought me luck, little kitty. In return, you’ll get a piece of fish.”

Siebenthal 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 enunciation of the word. “*Eurodin*,” emphasized on the first syllable, sounded more like a European Union authority than a god. Then it occurred to him how often an acute accent in the Old Norse original of the Edda determined the stress of a word. So, he added the diacritic above the o, resulting in “*Euródin*.” This not only looked better and gave the name something unmistakable, but it also was now pronounced “*Eurodin*,” or, preferably “*Juroudin*”—after all, English, not German, was the *lingua franca* of modern-day Europe.

And what did He have to say about it? Someone inside him seemed to shrug. His God 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”; while *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, Siebenthal 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 considered the fact that Fortuna might have an owner who was missing her. There was no point in denying it, because the object of inquiry was already sneaking

toward 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 up, cuddled her in her arms, and stroked her fur. "Jasmin, there you are, my little vagabond!"

He had liked the name 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 spoiled, aren't we?" She looked a little reproachfully into Jasmin's dark green eyes and cuddled her some more. Then she looked at Siebenthal: "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 isolated his life was. He didn't even know the neighbors down the street. His marriage had been over for quite some time. And after leaving Deutsche Bank, he'd tried his hand as a wine merchant in nearby Wismar. But the business never really took off because he did no networking. He'd since 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 the right moment to invite her in for coffee, and for example, ask her about Jasmin—alias Fortuna. 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, maybe," she replied. "Well, then, have a nice day," she said with some disappointment in her voice.

Alone again, this time without even a cat, Siebenthal sighed and went back to his study. There he created a new Word document on his PC, titled "The History of the Gods and Men."

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

“Haven’t we built some wiggle room into our offer?” Jochen asked defensively.

“But not ten percent!” Armin’s first euphoria had quickly evaporated when Jochen told him about the discount the Australians demanded. It was just as well he hadn’t already asked Cordula to chill the champagne. Solving one problem . . .

“And then we’re supposed to decide by the end of the week,” he grumbled. “I guess that’s called blackmail.”

According to Jochen, if they didn’t agree, the entire project would be put out to tender again. And by the time a new decision was made, NEMAS would probably no longer exist.

But it was precisely this time constraint that gave Armin an idea. He interrupted his desperate pacing through the room and fixed his gaze on his brother, who was sitting on one of the chairs in the corner with his legs crossed and his back straight as a die.

“Listen, if they re-tender it, it will take two years to award, with all the regulations and the political back-and-forth. And we have inflation, so it’s not going to be cheaper for the Australian taxpayer. Come to think of it, I guess they’re partly bluffing.” He poked a finger in his brother’s direction. “Try this: accept the discount on the drones, but take the spare parts, maintenance, and training out of it. That takes half the discount off the table—but to the Australian public, it looks like they’ve got a bargain. After all, only the insiders have an eye on the system price, not the taxpayer or the press.”

“Great idea!” agreed Jochen. “I can try that.”

The Australians had probably taken this into account already. Armin suppressed a shake of his head. Jochen, having studied defense technology at the Bundeswehr University in Hamburg, was fluent in technical details and confident in dealing with military customers, but he sometimes seemed naive when it came to commercial matters.

“But that’ll do it, do you think?”

“Well,” said Armin, “then we’re just above the keel line. But after all, we want to make some money and sell the company at some point, don’t we?”

Jochen ran his fingers through his black crew-cut. “True indeed,” he said. “For my part, I surely don’t want to sit around here until retirement.”

Armin had always suspected that one of the reasons Jochen had chosen a military career was because he shied away from competing with him. Not only was Armin an inch taller and three years older, but also their father had made it clear early on that if anyone in the family could succeed him at all, it was Armin—that is, after the oldest of Klaus’s three sons, Henoch, had turned out to be a failure and consequently fled into the arms of religion.

Now he realized that Jochen, by giving up his military career to join the family firm, had perhaps made a greater sacrifice than even Armin had. Instead of being the godlike commander of a man-of-war, he was, at least in his eyes, just his older brother’s sidekick and busy winning and dining the military clientele—something that Armin despised doing.

Jochen broke the silence by asking, “Can we squeeze something out from the suppliers?”

“Not really,” Armin replied. “We’re too small to dictate prices, and with all the supply chain shortages . . . No, I’m afraid we’ll have to cut into the personnel costs.”

Jochen nodded, but his gaze told Armin that he would have to slay this dragon all by himself. If his brother managed to negotiate away half of the discount, he had delivered his pound of flesh.

“Well . . .” Armin said, thinking aloud. With Canberra, the Australian capital, nine hours ahead of Hamburg, everyone at the Ministry was already calling it a day. “By now they’re on their way home anyway. So, hurry to your PC, hammer out an email, and send me the draft,” he instructed his brother. “We’ll discuss it then. In the meantime, I’ll talk to Goldmarie and Wolter.”

Without his chief financial officer and his human resources manager he would accomplish nothing, he knew.

Jochen stood up, leaving a hollow in the worn, black, leather chair, which Armin had taken over from his father along with the rest of the office. If NEMAS had to save money, so did he.

As Jochen walked away, he glanced at the closed door to the ante-room and stopped. "By the way," he asked, "what's the matter with Cordula? She seemed upset when I came in."

Armin frowned. In this hell of a conundrum, Jochen was wasting thoughts on his brother's assistant? Then it dawned on him: Jochen had always looked at her admiringly, though Cordula had made a point of ignoring it.

"She broke up with her boyfriend," he said in an offhand tone. "He probably cheated on her one too many times."

Jochen's eyes widened, as if it were the real news of the day, and Armin suppressed a grin.

"Good luck," he wished him as a goodbye. Whatever for.

Alone again, Armin sat down at his desk, folded his hands, and thought. Then he got up, went to the door to the anteroom and opened it. He half expected to see Jochen behind it, sitting chummily at the edge of Cordula's desk and chatting her up in the light of the latest findings; but his brother had apparently hurried on into his office without delay. And, to his relief, Cordula no longer seemed so disconsolate.

"Cordu, I need you to make two appointments: one with Wolter and then another with Brehm," he said. "Wolter can be after midday, and Brehm two hours later. Tell them it's about *Ghostfish*, and they have to drop everything. Until then, you and Goldmarie must put together a presentation for me. She'll come to you about it later." His plan was to first stitch together a savings package with the head of the human resources department and then present it to Brehm, who, as the works council chairman, had to agree to it.

Cordula nodded, somewhat taken aback by the flurry of activity when she had been looking forward to a quiet day.

"I'll be at Goldmarie's," he said, and left the anteroom in the direction of the hallway. He could have phoned her, but his breakfast coffee was making itself felt in his bladder and his CFO's office was on the way.



He had poached Marie-Louise Sommer—who mostly went by her nickname Goldmarie—from an auditing firm after he had to dismiss his father’s CFO due to the “incidents” shortly after having taken the helm of the company. He never regretted it for a single day. As a former audit manager, Goldmarie was able to lead a team and was not only well versed in taxes, accounting, and balance sheets but also dealt smoothly with the banks. Together they had mucked out the Augean stable, often until late into the night. Her greatest wish was to be promoted one day to chairwoman—her predecessor had been chairman too—but Armin was skeptical about that. They didn’t need a trio at the top. But who knew, maybe one day . . .

As he approached the open door of her office, he expected to see her sitting erect as a soldier at her computer, in her conservative business suit and blouse, her brown hair tied back in a bun, and on her face the slightly pinched expression she usually wore at work. In the doorway, however, the “*Moin, Moin*” died on his lips and the fist with which he had wanted to knock on the frame froze in midair. He had never seen her so furious.

“It’s ten o’clock, and you’ve just got up?” she barked into her smartphone. “I’m sick of toiling away while you’re tossing and turning in bed instead of looking for a job. And on top of that, you’re cheating on me with my brother of all people, you, you—Oh, come on, I know!”

At this moment, she noticed him in the doorway, and her face, white with rage, turned dark red. “I’ll talk to you later,” she hissed, ending the call abruptly. Then she looked down, ashamed that he had overheard everything.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “But the door was open, and I was about to knock.”

He had already noticed that things had been going awry between Marie and her partner, Jutta, for some time. They lived together in a penthouse apartment in the city and were each raising an artificially conceived child: Jutta, her daughter Barbara; and Marie, her son Hallgrimm, who was her everything. Apparently, Jutta’s part in the relationship was to squander away the money that Marie worked so

hard to earn. Now she seemed to be cheating on her on top of that—and Goldmarie had finally had it.

As sympathetic as Armin was, he sighed inwardly. It was perhaps the most important day in the company's history—and two of his most vital employees were suffering from heartache.

He cleared his throat. "Listen, Marie, there's some important news about *Ghostfish*." He pulled the door shut—what she would have been wise to do herself before. "An email came from Australia this morning. The British have been kicked out of the race for corruption, and it's our turn now. However—but this stays between us for now—we have to lower the price, and substantially at that."

Goldmarie's blush began to fade, and she looked at him, halfway restored, inquiringly. "How much?"

"Ten percent."

"Oh."

"Jochen is trying to negotiate half of it away. But the two of us must deliver the rest, and as you know, that can be done only by cutting down on HR expenses. What I suggest is: we still have those savings ideas from the *NEMAS 2030 workshop* last spring. Update them and cobble together a presentation with Cordula. I'll go through it first with Wolter and then with Brehm. The aim must be to conclude an agreement with the works council by the end of the week. That's the deadline the Australians set us."

Goldmarie puffed out her cheeks. "Well, *that's* certainly ambitious!" Her domestic woes already seemed to have faded from her mind.

"I know, but it's about the company's fate."

"Then I should probably tell my staff not to make any private arrangements this week."

He nodded. "Might be a good idea."

With that, he left. He knew she would do the job.

After visiting the bathroom, he walked straight back to his office. In the anteroom, Cordula was already able to give him an update: "I've fixed something with Wolter at one o'clock and with Mr. Brehm at

three,” she said. “It wasn’t possible before. He has a doctor’s appointment; besides, you need time with Wolter, too.”

“True. It’s all fine with me,” he replied and was about to move on to his office. But something in Cordula’s gaze irritated him. What else could be on her mind?

“I hope it’s all right?” she asked. “I mean, you’ve got this meeting with an architect this afternoon.”

Only now did he realize it, and it hit him like a slap in the face: despite his solemn promise at breakfast, he would have to let Mette down once again.

## 6

Mette slammed down the phone back onto its base. So, Aarhus University was going to cancel her research project next year! Allegedly due to a lack of funds. In truth, because she was not on-site, and others filled the ears of the top brass of the Institute of Ecosciences with supposedly more important or prestigious projects. Out of sight, out of mind. She should have accepted the offered lectureship that she had waived in favor of having a second child. Then she could lunch with the right people there and pull the right strings. But for this, she’d have to drive two hundred miles to Aarhus and back once or twice a week, being away from home from morning to night.

She looked wistfully at the framed photo hanging above her desk next to her doctoral certificate. It showed her posing on the edge of a dinghy in front of a humpback whale, which was blowing its bladder behind her. It had been taken on an excursion during her biology studies—and on this trip she had learned that sonars, such as those used by warships, caused the animals to panic because they worked in the same frequency range as their body’s own echo sounders. They then remained at great depths for too long, or surfaced too quickly, and often died. She was therefore involved in a research project that

sought to modify sonars in such a way that the military purpose was still achieved, but the animals were less affected.

This was also how she had met Armin. Mette had visited his company in Aarhus as part of the project and fell in love with him at first sight.

When they moved to Germany after Klaus's death, Armin had set up a position for her at NEMAS. Since then, she had advised the designers and had the sonars tested for their effect on whales by a research vessel from Aarhus University. If they discontinued the project, her work would no longer make sense, unless she found a new sponsor, what she didn't really believe would happen.

Mette sighed. She was neither a pacifist nor did she imagine that her work would make a great difference in the grand scheme of things. She was just a small cog in the wheel of the international scientific community researching the same topic worldwide. But she loved the animals and her work with her heart and soul.

Which was more than she could say for her family-in-law. Apart from the nice, sociable Jochen, she had never warmed to them, nor to Hamburg, which seemed cold, anonymous, and distant compared to Denmark. That's why she hoped so fervently that things would work out with *Ghostfish* and the sale of NEMAS. Perhaps it had been a mistake not to let Anngrit in on the plan to move back to Denmark right from the start. Then again, why stir up the hornet's nest if, despite her sudden bout of optimism at breakfast, nothing came of it after all?

Miserably, she stood up and went into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of milk, shook one of the iron tablets she was taking as a precaution out of the bottle, swallowed it, and washed it down. Mette then turned her attention to the parcel she wanted to send to her parents. Since her father had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, she felt more than ever to be a lousy daughter. So, she had decided to send them at least a few things already sitting on the kitchen table: pipe tobacco, chocolates, a bottle of twelve-year-old rum, Vicks NyQuil—a flu medicine not available in Denmark—and, above all, a framed photo of Anngrit. It showed her together with her friends at the Scout camp, proudly hoisting the flag captured during a game from the “enemies” in the other group.

Mette was sealing the parcel with packing tape when the doorbell rang. She peeked through the kitchen window and rolled her eyes. Her mother-in-law was standing in front of the door with a box in her hands. The cab, which would take her to the airport, idled on the street. She knew that Beata was leaving today for her annual spa treatment in Abano Terme, Italy. And now she wanted to say goodbye to her before she left? Mette considered simply not answering the bell. But Beata had probably already spotted her through the curtains. So, she went to the door and opened it.

Beata looked disapprovingly at her casual house clothes. She herself was wearing a costume as gray as her permed hair, which was covered by a purple hat. The wafts of her perfume, reminiscent of incense, drifted toward Mette.

“Good to reach you,” said Beata. “There’s some cake left over from yesterday. I wanted to drop it off on the way to the airport.” She held out the cardboard box.

“Oh, thank you very much,” said Mette, taking it from her. Once a month on Sundays, Beata held a coffee party with her friends from the church parish, which Armin mocked as her Bible study group. Usually, however, she gave the leftover homemade cake to Mrs. Nowak, her housekeeper.

“Well, you have to eat for two now, don’t you?” Beata remarked. “How’s it going this time?”

Mette blushed. Armin and she had been trying for years to have a second child, but she had suffered two miscarriages. After an odyssey through doctors’ surgeries, she had discovered that the cause was a complicated malfunction of her immune system. As a result, she underwent an infusion of healthy white blood cells from her husband. Now her risk of miscarriage should only match that of any other woman her age.

“All’s well,” she said. “I think it’ll work this time. Do you want to come in?”

“No, the driver knows me, but still . . .” Then she seemed to think of something. “Oh, by the way . . .” Beata opened her crocodile leather handbag, pulled out a book, and held it up. “I wanted to bring you this. It’s an anthology of essays to which Henoch had the honor of

contributing. It contains a personal dedication,” she finished meaningfully.

Mette glanced at the book jacket. *The Role of Pneuma in Modern Theology*. She had to pull herself together not to burst out laughing. *Pneuma* was the technical term for the Holy Spirit; she knew this thanks to the lectures that her brother-in-law, who considered himself an eminent theologian, had delivered at family gatherings. Henoah was Beata’s pride and joy, and she probably truly thought that her oldest son’s drivel would interest her or Armin. If he found the book on his desk tonight, Armin would laugh and read some silly sentences from it to her while devouring his mother’s cake. Mette suspected the latter was just a pretext, and the book was the real reason for her surprise visit.

“Thank you so much. I’m sure Armin will be delighted,” she said dutifully. “Just put it on the box.”

Mette expected her mother-in-law to hurry back to her waiting cab, but Beata seemed to have something else preying on her mind. “That reminds me,” she said pointedly. “I haven’t seen Anngrit in church for a long time.”

Mette made an apologetic face. “Anngrit has a lot on her hands, at school and outside. Besides, she’s old enough to decide for herself. You’ll have to ask *her*, not me.”

Beata’s brow knitted—her way of showing what she thought of her parenting methods. “Well, for me to do that, she would have to visit me in the first place. You know I have a heart condition, and I don’t want to meet the Lord without knowing my grandchildren are on the right path.”

The honking of the cab’s horn spared Mette from having to answer and listen to the remaining verses of the usual litany, including the negligence of her own domestic help Anna. That much was true: even Mette hadn’t failed to notice the dirty streaks on the windows that Anna had allegedly cleaned. She made a mental note to speak to her about it.

“Anyway, I have to go; otherwise, I’ll miss my plane.” Beata said goodbye with a final admonishing look.

Mette closed the door with relief and waved away the clouds of incense perfume with her free hand.

As she passed the door to her study, she heard the chorus of Daniel Powter's "*Bad Day*"—her smartphone ringtone. She hurried into the room and reached for it, but Armin had already hung up. She called him back immediately, but he didn't answer—probably rushing off already to his next meeting.

In the kitchen, she peeked inside the cake box and found the contents tempting. Whatever else she thought of her mother-in-law, the woman could cook. Mette placed the box in the fridge, and just as she closed the door, her smartphone sprang to life again. This time she reached it in time—and it was Dr. Fellner, her gynecologist, calling with the results of the amniocentesis.

"Everything is fine," he reassured her, then added almost as an afterthought, "It's a boy, by the way."

This meant Armin would have a son and heir—even though he always made a point of saying he would love another daughter just as much.

Mette hung up and felt as euphoric as she had been when she learned about the pregnancy four months ago. Today was shaping up to be a very special day, with more good things to happen. To channel her overflowing energy, she began putting away the laundry that Anna had ironed last week. She picked up one of Armin's dress shirts and sighed. The young Polish woman pressed clothes about as well as she cleaned windows. But Anna was warmhearted and cheerful, financing her studies in textile design in Hamburg working part-time as a housekeeper, and she was always available when needed.

While placing a few blouses in the bedroom closet, Mette noticed her running gear lying on a shelf at the bottom. Since being a teenager, she ran regularly and even took part in a marathon once. Although she'd resolved to exercise as often as possible during her pregnancy, she'd let two weeks go by without working out even once. Today, however, she would celebrate all the good news with a run through the Volkspark. It should be possible in the early afternoon, between the end of her home office and the predicted thunderstorm and

during Rainer's visit. After all, Armin had solemnly promised to take care of his friend.

Having finished the laundry, Mette tried reaching her husband again.

This time he picked up.

"Imagine, it's going to be a big one!" she greeted him.

Armin was puzzled at first, obviously needing a moment to understand; they had agreed to name the child Magnus if it was a boy and Sofia in case of a girl.

"That's fantastic!" he finally said. "And everything else is all right?"

"Yes, Fellner says everything looks fine. Armin, I think we will be lucky this time!"

"Honey, I believe this is our day," he said, now sounding exuberant himself. "I wanted to call you earlier to tell you the next piece of good news. Hold on tight: we've got the *Ghostfish* contract! The British cheated and are out of the running. However, we must cut down the costs. But I'll manage that. One thing, though." He paused. "I've got meetings now all afternoon, and you have to take care of Rainer yourself. Or should I cancel on him?"

Mette considered it for a moment but decided against it. With Magnus on the way, she wanted to have the attic converted as quickly as possible. Well, then, she would go running after the architect had left.

"No, I'll do it," she said, adding triumphantly: "So, didn't I predict it to you this morning?"

"Yes, darling, you are not only the most beautiful and smartest woman in the world but a seeress too."

Mette smiled. "And you are an awful liar. I love you."

"I love you, too."

After they hung up, Mette stroked her belly—that up to now hardly showed her pregnancy—to let Magnus share in her joy.

Suddenly, however, it was as if a shadow fell over her soul. Like a cloud out of nowhere that plunged a bright summer day into darkness. Could something still go wrong? With the pregnancy? Or with NEMAS? Was it . . . all too *easy*?



*Nonsense*, she said to herself. *Don't be an old hag.*  
She sat down at her desk and continued working.

## 7

I scraped the breadcrumb coating off the fish stick I had saved for Odysseus with my knife, wrapped the white-marbled small block of meat in a napkin, and slipped it into the jacket hanging over my chair. That didn't raise an eyebrow with Wenna, Sephine, or Marina. Whenever the school cafeteria served fish for lunch, I always kept some for our tomcat.

Then I said, "Ready to march and mount up?" Which meant the members of the String Quartet should get up, go to the bicycle stands in the schoolyard, and cycle home to my house. Wenna, Sephine, and I stood up; only Marina sat there with her brown fuzzy head and an open mouth, her otherwise dreamy eyes staring alternately at me and my jacket on the chair, as if we were both from outer space. Sometimes I wondered. And every now and then, one of us would put a hand on her forehead as if to check her temperature.

Suddenly, Marina clapped her hand over her mouth and exclaimed, "I left my jacket in the classroom!"

"Cinderella-dear, we already thought your great-grandfather's ghost had appeared to you," said Sephine in her typical mildly mocking tone. She shook her long, black hair. "Hurry and get it, or the nasty thunderstorm will turn you into a mermaid later."

Marina jumped up and rushed toward the exit.

We watched her, rolling our eyes. "Our absent-minded genius," remarked Wenna, getting to the heart of the matter.

My friendship with Sephine went back a long way, and we shared a desk in class. As for Morwenna and Marina, who sat behind us, I'd gotten to know them only last summer at the Scout camp. And it hadn't been me who came up with the plan for hijacking the blue

team's flag in the game conquer-the-flag, but rather the otherworldly Marina. As was so often the case, she'd let her melancholic gaze wander into the distance and then returned to earth with a stunning idea. So, back then, I only led the troops into battle, Sephine and Wenna being the shield-maidens who made the young Masters of the Universe look like a bunch of girls. Wenna was the smallest of us, but with her wild, red, curly head and determined look in a way also the most intimidating, I have appreciated her fighting prowess and stamina ever since. Sephine, on the other hand, not only surpassed us all in size and beauty, but also brought French flair and sophistication into our midst and exposed the weakness of every plan with corrosive acidity.

Contrary to what you might think, though, none of us knew how to play a bow string instrument that would be used in a classic string quartet. Sephine played the piano excellently; Marina, the guitar; and me, well, a little trombone. As far as I knew, Wenna's only instrument was her dog whistle, apart from the fact she was pretty good at blowing a homemade kazoo of comb and tissue paper. No, making use of the German word *Streich*'s double meaning of "string" and "prank," we named ourselves "string (or prank) quartet," since we would secretly swap the notes of the Johann Sebastian Bach chorale "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" for "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift in music class. Our music teacher couldn't resist railing against "this modern stuff."

While Marina sprinted off, we strolled leisurely down the stairs and through the foyer, reading the announcements on the notice boards; because as befitted a private and pretty upmarket international school like ours, the Global School Hamburg posted at the start of every school year the offers for all kinds of extracurricular activities, from "Yoga für Jugendliche" (Yoga for Youths), to "Fliegenfischen an der Elbe" (Fly-fishing at the Elbe). With classes being held in German as well as in English, the announcements were written in both languages.

Outside, we continued to the bike racks at the side of the schoolyard, expecting to find Marina there. Given her Olympic pace and the short detour to the classroom, she must have caught up with us long ago.

But there was no sign of her.

Finally, I spotted her in the corner between the gym and the school building. She was surrounded by three boys and frantically waving her arms to ward something off. I knew those three and suspected immediately that she needed help.

Now Marina had seen us too. "Scha!" she called out desperately.

I ran over while Sephine and Wenna, still perplexed, held on to their bikes.

The trio that attacked Marina were in the same grade, but in another class. Mustafa was something like the boss. He was short, pudgy, and chubby-cheeked, and usually wore a smug grin. His father managed the Hamburg branch of an investment fund belonging to the Saudi royal family, and Mustafa spread the word that he had royal blood running through his veins. He always wore expensive clothes, even owned a gold watch, and enjoyed throwing lavish parties in the cellar of his father's villa, to which he invited half the school.

Yuri, a stocky Russian with blond, stubby hair, piercing blue eyes, and a mean face, was a well-known school bully. His father worked at the Russian consulate general in Hamburg, and rumor had it that he was actually a spy. Igor, his inseparable buddy, had half-Kazakh and half-Russian roots. Pale, tall, and lanky, with Mongolian features, he did what the other two ordered him to do. His father worked for the Hamburg branch of the Russian oil company Rosneft.

Nobody really knew how the three of them had come together. Yuri and Igor had both had to repeat a grade. And as Wenna knew from her mother, who happened to be an English teacher at the school, that would have been Mustafa's fate as well had his father not pressured the administration to let his son move up. An upmarket international school didn't just make demands on the parents' wallets, after all, but as well on the brains of the students. Perhaps this welded the trio together; or maybe Yuri and Igor were impressed by the way Mustafa threw money around. He, in turn, seemed to regard them as his lackeys, or bodyguards, who guarded him and—not to forget!—his gold watch.

But why they were having a go at Marina was a mystery to me.

As I approached, I saw that Yuri and Igor were trying to stuff rubbish from a waste bin into Marina's jacket collar, while Mustafa was cheering them on, hands in his pockets.

"What are you doing?" I shouted. "Stop it right now!"

I enjoyed a certain reputation at school, and the two boys immediately let go of my friend. Disgusted and on the verge of tears, she shook off the garbage.

"She's a *Jagida*," Yuri hissed.

Since Russian was not one of my preferred lingos, I had no idea what he meant, nor did I care. "Marina, come here!" I said. "We're going!"

In the meantime, Sephine and Wenna were arriving with grim faces, and it dawned on the two Russians there was nothing for them to gain here anymore. They stared at us hatefully but made no move to attack us.

We were about to leave. But Mustafa, obviously incensed that his palace guard had capitulated so meekly to a bunch of girls, scolded, "You're really intimidated by her?"

He then turned to me, his chubby face contorted into a sneer. "'Scha,' they call you, eh?" he said, spitting out the words. "*Scharfe Anngrit*, is that it? Well, well!" He began to wiggle his hips obscenely. "Maybe you can dance in my basement sometime?" he suggested.

That had been a mistake. I was on him in one movement, grabbed his right wrist and twisted his thumb with a grip an older boy had shown me in judo training. Mustafa dropped to his knees, whimpering in pain.

"Wash your mouth out before you talk to me next time," I said fiercely. "Or even better: keep out of my way." I stressed my point by increasing the pressure on his thumb. Then I let go of it abruptly.

Perhaps someone should have told him that "Scharfe Anngrit"—"scharf" meaning both "sharp" and "sexy" in German—didn't refer to my sexual availability. Rather, Uncle Jochen had let me use his 9-millimeter Glock at his gun club. He was so impressed with my shooting skills that he predicted I would become a real *Scharfschütze*, or sniper, one day. Unwisely, I had bragged about it at school, and since then, the nickname stuck.

Mustafa gasped in pain. “You . . . you’ll pay for this, by Allah!” he groaned.

Basically, he was just a stupid show-off and a weakling. Maybe I shouldn’t have let myself be provoked—for I had a foreboding that he would get his revenge one day. “Go to hell!” I said and turned away.

Accompanied by the hostile looks of Yuri and Igor, we took Marina into our midst. Comforting her and removing the traces of garbage from her clothes, we walked back to our bikes—until Dr. Löbel, our religion teacher, blocked my path.

“Well, is that how you react to a verbal aggression? With a physical attack? Are you sure you didn’t hurt your classmate?” He eyed me sharply, his moon face even more disapproving than usual. As always, he was wearing a mouse-gray suit, and even in this late-summer heat, a gray sweater. He must have been watching us. The worst thing was that he knew Grandma from church. If he went and complained to her about me, Mom would be facing the music.

“Verbal aggression?” Sephine fumed. “The three of them tried to stuff garbage down her collar!”

Löbel just shook his head gruffly, continuing to fix me with his stare: “So, was what you did the right thing?”

“His thumb isn’t hurt,” I replied. “A splash of cold water, and it’ll be as good as new. And I won’t let anyone stop me from defending my friends. Why didn’t *you* help Marina?”

“I didn’t notice any of that,” he claimed. “But your aggression is known throughout the school. This time I won’t report it to the school administration. But watch out! Don’t let me catch you playing the avenger again!”

I could feel the color rushing to my face. Humiliated, I walked on with the others.

“Löbel is an asshole,” Sephine huffed, the use of vulgarity very unlike her.

“Right you are!” agreed Wenna. “Don’t worry about it. If he complains, I’ll say I can testify to how he just stood by when those three attacked her.”

“Why were they after you in the first place?” I asked Marina, still grumbling under my breath at the injustice of it all.

“Because I saw Yuri and Igor drawing a Z on the blackboard. And I’ve reported it. I’m sure they’ll be punished for it,” she said gleefully, despite everything.

It was a transgression in Germany to use the Z that symbolized for the Russians their attack on Ukraine, and of course, the two would be disciplined for it.

“And what did Yuri call you?”

“*Jagida*—that means ‘snitch,’” she said, somewhat mortified. “The Russians are murderers who attacked my homeland. And those who defend murderers are ones themselves,” she added all the more vehemently.

Marina and her parents had fled the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, located just twenty miles south of the Ukraine-Russia border, at the beginning of the Russian attack in February 2022. Nevertheless, I found her logic dubious. “They’re just stupid boys. Remember: you don’t start a war you can’t win. That goes for the Russians, but for you too.”

“But *you’re* waging war for me!” she said, jumping up at me like a dog with an admiring look.

“Oh, please!”

By now, we were standing in front of our bikes. “Can we stop by my house and pick up Newton?” Wenna asked in the emerging embarrassment. “Mom won’t be home until later, and he doesn’t like being alone.”

So, I would also accommodate Wenna’s German shepherd in my room while we all did homework together, chatted, played a bit, and tried to forget the unpleasant incident as quickly as possible.

When Mette ended the phone call with her colleague at NEMAS, she heard girls' voices from outside. *Ah*, she remembered, Anngrit had announced yesterday that she would be bringing her friends home. Mette looked at her watch: it was half past two, just enough time for her to welcome the girls, get ready for Rainer's visit to give an estimate on the attic renovation, and set the table for dinner.

Today they would have a *smørrebrød*, an assortment of open-faced rye bread sandwiches, with salad and the fresh strawberries she had bought from the farmer on Sunday. Normally they would celebrate the good news about Magnus and NEMAS later with a bottle of wine or champagne. But because of her pregnancy, it was out of the question, and Armin wouldn't drink without her.

Mette got up and walked out of the study and through the hallway to the front door, where Anngrit was already inserting the key in the lock. Immediately afterward, four girls and a dog crowded the narrow foyer.

"Can we take Newton with us to my room?" begged Anngrit. "He so hates to be alone."

Mette didn't really like dogs in the house, if only because of Odysseus. But the tomcat was having a nap on the sunny terrace, and besides, Morwenna's German shepherd was well behaved. "Of course." She stroked the animal, which didn't jump up at her but just eyed her curiously.

"And, Mom, can Seph, Wenna, and Marina stay for dinner? Otherwise, we'll hardly see each other all week."

Mette knew that the four friends, at least apart from Marina, were very busy. Horse riding, tennis, dog school, judo, Scouts, piano lessons—their schedules were almost as packed as that of any adult. Apart from this, the quartet was inseparable, and Mette was pleased that her daughter had found such nice, close friends, each of them special in her own way:

The French girl, Josephine Buchet, who came from Toulouse and whose father was a senior manager at Airbus in the Finkenwerder

district of Hamburg, was tall, had long, black hair and an aristocratic face. You could see even now that she was going to be a beauty one day. Sephine was highly intelligent and an excellent pianist—like her mother, who had given recitals in her youth.

Then there was Morwenna Peters, an English girl whose mother taught English and geography at Global School Hamburg. A wild-looking lass with bright-red hair, Wenna was, in fact, rather quiet and spent much of her time in nature and with her dog. Her father, English too, had been killed in a car accident during a family vacation in Spain five years ago. Since then, Mrs. Peters struggled with her small salary and the high cost of living in Hamburg. Fortunately for her and Wenna, GSH waived the otherwise hefty school fees for sufficiently talented children of its teachers.

Finally, the Ukrainian Marina Yefremenko, who often exuded a sadness that was probably not only related to the war in her home country but also was innate. Mette was especially pleased that the others had accepted her into their midst. Her parents were mathematicians who now worked for an insurance company in Hamburg. They probably wouldn't have been able to afford the school fees, either, but Marina, for all her occasional outlandishness, was also highly intelligent and a hardworking student. So, she had been granted a scholarship.

As a matter of fact, she and Armin should not have been able to enroll Anngrit at GSH. The school was intended strictly for children of diplomats and expatriates who were staying in Germany only temporarily—which is why part of the lessons were taught in English. Being a combined Junior and Senior High School, students could graduate either with a High School Diploma or an International Baccalaureate. However, Mette had argued with her Danish citizenship, other German parents found other reasons or simply speculated the school authorities were looking the other way. Just as long as they could save their children from the ever-worsening German public school system.

“Of course you can all stay for dinner,” Mette replied, although it upset her plans a little. But she would simply add a soup made from instant broth, leeks, and frozen *köttbullar*—meatballs. If Rainer stayed



until five o'clock, and she went running straight afterward and was back and showered by six, she would still have an hour to prepare dinner.

The four girls and the dog were about to storm upstairs, but Mette held Anngrit back. "Can you help me in the kitchen for a moment?" she asked her in Danish. She had raised her daughter bilingually and always spoke Danish to her when they were alone together.

"Grandma Beata has brought over some cake," she said in the kitchen. "Why don't you take a few pieces up to your friends?"

Anngrit had inherited Mette's slim but womanly figure as well as her thick, light-blond hair, which she usually wore in a plait, as she was doing now. Armin had contributed the light-blue eyes and the energetic face, which now darkened at the mention of Beata.

"Was there something special at school?" Mette asked with a mother's hunch.

"No, nothing." Anngrit unwrapped what looked like a piece of fish from a napkin and placed it in Odysseus's food bowl in the corner.

Mette could tell this was not true, but she didn't feel in the mood to pursue it. "Listen," she said as she took the box of cake slices out of the fridge and placed plates and forks on a tray. "There's some really good news. Go figure: NEMAS won the *Ghostfish* contract! They've already decided it today. Dad just has some negotiations to do, so he can't come home early."

"I see . . ." said Anngrit in a pointed tone, clearly meaning: What else did she expect?

"Besides, my doctor called. You're going to have a brother, sweetheart. His name will be Magnus."

"That's great!" said Anngrit, who really looked forward to having a sibling. "And what about the conversion? I mean . . ."

Her face darkened again, and Mette guiltily thought back to their argument at breakfast. Anngrit just couldn't understand that moving to Denmark was the best thing for them all in the long term. Even though she liked her grandparents' homeland and had a Dannebrog—the Danish flag, featuring a white cross on a bright-red

background—hanging prominently in her bedroom. But it would work itself out over time, Mette was sure.

“We’ll do the conversion anyway,” she reassured her. “Like Dad said: it’s all going to take time. And by then, your friends will be older and can visit you in Denmark. You can always invite them. I promise.” Mette reached for the sheet of paper lying on the kitchen worktop. “Dad even scanned your plan and sent it to me by email. Do you want to be there when Rainer arrives?”

Her daughter, seeing, of course, through her attempt at appeasement, raised an eyebrow. “I have to take care of my guests, don’t I?” she said. “And as for the rest, we’ll talk about it another time.” She grabbed the tray and marched out of the kitchen.

Mette took a deep breath. Everything would be fine.

Up in the room, we tested one another’s vocabulary. Or rather: Seph mimed the stern *madame la professeur* and tested us—and if we didn’t give the right answer, she smacked us on the wrist with a ruler. Not really hard, of course, but just enough so that it stung a bit. Pain is the best teacher, someone had said. Or was it me?

Presently, I heard Mom coming up the stairs with Rainer and them talking. “The two of them are currently planning my future rooms in the attic,” I informed the others grandiosely. “If you want, I can show you my plans later,” I offered generously and half-heartedly at the same time. Somehow, I no longer believed I would ever move in there.

Once we were finished learning the vocabulary, we did our math homework, with Marina, who must have inherited the math gene from her parents, rolling her eyes at our obtuseness. That accomplished, we fortified ourselves with cake, which won unanimous praise. Grandma really should have been a cook instead of a zealous Christian.

While eating, we discussed the invitation list for my thirteenth birthday in two weeks, which, given the significance of the event, took quite a long time. Names were suggested and discarded after heated debate, and meanwhile, it was getting increasingly gloomy outside. The wind blew through the cracks in the poorly insulated window, and Seph let out an “*Ooh, la, la!*” at the sight of the pitch-

black wall of clouds. So, I refrained from showing the others the materials for my pond in the garden and soliciting their opinions. It was supposed to be my yearlong school project for biology class. But if the storm caught us outside . . .

Meanwhile, I heard Mom's and Rainer's voices outside my room again. He had obviously measured and recorded everything.

Instead of going outside, we decided to play a game in my room. Wenna suggested Categories and proudly presented an app on her smartphone, which randomly selected the first letter. In addition to the three standard categories—city, country, and river—each of us had to choose her own. Unsurprisingly, I chose “weapons,” Sephine “composers,” and Wenna “dog breeds.” The trouble started when Marina chose “mathematicians.”

“That’s too special,” protested Sephine. “None of us except you know more than three by name.”

“And how is your ignorance my fault?” Marina parried.

“Cinderella-dear, we want to play fair, don’t we? Or what would you say if I chose the first names of my relatives as a category? Find something else!”

“Pudding flavors, then,” said Marina, offended.

“That’s silly.”

Marina rolled her eyes. “Colors? Would this be acceptable to Your Highness?”

“Colors are fine.”

Their bickering made me realize how ineptly I had chosen my own category. Even if someone wasn’t interested in weapons, they knew the names of many of them, which wasn’t necessarily the case for composers or dog breeds. “Can I still change my category to ‘military ranks’?” I asked.

“No!” came the chorus.

So, I went looking for scrap paper and came across a pile of brochures for Danish vacation homes on my desk. Mom had been pestering Dad for quite some time to buy one, as a bridgehead in her old home country, so to speak. Since all the talk of moving there seemed to have made that unnecessary, I handed each girl a bunch. They had pens, and so we were ready to go.

Wenna's blasted app chose a Z, of all things, and I couldn't even think of a weapon that began with Z. Perhaps *Zielfernrohr* (scope) or *Zange* (pliers)? Sephine would surely protest those. *Zwille* (slingshot), I remembered, luckily.

While we racked our brains, accompanied by the eerie howling of the approaching storm, the door opened, and Mom stepped into the room. She was in running gear, her smartphone in a belt pouch. In another was her bunch of keys and a can of pepper spray. The whistle dangling around her neck completed her emergency equipment. Better safe than sorry.

"I'm going for a run in the Volkspark," she announced. "I'll be back by dinner time."

We stared at her in amazement. "But there's a storm, Mrs. Weskamp," said Sephine, stunned like the rest of us.

"Well, I'm not made of cardboard, am I?"

It sounded downright frivolous. What was wrong with Mom today? She had been as excited, almost as feverish, as a lovestruck teen since breakfast. It had to have something to do with this *Ghostfish* and her dreams of moving to Denmark. Or with Magnus. Or with everything. After she had left, I shrugged, as if I had to apologize for her.

"Your mother has real Viking blood running in her veins," Wenna said with wide eyes.

Shortly afterward, I looked out the French window of my room and saw Mom jogging along the sidewalk toward the park. She always went running there, and she was basically right: the rain didn't have to bother her.

At this moment, Newton, who had been dozing peacefully at Wenna's feet, stood up. He tripped to the window and looked outside, where Mom was running.

And he let out a stifled yelp that made me shiver.

After two hours, Armin had his works council chairman ready: flexible working time accounts instead of paid overtime, cuts to the pension scheme, and offsetting the nontariff bonus against future pay raises or converting it into a performance bonus. Plus, small concessions such as contributions to cafeteria meals and the company's on-site day care center. Armin had made it clear to Brehm that NEMAS was not a land of milk and honey but had a future in the increasingly concentrated defense industry only as part of an international group and at competitive personnel costs. In return, no one was immediately deprived of anything, and layoffs would affect only the administration—which had become bloated over the years—by not filling vacant positions or offering severance packages.

Brehm's personal future may have played a role in his decision to give in, too. If *Ghostfish* dragged NEMAS into the deep, not only would the gold-plated crockery go overboard, but Brehm, who had already celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary with the company, first as a technical draughtsman and then as a design engineer, would not be able to find a new job in his mid-fifties, even with the current shortage of engineers. Or maybe he—being a chain-smoker who left the smell of a fireplace everywhere he went—was just longing for a cigarette. At least that's what the trembling of his nicotine-stained fingers suggested to Armin.

"So, we're in agreement?" asked Armin, closing the binder with the presentation that Goldmarie and Cordula had put together for him in no time at all.

To his surprise, the answer was not a curt "yes." Instead, Brehm stroked his icy-gray moustache and furrowed his brow even more than the years had already done for him. There was a calculating—and alarming—glint in his eye. Was it going to start all over again? What else could Brehm want? A personal "rescue package"? Armin would be surprised. Because as much as he didn't like him, he didn't think the man was corrupt.

“Yes, on one condition,” Brehm said finally. “If you convert NEMAS back into a GmbH.” A company with limited liability under German law.

Armin was too stunned to answer immediately. He knew exactly what Brehm meant, even if he had never expected him to take this home as a trophy—or rather a consolation prize—for his workers. Klaus Weskamp had converted NEMAS from a GmbH into a BV under Dutch law shortly before reaching the size criteria that would have otherwise triggered compulsory application of the German workforce codetermination regulations. Under those terms the works council would have seats on the company’s supervisory board, and a say in all important management decisions. To evade that by changing the legal form was allowed within the European Union, it had never set off any official protests from the works council, and no employee had ever approached Armin about it. But, well, if these were the hidden desires of Brehm’s people . . .

“You mean the codetermination?” he asked unnecessarily. He raised his hands as if surrendering. “Fine by me! I do need the family’s consent, but I’m sure that won’t be a problem.” Shrewdly, he added: “Incidentally, I have no problem involving the workforce in entrepreneurial decisions—as long as they think as entrepreneurs, too.”

In any case, neither Henoch nor his mother cared how Jochen and he pulled the chestnuts out of the fire. The main thing was that the company made a profit again and they managed to liquefy the family silver so that his brother and Beata could donate it to their beloved church. His sister, Katharina, on the other hand, had already had her inheritance paid out in her youth to finance a yoga retreat on the island of Corfu. She only wrote begging letters from time to time when her wellness oasis threatened to dry up financially.

As for Armin, honestly, may the devil care. Let some investor lose his sleep about it. It was one of the many reasons why he preferred to set up a new company in Denmark, where there were no such regulations. Sometimes he wondered whether Germany still had a future at all.

“So, it’s a deal,” said Brehm, and held out his hand. “We’ll conclude the agreement subject to the introduction of the workforce

codetermination.”

“That’s right,” said Armin, and shook his hand.

Immediately after Brehm had left and presumably headed straight for the smoking room at the end of the corridor, Armin called Friedrich Kussmaul. His best friend and legal advisor had to get him off the hook once again.

He reached him on his smartphone. Apparently, the attorney was just leaving the district court. Friedrich promised to stop by on his way to his legal office. “If I get there alive, that is,” he added. “See you soon!” With that, he hung up.

Puzzled, Armin wondered what his friend could have meant by his dramatic remark. Then a rumble of thunder brought him enlightenment. Amid all his feverish efforts regarding *Ghostfish*, he had completely forgotten about the predicted storm. A glance outside at the black and yellow wall of clouds approaching from the north at break-neck speed told him the time had come. According to the morning news, even the Fischmarkt—a famous Hamburg marketplace for fish next to the Elbe—could be under water.

Armin was a sailor like his father, and generally a storm didn’t worry him too much. Still, what was going on out there made him shiver slightly.

With a queasy feeling, he went to the tilted window and closed it.

## 10

Siebenthal didn’t even stop to correct typos as he feverishly recorded in the Word document what streamed from his soul into his consciousness as if through a wide-open floodgate. “The History of the Gods and Men.” It had begun thirteen billion years ago with the creation of the universe. As far as they themselves could tell, the three gods named in the Edda had also come into being then: Odin—

whom Siebenthal now called Euródin—and Vili and Vé, whose names were of no importance to him. They are beings of pure spirit; they are knowing, but not omniscient, nor omnipotent. They were created in the big bang from matter and energy, but they are neither the one nor the other, but something . . . that we humans cannot comprehend—at least not as of yet. They are not creators, but created ones, from the essence of the universe itself. Their spirit is immeasurable for humans, but not infinite. They cannot see into the future because it is not predetermined. They observe the universe but cannot change it because they are pure spirit. Because they are not matter, they do not age or die. They need neither space nor energy, so there is no entropy for them.

In the beginning, they were alone with themselves. But then, at some point, another spirit emerged alongside their own, somewhere in the universe. More precisely, in living beings on some of the planets they had observed for a long time. Their spirit, like that of the gods, had emerged from matter and energy; however, it is not free but bound to time and space.

Here Siebenthal paused, because he first had to understand something important: the spirit that he himself obviously possessed—otherwise Euródin would not be able to speak to him—was it identical to what scientists called consciousness? No, he heard within himself. Consciousness is a necessary precursor, but it is not enough. Higher animals on earth also possess it in a weak sense; however, the step that only *Homo sapiens* has accomplished is missing: the spirit as an emergent but new property of consciousness, which is still entirely attached to matter. What we call the soul. Only this soul, which can transcend matter, makes us companions of the gods. From matter (the body) to consciousness; from this to spirit (the soul)—only the crossing of both bridges leads from life to animated life and thus to the gods.

Unlike the spirit of the gods, that of man is still bound to matter like the pattern to the fabric of the carpet that realizes it. But it is precisely through this connection, as through invisible threads, that it can change matter. *Man*—as presumably other intelligent species somewhere—*can change the universe. The gods cannot.* That is his gift



and at the same time his curse. For whatever is connected to matter must perish with it. So, at the end of life, there is inevitably that entropy, which we call death. Everything we have ever done, felt, and thought, everything we are, is extinguished with our body.

And the gods have understood that animate beings fear their death, of which they are aware, unlike an animal. This is why we bury our dead. So, the gods came up with a plan: over the course of billions of years, they created the possibility of establishing a connection between their spirit and the spirit of animate beings. A bridge over which they can reach our souls; and at the end of which a lock to a door awaits, to which they have made themselves a key. It is—Sieben-thal searched for a suitable religious term—a kind of . . . consecration; indeed, a consecration of the soul. For every newborn must first be provided with a lock and a suitable key and thus be consecrated—a key, too, something inside him said, which granted access to only one of the three gods, not to all of them.

Through this door, they can give us humans advice during our lives, comfort us, lend us courage and strength, and save us from despair. If we let them, that is, because it is a lock with a key on both sides. The gods visit us only if we let them in. They have adopted us; they are our Soul Fathers, and we are their Soul Children. And just as some children turn a deaf ear to their parents, so too do some people ignore their heavenly Father.

But that is not all. The gods are able to support us during our lives—however, without performing miracles, as some holy scriptures would make us believe. Over time, they have also found a way to capture our souls after death and harbor them in their own spirits—what we call “eternal life,” or paradise. This enables them to take away the fear of death from those who believe in them, and it doesn’t even cost them much. For the spirit takes up neither space nor energy; and so, in principle, they can accommodate an infinite number of souls.

And in this paradise, of which every god maintains his own in his spirit, those who have not transgressed against their own and thus against the children of their god are rewarded. There they can watch their loved ones down on earth and savor again all the good things

they have encountered in life as often as they like—until one day they close their eyes of their own accord. For them, it is a place of peace and happiness.

But for those who have done evil to their own, there is that other, dark place where they must suffer in their own minds what they have done to others. Euródin's place of happiness is called Valhalla, and that of darkness, Helheim, and it is the Valkyries who bring the souls to Him, and they are angels and instances of His own spirit.

*But what do the gods themselves have to gain from all this*, Siebenthal suddenly asked himself and again paused writing. Are they doing it only for our sake? Strangely, the question initially remained unanswered inside him, as if He were hesitating. After a long pause, though, it did seep into his consciousness: *because we were alone with ourselves; and because we couldn't change anything*. Suddenly it stood before Siebenthal's eyes: the gods need us as much as we need them! Without us, they are powerless—mere observers of a universe they cannot change. But when they connect with living beings on earth and presumably elsewhere, their spirit enters into a connection with matter via the souls they have consecrated, and thus they can shape the universe.

However, that was not all, it dawned on him. The gods—he hesitated to write it down—had simply been lonely, for they had no one but themselves. With the souls they began to consecrate, they created a family of their own and could share in the fate of their “children”: help them, rejoice with them, and suffer with them. And plan a common future for themselves and their family.

But what could this future look like? Silence reigned in his head again for a while. Then he heard Euródin's voice inside him: *I want to become one with you, so you are in me as I am in you. And create a world with you in which you no longer must suffer*.

And the other gods? This time He remained silent. Vili and Vé could not speak to him, and Euródin did not speak about them. Be it that, in his opinion, he didn't *need* to know or *shouldn't* know.

But how do you divide the people among you, Siebenthal asked. And when did it happen? He understood that a few conditions had to be fulfilled first. To begin with, a species had to have developed a

consciousness, a mind, in the first place. He knew this already. But it also had to be worth the effort, so to speak, by not being in danger of dying out again soon, which was bound to happen frequently in the universe. In the course of his work on religion, Siebenthal had studied the history of human evolution too. *Homo sapiens*, at that time native only to Africa, almost became extinct as recently as seventy thousand years ago; only a few thousand of them were left, according to studies of the genetic primordial Eve, the so-called Mitochondrial Eve.

Not long afterward, a small group of the recovered population of African prehistoric humans set off northward for the second time, the first time having led to Neanderthals in Europe and *Homo erectus* in Asia. The second time, however, what in paleoanthropology was called the Second African Migration, this time of *Homo sapiens*, beginning about fifty thousand years ago—that had been the beginning of everything, Siebenthal realized. The prehistoric humans had migrated across North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to Central Asia. Some had stayed there, others had migrated farther north across the Bering Strait to America, others again had been drawn eastward toward Asia, the rest westward to what is now known as Europe. This is how not only the three major human races came into being, but also the *Urvölker*, the Primordial Peoples of the gods.

A name popped up in Siebenthal's mind: Ararat. The mountain of Noah's ark, sacred to all three Abrahamic religions and located roughly between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Not there exactly, but in this area, it had happened. The first, or Primordial, Consecration of humans by the gods. The *Urweihe*. They had divided up the humans among themselves as they had moved on, with the later Europeans becoming the children of Euródin; the Asians, the children of Vé; and the Africans, the children of Vili.

What happened, though, beyond that? After all, new souls to be consecrated were born every day. Did the gods divide them up according to their place of residence, as a kind of divine *jus soli*? Siebenthal listened within himself and learned that this had obviously not proved to be a success because the divine families were never able to develop sufficient stability and homogeneity due to constant migratory movements. Furthermore, the gods could not or would not

think in terms of geographical boundaries. Instead, they gave themselves four simple rules, which they have observed to this day: First, if the souls of both parents of a child are consecrated by the same god, the soul of that child also belongs to this god. Second, if they are consecrated to different gods, the child's soul is not accepted by either of them, because then there would be a dispute between the gods as to who it should belong to. Third, the same applies if both parents are not consecrated to any god, because in this case, too, the gods cannot decide without arguing. Lastly, however, if one parent is consecrated to one god and the other to none, because his parents did not belong to any god or belonged to different gods, then the child is assigned to the god of the consecrated parent.

That is how it is decided. But what are the consequences if a child's soul remains unconsecrated—for example if its father is Asian and its mother is European? Well, then it remains in the state before the *Urweihe*. No God can assist its soul while it is alive, and no God can preserve it when its body dies. The soul expires shortly after death and is lost in the universe. Paradise remains closed to it.

Siebenthal translated this into racial affiliation. If two members of the same race have a child together, it was unproblematic. However, if an African and a European procreate, the child remains unconsecrated. This applies as well if two mixed breeds conceive a child together. If, on the other hand, a pure breed and a mixed breed have a child, it becomes the child of the god of the pure breed. This, again, had to lead to a certain amount of genetic mixing of the *Urvölker*. Other than many racists thought, race and belonging to a people of God were not simply synonymous, they only ran in a similar direction. Moreover, races, which were probably not even the primary concern of the gods, existed in countless fluid transitions. The soul, on the other hand, is always consecrated to a specific god or to no god at all.

Siebenthal now considered what the consequences must be if people were dedicated not to the same god but to different ones—or to none at all. One consequence was certainly that they might live together on earth in a colorful mix, but their fates would separate after death at the latest. Because no matter whether on earth they were

related, married, or friends, they would be divided between different paradises or into none. Not even children necessarily joined their parents in paradise, but only if they were consecrated by the parents' god.

Another, equally obvious consequence was that the gods regarded their consecrated peoples as their own family. And a family member was expected to behave loyally toward the head of the family and fraternally toward the others, treating them better than non-family members. Euródin still had to explain to him what it meant in concrete terms. In any case, it seemed clear that the gods expected loyalty—for themselves, but also for the likewise consecrated brothers and sisters.

Which, in turn, led Siebenthal to a particularly difficult question: How did one even know which god's child one was, when this obviously had such far-reaching consequences? If it was not race alone, or the exact race could not be determined? When were you a "half-breed" and when were you still a "pure breed"? As for himself, his soul told him so. He had never felt to be anything other than a European, so he had to be one. But that didn't have to apply to everyone.

*He* obviously could not give him a better answer than to question his own soul. And this thought led Siebenthal to the next: How could Euródin still be the head of an *Urvolk* if almost no one believed in Him anymore? If there were only a few scattered neo-pagans and the Scandinavians occasionally adorned ship hulls—or, for that matter, cheese packages—with His name out of folkloric nostalgia? Hadn't his *Urvolk* died out as a result? No, Siebenthal told himself. Euródin continued to consecrate the souls of his children according to rules that were billions of years old, whether or not they acknowledged him or were even aware of him.

However, this led him to yet another question: when he looked at the major world religions, Vé's was a mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism, supplemented by the philosophy of Confucianism. Quite blurry, but Siebenthal was not concerned with Vé, who obviously could not or did not want to ensure uniformity here.

But what about Vili? The god of the Africans was now obviously the master of three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all founded in Africa by the three successive prophets Moses, Jesus, and

Muhammad, respectively. If Muhammad was not an impostor but the sincere messenger of his god, then in Vili's eyes he must represent the ultimate version of his religion, and Judaism and Christianity therefore had to be obsolete. Why else would Vili have appointed him? His reflections in *The Phenomenology of God* had already led him this far. But the fact that Jews and Christians now adhered to an outdated religion that their own God no longer accepted didn't concern Siebenthal anymore. Or rather, it wouldn't have to concern him if the Europeans, insofar as they still believed in God at all, were not predominantly Christians, and thus, inconceivably, adhered to the religion of an alien god—namely, Vili's—instead of their own.

Siebenthal remembered what he knew about the spread of Christianity. It had emerged from Judaism and reached Europe via Jewish communities in Asia Minor and Jewish slaves in the Roman Empire. It had become the state religion in Rome in the fourth century and had begun to spread north of the Alps from the fifth century on. The last pagans in Scandinavia had been converted in the eleventh century, not always voluntarily. But how could Euródin have allowed this to happen? Why had He not appointed His own prophet in time? Vé had to ask Himself a similar question, because Vili's Islam had deeply penetrated His empire as well, for example, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The same applied to Korea's Christian minority.

What a mess! Siebenthal sighed and rubbed his eyes. He knew so much now. More he wouldn't find out, at least not today, because Euródin remained stubbornly silent in response to his last question about the spread of Christianity in his realm, as if it were a matter of embarrassment to Him. A rumble of thunder snapped Siebenthal out of his brooding. He hurriedly saved the file and printed it out before a lightning strike ruined everything. Then he went to the window. The storm, which had been predicted for days, was approaching the coast with a tremendous wall of pitch-black clouds. Was it a sign that he had received his revelation on a day when nature was in such turmoil?

However that may be, the little boy who had once asked the heavens what God was and what He expected from him now, decades

later, knew the answer: there were three gods, and he, Siebenthal, was the prophet of one of them, Euródin.

That was the meaning and purpose of his life he had been searching for for so long.

## 11

In Hamburg, Hamid shoved his hands in his pockets. The rest of the day stretched out before him as endlessly as the desert outside his hometown of Mazar-e Sharif; as endlessly as the rest of the week—or his whole life. Nothing had worked out since he had to flee Afghanistan with his family because the Taliban had threatened to first stone them, set them on fire, and finally drown them like cats in a sack.

His old man knew German because he had lived in Hamburg for a few years and worked as a cab driver until he had to go back to Afghanistan. The *Bundeswehr*, the German armed forces, hired him as an interpreter and driver at its camp in Mazar-e Sharif. He made loads of money there but turned the family into traitors in the eyes of the Taliban. Servants and spies of the infidels. And that's why Hamid now was here; the whole family flown out by the Germans. Only his eldest brother had remained back—a land mine had rubbed him out.

What hadn't his old man promised him! And what hadn't his buddies and brothers blabbered! They would live in a nice house, paid for by the state, which would take care of everything else, too. If you worked, it was only seven hours a day, not twelve like in Afghanistan, and if you were ill—or just didn't feel like going in—you'd stay home. He would fuck blonde bitches who you just had to pick up while they offered themselves half naked on the dance floors of discotheques. And when he'd had his fill of them, the old man would get him a virgin Muslim woman from home.

What crap! Instead, they lived in a three-room apartment in a dirty, smelly tower block. They spent most of their time there, except when

he, his brother, and his old man “helped out” in a brother-in-law’s used car dealership or his uncle’s kebab joint. Officially, they were unemployed. Selling kebabs to the Germans. Shit, was this the promised paradise? And what’s more, the old man was stressing him out because he had thrown in two apprenticeships and the cops had once caught him with weed and pills. Just look, what a loser he himself was! Sold off the family’s honor and pride so they could live here like beggars. Well, like rich beggars. But where the fuck was his dignity?

And as for the chicks? Sure, they were sluts, and every whore in his home country was chaste compared to them. But they paid as much attention to him as to a pile of dog shit in the meadow. Unlike his buddy Ahmad. He had such a German broad, even if she was ugly as snot, and that’s why he was now standing on the street outside Ahmad’s apartment. So that his buddy could fuck her at his leisure after they had spent the morning listening to music and smoking hookah. But Ahmad was a lucky bastard. His parents and brothers were at work, and he had the whole place to himself. And he knew how to get the chicks around here. Making eyes at them, flattering them, and prattling on about great love. Besides—Hamid could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks—Ahmad was slim, and there were no pimples defiling his beautiful face.

Aimlessly, he begins to shuffle along the street. Maybe he should go to the central station and pass the time there until dinner. Maybe he’ll meet someone he knows there. But the sky is getting dark—the fucking storm his mother nagged him about in the morning—and he doesn’t feel like getting as wet as a poodle. An arcade? A *hookah* bar? He still has his uncle’s fifty bucks for scrubbing the snack bar with him all Sunday because of a health department inspection. The beeping of his smartphone snaps him out of his rumination. It’s Sinan, another friend, with a text message.

“Hey, bro, we’re partying in the Volkspark. Feel like joining?”

“Are you crazy? In this weather?” he wants to type. But then he thinks, Why not? Sinan and his buddies are good for fun. When it starts pissing rain, they’ll take shelter, and until then . . . “All right, dude,” he types. “Where there?”



When Hamid arrives at the park, there is, apart from Sinan, only one other dude there, who he only knows by sight. But what does he care? For ten bucks they not only share the vodka with him but also let him take a hit off the crack pipe. Hamid has never done the stuff before, only weed or pills, which the cops had caught him with. But there are no cops in the park now. They'd rather keep their asses in their patrol cars, so they don't get wet. Dude, that crack's hitting him like a hammer! Suddenly he's a giant, and dancing among the stars, and he feels like he could tear out every tree in the park and throw it to the ends of the earth.

First, they talk about wheels, then about chicks, and the other guy, who Hamid doesn't know, says he nailed a German blonde just last night, dumb as shit, but tits like balloons, swinging around like mad when he was ramming her from behind. And she was screaming for more, you could hear it all the way down the street. All the way to the street! They laugh their asses off. Hamid's prick grows right up to the sky. He rams it hard into them, and they scream for more, they crave and beg and drink his juice like honey. He'll lock them up in cages, what they beg him to do, and take them out to cook for him and wipe his ass with their bare hands until he fucks them in their own. Dude, if only he could he jerk off here!

Then the fucking rain starts. His buddies are suddenly done partying. The crack has run out, the vodka is down to its dregs. "Man, we'd better hit it," says Sinan, drunk and high, slurring his words. But Hamid is not a weakling, not a braggart like the others. He's a giant, his prick is as long as a tree trunk, and his heart pounds like a steam hammer. It thunders, it flashes, the sky glares as if lit by a giant firework, a spectacle for him, the new god. And he feels himself getting stronger and stronger, his mind suddenly becoming crystal clear. He now understands everything. *Kismet*, that's it. It's his day today. Something huge is going to happen, and it will make him immortal. The others are already pissing off, calling out to him, "Hey, dude, where are you?"

He waves it off, he stays here, he looks around, and he knows: it will be good. Today he will become a man, and tomorrow the world will know its new lord and master.

At first, Mette thinks she can avoid the storm. If she completes the shorter of her laps, just under five miles, that might be fast enough. But she hasn't trained for weeks and must take her unborn child into consideration. So, she forces herself to breathe calmly and run at a relaxed, moderate pace. The first mile takes her through quiet, well-kept residential streets in Gross-Flottbek. In the houses she passes, she knows a few mothers whose children also go to GSH. Every now and then, she looks doubtfully up at the sky. There, pale, sulfur-yellow light mingles with the black of the clouds.

Then she reaches the traffic circle on Luruper Chaussee, which she has to cross to reach the Volkspark. The traffic lights are red, and she stops, takes a deep breath, and measures her pulse: 120 beats—not bad, considering her condition. The light turns green, and she is about to continue running, but suddenly a clap of thunder shakes the air. Mette looks up and sees an eerie vein of lightning pierce the sky. Then she notices the pedestrians on the other side of the road. They are running toward her on the path along the horse track at the edge of the park or riding toward her on bicycles. They are fleeing from the park. It can only be minutes before it starts pouring down.

Should she . . . ? She's been working out for only ten minutes, warmed up, no more. Didn't she just tell the children she wasn't made of cardboard? But what if she's struck by lightning? Mette hesitates, weighs the pros and cons, already wants to turn back. But then she thinks about how good she will feel afterward, how all the excitement that has built up inside her over the course of this incredible day will dissolve into a warm, calm feeling of happiness. Suddenly she is convinced that if she can master this challenge, if she can defy the elements, everything will be well.

Mette resumes running at the same moment the downpour begins. But she barely feels the heavy drops. The puddles, forming already, will hinder her only when the water penetrates her shoes, leaving her with blisters. But she doesn't think about that now. She is gripped by euphoria as she runs through the rose garden, the most beautiful part of the park, and feels like she is going faster and faster, almost flying. She barely registers the escaping park visitors, jackets, or in some cases plastic bags, clutched over their heads. She is now an elf and dances

on their hill like in the fairy tale of Andersen she'd read as a child; the storm crowns her the queen of the fairies. Her eyes are almost blind from the dripping water, but she doesn't need them; she knows the route like the back of her hand.

She reaches the end of the garden and turns left into the wooded part of the park. The clouds, the rain, and the trees create an eerie darkness, almost as if it were already night, and she realizes that she is completely alone. A warning arises inside her. She thinks of Little Red Riding Hood and the wicked wolf, and her heart beats faster. Why now? She is an elf, she is flying, who is going to stop her, and the trees are like good spirits protecting her.

She glides, floats over the tarred paths, then turns left again, crosses a road, and disappears into the northernmost part of the park, with its network of narrow, dark paths. They are no longer tarred or even made of paved earth; they are forest paths, and she has to watch out for the roots, fairy queen or not. She slows down, if only a little, because, after all, she wants to keep flying.

It happens around a bend. Apparently, she has tripped over something. Now she is flying indeed—but only until she hits the ground hard. Her child! And her leg and ankle! Has she hurt herself? *What have you done?* She catches her breath, fights against the pain. Then she looks around—and suddenly she sees the troll. He is short and stocky, earth and leaves sticking to his wet clothes, and he has wide, feverish, almost glowing eyes staring at her from a yellowish, pale face. His savage grimace is not an expression of fear or hatred but of madness—and lust.

Her heart is racing, she reaches for her whistle, but who will hear her? She fumbles for the pepper spray. Too late! She sees the iron bar in his hand, with which he has brought her down. He reaches her in one movement and takes a swing.

"Please, my child!" she wants to say. But no sound leaves her lips.

Instead, the troll begins to speak. "I am Hamid from Afghanistan," he says, "and from now on, I am your lord and master."

A half hour later, the deluge was over. The early-evening sun was shining again, and when Armin opened his office window, he was met by fresh, cool air, and everything was peaceful. Mother Nature was wearing her innocent face again, as if nothing had happened.

Promptly, there was a knock, and Friedrich—or “Legal-Fritz,” as Armin’s youngest called him with her typical disrespect—came panting into the doorway. As usual, he was wearing a dark gray suit with a muted tie that hung over his sizeable paunch. As Friedrich looked dry and unharmed, Armin assumed his friend had survived the storm in his car unscathed.

He carried a huge, bulging briefcase made of worn leather. Like with his last visitor, Brehm, a smell of tobacco wafted around him, only it was that of fragrant cigarillos and not supermarket cigarettes. The hairline on Friedrich’s massive forehead seemed to have receded every time Armin saw him, just like his waistline seemed to have grown. Which was quite often, because they had been buddies since school days, and after a break during which they had lost sight of each other—Armin’s apprenticeship years in Bremen and Aarhus—they did things together regularly. Sometimes they went out to eat, sometimes to a concert, though Armin had never been able to persuade him to go sailing, play tennis, or hike in the mountains. Sports were absolutely a no-go for his friend.

Anyway, Friedrich Kussmaul was now a renowned lawyer and partner in a law firm specializing in commercial and corporate law. When Armin was forced to wade knee-deep through the NEMAS quagmire following his father’s death, his friend had become an indispensable advisor. Since then, he let Fritz handle everything concerning the corporate level, leaving only the day-to-day business, such as contractual matters, to the company’s own legal department. Friedrich was extremely competent, completely discreet, and loyal. Therefore, Armin would naturally trust him with the change of legal form requested by the works council.

"I'm just coming from the district court," Fritz said, still panting. Had he broken with his no-sports-policy for once and used the stairs instead of the elevator?

He stepped into the room and held out his hand. "So, what's so urgent, my dearest?"

Armin returned the handshake and patted his friend's shoulder affectionately. He had to stretch to do this, as Fritz was even taller than him and could barely fit under the door, which is why he walked through life with a slight stoop. "Sit down, and I'll fill you in."

But first he went to the cupboard on the side of the room and opened a door, behind which was a bar Armin had inherited from his father, like most things. He took out an open bottle of J. Dupont 1er Cru de Cognac XO and held it out to Fritz. "How about a tiny sip? I hear it's very good."

Although Armin rarely drank spirits, he occasionally poured visitors a glass if he thought it would please them—as he assumed it now. Friedrich examined the label, then nodded approvingly. "Why not?" He looked at his wristwatch and said, "It's just turned six o'clock."

Armin poured them two glasses, only a small sip for himself and a fingerful for Fritz.

Then he recounted the day's events.

"Well," said Friedrich, "technically speaking, no problem. It takes time, of course, and, for the time being, you can only give the works council a declaration of intent. Furthermore, you need a shareholder resolution, and, in this case, *everyone* must agree, not just the majority."

Armin was well aware of the unspoken question behind it. According to his father's will, he owned one-third of the shares, as did Jochen. The remaining third was divided between Henoah and their mother, Beata having additionally inherited the family home and Klaus's private bank account. Father had understood that only his two younger sons could guarantee the future of the company, which is probably why he had limited the other two to their statutory shares. Understandably, this had caused some bad blood within the family.

Nevertheless, Armin said, "I don't see why Henoah or Mother should cause any difficulties. After all, it is in their own best interests

that the agreement with the works council and with it the *Ghostfish* order come through. Otherwise, no money will ever roll in. Besides, it's not them who will have to deal with a co-determined supervisory board afterward."

Friedrich took the last sip of his cognac, letting it swirl in his mouth with relish before replying, "Not *rationally*. Unfortunately, people are not always rational. When I think back to the way your brother behaved at past shareholders' meetings . . . Perhaps the Holy Spirit is whispering something in his ear again?"

Armin laughed. "I guess we'll have to take that risk."

"Well, let's wait and see. But tell me, old boy: if I've understood your plans to move back to Denmark correctly, we won't see each other that often anymore."

Armin waved it off. "It's a long way to go, in any case. We'll have to wait and see for that as well."

"But in any event, your Danish vacation home probably won't be happening?"

"If everything works out, we'll buy a proper home there, of course," Armin confirmed. He had recently told Friedrich that they, Mette in particular, were looking for a property there because his in-laws' house had only one bathroom and one guest room, and they didn't always want to stay in a hotel. Friedrich could have used the vacation home free of charge.

"And besides that, how is Mette?"

"Everything is fine. It's going to be a boy, we found out today."

"Well, congratulations, old friend!" Fritz stood up and reached for his briefcase. "I'll be on my way, then. And thanks for the cognac."

Armin stood up to escort him to the door. He hadn't failed to notice how the update about Mette's pregnancy had stung Fritz a bit, despite his genuine joy. "And you?" he asked cautiously. "What happened to the nice lady lawyer you brought to the restaurant the other day?"

Friedrich shrugged it off. "I don't think we're made for each other after all."

As far as Armin knew, his friend once had a girlfriend, but that was a long time ago, and he'd remained a bachelor ever since. As the saying

went, Fritz was married to his work, putting in sixty-hour weeks, then devoting the rest of the time to his wine collection, playing golf (his only sport), listening to classical music, and occasionally attending an event organized by the liberal Free Democratic Party, of which he was a member. Armin sensed that Friedrich wasn't happy with this, but he didn't know how he could help him, either. In any case, all previous attempts to set him up romantically had failed.

"You'll find your Mrs. Right one day," he comforted him.

Friedrich made a skeptical face. "When I look at the many failed marriages in my profession and the ones who never even got married, there seems to be some statistical evidence against it."

"True again." Armin opened the door for him. "With my first—and, hopefully, last—marriage and my soon-to-be two children, I almost feel like an exotic. In the past, people didn't get married because the man didn't have the money or the wife didn't have a dowry, and they stayed childless if nature wanted it that way. Tell me, what has the world been coming to?"

Friedrich stopped and looked at him thoughtfully. "It ends, old boy. At least for us Europeans. But first we'll change your legal form," he said with a wink, then walked out.

Friedrich's last words left Armin in a strange, melancholy mood. He was jolted out of it by Jochen, who burst into the room without warning because Cordula had gone home for the day.

"Dave Higgins has sent an email," he blurted. "He asked if he could talk to us on the phone in two hours about our revised offer."

Armin knew that Higgins, a department head in the Australian Ministry of Defense, was responsible for handling the negotiations on *Ghostfish* and was Jochen's most important contact. But at this hour? He looked at his desk clock. It was just after half past six. "It's not even four in the morning there! Does he work around the clock?"

"Perhaps? A former soldier only ever sleeps with one eye open," Jochen said with a twinkle in his eye. "He writes that otherwise he wouldn't have time all day. Shouldn't we take him up on his offer?"

Armin felt the same tugging in the pit of his stomach that he'd experienced that morning upon receiving the first email from Australia.

So much could depend on this phone call, for him, for his family, and for all the employees at NEMAS.

"Of course," he said. "I'll just call Mette quickly; maybe go home to grab something to eat."

"That's what I had in mind too," said Jochen.

As soon as his brother left, Armin called his wife's cell phone. He let it ring a dozen times, but she didn't answer. *Strange*, he thought. *Where could she be?* Mette, reliable as clockwork when it came to domestic matters, was usually preparing dinner around this time. He called Anngrit's cell, who at least picked up after the tenth ring.

"Hello, little bunny, do you know where Mom is? I can't get her on the phone."

He could hear her girlfriends giggling and pop music in the background.

"No," said his youngest. "She went jogging and hasn't come back yet. I tried to call her fifteen minutes ago, but she didn't pick up. Maybe her cell phone got wet, and she took shelter somewhere?"

"She went running in this weather?" Armin asked incredulously.

"What was *I* supposed to do about it? Normally adults tell their children what to do, not the other way around."

Armin laughed. "You're right about that, of course."

Yes, she'd probably taken shelter somewhere and got delayed on her way home.

"Dad, can I order pizza?" Anngrit asked. "With Mom's permission, I've invited my friends over for dinner, and it's too late to cook and they have to go home at some point."

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Take the money from the household cash box. I'll be there in half an hour, too, so order one for me as well."

"With what on it?"

Armin thought for a moment. "Salami, pepperoni, and olives. And order Mom one as well. After running through the storm, she'll definitely fancy hot pizza. I'm sure she'll be there when I get home."

"Four cheeses?"

"Yup." It was Mette's favorite. "See you in a bit," he said, and hung up.



He then fished the ring of keys out of his desk drawer, slipped on his jacket, and hurried out of the office. Because, meanwhile, he was deeply worried about his wife.

## 13

Mom's pizza lay like a silent reproach on her plate, framed by her unused cutlery and empty water glass. Wenna, Marina, and Seph struggled to keep up the conversation at the table as if nothing was wrong, but Dad and I kept glancing furtively at the kitchen clock, barely talking. It was now a quarter past seven, and we were both thinking the same thing: something bad must have happened, otherwise, she would have been here long ago. Everyone ate listlessly, almost bashfully, as if it somehow wasn't proper. I was suddenly no longer hungry myself and put down my knife and fork. Only Dad continued to gobble down his pizza. But I could tell he was forcing himself to eat because he still had to go to his meeting and didn't want to sit there on an empty stomach. The most disturbing thing was the sight of Newton. Dejected, he barely touched the food in his bowl. He looked so sad, as if he knew something we didn't. At least, that's what I imagined. I thought about how he'd howled after Mom when she'd gone for her run, and I shivered again.

Dad's smartphone rang, and we all thought it had to be Mom, finally telling us where she was.

"Yes, I see . . . fine . . . whatever," Dad said between long pauses, sounding pained. "See you in a bit then." He ended the call and looked at me. "Anngrit, will you come out in the hallway with me?"

My heart stopped for a moment. It could only be bad news! But then why had he said, "See you in a bit"?

I followed him on shaky legs. What would he say to me?

Dad closed the door to the kitchen. "Listen, Anngrit: I'm afraid I have to go to the office straight away. Something's come up that needs to be clarified before the meeting."

So, it hadn't been Mom. She still hadn't called.

My thoughts must have been written on my face. "I think we're both worried now, but, nevertheless, there may be a harmless reason," he said gravely. "We'll do it like this: if Mom isn't here or hasn't called by eight o'clock, you phone me, and I'll inform the police. I'll leave the ringtone on—meeting or no meeting. Do you understand that?"

I nodded.

He took a deep breath. "Excuse me to your friends. Are they getting home on their own?"

"They all live not far away and ride their bikes," I said. "It's still light, and they're about to leave."

Dad hesitated, but finally nodded. "Okay." He reached for his jacket on the wall stand, snatched his keys off the hook, and hurried out of the house.

When I returned to the kitchen, the others had already gotten up and were clearing the table. The only thing they hadn't dared to touch was Mom's plate.

"What is it?" Sephine asked in a hushed tone.

I swallowed before I said, "It wasn't my mother. My father suddenly had to go back to work straight away. If Mom doesn't come soon, we'll call the police."

"Should we stay with you?"

As grateful as I was for the offer, and as much as I would have liked to have the three of them with me, I said, "Then *your* parents will be worried. It's better if you leave now."

When I was alone, I put the dishes in the dishwasher. I wrapped Mom's pizza in aluminum foil so she could heat it up in the microwave later. After all, she had to come home eventually, didn't she? I could still feel the pizza delivery man's change in my pocket, and I put it in the round Danish cookie tin on the shelf, which served as Mom's household cash box. As we had agreed, I wrote the date, the amount,

and the reason for the expense on the notepad inside: “Pizza—Dad allowed it.”

I put back the can and stared forlornly out of the kitchen window, which overlooked the front garden. There, under the canopy, I saw the pots of water plants, the gravel, and the plastic sheeting—materials for my pond project—which I had bought with Mom last Saturday. Out of nowhere, I was gripped by an abysmal sadness. I would never build that pond, I thought suddenly.

Then the doorbell rang, and it changed everything. I didn’t walk, I ran to the door. It could only be Mom, and no matter what had happened, no matter what state she was in, the main thing was she was home. I braced myself for a wild story she would tell me breathlessly. She had slipped and fallen in the rain, her phone broke, a kind stranger drove her to the doctor, and no one had thought to contact us.

“Mom, finally!” I shouted, pulling open the door.

There were two police officers in front of me. A man and a woman.

“Is your father at home?” the policeman asked.

I stared at him open-mouthed, uncomprehending. “My father?” I finally stuttered. “He’s still in a meeting at the company.”

Then I realized it, and shouted, “Why are you asking about my father and not my mother? *What about my mother?*”

The two took off their caps, and the policeman said, “We’re very sorry.”

# Part Two

Years later, I would ask myself how I had been able to go to school the next day. Maybe it was to avoid having to face reality, or maybe because I had not understood it yet. A numb sensation enveloped my head—indeed, my whole body, like a cocoon that bathed everything around me in a milky, dull light and made me endure the mumbled condolences, the embarrassed looks. The teachers ignored me as if they wished I didn't exist. Only Mrs. Peters, Wenna's mother, hugged me during a break and burst into tears. Tears I couldn't find myself. Sephine silently squeezed my hand under the school desk. She didn't have the words either.

At home, Dad told me I'd better stay home from school for the next few days. Newspaper and TV reporters had been calling already. My friends could bring over my homework. Anna said goodbye with a big hug. I had called her yesterday evening, right after I had given the policemen Dad's cell phone number, and she had come straight away and stayed the night. She'd cooked a meal before she left and would be back tomorrow and all week. She dropped everything for us, even her lectures.

What was I supposed to do? The rest of the day stretched out before me like a gray plain surrounded by a leaden wall. I couldn't imagine what lay beyond it. As mechanically as I had gone through the school day, I packed my bag for judo training and left the house. I went through the lesson robotically, half functioning but absent. Nobody there knew anything about it yet. At some point, however, Jens, my coach, realized something was wrong with me. Did I want to talk? I shook my head, and he sent me home.

Once there, I went first into the kitchen to see what Anna had cooked. *Wareniki*, I discovered, which her mother back in Poland always made in large quantities and sent frozen to Germany so that her daughter wouldn't starve. The filled dumplings were swimming in a strange-smelling onion-and-cream sauce. Next to them sat a pot of overcooked boiled potatoes, which I should probably heat up in

the microwave. As much as I valued Anna, she wasn't a great cook. But I wouldn't be able to eat anything anyway.

Then I went into the living room, where Dad was lying on the couch, asleep, a glass of fifteen-year-old whiskey on the table in front of him. The accompanying bottle was half empty, and I smelled the alcohol on his breath. It was a Christmas present from a supplier he had made fun of at the time because he rarely drank whiskey. Now I noticed a tear running down his cheek. Was it possible to cry in your sleep? I switched off the TV, which had on some nature program at low volume. Dad never watched TV during the day. I took the cashmere blanket Mom liked to wrap herself in—*bad* wrapped herself in, I corrected myself—from her armchair. It still smelled of her, and I covered Dad with it.

That done, I went to my room and cried, finally.

## 15

Armin woke up to the sound of the doorbell. He didn't know how long it had been ringing. He struggled back to reality and peeled himself out of the blanket Anngrit must have covered him with. He stood up and shuffled into the hallway to open the door. First, though, he glanced in the mirror above the shoe cupboard and hastily straightened his disheveled hair. There was nothing he could do about his pale, flushed face, the alcohol on his breath, or the lightheadedness that kept him trapped in a half-world between sleep, confused dreams, and reality.

If it was the media, he would slam the door in their faces and have his peace back. Then, again, it could be Cordula bringing him something to sign. Otherwise, Jochen was taking care of everything in his absence. After the call from the police, his brother had handled the night-time phone meeting with Higgins alone. But Armin couldn't

completely neglect his duties, as much as he would like to—and, for now at least, perhaps should.

When he opened the door, Henoah and his mother were standing in front of him. With some difficulty, he recalled that last night, when he had called Beata and stammered about what had happened, she had announced that she would be returning on the first plane from Abano Terme. He hadn't expected Henoah. It was now around five o'clock, as Armin had noted on the living room clock. His older brother must have left in the morning to get here from the town of Ettlingen, in the very south of Germany.

Beata hugged him first. Armin leaned down toward her, this time almost eagerly inhaling the incense scent of her perfume and not with the usual slight disgust. Then Henoah hugged him, and Armin had to bend down to him too and endure the pressure of the huge paunch of his bacchanalian brother.

In the living room, he offered them both the couch, while he sat down in Mette's armchair, hoping he could still smell her scent and feel her warmth. Neither of them remarked about the half-empty whiskey bottle, which he hadn't bothered to hide.

Armin recounted what he had learned from the police. Park visitors found her body in the bushes by the side of the path shortly after the storm had passed, around six-thirty in the evening, at exactly the time when he tried to call her. The witnesses had wondered why the chorus of "Bad Day" sounded from the undergrowth. So, at least she didn't have to lie there for long.

Although Mette never carried her ID and wallet with her when she went running, she did have an emergency medical passport, which also contained her contact details. This was how the police found his house. Immediately after their call, he drove home and accompanied them to the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf to identify the body. It wasn't necessary, but he wanted to see her one last time. Her eyes were closed, her features peaceful, despite the violence done to her. The laceration on the side of her head, the strangulation marks on her neck—he would never forget the image. In the grass next to her, the police had found the rusty iron bar and even the belt used to strangle her.

The rest of her body, however, remained hidden under the cloth of the stretcher. The police hinted it had been a sexual offense followed by a cover-up murder. The results of the autopsy would be available in a few days at the earliest, they said. But given her half-clothed state and other circumstances . . .

Armin's voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands. His Mette, who had been so gentle and tender and had never done anyone any harm in her life. Who had even returned hatred with kindness. Perhaps she would forgive her abuser and murderer. He never would.

When he opened his eyes, he looked into the concerned faces of his mother and brother.

"Are there any clues about the perpetrator yet?" Henoah asked in the smooth pastoral tone of a theologian and former parish priest. He ran his fingers through his black, curly hair, which was already beginning to recede from the center of his skull into a kind of tonsure.

"No," said Armin. "They're searching intensively for witnesses and have apparently set up a task force."

A detective had called him in the morning and left him his contact details. He could get in touch with him at any time. Armin had then phoned Friedrich and told him the case number. Victims' rights, private prosecution—things that didn't interest him now. Friedrich's bewilderment had been palpable even on the phone. He had wanted to come, but Armin couldn't handle it yet and preferred to be alone.

"But because of the storm," he told Henoah and Beata, "there was hardly anyone in the park at the time." He shrugged.

His mother shook her head. "Maybe it's not the right thing to say, but did she have to do sport in weather like this? Especially in her condition?"

She immediately regretted the remark. Because Armin hurled at her: "My wife didn't die from the rain, she was murdered, Mother. And why shouldn't she go running there in broad daylight? Isn't it the real problem that nobody is safe in this country anymore?"

The two remained silent, embarrassed. The memory of all the subtle teasing and taunting his mother had pestered Mette with from the



very beginning came flooding back to him. But what good would it do to bring this up now?

Henoch finally cleared his throat. "What's happening next? I mean, we also have to think about how to lay Mette to rest."

"The public prosecutor's office hasn't released her body yet," Armin replied brusquely. "Not even her things."

"But I assume she will be buried in our family grave in Nienstedten? Should I contact Head Pastor Büschken about the sermon? Furthermore, I can arrange for a prayer of intercession at Sankt Michaelis—"

Armin cut him off. "Save yourself the intercession and all the rest. Mette will be buried in Denmark with her own family. I promised her parents that last night."

Apart from the visit to the mortuary, making that phone call had been the most terrible thing he'd ever had to do. Karen, his mother-in-law, hung up in tears at the end.

Armin could see from his mother's face that she regarded the funeral in Denmark as another slight the Hansens had inflicted on her family. But she said only, "You're home now for the time being, I take it?"

Was this a hidden accusation that he was neglecting his duties? "Yes, I'm working from home currently," he replied irritably. "Jochen is taking care of things. He can manage without me for a while."

He suspected that not having been able to get home in time because of *Ghostfish* was one of the reasons why Mette was dead. Otherwise, she would probably have gone for a run earlier, during Rainer's visit, before the storm, and never met her murderer. Now he had to realize that in a cruel twist of fate, the darkest day of his life had also been perhaps the most successful one in the history of NEMAS.

"There's good news about the company, by the way," he said, rubbing his eyes. "The Australian navy will probably buy our drone, Jochen wrote to me this morning. Albeit at a lower price. And this means we must cut costs, and in return the works council is demanding the introduction of codetermination and a different legal form. We will have to pass a shareholder resolution for that soon."

"But that's not what is important now," his mother replied tactfully, and Henoch agreed with a silent nod.

But Armin didn't miss the glint in his brother's eyes before he hastily hid it behind his usual pastoral facade.

"What about Anngrit, by the way?" asked Beata, looking around as if wondering why she wasn't here.

"She's in her room," said Armin. "Anna comes every day for now and looks after her. And then there's me as well."

"But with this Anna, that's not a long-term solution, and you'll have to go back to the office eventually. Wouldn't it be best if Anngrit moved in with me for a while?" his mother inquired. "Then Mrs. Nowak and I can look after her."

He had a pretty good idea of what Anngrit would think of it. Nevertheless, he said, "Let her decide for herself." He called loudly through the living room and up the stairs: "Anngrit, will you join us for a moment?"

When she stood in front of them, with a tear-stained face and her lower lip stuck out defiantly and just a gloomy "Hello" as greeting, Armin dutifully presented her with Beata's proposal: "Your grandma is offering you the chance to move in with her for a while. Can you imagine that?"

He could already see that he would have done better to cancel on Mother himself. Now his youngest would do it in a way that shook the walls, if he interpreted the dark clouds gathering on her face correctly.

"No, I can't imagine that at all!" she exclaimed with open disgust. "Anna teaches me how to cook and clean and takes care of everything. Besides, I have lots of friends, and should I require a change of scenery, I prefer Aarhus very much. Now can I go upstairs again?"

Without waiting for permission, she turned around and stomped out of the room and back up the stairs. The slamming of her bedroom door must have been heard even out on the street.

"That's a bit strong, I must say," muttered Beata, clutching her chest. "I left at dawn and now I'm being treated like this."

"Do you need your spray, Mother?" Henoch asked anxiously, already reaching into her handbag, where the nitro spray for her angina pectoris attacks was always at hand.

"No, I'm fine," she insisted, motioning for him to sit back down. "Maybe it's best if we leave it at that for now. Armin: me and your brother, we're always there for you if you need us, and this applies to Anngrit as well—despite everything."

"Thank you, Mother," he mumbled. "You'll have to excuse my daughter; it's not exactly easy for her, either."

After his mother and Henoch had left, Armin remained sitting in Mette's armchair, lost in thought. A ping from the smartphone in his pocket jolted him back to the present. It was a text message. Probably Jochen or Cordula or someone else from the company, he assumed. Fortunately, the condolence calls would still take some time. But when he read the sender's name, he frowned. Inga Poulsen was the name of the Danish estate agent Mette and he had commissioned to look for a vacation home.

"Might have the right thing for you," she wrote in Danish, along with a link to an online real estate listing. "I can reserve it for you for two weeks if you like."

To Armin, it seemed like another bitter twist of fate. Now that he could most likely afford it, thanks to the *Ghostfish* contract . . . But what was he supposed to do with a vacation home there now? Without Mette? He shook his head and began to type that he wasn't interested anymore.

"What have you got there, Dad?"

Armin wheeled around in his armchair and saw Anngrit standing behind it. She was carrying Odysseus in her arms and looking over his shoulder.

"Oh, nothing really, little bunny. Our Danish estate agent has apparently found us our dream vacation home—now that we have no longer any use for it."

Anngrit set Odysseus down in his lap and grabbed his phone instead. She seemed to be following the link.

After a while, she handed the device back to him. "Why don't we need the house anymore?"

"Well, honey, what are we supposed to do with it, now that—"

Anngrit's reaction shocked him. She walked around the armchair, stood up in front of him, and burst into tears. Sobbing, she exclaimed, "You really don't want to have anything to do with Mom anymore?"

"What on earth do you mean?" he stammered.

"Do you want to go to a hotel every time you visit her grave? Or are you not planning to do that at all? I take it we're not going to move to Denmark anymore."

Armin put down Odysseus, jumped up and hugged her. "But darling, how can you even think that? Of course we'll go there regularly."

And as he caressed her, he began to see her point. For him to now dismiss the idea of buying a getaway in Denmark was akin to severing a final bond between him and Mette. Did he want that? Was he allowed to? True, he no longer considered moving to Denmark. But then, this was precisely why he needed a vacation home there, as illogical as it had seemed to him at first.

"You're right," he whispered in his daughter's ear. "Now, with things taking a turn for the better at the company, maybe we can afford it. I'll tell Inga to keep looking for us."

Anngrit freed herself from his embrace and wiped the tears from her face. "Why must she keep looking?"

"Well, I . . . What?" He looked at her questioningly, utterly confused.

"But I don't want just any vacation home, I want this one," announced his youngest, crossing her arms.

"Why . . .?"

"Because I like it. I discovered it earlier while surfing the Internet."

Armin sighed. "Let's discuss that over dinner."

Siebenthal, sitting in the wicker chair on his terrace, drank in the fresh, cool air that had hung over the coast since the thunderstorm three days ago. Across the dunes, he enjoyed a panoramic view of the Baltic Sea, all the way to the horizon. A few sailing ships, a freighter, a ferry—nothing out of the ordinary. But now he beheld everything with fresh eyes. Was it a coincidence that he, a South German from Frankfurt, had ended up here in the North after leaving investment banking? He still remembered how excited he had been when he walked onto the beach on his first vacation here and greeted the waves that crashed against him like old friends. And this despite having traveled the world and stood on the shores of the seven seas.

Directly beyond the horizon lay Denmark. To the north, Sweden and Norway. To the west, Great Britain. And to the east, Poland. It was His sea, the cradle of what Siebenthal, in a flash of inspiration, called the Second European Civilization, after the first Greco-Roman one. And he had immediately felt at home here, among the northern Germans, as if he had always belonged here.

Signs, of which, he reflected, there had been others in his life. One time, when he and Dolores were still married, he astonished her by proposing spontaneously that they lay an Othala rune in the gravel area behind their new terraced house in Frankfurt. Even if he didn't end up doing it, how had he come up with the idea in the first place? At the time, he had no interest in runes or Nordic religion. It was as if someone had tried to nudge him, and he had just been too slow on the uptake.

Siebenthal turned to his text, "The History of the Gods and Men," which he had revised again this morning. He gave the new religion, which it indeed was, the name Tritheism—even if the term was already used in theological circles to criticize the Christian doctrine of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he was not afraid to call it not *a* new religion, but *the* religion itself. It was nothing less than a Copernican revolution in faith. There were neither thousands of gods nor just one, but exactly three. And they had not created the

world but had been created with it. Nor had they created man or given him a soul. They merely lent him their divine breath—described in the Edda as *Önd* and in Hinduism as *Atman*—and thus consecrated him and created a connection.

They neither knew the future, nor could they work miracles; they could only influence matter through the connection to “their” humans. They were therefore not really important for the inanimate universe—but all the more so for humans and other civilizations in space, which they may have taken care of. For we humans were now a member of one of three divine families, unless our parents belonged to different gods or no gods at all and thus left us unconsecrated. And as members of such a divine family, we had rights: for example, to advice and encouragement and entry into one of the three paradises. But we also had duties: loyalty, brotherhood, and certainly some amount of worship.

Of course, these general duties applied to Siebenthal as well—but in his case, they could hardly end there. Euródin had most likely not just taken him into his confidence to satisfy a curiosity that had plagued him since childhood. He expected something special from him, that much Siebenthal was aware of. But what, exactly? What was he supposed to do? Write another book? Despite a long search, he hadn’t found a publisher for the first one and ended up publishing it himself through a service publisher. Nobody reviewed it, nobody reported on it, and, of course, it didn’t sell. Why should it be any different for a second book, this time “The History of the Gods and Men”? Just because Siebenthal claimed to be a prophet? He could imagine the laughter in the publishers’ editorial offices. Or should he copy the text and hand it out on the market square in Wismar, like advertising flyers?

After yesterday’s euphoria, Siebenthal felt a little perplexed. Even if he took all of this upon himself, what exactly did his god expect—from his people in general and from him in particular?

The inner voice within him was silent, and this gave him the idea of invoking Him in a ceremony to emphasize his request for enlightenment. Siebenthal drew from the depths of his memory whatever he had read about the Nordic-Germanic cult and considered what he

could accomplish with his modest domestic means. For the time being, unfortunately, Euróðin had to do without the sacrifice of a full-grown bull; there wasn't even any blood in the house, unless he drew his own.

Siebenthal made his way to the attic. First, opening a dust-covered box, he fumbled out a metal musical triangle his father had given him as a child. Then, from another box, he withdrew his grandmother's amber necklace. He'd presented it to Dolores after their wedding, but she had worn it only once. To her, a native Colombian, the time-honored jewelry must have seemed even more old-fashioned than it would to a German, and following the divorce, she had returned the piece, especially since it wasn't valuable. Now, however, the family heirloom might come in useful. For Siebenthal, incense was part of every religious ceremony, but he did not own frankincense and found the resin of this plant, which grows only in Africa, inappropriate anyway. Amber, however, was also a resin that could be burned as incense. The gold of the Baltic Sea, the mythical tears of Freya—what could be more suitable?

In the rest of the house, he found what else he needed: a mortar for the amber, a small pan to melt it, a chafing dish to heat it, a red tablecloth, matches, a candle, and, finally, a compass.

He quickly converted a small side table on the terrace into an altar. He covered it with the red cloth, placed the small pan with the crushed amber on the chafing dish, lit it together with the candle, and set out the triangle and compass. As the smoke from the amber bathed the terrace in an aromatic resin scent, without the pungent note of incense, he first picked up the compass and used it to point himself north, the logical direction of prayer for him. What the east was for the Muslim, the north was for the European.

He then opened the ceremony, similar to a Catholic Mass, with two triangle strikes—*ting! ting!*—bowed, and placed his right hand on his heart. *How should I address you?* he asked himself suddenly. He decided on what the Edda had handed down: "Hail, Euróðin!"

Siebenthal paused, thought for a moment, then added, "You father of my soul." Because this is exactly what the gods were to humans: not their biological fathers but the adoptive fathers of their souls.

“I thank you for all the knowledge that you have given me, and which fills my heart with joy,” he continued. “I want to serve you loyally as best I can, and all I ask of you is to give me an indication of what exactly you expect me to do for you. I will then do it faithfully.”

Looking up into the sky, he let his words fade away. Had He heard him? And would He answer him? A kind of holy mood took hold of him, as if he had crossed a threshold from the profane everyday world into a sanctuary with just a few actions and words, thus confirming for Siebenthal that the ritual had at least an effect on him. Even when, to his disappointment, he received no immediate response, he was gripped by the feeling that he had done something extraordinary. He ended the ritual with another bow and a single triangle strike, then solemnly extinguished the candle and the chafing dish.

Afterward, he sat in the armchair in front of his makeshift altar for a long time, lost in thought.

He received the answer that night. Siebenthal woke up as if from a dream, switched on his bedside lamp, and scribbled with a ballpoint in his notepad, which lay always ready on his nightstand:

1. Report the truth about the three gods and their peoples.
2. Found a community for my children.
3. Enjoin them to keep to themselves and preserve themselves until Ragnarök.

Siebenthal could hardly believe his eyes as he read through what he had hastily jotted down. A glance at the bedside clock told him it was half past two in the morning. But sleep was out of the question. He ran downstairs in his pajamas, clutching the note in his hand, and first went to the kitchen to brew himself a pot of green tea. Then he entered his study, switched on the PC, pulled all the monographs he'd collected on Nordic religion from his bookshelves, and stacked them on his desk. He sat in the swivel chair and read through the dream message a second time.

It was not the first of the three points that irritated—even frightened—him. It almost went without saying that he should spread the message he had received, even if he didn't know how yet. The second, “Found a community,” was unsurprising, too. Although he felt that



he, a loner and maverick all his life, was not exactly predestined for the task of founding a church for his god, and nothing else could be meant by this. For example, a few years ago, Siebenthal decided to try to gain a foothold in organized social life by becoming a member of a political party. It seemed the best bet for a man such as him; after all, he had no interest in rabbit breeding or the like. But he abandoned the experiment quickly. The intrigues, the power struggles, the pretentiousness, and the lack of loyalty to the party and supposed party “friends” repelled him too much. Nevertheless, even here Siebenthal would overcome his aversions if he had to and someone helped him.

What stunned him, however, was the third point: “to keep to themselves and preserve themselves until Ragnarök.” Each part of the simple sentence was outrageous in its own way. Remain among themselves: Siebenthal regarded the division of humanity into three *Urvölker*—four, if you also counted the unconsecrated—as something divinely given, which only confirmed what he had always felt intuitively. Presumably, people in Asia and Africa would shrug it off like he did; they had never thought otherwise there. But in Europe, especially in Germany, things were different. It was nothing else than the negation of the left-wing dogma that “all men are equal,” because now they were suddenly unequal in terms of their membership in a people of God and consequently had to treat one another unequally.

Siebenthal was not an expert in this field, but it seemed inevitable to him that this would lead to accusations of racism and “misanthropy,” and therefore being directed against the values of society and the German constitution. After all, discrimination based on one’s ethnicity or religion could hardly be justified with a “never-again-Hitler” constitution such as the German *Grundgesetz*. What was He actually thinking when He commissioned a German, of all people, to this task? Was it perhaps some kind of divine joke?

Well, a danger foreseen might be a danger avoided. Here a distinction had to be made with the utmost care between religion and private life on the one hand and politics on the other hand. Siebenthal certainly did not see himself as an insurgent. He was concerned with knowledge, not change, and basically meant well for everyone. Even the non-Europeans had to know they had their own god, and for his

part, he certainly did not demand that they treat him as one of their own.

So much for “keep to themselves.” However, the second part of the sentence caused him the greatest concern: to “preserve themselves until Ragnarök.” It was comforting, at least, that Euróðin “only” told him to “enjoin” his own and did not downright place the responsibility for their survival in his hands. Prophets were the mouths of the gods, not the executors of their will. At least this is how it should be. Ragnarök, the “fate of the gods,” was the Norse version of the end of the world, of course he knew that. The gist of it—for this he didn’t even need to consult the books on his desk—was that a *fimbul-winter* lasting several years heralded the end. An earthquake then freed the Fenriswolf, once bound by the Aesir, and caused a flood, which brought the Midgard serpent ashore and refloated the death ship *Naglfar*. On board were the giants, the enemies of men and gods since time immemorial. Giants, Fenriswolf, and the Midgard serpent stormed Asgard together and challenged the gods, on whose side the *einherjar*, the fallen warriors in Valhalla, fought.

As he remembered it, the matter had not ended very well for either the humans or the gods. So, what was Euróðin trying to achieve with this part of his mission? What was the point of preserving His people if they were to perish in the end anyway?

So, after all, he did look into his books and had to correct himself at least in part: although the world ended with Ragnarök, Odin was reborn, according to the Edda, and created a new one together with the remaining Aesir. The world view of the Germanic tribes differed significantly from the Christian one in this respect: while Christianity depicted a linear course—from the expulsion from paradise, to the apocalypse, to the final establishment of a kingdom of peace by God—the Indo-European peoples, as most peoples, believed history to be cyclical. A constant cycle of becoming, being, and passing away, which is another reason why the number three was sacred to the Germanic peoples. And this, in turn, probably did not just coincidentally correspond with the scientific hypothesis of an expanding universe that would pass away and then—hopefully!—at some point arise anew.

What if Ragnarök was merely an image of Euródin, which he used to describe all sorts of dangers for his *Urvolk*, which had to be endured until a new cycle began? Therefore, He had given them the general task of “preserving themselves,” somehow surviving and preserving the seed until better times dawned again, just like in the myth. Or did He have something specific in mind?

*Nobody knows what Ragnarök will be and when it will be*, not even the gods, he suddenly heard inside himself. *You must prepare yourselves for what you do not know.*

Sieenthal thought about this. How did you prepare for something you couldn't know? Some clues could possibly be taken from the Edda. According to legend, the giants and the Midgard serpent lived in Utgard, the outer world, which surrounded Midgard, the world of men, above which stretched Asgard, the home of the gods. The giants might now be equated with the other *Urvölker*, who posed all kinds of dangers, from creeping infiltration and displacement, to war, conquest, and destruction—something the Europeans were also guilty of in their history. The Midgard serpent, on the other hand, stood for the dangers of nature, from cosmic catastrophes to epidemics.

Which left the Fenriswolf. According to legend as well, he was a son of a giant and of Loki, a dark, ambivalent god of the Norse pantheon. So, he was partly an alien and partly one of their own ranks, which distinguished him from the giants and the Midgard serpent. Therefore, he stood for the inner enemy, who destroyed his own and collaborated with the outer enemies.

All these things might be distant, terrible, and, fortunately, rare events for humans. For the gods, however, who have been going about their business for billions of years, it must have been commonplace. Even the earthly solar system had once emerged from the debris of an older one. But did this help him? It was necessary to arm oneself against wars, natural disasters, and the self-destructive raging of the enemy within. But what exactly did this mean and how should we prepare for it? Unity, if necessary: unification, vigilance, and hoarding whatever would be needed, from supplies and knowledge to

customs and collective memories. That was all he could think of for the time being.

Siebenthal sighed and downed the now-cold cup of tea in one gulp. The light of the coming day filtered through the curtains of his study.

Today, at least, the sun rose once again for him and his own without any preparation. But they had no time to lose.

## 17

Siebenthal had spent the rest of the morning walking along the beach and then had breakfast in a café in the spa gardens, something he rarely did. But today he felt the urge to be among people, even if he knew only a few regulars by sight and didn't speak to anyone except the waitress—blonde, blue-eyed, pretty, while a little plump.

Back at home, he scoured his usual news portals on the Internet. The notes he had made following his latest revelation lay neatly stacked next to him on the desk. The task described in them was so daunting and the path ahead so shrouded in fog that he avoided even looking at them. May He give him a hint as to which direction to take. For now, Siebenthal would wait and drink green tea.

The news hardly differed from the previous day. An old war in Ukraine, a new one in the Middle East, government finances were once again spiraling out of control. In addition, Germany—indeed, the whole of Europe—was flooded with immigrants; but that, too, was nothing new. It whispered in the back of his mind that he shouldn't dismiss the latter so lightly. *Enjoin them to keep to themselves.* But how was he supposed to do that? Who would listen to him?

This was precisely what made him skirt Euródin's mission like a necessary, but dangerous, drug. He was well aware that to proceed would automatically put him in the sights of the violent and omnipresent German antifa who even here in idyllic Boltenhagen made their presence aware by scribbles on the walls and who were only

too happy to support the authorities' relentless "war on the Right" with fists and clubs in dark alleys at night.

To distract himself, he scrolled farther down in the news. Sometimes, in what used to be called the back section of the newspaper, a book would be discussed or there was something else that interested him, like an interview or a report about a curious event. This time he didn't have to dig deep into the bowels of the news belly, because on one of the smaller, alternative news portals, a prominent headline caught his eye: "Wife of Hamburg Businessman Murdered in Broad Daylight in Park." It wasn't so much the story itself that piqued his interest—after all, this was nothing new, unfortunately, and to be sure, one of the reasons why he had preferred rural Mecklenburg to Frankfurt.

What made him curious was the name Weskamp, which sounded familiar. It was the name of a client of Deutsche Bank's investment banking division, NEMAS BV in Hamburg, he remembered. It was a long time ago and must have affected Weskamp's father, who, he was vaguely aware, had died in a sailing accident a few years ago. Some foreign acquisition, which ultimately came to nothing—that's what it had been about back then. Siebenthal had not been part of the core team; he had worked only on the sidelines. Nevertheless. What a small world it was! That's why he read the article to the end. Weskamp's wife had apparently been raped as well as murdered while jogging in the deserted park during the storm three days ago. She left behind a husband and a daughter and had been carrying an unborn child.

Ordinarily, Siebenthal would have clicked on the next report, shaking his head. This time, however, something was different. For one thing, the murdered woman was from Denmark. He automatically associated that small country with runes and the Nordic religion. The drawing he had dreamt of: if it existed in the original, it might well have been something that back then someone would have carved into a rune stone. But that alone could not explain his violent reaction: he suffered a shock, as if his own wife were the victim; indeed, for a moment he thought he could feel her pain and despair inside him. He thought he heard her cries for help, as if she were calling out to him! Siebenthal breathed heavily and backed away from the screen as if it

contained an evil spirit. How was it possible? Nothing was known about the perpetrator, even if Siebenthal, like most people, harbored his suspicions. But the crime itself was nothing unusual. So where did his horror come from?

Siebenthal's gaze wandered to the pile of paper with the last revelation written down on it, and gradually he realized: Euródin had just given him a sign. How else could the soul of the murdered woman have touched his own in such an uncanny way? But what did it mean and what should he do? *He* remained silent on the subject.

Siebenthal thought about it for some time. Finally, he became convinced he would have to contact this Weskamp, although he didn't know why or how. He didn't know his phone number, nor his address, and Hamburg was a big city. Then he remembered an acquaintance who still worked in investment banking at Deutsche Bank. Dieter was one of the few people there he kept in touch with, and not so long ago, he had invited him to a tasting at his wine shop when Dieter and his family happened to be vacationing on the Baltic Sea. The Weskamps had kept their personal accounts at Deutsche Bank as well, at least at that time; in their circles, you didn't patronize the local savings bank. And Dieter would have access to Weskamp's account details and thus to his address.

A quarter hour later, Siebenthal, steaming with excitement and embarrassment, knew where Armin Weskamp lived. He had claimed to Dieter that Mr. Weskamp had ordered wine from him the other day, and he had stupidly misplaced his address. Dieter probably didn't believe him but gave him the address anyway.

Now he held the piece of paper with the address in his hands like another revelation. But soon he was overcome with doubt again. What exactly was he supposed to do with it? Well, pay a visit to the source of the possible hail, what else? For the time being, however, only from the outside. After all, he was a cautious man.

Armin knew his first day back at work would be the hardest. Mette had been dead for almost a week, and, so far, he had worked from home, with only Cordula and Jochen having stopped by to drop off some important documents. But he had to return to the office at some point; life went on, after all, and he was responsible for an enterprise.

So, he got up, breakfasted, drove to his reserved parking space as usual, climbed the stairs, and greeted Ms. Hussmann at reception with "*Moin, Moin!*"

She appeared ready to offer condolences. But before she could, he'd hurried up the stairs, even though today it felt as if he had to scale a mountain.

Upstairs, he met Cordula in the anteroom and was startled by the change in her appearance. Hadn't he seen her just a few days ago? She was wearing muted colors instead of her usual vibrant floral patterns and had obviously been to a stylist, who'd cut her hair short and permed her curls into waves. The scent of his assistant's perfume was unfamiliar to him, too. It was less citrusy and had a strong vanilla note. Overall, she appeared more mature and elegant.

He previewed the day with her. At eleven, there was a big meeting with the entire upper management. In response to the revised offer for *Ghostfish*, the Australians had faxed a letter of intent stating that they wanted to conclude the deal on the terms offered and start detailed negotiations. The meeting was more of a motivational kickoff, as the actual work would grind on for weeks if not months. Armin hoped the hustle and bustle that was now bound to break out would distract him from his grief. Already his immersion in the office routine was having a pleasantly sedative effect on him.

"I've just heard the Australians want to meet us in person," Cordula said. "Thursday next week until Sunday. There's apparently also a social program . . ." She let the sentence hang in midair, which Armin intuitively understood to mean plenty of hobnobbing in a relaxed atmosphere. Perhaps they'd visit a few warships, go on ex-

cursions, and wine and dine, preferably in the company of ladies. And he would be expected to head the NEMAS delegation.

“Thursday next week,” Armin repeated slowly. “The public prosecutor’s office has meanwhile released my wife’s body, and the funeral in Denmark is exactly on that day. I just learned this on Saturday. Maybe it’s better if my brother stands in for me.”

Cordula nodded as if she had expected nothing else. “Jochen, I mean your brother,” she corrected herself hastily, “has already said he would fly there.”

Armin was taken aback. Since when were the two of them on a first-name basis? “That’s fine,” he said. “Route it through our usual travel agency.”

Cordula looked embarrassed. “I . . . Could I ask you a favor?” she asked sheepishly.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Your brother asked if I could fly with him, so he’d have someone to help him with everything.”

Armin stifled a grin. Cordula was as bad a liar as she was a good assistant. The new hairstyle, the new perfume, the mourning clothes, as if she were part of the family: obviously, his brother had wasted no time—or Cordula, depending on how you looked at it. “Are you two together?” he asked straightforwardly. He’d never been one to beat around the bush.

The dark-red color of her face answered his question. He winked at her and patted her on the shoulder. “Go ahead and fly there. I’m in Denmark anyway. And congratulations! My brother is a fine chap. Just promise me one thing: you’ll stay my assistant, at least until everything is cut-and-dried here.”

“Of course,” she said, relieved and happy.

His first visitor was Goldmarie. She not only consoled him but also inquired about the status of the criminal investigation. “Have they got any leads yet?”

“No, not yet. They have DNA traces, but apparently no match in their database. They’re assuming a younger, male, random offender,



but that's hardly surprising." He'd been told this by Friedrich, who was now officially representing him as the victim's next of kin lawyer.

"Everybody knows what kind of 'male' did it," she said scornfully. "If they analyzed his DNA properly, they'd be able to pinpoint where he came from on a globe. Certainly not in tenth generation from Blankenese. But, of course, they'd rather hack off their hands than do that." Blankenese, a suburban quarter located in the western part of Hamburg and the location of his mother's home, was as affluent, old German stock and low crime as you could find in Hamburg.

"However this may be, Marie, none of it is going to bring my wife back," Armin said resignedly. The last thing he needed now was to speculate and have a debate about the country's failed immigration and asylum policy.

"Until recently, I thought *my* life was a mess," Goldmarie murmured. "Armin, I really am so sorry."

He remembered the phone call he'd overheard when entering her office the previous week, which now seemed like an eternity ago. "So . . . you and your partner, have you made up again?"

She shook her head. "No, this time it's final. She's looking for a new home."

Armin was about to walk with her through the figures for the upcoming meeting. But Goldmarie seemed to have something else preying on her mind.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. It's just . . . What will it be like if the *Ghostfish* order goes through?" she asked hesitantly. "There are rumors about the company being sold afterward."

"That could happen," Armin said cautiously. "My brother and I have never made it a secret we don't want to retire here. And as for the rest of the family—if the price is right . . ."

"I understand that," she said. "I'm just curious: Are you going to retire to private life? Or are you going to start something new?"

"I . . . would certainly start a new company in that case," he said slowly. "Or should I spend the rest of my life sailing and playing tennis?" The only thing he wasn't so sure about anymore was whether

he would start it in Denmark. Of course, he knew what Goldmarie was really getting at.

"In any case," Armin continued, "if I need a capable head of finance, which I suppose I will, I'd certainly make you an offer. That's what you're after, I assume."

She nodded.

"Marie, I've never left anyone hang out to dry, who has been as loyal and hardworking as you are. Shall we now go through the figures for later?"

After she had left, he called in Cordula. "Cordu, I forgot, you have to block four o'clock in my calendar. I must take my daughter to IKEA. We want to buy a bed and some furniture for the attic so that one of her friends or Anna can sleep over if she feels lonely."

Cordula nodded. "Okay, I'll do it," she said, and left.

He had now half an hour left until the meeting. It was high time he skimmed his emails, which had already arrived in the dozens. But before he could even start, a text message pinged on his phone. Inga Poulsen, the Danish estate agent. She wrote that she could only reserve the vacation home he had shown interest in for a little longer. Would he like to view it on Friday next week?

Armin had almost forgotten about the small domestic drama between him and his youngest over it. The wild plans they'd hatched out at the kitchen table afterward had given them both a welcome dose of fresh optimism, he recalled. It had been like the beginnings of a new life plan, as if the vacation home would solve all their problems. Meanwhile, he viewed it more skeptically. Should he really?

Then he remembered he would be in Denmark next Thursday anyway for the funeral. And he had made arrangements to spend the night in Aarhus with Anngrit. So, it would be easily possible.

"Will ten in the morning be okay?" he typed.

Five minutes later, he had her okay.

Siebenthal felt like a detective in a cheap movie. He had sunk from prophet to voyeur, he thought bitterly as he waited in his car for a suitable opportunity, parked diagonally opposite Weskamp's house. And it would get worse. He had bought the GPS tracker at an electronics supermarket this weekend. It came from a Danish company called Copenhagen Trackers, of all things—and wasn't there a certain irony in that?

The small black box next to him on the seat was the size of a pack of cigarettes and weighed as much as a bar of soap. The double-sided adhesive tape with which he would attach it to the underbody of Weskamp's car was already in place; he just had to peel off the protective paper. He had already tried out the device by hiding it in various places on the Boltenhagen cliff and then using a smartphone app to locate it. And he had practiced attaching it by using his own car. His findings: the tracker should adhere securely to the undercarriage, provided that it wasn't too covered in oil, soot, and road grime.

What had surprised him was the large selection of models in the store. Were there so many people who wanted to track their own car in case it was stolen? Maybe he should check under his own vehicle from time to time in the future . . .

This led him to wonder to what extent he was making himself liable to criminal prosecution with his plan. He would be *adding* something to Weskamp's car, not take anything, so it wasn't theft, he rationalized. As the tracker and the adhesive tape could be removed without leaving any residue, it wouldn't cause property damage, either. Espionage was ruled out too because he was not working for the secret service of a foreign power, unless He was regarded as one. But even if he *was* committing an offense, since He had ordered him to trail Armin Weskamp—for whatever reason—what else was there to do?

Last week, Siebenthal had already explored the lay of the land. Just like then, today there was only an old, mud-spattered Renault Kangoo station wagon in the driveway of the surprisingly modest

property, right in front of a narrow garage. A typical “shopping car,” with a “Save the Whales” sticker on the rear bumper and a tiny decal of a Dannebrog next to it. It had to be Mette Weskamp’s car.

Weskamp’s murdered wife—Siebenthal had even dreamt about her the other night. A tall, slender, and beautiful woman with a long, blonde braid who had sat like a fairy in a forest clearing by a pond—at least he thought it had been her. A peaceful serenity had emanated from her, which gave Siebenthal hope that she was in a good place. In a better one than he was currently, he thought bitterly.

After two hours—it seemed much longer to his bladder—the time had finally come: a large, dark-blue BMW approached the property and parked at the curb. Weskamp got out, allowing Siebenthal to see him in the flesh for the first time, having previously only found a few work-related photos of him on the Internet. He was wearing a dark suit, was tall like his wife, had curly, blond hair, and an athletic physique. His face, now of course marked by grief, was open and good-natured. Not someone you would expect anything bad coming from.

As it had started to drizzle, typical Hamburg weather, Weskamp hurried to the house. But before he could unlock the door, it was opened from the inside. A slender young girl, almost the spitting image of Siebenthal’s dream apparition, stepped out. This had to be Weskamp’s daughter, and her long, blonde hair was braided like her mother’s. She was wearing jeans and a red rain jacket and was holding something which she handed to her father. They were the basic carriers of a roof rack system, and with them in their hands, the two of them ran through the rain to their mother’s car.

Siebenthal realized the girl must have been awaiting her father’s arrival from behind the window, and a shock ran through him. Had she noticed him sitting at the wheel behind the tinted windows of his rental car? He had hired it for the occasion, as his own would have given him away with the advertisement for the wine shop he had never bothered to remove. If the daughter *had* seen him, she didn’t let on. The two of them hurriedly mounted the carriers, with the girl having to stand on a crate sitting in the driveway. Obviously, they were about to drive off again to transport something bulky. A mundane purpose for which Weskamp did not want to expose his

immaculate sedan to the risk of scratches but rather a task for “Mom’s jalopy.”

The two of them got in. Before she did so, the daughter looked around the street once more, in a reflex that seemed almost military to Siebenthal, as if she wanted to secure the retreat. For the first time, he got a clear impression of her face and eyes—and recognized the alertness and intelligence in them. Again, it seemed to him as if she saw him and understood everything, although it couldn’t be. *Was it not Weskamp at all? Was it her?*

Thoughtfully, he watched as the Kangoo reversed out of the driveway, glided along the road, and finally disappeared. And only now did he begin to realize how lucky he’d been. He had already envisaged himself crawling through hedges and climbing over fences onto the property at the witching hour, breaking into a garage or something similar. After all, to attach the tracker, he had to get to Weskamp’s car in the first place.

Now it stood not, as you would have expected, in the garage. That was obviously too narrow for today’s cars, which was why the Kangoo had not been parked in it, either. The driveway, on the other hand, would be long enough for two cars. But Weskamp would have had to repark now and later and had decided to spare himself the trouble. Instead, he left the BMW at the curb in front of the house, with no one at home—at least as far as Siebenthal knew. On his return, Weskamp would park his wife’s car immediately in front of the garage again and his own behind it, Siebenthal assumed.

In any case, he couldn’t miss the opportunity. He slipped the tracker into his rain jacket, and, more for extra camouflage than for the rain, grabbed the umbrella he had wisely brought with him. He got out, opened the umbrella, and strolled leisurely to the other side of the street, as if he were looking for an address. No one else was out in this weather. He pulled his hood down low on his forehead and, seemingly without a purpose, sauntered on the sidewalk to Weskamp’s car. There he bent down, as if he had dropped something. With a sweeping movement, he attached the tracker to the underbody. A quick glance told him it was as immaculate as the rest of the sedan. Satisfied, he moved on. The device would stick.

With a craftiness he would not have thought himself capable of, Siebenthal walked on calmly, first turning right two blocks farther on, then two more times, until he reached his rental car again after completing the circle. Anyone watching him would think he had finished whatever he had been doing in the area.

Back in the car, he took a deep breath of relief. He opened the tracking app on his smartphone and was greeted by a pulsating circle marking Weskamp's car. To him, it seemed like a heartbeat. Of course, he hadn't considered that Weskamp might own several cars. But he would certainly use his dead wife's battered, old one only in rare cases and would probably sell it soon anyway. Thus, an invisible bond between Weskamp, his daughter, and himself had been formed.

Siebenthal was excited to see where it would take him.

## 20

The blasted app had been dominating his life for the last ten days. At first, Siebenthal had found it exciting and felt like a real gumshoe. Now it exasperated him, and he considered himself more than ever a voyeur, a stalker—or a weirdo. He didn't even spare any bitter accusations against Him, because: What was it all about? Whenever the dot of Weskamp's car moved—which the app reported to him with an apocalyptic beep like something out of a science-fiction movie—it was always a matter of everyday trips. At least as far as he could tell. It wasn't as if he could just jump in the car and drive to Hamburg every time, and setting up camp in front of Weskamp's house was hardly an option. He trusted that his heavenly master would give him a kick up the backside in addition to the app's disaster alarm if things really got serious.

To his best knowledge, Weskamp led a harmless, unremarkable life. He drove to and from work, except on some days when he

probably worked from home. Once, the flashing circle stopped in front of a building that Google Maps showed was the Global School Hamburg—his daughter’s school, Siebenthal deduced. And twice it had parked in the lot of a funeral home, which had sent a chill through his guts the first time and made his throat constrict for a moment. What had been done to Weskamp’s wife still affected him in a way he could barely comprehend.

At the weekend, he thought for a moment the time had finally come. The dot was heading north on the interstate toward the Baltic Sea, which alerted him for some reason. He almost got into the car to follow it. But then the dot moved on toward the port city of Lübeck and farther north to Timmendorf, popular for its long-stretched beach. There it remained for a long time in a parking lot and then in front of a restaurant. Weskamp had just gone for a walk on the beach, probably with his daughter, or perhaps with friends, and then gone out to eat.

Siebenthal’s own life, meanwhile, was falling apart. Ready to jump at any moment, he couldn’t concentrate on anything and busied himself with gardening and repairs. He had not even been able to systematically analyze the facts of his “History of the Gods and Men”: namely, the connection between human history and the Primordial Consecration, the *Urweihe*, by the gods. Yet there was so much to consider and understand. He would have to develop a mathematical model of how the consecration rules, particularly the healing rule—when a consecrated person and an unconsecrated person fathered a child together—affected the development of the consecration status of a population. His guess was that the rules tended to bring about a homogeneously consecrated one.

He had also realized that without Euródin’s help, the consecration status of an individual could be determined only indirectly via the genetic lineage, the proportion of so-called ancestry-informative markers in the genetic material. A threshold value was probably needed here. But all this had to wait until the current task He had set him had been completed—whatever it may be.

Siebenthal was just about to leave the house to clear his head with a long walk on the beach, when his smartphone once again started

trumpeting in his ear about the impending end of the world. Could you replace that with birdsong? He looked at the app and noticed that Weskamp's car was not heading toward NEMAS as expected—it was nine o'clock in the morning—but instead north on Interstate A7. When the pulsating dot reached the Schnelsen-North exit, Siebenthal was alarmed. It led to the Hamburg-Fuhlsbüttel Airport. Would Weskamp fly away from him? But the dot moved on toward the city of Flensburg.

*Flensburg?*

Suddenly, the expected heavenly kick in the backside was clearly felt: Flensburg was on the Danish border, and whatever Weskamp was planning to do in Denmark, He wanted Siebenthal to follow him there.

Something else occurred to him now: Weskamp's car had stopped twice in front of a funeral parlor but never at a cemetery. So, he was probably attending his wife's funeral, which would take place in Mette Weskamp's native Denmark—and Siebenthal was supposed to be there as well.

Siebenthal rushed out of the house as he was. Then he thought better of it, went back inside, and hastily packed a suitcase. Clothes, washing kit, his e-reader and laptop, a few important printouts. Half an hour later, he was finally ready to go. He put on his fedora, which he rarely left the house without, hurried to the car, and drove off.

It was farther to Denmark from Boltenhagen than from Hamburg, so Weskamp had a head start, but Siebenthal managed to shorten the distance to the blinking dot with a reckless driving style that must have shocked the Danes, who always drove slowly and according to the rules. A few hours later, however, he was not in front of a cemetery as expected but a modest, well-kept little house in a middle-class neighborhood of Aarhus. Weskamp's BMW was already parked there. Next to it were two more cars sporting German license plates and several with Danish ones. A Dannebrog was flying at half-mast in the front garden, and Siebenthal realized: it must be Mette Weskamp's parents' house, and the family was gathering there to drive to the cemetery together.



So, he wasn't too late. But he asked himself, as he had done throughout the journey, too late for what? What was he supposed to be doing there? It had to do with Weskamp's wife's Danish origins and with the drawing, he sensed. But what exactly should he do at the funeral? Watch it while hiding behind a tree? Or mingle with the mourners?

Then an idea struck him: earlier, he had driven past a large Super-Brugsen supermarket, which should sell what he needed.

For Armin, it was as if he were burying his wife for the second time. Last week he had said goodbye with Anngrit, Jochen, Beata, and Henoeh and his family in a room at the Hamburg funeral home. They had chosen a white coffin, as was customary in Denmark, and he had insisted on laying her out in it and kissed her one last time. The body had then been transferred to Denmark. There, her family had said goodbye to her too at the open coffin and sung her a song as the traditional "last serenade."

Now her urn was waiting in the chapel of the Vestre Kirkegård, Aarhus's main cemetery.

The fact that it was his second farewell didn't make it any easier, and Armin struggled to hold back his tears.

He took a sip of the coffee Pia—the wife of his brother-in-law, Morten—had poured for him a half hour ago, even though it was cold by now. The atmosphere in the room was oppressive in every respect. The afternoon sun shone through the patio windows, making the air feel hot and heavy. The most depressing thing, however, was what he read on the faces of the other mourners. No one blamed him outright, neither Mette's family nor her friends, who were also present and would come to the cemetery in even greater numbers. Friends, some of whom had once been his own, their mutual circle of acquaintances. But that was over, he suspected. What they were hiding behind their masks of politeness and sympathy was probably what he himself was thinking: if Mette hadn't married him and moved to Germany, she would have been jogging along the beach in Aarhus, where you had to think far back to come across a case of rape and murder.

His father-in-law, Joakim Hansen, sat slumped in an armchair at the edge of the room. The retired city official had already been ill before his daughter's murder, and now the crime seemed to have robbed him of the rest of his flagging vitality. The two men had never been close; if anything, Joakim seemed to view Armin with skepticism from the very beginning. Nevertheless, they had sailed together from time to time. But that was over, too, Armin sensed. What had happened would always stand between them.

Karen, his mother-in-law, fared somewhat better. She distracted herself with her role as hostess, which she fulfilled with the help of her daughter-in-law, Pia. In addition, the former teacher had always seemed to Armin stronger and more cheerful than her quiet, introverted husband. She was an active Christian in the Danish People's Church and was involved in its charity work, which might help her. Since that terrible day, she had treated Armin with great compassion, and he reckoned that she would keep her house open to him, if only for Anngrit's sake.

Of his own family, apart from Anngrit, of course, only Jochen had come along. He was standing at a window together with Friedrich, who had insisted on being there as well and was talking to him quietly. Being the only other Germans in the room, they couldn't follow the conversations around them. When foreigners were present, Danes often spoke English out of politeness, as everyone here was fluent in it. But today they didn't. Who could blame them?

Beata and Henoch nobody missed.

Something that Mette's brother Morten said to him in Danish snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Is there anything new, Armin, I mean . . .?"

"No, nothing," he answered flatly. So far, they had avoided the subject like a taboo, instead sharing fond memories and discussing practical matters, such as what to do with Mette's things and mementos. Armin glanced at Friedrich in the corner. "There are traces that point to the perpetrator—DNA and other things—but he seems to be a blank slate, and there are no witnesses," he said quietly. "I can't stop thinking: if only something had been different that day. If the Australians had decided a week later and I had been at home. Or if I

had canceled the appointment with the architect. Or if there hadn't been a storm . . ." If, if, if.

"I see things a little differently," Morten replied. "If the guy hadn't been in the park . . . If he hadn't, I say, been in the country at all."

Morten was a doctor, a radiologist. Armin had rarely heard him talk about politics before, aside from complaining about bureaucracy strangling the health care system, high taxes, and things like that.

"Maybe we'll never know who did it and why it happened," he replied diplomatically. He didn't want to start a speculative political debate—which could lead to nothing except interfering with the memory of his wife—any more now than last week with Goldmarie.

But suddenly Anngrit, who had been staring silently—almost stonelike—out onto the terrace the whole time, turned her gaze to Morten. In her black blouse, black skirt, and black stockings, with her hair tied back in a prim ponytail instead of her usual braid, and her pale, waxy skin, she looked almost sinister.

"I will find him and avenge Mom even if I have to go to the ends of the earth to do it," she said.

Her tone, calm and matter-of-factly, not hateful, sent a shiver down Armin's spine. A shocked silence spread throughout the room.

Karen spoke up at last. "You don't say things like this, child," she said in a compassionate but firm voice. "'Vengeance is mine,' it says in the Bible, and that we should forgive our enemies. As hard as it may seem, maybe we must try here too. We must never lose our humanity."

"Maybe we're *too* humane," Anngrit insisted coldly.

Everyone was looking at her now, and even Joakim had awoken from his stupor in the armchair and was looking at her in amazement, as if she were some sort of oracle.

Armin, seeking to deescalate the situation, looked demonstratively at his watch. "We'd better get going, don't you think?" he asked, earning relieved agreement.

He stood up with difficulty and hoped his legs would carry him on the walk, which would perhaps be the hardest of his life. Following the service, after he had emptied a shovelful of sand into Mette's urn grave and said his final farewell to her, and after he and

the family had accepted the first condolences, he felt an initial sense of relief, as if a burden was now being lifted from him bit by bit. There weren't many people left in the queue, and he and Anngrit would go to their hotel afterward and have something to eat. Karen had invited him for the sake of form, but everyone had probably preferred him to decline, wanting to be alone with their thoughts and memories. Friedrich and Jochen, for their part, would be driving back to Hamburg immediately, where Jochen would take the plane to Frankfurt and from there the overnight flight to Australia on behalf of *Ghostfish*—with Cordula probably in the seat next to him.

Armin didn't know many of the mourners. So, he thought nothing of it at first when, almost at the end of the queue, a curious stranger stepped in front of Mette's grave. He looked to be in his early fifties, had a gray, carefully trimmed full beard, and was slim and as tall as Armin was. What irritated him most was the discrepancy between the man's unfashionable, functional outdoor clothes, which looked as if they had been thrown on hastily almost as an afterthought, and his elegant gray fedora with a black band.

When he reached Mette's grave, the stranger did something highly unusual. He didn't throw one of the waiting roses or a shovel of sand into the grave but dug something out of his pocket that Armin couldn't recognize and let it trickle into the grave. Grains? Then he recited something for some time in a strange and ancient-sounding language. He looked like a German, and when he approached Armin, he actually said, "*Mein Beileid.*" You have my sympathy.

His scholarly demeanor and the informal, even eccentric nature of his appearance made Armin think of a colleague of Mette's, possibly a marine biologist—an expert on rare clams, or something like that. But if he had come from Germany especially for the funeral, he must have known her well, and Armin searched his memory for someone he might have met before.

Before he could reach a conclusion, he heard Anngrit next to him ask the man with her usual bluntness: "What did you throw into my mother's grave?"

"Grains of wheat. An ancient custom."

"And what did you say? It was neither German nor Danish."

“No, it was Old Norse. Just a few old verses.”

If the stranger had already attracted general attention, now even the chaplain, in his black robe and white, wide official collar was looking over at them with irritation.

“Your mother isn’t dead, you know,” the stranger said. “She’s just somewhere else now.”

With that, he tipped his hat and left.

Anngrit stared after him with her mouth agape until Armin tapped her on the shoulder and brought her back to the present. “There are others waiting,” he whispered.

She looked at him almost shocked. Then she nodded as if she had understood something important.

## 21

Dad really tried to make us a nice evening. But the stroll through the Latinerkvarteret, the Latin Quarter of Aarhus’s old town, the pretty alleyways full of historic houses, the cafés, and carefree students sitting or strolling around, the delicious fare in Mom and Dad’s old favorite restaurant, and the mild, sunny evening—none of it was able to dispel my dejection and the leaden heaviness in my bones, as if Mom’s funeral had beamed me straight into retirement age.

There was nothing amiss with the hotel, either. Elegant, modern, and with every comfort, and Dad had even offered me my own room. But I didn’t want to be alone, not *that* night. Instead, I had pulled Emil out of the bottom shelf of my wardrobe at home and secretly brought him with me. I hadn’t slept with stuffed animals for years, but tonight the venerable green plush crocodile with its stains and tears had to protect me just this one more night. I slipped it under my comforter as soon as Dad looked away.

Later I joined him on the balcony. I relished the view over the harbor in the reddish light of the sun dipping into the Baltic Sea. Dad

had opened a bottle of red wine for himself, and I joined him on the second chair, with a small wooden table decorated with Nordic serpentine carvings between us. In addition to the wine glass and the bottle, there was his open laptop, which he was probably still using to read some company emails out of a sense of duty.

There was also a printout on the table about the vacation home we were going to visit tomorrow, and I leafed through it in silence for a while. Then I put it down, cleared my throat, and said, “Did you actually know the man earlier, Dad? I mean, he must have known Mom well if he came all the way to Denmark just for her funeral.”

Dad looked up, startled—apparently, he had forgotten about him already. Then he shook his head. “I don’t know, sweetheart,” he mumbled. “Probably someone who knew her professionally. Someone who spends a lot of his time on a research ship, and maybe he just happened to be in Aarhus—on shore leave, so to speak—and heard about it.”

“Old Norse is the language in which, for example, the Edda was originally written,” I continued thoughtfully. “And putting wheat in the grave is an old pagan custom. I researched it online when we were in the pub.”

In Denmark, people still knew the old stories about the Norse gods, even if they were regarded only as fairy tales nowadays. For example, when Grandma couldn’t find something, she would sometimes say, “Loki must have got that!” Loki was the Norse god of trickery and deceit, a kind of devil. I knew all this because Grandpa had once given me a book about Norse mythology, which I devoured just as much as the Greek myths.

Now I said meaningfully: “So the man must be a pagan. Why else would he be quoting pagan poetry and throwing grains of wheat into Mom’s grave?”

Dad took a big sip of wine before he answered in an offhand tone: “Maybe so, dear. Sometimes I almost think there are as many religions as there are people.”

“But what did he mean when he said Mom isn’t dead, she’s just somewhere else?”

Dad put down his wine glass, looked at me affectionately, and squeezed my shoulder. “But you know that from the church service and religious education. He means Mom has an immortal soul that is now in heaven.”

I shook his hand off and frowned. “Of course I know that; I’m not a three-year-old anymore! But according to Christian doctrine, the soul doesn’t go straight to paradise; it’s only on Judgement Day, when everyone rises from their graves.” When I first heard this story as a child, I was plagued by a nightmare in which rattling skeletons with grinning skulls were shuffling toward heaven. “The Germanic tribes, on the other hand,” I continued, “believed that the soul leaves the body immediately after death and is taken by a Valkyrie to Odin and Freya. Now, which of it is correct? Where do *you* think Mom is now?”

Dad was visibly embarrassed. “I don’t know, darling. I hope she’s somewhere where she’s well and can see us, but whether it’s the Christian paradise or your Valhalla, I won’t know until I get there myself.”

“Besides, the book Grandpa gave me said that only warriors go to Valhalla—the *einherjar*. Do you think the man thought Mom was a warrior?”

Dad laughed. “I can’t imagine anyone would think your mother was. She was the gentlest person imaginable. But I’m sure the women’s rights movement has found its way into heaven as well by now. And the man probably just wanted to say something comforting anyway.”

That seemed to settle the matter for him, and he returned his attention to his bottle of wine.

I, on the other hand, crossed my arms. “I don’t believe that. I think he was serious, and he meant something very specific and wants something from us. In fact, I’m pretty sure we’ll see him again.”

With that, I had finally aroused Dad’s interest. “Do you think so?” he asked intently. “I can’t imagine that. What would he want from us?”

Now it was my turn to play it cool. With a knowing smile, I looked past him into the sea and said, “We’ll see.”

Inga Poulsen greeted them with “*Hej!*” and a beaming estate agent’s smile and squeezed Armin’s hand with a firmness that made him

think she might box in her spare time. Unusual for a Dane, she was black-haired, and attractive, if somewhat austere. But it wasn't why he was here. Why else, he didn't really know. The vacation home settlement of Gammel Løgten, a half-hour drive from Aarhus, was situated idyllically in the middle of meadows and woods and boasted an impressive beach by Danish standards—very few of them could compete with the soccer-pitch-wide and miles-long beaches of the German North and Baltic Seas. Nevertheless, the house and its location would have been perfect. It would have been the shared vacation home of his family and his parents-in-law; and the large terrace and spacious lawns would have been ideal for hosting their Danish circle of friends.

Now, realistically speaking, that ambition was history, and Armin would first have to find a new reason for wanting this house. Anngrit, on the other hand, had already enthused about it on arrival, as if she had always been looking for something exactly like that. But his youngest didn't have to pay for it and keep it in shape and running.

Speaking Danish, the three of them inspected every room of the stylish house, in which products of Danish art design greeted them from every shelf and wall. It featured three bedrooms, one of which could be used as a study, and a large living-dining area with a dining table for ten, adjoined by a beautiful conservatory. However, the property had seen better days, and its major weakness was the bathroom, which was far too small. He would have to rebuild it and combine it with the laundry room, and that at Danish craftsmen's exorbitant prices.

The best part of the house was outside: a large wooden terrace, which tapered like the bow of a ship and had a "railing" made of weathered wooden planks. There was a large round table in the middle of the terrace and smaller ones with armchairs at its edges. And immediately behind the terrace was a forest. It was as quiet and idyllic as you could wish for, and Armin knew from experience it would stay that way at weekends and during the high season, too. Danes were extremely considerate people and avoided causing noise and trouble for their neighbors.



Armin sucked in the forest air, which was now, at the beginning of autumn, fresh and full of earthy aromas. A lovely place to relax and reflect.

Anngrit, next to him, leaned on the railing and gazed at the forest in front of her with an explorer's expression, as if she were the captain of a ship on an adventurous expedition. The way the house helped her to shake off the paralysis that had held her captive for the last few weeks touched his heart.

Inga knew her business and let them look around in peace without overwhelming them with information. She limited herself to pointing out the two garden sheds, complete with tools, and that the roof had recently been done. Now, at the end of the tour, she looked at Armin expectantly.

Armin, in turn, directed his gaze at Anngrit. "So, what do you think?" he asked her in German.

"The house is great! You absolutely have to buy it!"

He smiled, as did Inga, who knew enough German to have understood it.

"Is there anything we can do about the price?" asked Armin.

Inga was skeptical here. "The owner has already lowered it. I don't think he would sell for much less. You can make a counteroffer, of course. However, there are already other interested parties. I as good as sold it already, but then they suddenly changed their mind."

Armin was half determined, but not quite yet. All the money and a property that would tie him to what he now considered his former life; something he couldn't yet say that he wanted or not. Sure, the rise in interest rates meant the Danish real estate market was also in the doldrums, a good time to invest. And if things worked out with *Ghostfish*, his bank would almost beg him to take out a real estate loan. The most compelling reason to take the plunge, though, was a sudden, if confusing, feeling that this house was meant for him.

"Can I think about it, Inga?"

"Sure. But I can't reserve it. So, if anyone comes along . . ." She made a regretful face.

Armin suddenly thought of something else. "There's one more thing. My wife, who had Danish citizenship, was actually supposed

to buy the house formally. But she passed away two weeks ago—and even EU foreigners aren't allowed to buy a property here so easily." He had indeed completely forgotten that.

Inga looked shocked. "My sincere condolences," she said. She had probably wondered why he was visiting the house alone, but hadn't asked.

"Though that probably wouldn't be a problem in your case," she then said. "Your daughter is at least half Danish, and you speak Danish—I'm sure they'll make an exception. I can clarify it with the lawyer who works for me if you want."

"Yes," he said. "That would be great. Anngrit has Danish citizenship, by the way. And I'll make up my mind for good in the meantime."

She nodded. "That's how we'll do it."

"Thank you for the tour anyway," he said, and then addressed Anngrit: "Shall we hit the road again?"

His daughter was again staring out into the forest and now turned toward him in surprise.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, I just thought someone was there. What did you say?"

"I said it's time we start heading home."

She pulled a pouty lip. She had obviously expected him to buy the house on the spot, as she had downright demanded from him the other day. But she refrained from commenting.

Before they got in the car, they both took one last look back at the house.

In love, this was seen as a good sign. Indeed, Armin had the feeling he would come back.

Henoch didn't have any bothersome appointments this weekend and spent Saturday morning the way he liked it best: sitting in his armchair in the study, a leather model with lumbar support and a backrest so high that his family called it the Holy Chair. Exaggerated, certainly, but not absurdly so, Henoch thought. He listened to soft pop music purring from the radio on the bookshelf and clipped his fingernails, which was almost a ritual undertaking for him. He still wore slippers, pajamas, and a robe. Until the nineteenth century, all important personalities dressed only at midday. So, why shouldn't he do the same, at least on the weekend?

He had reached the middle finger of his right hand when his wife entered the room with a tray. Unlike him, Sofia was already dressed in her usual house clothes: plain brown trousers and a beige, non-iron blouse. She was wearing a flowered apron over it, because, as Henoch could tell from the aromas wafting in from the kitchen, she was already busy cooking lunch. She had a glass of slightly chilled German wine on the tray—a gray Burgundy from the Kaiserstuhl region nearby, as he'd requested—next to his cholesterol-lowering tablets, and exactly two cookies, one of each variety she had baked very early this morning.

Henoch's face lit up. "Sofia, darling, you'll drive me to my grave with your cooking one of these days," he scolded her, but pinched her buttocks as an expression of gratitude. He had never found it difficult to make his four children with her. Now he wondered whether they should retire to the bedroom for some exercise after lunch.

"But just those two," she said, looking at him sternly through her horn-rimmed glasses.

He couldn't resist trying the first cookie—something with almonds and fruit and jam—straight away, so that the crumbs falling out of his mouth mixed with his fingernail clippings on the desktop. "Yum-yum!" he called out. "Speaking of the devil: What's for lunch?"

But before she could answer him, the doorbell rang. "Are you expecting someone?" she asked. "It's still too early for the mailman."

Henoch looked perplexed. “Not really. And it shouldn’t be the Jehovah’s Witnesses, either, since I reprimanded them the other day.”

He had finished the second cookie and washed it down with a gulp of wine when someone entered the room whom he would never have expected, unannounced, at this time of day and in his own home: Meinhard Lahm, his loyal assistant, stood before him in washed-out jeans and an equally faded blue polo shirt. He looked breathless, and the half-bald head, which he had already developed in his early thirties, glowed red with excitement.

“Dr. Weskamp, excuse my coming here. But I learned something last night I absolutely have to tell you.”

“Sit down, Meinhard,” he said, offering him the chair in front of the desk.

Henoch called him by his first name and had encouraged him to do the same—but that Lahm had refused, saying that it seemed disrespectful. Lahm was something of an oddball. But he had provided him with invaluable services since serving as his personal assistant, first in Henoch’s position as deputy director of the Diakonie Karlsruhe, one of the social welfare institutions of the Evangelical Church Germany, or EKD, and later as dean. He was completely loyal to him, knew all and sundry, and was a consummate string puller who effortlessly found his way through the EKD’s labyrinthian web of intrigue.

“A glass of the gray Burgundy, too?” he asked.

“No, no,” said Lahm, raising his hands defensively as if resisting a biblical temptation.

“Well, then fire away!”

What Lahm told him afterward was so sensational that Henoch could no longer stay at his desk. Trembling with excitement, he got up and marched to the window, where he saw his eldest daughter, Elisabeth, cutting herbs outside in the garden, probably for lunch. “So, Bishop Leutheusser is resigning!”

“But it’s not official yet,” Lahm cautioned. “His personal assistant told me in confidence last night over a beer.”

As knowledgeable as Lahm was in such matters, Henoch wouldn’t have been surprised if he had gotten the assistant drunk on purpose. “When *will* it be official?” he asked.

“In two months, for the fall synod.”

The synod, the parliament of the Evangelical Church, convened twice a year, and in such a synod Leutheusser’s successor would be elected, too.

“But as I’m on vacation for the next three weeks,” Lahm continued, “I took the liberty of coming here.”

Henoch turned around to face Lahm. “Well done! So, we still have a bit of time.” In an admonishing tone, he added, “This vacation of yours: we’ll have to see about that. Have you booked anything yet?”

“No, but—”

Henoch waved his hand dismissively. Lahm’s vacation was already off the table for him. He gazed out the window again. Elisabeth, bending down to cut her herbs, brushed her long, black hair out of her face. On this occasion, he noticed for the first time that the neckline of her top revealed a considerable amount of content. How old was she? Sixteen? An age at which he, as a father, had to start worrying.

Ending his musings, he turned his thoughts back to Lahm’s news. Rumors had been circulating for some time that Leutheusser was suffering from cancer and would not complete his term of office as evangelical bishop of Baden. In the normal course of events, it would last another two years—and it was precisely this date that Henoch had based all his plans on. He was forty-seven now and could look back on a career in the EKD that made him not a little proud. After turning his back on his father’s questionable weapons business and devoting himself to God instead, he had studied theology, spent a few years as a parish pastor in the city of Freiburg, completed a doctorate on the doctrine of the Holy Ghost in the work of the Protestant theologian Erich Schaeder, and had finally worked his way up to the position of dean. Now, however, it was time to take the decisive step and continue the great tradition of his family. After all, his maternal grandfather had once been bishop in the district of Baden, too. Johannes Kinzinger’s stern portrait hung on the wall of Henoch’s study, and he kept the Bible and the golden cross his grandfather had bequeathed him like precious relics.

The news of Leutheusser's impending resignation should therefore play into his hands. However, Henoch wasn't yet ready with his preparations.

He trudged back to his desk. "Meinhard, you know what that means for us: what we wanted to achieve in two years, we now have to get done in six months." Lahm nodded eagerly, and Henoch continued: "I suppose we have to assume that Zölsch-Brink will run as well?"

Lahm nodded again. "After the fuss about her donation scandal has died down . . ."

Henoch, or rather Lahm, had discovered that donations had been used improperly in a foundation, which she chaired. Henoch had then tried to discredit his potential competitor. Unfortunately, the bomb never really went off.

"And since the current bishop is a man, we both know what that means for the likely gender of his successor," continued Henoch. "And we also know what it means for the EKD when someone like her takes the helm. She is the first professor of theology I have ever met who has no idea about theology and isn't interested in it, either. Sometimes I wonder if she even believes in God. She would be another nail in the church's coffin. In the end, we'll all just be refugee helpers handing out soup to the poor of the world."

Henoch knew Lahm thought like him. In a way, they were both dinosaurs in a church that was becoming increasingly distant from God. The mystery of faith was what had brought him to the ministry, not the urge to allow half the world to migrate to Europe or to grant homosexuals the sacrament of marriage. And because he would never be able to hold a candle to Zölsch-Brink, who knew how to swim in all charitable and political waters, in her own field, he had sharpened his theological profile by joining the Scripture and Proclamation Committee, and recently contributed a small piece to an anthology. On top of that he had started two projects a few years ago; one quite officially and another only in his head for the time being.

"Meinhard," he said after a moment's thought, "call in Pastor Bohrmann for next week. In the light of your news, we have to make a quantum leap with Jesus Now!"

“So should I cancel my vacation?” Lahm asked shyly.

Henoch looked at him gravely. “Unfortunately, the Lord’s work knows no rest for the chosen ones—especially not now.”

To that, he raised his glass and then emptied it.

After walking Lahm to the door, he entered the kitchen. It smelled as if something was burning there, and the last thing he needed in this arduous stage of his life was a ruined lunch. There was no sign of Sofia in the kitchen; instead, Elisabeth frantically tore the pan from the stove. She had been busy chopping the herbs she had harvested.

Henoch approached the pan and sniffed at it with interest.

“Sautéed pork with onions,” his eldest explained. “It’s served with herb potatoes and black salsify.”

He would have preferred spaetzle, the favorite local pasta, but Sofia had recently been tormenting him with a health obsession. When he had moved from Hamburg to southern Baden, he had struggled at first to get along with the people here. Only his father’s impossible treatment of him and Beata’s old contacts in the region had persuaded him to become the prophet who changes his land. But the excellent food and wine, not to mention the sunny weather, had long since reconciled Henoch to his exile.

He reached for a fork next to the stove to check the seasoning of the pork when Elisabeth cleared her throat.

“Father, can I ask you a favor? There’s a party at a school friend’s house tonight. May I go?”

Henoch let the fork with the piece of meat hover in the air between the pan and his mouth. “A party? And not at the church? Possibly with alcohol and older boys?”

“No, Dad, it’s just classmates, and the whole class is going!”

At this moment, Jacob, his second eldest, entered the kitchen. “But I’ve heard his parents are out of town,” he crowed. “There’s even supposed to be a drug dealer coming.”

His otherwise lamblike Elisabeth now became almost furious by her standards. “Why are you interfering? That’s not true!” she shouted angrily, hands on hips.

“Are his parents out of town?” Henoch asked sternly.

Elisabeth blushed. “Well, that part is true, but of course no drug dealer is coming.” She must have seen how the scales were tipping against her, so she upped the ante: “Dad, I’ve rarely asked you for anything, but I’m sixteen, after all, and if you forbid me to go there just because Jacob tells some fairy tales, then . . .”

“Then . . .?” Henoah asked with raised brows.

She became even redder in the face and lowered her eyes.

Henoah let her stew for a while before he said, “You’ll be home at ten o’clock sharp and come and see me before you go, so I can see what you’re wearing.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Next, he took on Jacob: “And you’d better mind your own business. Like mowing the lawn, for example, which is your duty this weekend.”

Jacob hastily quit the field, and Henoah finally let the piece of meat disappear into his mouth with a sigh.

Back in his study, he closed the door behind him and went to one of the filing cabinets. There he pulled out a model that he had built a long time ago from Lego bricks he’d pinched from his sons. Alongside Jesus Now!, the House of Christ was the second project with which he not only wanted to conquer the bishop’s chair but also spearhead nothing less than a spiritual resuscitation of the church. It wouldn’t be just another conference and training center, but the center of Bohrmann’s new missionary project Jesus Now! and thus God’s beating heart! It was not about bringing the church to the people, as Zölsch-Brink and her confused left-wing bawlers thought; it was first and foremost about bringing God back into the church.

The center would be located on a hill in the Black Forest—he already had a plot of land in mind—and it would be a highly visible beacon and a powerful sign that Christianity did not have to end. Of course, it would also cost a lot of money; funds that he would never get from the church. Until Lahm’s visit, Henoah had reckoned another two years would be enough even for his incompetent brothers to sell this *Ghostfish* whatsit—and NEMAS in the wake—so that he could thus fund the project from his share. But even if a silver lining



finally appeared on the horizon, as Armin had hinted recently, it might be too late for him.

He carefully put the model back in the cupboard. Instead, he picked up the printout of the email his brother had sent him the other day about some shareholders' meeting. A change of legal form. What did he care? But if you read it closely, all the shareholders had to agree to it.

Suddenly he felt as if someone up there had sent him salvation, and he came up with a plan.

## 23

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Anngrit, happy birthday to you!"

Newton, on whom they had put a gawdy party hat, barked in between and jumped up to greet me, something he rarely did. My part was basically to act surprised; of course, I had suspected something when Wenna had invited me "for a cup of tea," and Dad had insisted on driving me there, even though she lived only a half mile away.

Originally, we had agreed to forgo the celebration of my thirteenth birthday in view of the circumstances. Even though I was feeling better two days after the funeral, the role of hostess to a dozen or more friends would certainly have been too much for me. Now we were standing in the narrow hallway of Mrs. Peter's penthouse apartment, surrounded by streamers and garishly colored balloons.

"I'm off again, Mrs. Peters," said Dad. As he had always ditched parent-teacher meetings at school, he met Wenna's mother, my English teacher, for the first time and seemed awkward. Or was there something else? Now I became aware of how she had dressed up for the occasion. Mrs. Peters was subtly but carefully made up, her curly, brownish-copper hair looked freshly brushed, and she was wearing a skirt and blouse that accentuated her figure and fit her somewhat

girlish nature. Otherwise, when I visited Wenna, I knew her mother to wear only comfortable house clothes. I even thought I could smell perfume on her.

All that because of my birthday? After all, since his tragic death in an accident, there has been as little a Mr. Peters around as was there now a Mrs. Weskamp.

"You're welcome to call me Victoria—or Vic, if you like," she said in her warm, purring voice, which turned school lessons with her into a cozy, cuddly bubble bath.

"Yes, with pleasure. My name is Armin," said Dad. "And thank you very much for the trouble you're making with my youngest." Now he was getting a little pinkish in the face.

"You can stay here if you want."

"Uh, I think the young people would rather stay among themselves." He cleared his throat and directed his gaze at me: "Just call me when you want me to pick you up."

With that, he left, seen off by Vic with a smile just as warm as her voice.

After the two lovebirds had finally managed to break away from each other, the attention turned to me, the real protagonist of the day. My friends led me into the living room, where the table was literally bursting with food and presents.

A true English high tea has little to do with throwing down a cup of tea and munching a roll. The table and chest of drawers behind it were piled high with scones, whipped cream, various jams, cookies, and platters full of sandwiches, including the famous indispensable ones with cucumbers, but countless others as well, some of them Vic's own creations, as Wenna told us proudly. Her mother must have been toiling in the kitchen all day because of me.

While we feasted, and for once, were allowed to feed Newton at the table, I unwrapped my presents. Wenna had given me a book for learning Krav Maga, the form of self-defense used by Israeli soldiers. Quite useful in these times, I thought appreciatively, and Marina immediately offered to serve as my practice assailant if I wanted to try out some of the book's techniques. I was moved by so much self-sacrifice, but not in a fighting mood. As for Sephine, she presented me

with one of her homemade scented candles and a spray bottle labeled “Fleurs d’Amour” in squiggly lettering.

“Oh my, oh my!” shouted the group.

“Do you make perfumes now too?” I asked in amazement.

Before Sephine could answer, Marina reached for the vial to squirt a sample onto her wrist.

“Stop, don’t do that!” shouted Sephine. “It’s not perfume, it’s homemade pepper spray. It’s just supposed to look like perfume.”

Sephine, you must know, not only excelled in the musical and artistic fields but also was the top student in chemistry class. I remember a lovely afternoon we spent in the laundry room of the Buchet’s bungalow. There, between the washing machine, tumble dryer, and freezer, she had set up a small chemistry lab. And so, the two of us had stood there, in lab coats that were too big and dragged on the floor, wearing breathing masks, safety goggles, and acid-proof gloves, and had detonated interesting mixtures. Sadly, she had rejected my suggestion to produce some real explosives as too dangerous.

“How did you do that?” Wenna asked admiringly.

Sephine smiled. “Professional secret,” she said, highly satisfied with the impression she had scored.

Only Marina had to play Punch and Judy once again. “I’ll try it out,” she said. Before anyone could stop her, she sprayed a splash of the “Flowers of Love” onto her index finger and dabbed it into her left eye. Then the gates of hell opened. With a loud squeal, she jumped up, knocked over her chair, and fled the room. We heard the bathroom door slam behind her in the hallway.

After that, there was no sign of our friend for a while, and we were already wondering whether we should go and have a look. But then Marina reappeared with soaked clothes and a reddened eye. “It really works,” she said, and we raged with laughter. It was just as well that Vic had retreated to her study, where she was correcting English essays and didn’t overhear anything.

The afternoon turned into evening, with all sorts of antics and banter to and fro, and for the first time I felt free from the oppression of my mother’s death. To everyone’s astonishment, Wenna informed us that her mother was a descendant of a Cornish noble family. This was

news to us and led us to wonder whether we would have to address our teacher as “Your Ladyship” or even “Your Highness” in the future. For my part, I told them about the vacation home that Dad, if I was to be believed, had as good as bought, and what couldn’t you get up to there . . .

Finally, it was time to call the “daddy cab.” When he arrived, he stopped in the hallway to talk to Vic, and the four of us listened with pricked ears and twinkling eyes in the living room. Poor Wenna turned dark red, as if she was embarrassed by her mother.

We heard her tell my father in a soft voice how she had suffered a great loss herself, and that I could come to her any time if I needed anything. Good to know, even if it was hardly me who was meant to be the actual recipient of the message. Which, in turn, let Dad summon his courage: maybe they could do something together with the girls some time . . .

Dad insisted on driving Marina and Sephine home too and so we said goodbye to Wenna together, with winks and knowing giggles.

At home, I only now unwrapped the presents from my relatives. As I had feared, Grandma Beata had given me a Christian book; Uncle Jochen, a compass, which was much more useful; and Dad, the longed-for air pistol, which I would shoot at my uncle’s gun club under his supervision. My Baltic Sea grandmother had sent me a parcel with Danish treats and an elegant silk scarf. Of course, as expected, I hadn’t received anything from Uncle Henoah.

Suddenly, Dad, who had been watching my glee with satisfaction, cleared his throat. “I found something else in your mother’s things that she, well, bought for you before.”

He handed it to me unwrapped, as Mom hadn’t gotten around to it, and like most men, he couldn’t even wrap a fish in a newspaper properly. It was my very first own beauty set. But instead of feeling happy about it, I fought back tears. Because I had to think how Mom would never be able to teach me how to use it. I would have to ask Sephine, who was an expert in all such matters. And Mom wouldn’t be able to help me in any other way. Nor would she get to see my wedding and or hug my children.

“Are you all right, darling?”

I managed to suppress my tears for Dad’s sake. “Yes,” I said. “I just had to think about Mom for a moment. Thank you so much for all the great things!”

I stacked the presents in my arms and placed them on the desk upstairs in my room next to those from my friends.

It was dark here, and alone again, I was gripped by an uneasiness, a feeling of gloom and forlornness, like right after Mom’s death. Although it was warm, I was shivering, and that gave me an idea. I dug a box of matches out of my desk drawer and lit Sephine’s scented candle. I set it on my bedside table, turned out the overhead light, and lay down on my bed. Lying on my side, I immersed myself in the sight of the flame while a scent of vanilla, lavender, and sandalwood spread through the room. The flame, small as it was, seemed to bring warmth and comfort, and for me it dispelled the darkness more than a bright lamp.

As I gazed into it and listened to its quiet sputtering, I thought about what the man had said at the funeral: Mom wasn’t dead, she was just somewhere else. Would she really never be able to see my future husband and children? It was as if the candle flame was touching the very core of my heart with its warmth and light.

“Mom, is that you?” I called into the darkness. “Where are you?”

*With you,* I thought I heard. *Happy birthday to you!*

That night, I dreamt of Mom. She was standing in a bright room, dressed all in white. She did nothing and said nothing, just stood there. In my dream, I wondered what kind of room it was, because it seemed strangely familiar. After waking up, I pondered it for a while until it came to me: it had been the conservatory of the vacation home in Gammel Løgten, adjoining the ship’s bow terrace.

Still in a daze, I prepared breakfast as I did every Sunday morning, even when my mother was alive. I baked pancakes and arranged leftovers from yesterday’s high tea on the table, which Vic had distributed among the guests to take away at the end.

This gave me the opportunity to change a few things in my life. First, I made coffee for myself too—after all, at thirteen, I was as good

as an adult now—and left the childish Lion Wildcrush Chocolate & Caramel Flakes in the cupboard. Sephine, who was always one step ahead of me, had confided that she had already switched from coffee, which had become too coarse for her palate, to Darjeeling.

When Dad came downstairs and I had poured him a coffee, I asked him casually if he'd given some more thought to the vacation home. After all, it had already been two days.

"Honey," he said with a frown, "two days is not enough time to make a decision like that."

"I'm just saying, I think we really should buy it, and what if someone else takes it?"

"Well, then it's gone, and we'll find another one."

*Mom doesn't want another one*, I thought. *She wants exactly this one*. For whatever reason. But should I tell him about my dream? I decided against it. He might just see it as a ploy so that I could play pirate captain. Besides, I was embarrassed. So, instead, I contented myself with a pout.

"My little bunny, I want it too. Like you, I feel it might be the right thing. But we have agreed with the estate agent that she will clarify the legal situation first. And to be honest: I'd like to wait and see how things develop at NEMAS. It's not as if we can afford it just like that."

*Money, money, always the damned money*, I thought with an inward sigh. So, my only hope was that this stinking *Ghostfish* would actually find a buyer.

## 24

Out of habit, Henoch sniffed Bohrmann inconspicuously as he shook his hand. Until four years ago, the man, who looked to be in his mid-sixties but was actually only in his early fifties, had been a parish priest in his church district. Well-liked, albeit quirky and radical in matters of faith, he would have fitted in well in the preserve of

Christian dinosaurs that Henoch now considered himself to be in. Anyone in Bohrmann's parish who had left the church or simply not attended services for a long time had to be prepared for an uninvited house call—or at least a phone call—and a lecture on the possible resulting punishment in hell. This not only earned him the nickname “Holy Fire” but also led to complaints landing on Henoch's desk, which, in turn, amused him greatly.

But in the end, it had become the old, sad story: frustration, loneliness, and the feeling of being the last of his kind had made Bohrmann seek salvation in the bottle instead of heaven and often stagger to the pulpit on Sundays. As his disciplinary superior, Henoch had given him the choice of entering rehab or being kicked out the door.

The withdrawal and subsequent stay in a monastery had now had an unexpected effect on Bohrmann: instead of sobering him up religiously as well, it rekindled the embers of his faith into a blazing fire. He had thrown himself at the Lord's feet and sworn to Him that if He would only rid him of alcohol once and for all, he would bring back His lost sheep in great numbers. So, he had come to Henoch with the proposal to grant him half a pastor's position and some funds so he could devote himself to converting apostates, or those who had never seen the light. Henoch had recognized potential in this. He labeled it with the catchy name Jesus Now! and exhorted Bohrmann to round up stray sheep in market squares and pedestrian zones, supported by a group of euphoric young Christians. Rumor had it that the pastor was spotted even in maternity wards, where he talked new fathers and mothers into having their children baptized.

However, missionary work in twenty-first-century Europe turned out to be a much tougher sell than in earlier times, when it sufficed to merely relate a few stories from the Bible, present alleged relics of saints, or in some places, just hand out colorful glass beads. As a result, both the success stories and the press hype Henoch had hoped for hadn't exceeded a narrow limit—too narrow if he wanted to win the bishop's election six months from now.

That was why he had summoned Bohrmann to the office of the deanery. He offered him a seat in front of his desk. He couldn't detect

alcohol on the man's breath or in his manner, but his appearance alone gave cause for concern: Bohrmann's emaciation, his drawn, wild face, his gray, overly long hair, and his glowering gaze made him seem more like a plausible character in a horror flick than a benign shepherd. Henoah made a mental note to suggest a comprehensive facelift to him later, or at least a visit to a haircutter. For now, however, he rustled the papers on the table in front of him, the success statistics and activity reports from Jesus Now!, which his secretary had compiled for him earlier.

"Well, Matthias," he said, clearing his throat. "I've taken another look at the numbers, and I'm, shall I say, slightly disillusioned. Just four reentries and two first-time converts in the last three months—and that's with twelve events and project costs of twenty thousand euros. If we continue at this pace, the thousand-year kingdom will come sooner than we will have gathered our lost sheep. And even that only if no one was allowed to leave the church anymore," he added, almost amused.

The Holy Fire pierced him with his gaze, as if fathoming the depths of his impure soul. "It's difficult. You know that yourself," Bohrmann grumbled. "We live in dark times. Besides, there must be more of them; not everyone fills out your form. In others, a tiny flame is flickering, which still needs to grow. Finally, some may have found their way back to God but not to the church. Isn't every saved soul worth every effort?"

Henoah coughed. "Certainly, certainly. It's just that we don't have every effort available. Even the church can sow only what it has, and I must justify myself to the committees just as much as you to me. If it stays this way . . .

"But," he said, adopting a less pessimistic tone, "I've given the matter a few thoughts." Henoah reached for the sheet of paper on which he and Lahm had jotted down their ideas. "My first point is: we need more volunteers who don't cost anything. How many of them are currently canvassing the pedestrian zones and market squares with you?"

Bohrmann shrugged. "Sometimes three, sometimes ten, depending on how many come."



“There, see? We have to increase the pace considerably. Meinhard will recruit volunteers from the parishes to work in teams and take turns. A cold lunch will suffice as compensation. Furthermore: puff is part of the trade. But I can’t find anything in the files except a six-month-old report in the *Badische Neueste Nachrichten*.” Henoah waved the printout of the short, meaningless article from the regional newspaper, which had probably appeared in the miscellaneous section. “So, we need to do systematic media work. I want you to be accompanied by a journalist from now on. Meinhard will try to find one. Maybe—this we’ll have to see—we’ll even do a TV feature.

“Then, very importantly,” he continued rapidly, “we need voices from converts, preferably as YouTube videos, otherwise as letters. Anything that can serve as proof. I want Jesus Now! to be the talk of the town in the Church of Baden, and preferably in the whole of Germany! This is the only way to secure the future of the project—and the salvation of the souls of our flock.” He looked at Bohrmann expectantly.

“Where’s the pressure coming from all of a sudden?” the pastor replied grumpily.

Henoah frowned. Hadn’t he expressed himself clearly? Suddenly he wondered whether he had backed the wrong horse with the Holy Fire. Perhaps if he had recruited a willing young man with a flowing mane and a Jesus-look in his eyes instead . . . But to be honest, Henoah had to admit he would never have come up with the idea of a missionary campaign in the first place. It had been Bohrmann’s baby from the very beginning. And besides, for all of Bohrmann’s outlandishness and pigheadedness, he was authentic. Anyway, it was too late to replace him now.

“As I have already said,” he replied with an edge to his voice. “We have to justify ourselves for the money and time spent not just to the Lord, but to the EKD.”

“The project has been running for only two years,” protested Bohrmann. “Many others have been running for much longer and have not achieved anything. I don’t understand it.”

“And what’s wrong with stepping up the pace of missioning and improving our effectiveness through media work and recommen-

dations, if I may ask? Won't we save more souls in less time? Aren't we even obliged to do that?" asked Henoch, now being the one to pierce his counterpart with his gaze. "Should Jesus have preached to the cave walls alone and the apostles have refrained from writing the gospels out of noble restraint?"

Bohrmann still did not seem convinced. The old fox probably smelled something else behind it. But he had run out of arguments. "All right, we'll do it like you want," he said, resigning himself to the inevitable.

After Bohrmann had trudged dejectedly out the door, Henoch called in Lahm. He told his assistant about the conversation and Bohrmann's reluctant agreement.

"So, my dear Meinhard, see if you can find a few volunteers. The most important thing for me is the TV feature. Ask the local public TV station, and if they don't want to do it, ask a production company. If necessary, we'll finance the movie ourselves."

"But Dr. Weskamp, that costs a lot of money. Certainly, fifty thousand euros. Or twice it or even more? Where are we going to find those funds?"

Henoch shrugged. "We'll think of something. The main thing is to get started as quickly as possible." He pulled a plastic folder out of his briefcase. The small stack of sheets in it had taken him all weekend. "I'll show you something, but you have to keep it strictly confidential for the time being. Jesus Now! is not the only ace up our sleeve."

He spread out the sheets in front of Lahm. The first one sported in huge letters the title "DACH, Das Haus Christie—The House of Christ." He then presented him with his vision of a Christian mission, training, and recreation center in a prime location in the Black Forest. He talked himself into a frenzy, raving about a new Vatican, a rebirth of faith—even comparing the hilltop in the town of Sankt Blasien, from which the DACH was to look down with pity on the former Benedictine abbey of the Catholics below, with a new Temple Mount. He was beginning to sweat and felt the heat rising in his cheeks.

When he finished, exhausted, and looked expectantly at Lahm, the latter was dumbstruck at first. Then he stammered: "But that costs millions . . ." Finally, it dawned on him: "Your family is paying for it, aren't they?"

Henoch puffed out his cheeks. "I'll pay for that—a small advance on what I'm still going to dedicate to the Lord with love. Isn't it said the last shirt has no pockets?" he purred. "And here, too, it's important not to put off the good works unnecessarily. I want to have a feasibility study on the table by the fall synod. Make inquiries with possible architects." He slid him his draft.

But Lahm only eyed it skeptically instead of leafing through it eagerly. Did he think Henoch was crazy to squander his money on it? Or did he simply not believe he had it? Of course, Lahm knew that, like all Weskamps, he was a rich man on paper. But in EKD circles, where little of the private lives of leading members remained hidden from gossip, it was also known NEMAS had not paid out anything for years; that the company founder had always kept his family on a shoestring and put everything into the business; and that Henoch could afford the donations he made only because of his mother's contributions. She also subsidized the middle-class household of the family of six from her private coffer. Because nobody got rich as a dean.

As much as his assistant's skepticism nagged at him, Henoch didn't go so far as to let him in on family secrets and tell him about the *Ghostfish* contract and the planned sale of the company. And he certainly didn't divulge to him what he was going to do at the shareholders' meeting on Saturday.

"My dear Meinhard," he said, ending the conversation, "hard times require great sacrifices. The Lord will not only nourish us but also provide us with the necessary means, and glory will be waiting for us at the end of the road. And now: get to work!"

The occasions when Armin met with his two brothers and his mother at the same time—what might be called a family reunion—had become rare in recent years. Basically, they were limited to Easter, Christmas, Beata's birthday, and the kind of reason that brought him to his parents' house this Saturday afternoon: a shareholders' meeting of NEMAS.

The Art Nouveau villa in Blankenese, which he waited in front of together with Friedrich and Anngrit, had been bought by his father over thirty years ago, and not much had been done to it since then. Thus, the three-thousand-square-foot property, with gables, bay windows, a magnificent wooden porch, a curved entrance staircase, and the extensive garden—where Armin had spent a largely happy childhood—suffered a certain patina. Nevertheless, it was worth a fortune, at least on paper.

The same applied to NEMAS, and to make sure that the company would be valuable in reality as well, that was why Armin stood here. Henoah's silver-colored van was already parked in the driveway, leading him to fear that his older brother had brought along his whole family.

"What's all the stuff good for?" he asked Friedrich, who this time had come not only with his usual briefcase and laptop but also with a kind of pilot's case. "You could be mistaken for a sales representative."

"A representative, yes, but of the law," his friend quipped. "I've brought a printer and some paper in case we need to amend the draft resolution again."

Armin frowned. "We're changing the legal form from a BV to a GmbH. That's all, and it's without alternative; otherwise, the agreement with the works council will collapse, and not only will NEMAS face ruin but also my dear family. So, what is there to amend?"

"Let's wait and see," Friedrich said cheerfully, as if he were already looking forward to a legal skirmish.

At that moment, Jochen's Porsche pulled up briskly at the sidewalk, and his younger brother shot out of the car like a soldier to battle. When he spotted Anngrit, who was carrying a bouquet of flowers, he greeted her with, "Well, comrade, still keeping up the chin and staying out of trouble?"

Armin knew what was coming next. It was a ritual between them. "Ever . . .!" Jochen called out in his best barracks-yard tone.

"... loyal and brave," replied Anngrit, whom he had dragged along against her will, more gloomy than euphoric.

Jochen was not satisfied. He put a hand to his ear: "Do I need a hearing aid, or did you just cough gracefully like an old lady? Once again: Ever. . .!" he yelled loudly enough to raise all of Blankenese from its afternoon slumber.

"... loyal and brave!" Anngrit now shouted at the top of her lungs, straightening her spine and pretending to click her heels together.

"That's my girl," Jochen said, beaming.

Armin had never been in the military. Now it seemed to him that some inspiration for raising children might indeed be found there. "So, it looks as if we could go in," he said, amused.

When he had rung the bell and his mother opened the door, he said to Jochen and Friedrich: "Go ahead, you two. My daughter and I have something to settle with Mother."

Grandmother and granddaughter hadn't spoken since Anngrit brusquely turned down Beata's offer to have her move in with her for a while.

"Mother," he said, "Anngrit has something to say to you. By the way, she bought the bouquet herself." Which was not exactly true. In fact, his daughter had stubbornly refused to use her allowance for it, arguing that it was far too meager anyway.

"Grandma, I'm sorry I was so rude the other day," she said (as per agreement with Armin) and handed her the flowers. "I was . . . emotionally incapacitated."

His mother appreciated the gesture sure enough, although she might harbor some doubts as to whether it came from the heart. "Thank you very much, Anngrit! Come inside then."

On the way into the living room, Armin said to Beata, “Anna now comes three to four times a week and takes care of everything.” Which was stretching the truth a bit as well: two or three times a week was more accurate, and in fact, Anna didn’t take care of many things, but what was the point?

“Is she supervising your daughter or just serving her?” Beata couldn’t refrain from asking.

Anngrit looked as if she wanted to snatch the flowers right out of her grandmother’s hands. Armin squeezed her hand as a warning, then nudged his daughter toward the living room.

Henoch was sitting there on the couch, a plate of leftover cake in front of him and a collection of crumbs on the coffee table and under his feet, as if a piglet had dug his snout into the pastries. His table manners, which—like his other habits—had not exactly improved since childhood, were one reason in a long list as to why Armin got together with him as seldom as possible.

He was relieved to see that Henoch at least hadn’t brought the whole family with him: his cheeky younger children were missing, as was his wife, whose pious humility appeared to him to be a mere pretense and behind whose thick horn-rimmed glasses disapproval and resentment seemed to fester. Just his niece Elisabeth, the only member of the family Armin liked, sat next to her father.

And, unlike him, she immediately got up to shake hands, first with Armin and then with her cousin. “What beautiful flowers!” she exclaimed, looking at the bouquet in Beata’s hands.

“Anngrit, will you get a vase out of the cupboard for them?” asked Beata, reminded suddenly of the gift.

But before his daughter even so much as stirred, Elisabeth called out, “I’ll do it!” She ran to the antique oak cupboard, opened a door, pulled out a vase, took the bouquet from Beata, and walked toward the kitchen with both.

Anngrit shrugged her shoulders and smiled mockingly.

At last, Henoch deigned to stand up as well and shake hands with the new arrivals. “Greetings to you all! I’ve been in Hamburg since this morning,” he said with cake cream on his upper lip. “I thought

I'd treat my daughter to something, and we'd take a tour around the city. We'll stay the night and join Mother for lunch after the church service before heading south again. You're welcome to join us if you want."

But there was something false in his tone, as if he didn't expect or hope for an acceptance.

"Oh, thank you, but we already have other plans," Armin said quickly. "Unless, of course, *you*, Jochen."

His brother shook his head vigorously. "Same with me. Plans."

"Won't you and you, Mr. Kussmaul, at least sit down and eat a piece of cake before we get down to business?" asked Beata, in an attempt to defuse the emerging mutual embarrassment.

Armin peered pointedly at his watch. "I don't know, Mother. Don't you have some appointment later, Friedrich?"

His friend was only too happy to oblige. "Uh, yes, unfortunately, I have something else that has been arranged for some time. So, if we could . . ."

"Very well, let's go to the drawing room then," said Beata, a little disappointed.

Anngrit wanted to follow on his heels, but Armin shook his head inconspicuously.

Beata, having not missed this, said to her granddaughter, "You two had best stay here until then. There are some games in the cupboard drawer you can pass the time with."

Dark clouds gathered on his daughter's face, and she gave him a stinging look. But Armin returned it with a warning one and walked out of the room with the others, leaving his youngest to her fate.

It wasn't often that I wanted to kill my father. This was one such occasion. I wondered if I could simply ignore my cousin by helping myself to the cake first and then turning my attention to my smartphone.

Crossing her legs demurely, she sat bolt upright opposite me in a tartan plaid skirt, which was, of course, above the knee and could be considered conservative. Or prehistoric. She wore a black sweater over it, and her black hair was tied back with a black headband. The

only thing that stood out about her was the gold cross dangling around her neck.

While I was lounging in the armchair, shoving my first piece of buttercream cake into my mouth, she cleared her throat and asked, “Do you say grace at home before you eat?”

At first, I just stared at her open-mouthed and uncomprehending. Then I said, “As you can see, no.”

I hoped she would leave it at that attempt at small talk, but, obviously, her good manners wouldn’t allow it. “And why aren’t you wearing a cross?”

I thought before I answered. “I tried it once. But it went off with sparks.”

That should have been the end of our charming little chat. But then I discovered a completely new side to my cousin: she smiled and said without any judgement, “Now, isn’t that interesting! And what does the ‘A Heart for Scha’ on your T-shirt mean?”

It was my class’s birthday present. I then explained my nickname to her, and she opened her eyes in genuine or feigned dismay: “Letting a twelve-year-old shoot with a live weapon? That’s unheard of!”

“Alexander the Great killed his first enemies at that age,” I pointed out. “Besides, I’m thirteen now. You must practice early if you want to be something. I, for example, might be a general or a marine biologist, maybe even an astronaut, but that’s yet to be decided. And you?”

That seemed to cause her some embarrassment. I had forgotten: with my uncle Henoch, you didn’t become what you wanted but what he had in mind for you. For Elisabeth, it was probably a career as a pastor’s wife with twelve children. Her answer surprised me all the more: “I want to study French and work as an interpreter. After graduating from high school, I’ll go to Paris.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So, you don’t have to study theology like ...?”

Now she blushed. “Why do I have to do something like this, do you think?”

I remained silent, embarrassed.

But even that couldn’t do away with her splendid mood. “Shall we play something together, like Grandma suggested? I haven’t played



Nine Men's Morris for ages. The games are in the cupboard over there." Before I could reply, she jumped up, ran to it, and pulled out a pile of board games.

I sighed inwardly. My cousin possessed an indomitable charm that even I had to succumb to.

So, we played Nine Men's Morris.

## 26

After Armin had explained the reasons for the change of legal form and Friedrich had laid out the technical details, his friend pulled out of his briefcase the folder containing the original draft of the resolution, which he had already sent in advance by email.

"Are there any questions, or should we proceed straight to the signing?" Friedrich asked the group.

They sat around the drawing room's oval cherrywood table, surrounded by period furniture and paintings, which Armin's father had bought in galleries over the years. In the bright, tasteful room with a view of the garden, they had been holding their shareholders' meetings at least once a year since Klaus's death, and each of them had their accustomed seat: Armin, at the top as unofficial head of the family; Jochen to his right; and Friedrich, who was always present as legal advisor, to his left. Mother and Henoch sat opposite each other at the far end of the table.

During his and Friedrich's presentations, no one had asked a single question, including Henoch, who was the only one Armin thought might raise an objection. Mother hardly understood what it was all about, and Jochen was naturally on his side. But something about Henoch's look and his attitude had already irritated Armin in the living room, as if his older brother were hiding something.

Now Henoch rustled his printout of the email. "If I've understood correctly," he said slowly, "we'll then be no longer our own masters

because of this workforce codetermination. Instead, there will be a supervisory board in which the workforce or the works council will have a say in any of our business decisions.”

Armin started to protest. In practice, it was not quite as bad as that. Besides, what was Henoch, who’d never cared about the company in the least, huffing about “our” decisions?

But Henoch didn’t let him get a word in edgewise. “I made some inquiries,” he continued. “This can also affect the chances of a company sale—and I think we all agree we want that to happen. So . . .”

Armin struggled to maintain his composure. Was Henoch just trying to puff himself up again and waste everyone’s time? Or what was he up to? He interrupted him sharply: “Were you actually listening to me earlier? If the change of legal form doesn’t happen, the agreement with the works council will be null and void, and with it the savings in personnel costs. Then we’ll incur a loss on every *Ghostfish* sold to the Australian navy, or at least no significant profit. And then there’ll be no company sale, but sooner or later a trip to the bankruptcy court. It’s certainly better to sacrifice a little finger than to have both your hands chopped off.”

“If that is true,” Henoch replied pointedly.

Armin pulled the packet of paper with tables and graphs from the folder in front of him and waved it in Henoch’s direction. “I’ve sent you and Mother all the figures. What else do you want me to do? Teach you to read, or what’s the problem?”

“Armin!” Mother called.

“The problem is one of trust,” Henoch said coolly. “You’ve been with the company for eight years now. Among other things, you were head of R&D and therefore responsible for this *Ghostfish*, even though it may have been Father’s idea. As a man of the church, I stayed out of all these matters myself, trusting my brothers would do the right thing. I didn’t negotiate with these Australians and am not responsible for agreeing to their price demands, which, in turn, has led to this change of legal form. Who’s to say you two didn’t let yourselves be pulled over the barrel?” He leaned back and looked at him and Jochen disdainfully.

“Besides, if the fate of the company depends on this contract,” he continued, “what potential for blackmail can the works council have? Is he sawing off the branch he himself is sitting on? Maybe you should have put a gun to *their* heads instead of presenting your own brother with a fait accompli?”

There was a hostile silence for a while. Into it, Henoah said, “That’s why I’ve decided not to agree to the change of legal form without further ado. I’m even considering having a special audit carried out by an auditor. Because I have the right to do that, as you very well know.”

Now Armin said quietly but cuttingly: “If the family no longer has confidence in me, they can recall me at any time. I joined NEMAS only for their sake. God knows I would have preferred to stay in Denmark—and still hold my dear wife in my arms.”

Everyone around him lowered their eyes. “What Armin says applies to me too,” Jochen said finally. “For my part, I would have preferred to stay in the navy. But if you’re puffing out your cheeks like that, be my guest and take the helm! Father threw you out because you couldn’t even sort the receipts in the accounts department properly. But go ahead and try earning your money in the private economy instead of living off church tax and your mother’s money!”

“Stop it, for God’s sake, everyone!” shouted Beata, clutching her breast.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Henoah said quickly. “But you see, my brothers leave me no choice.”

Armin and Jochen wanted to protest, but now Friedrich intervened: “So, what’s supposed to happen now?” he asked matter-of-factly. “Of course, Mr. Weskamp, you’re free to go ahead with the special audit, albeit at your own expense. But, I’m afraid, we don’t have the time. Because we would be talking about at least a quarter. By then, the contract will either be in the bag, or—if the negotiations are interrupted—the Australians will put the project out to tender again. And speculating that the works council will back down seems extremely risky to me. So, as your brother says, it really is a case of take it or leave it.”

Henoah turned demonstratively to Friedrich, who was sitting next to him. “What I want,” he said to him, ignoring his brothers, “is some

kind of financial security.”

“‘Security’?” Armin exclaimed, aghast. “What are you talking about now? Aren’t we all in the same boat?”

Henoch continued to address Friedrich as if his brother hadn’t said a word. “Not for me, of course, but for what is most dear to me: my church. In the event—which I can unfortunately no longer rule out—that my brothers are ruining the company, I want at least the Lord to keep some benefit.”

“What exactly are you thinking about?” Friedrich asked cautiously.

“A donation to the Evangelical Church in Baden to an account of my choice. As far as I’m concerned, it can be deducted from my share when NEMAS is sold. So, it would only be an advance, really.”

Now Armin wondered what really was behind it all. Henoch was the last person he believed to have altruistic motives. As an older brother, he had bullied him and Jochen when they were children and squealed on them to their mother when they had done something wrong. He was all about power and importance, and he had never been choosy in his choice of means. And Armin believed he had not heard the voice of the Lord when he had switched to theology after his undergraduate studies of business administration and the infamous internship with his father. Rather, it had been the perceived humiliation, defiance, and the—quite justified—hope that the church could do more with people like him than the business sector could. Thus, he suspected that Henoch needed the money urgently for something very specific.

“And how much is the letter of indulgence supposed to cost us?” he asked sarcastically.

“Ten million,” Henoch said, now looking at him without batting an eyelid.

Armin laughed. “Out of the question! We don’t have that much liquidity now. I sit down with my CFO every month to make sure we make it through the salary run.”

“But Armin, I think Henoch is right,” Beata intervened. “The church can do so much good with it. Can’t you come to an agreement?”

She clutched her heart again, and Armin noticed with concern how pale her face had become. But if he gave in now, it could have incalculable consequences for the company. He did the math in his head for a moment. "I can offer a million," he said. "More—then I'd make myself liable as CEO."

Only a tenth. Henoch turned fiery red, and Armin realized that in his brother's mind, this was yet another deliberate humiliation, just like when Klaus had thrown him out of NEMAS. Because he didn't understand, or didn't want to understand, the dire straits the company was in. And because he lived in a fantasy kingdom where the Lord fed the birds without them having to sow and reap.

"And if I stick to my no?" asked Henoch in a dangerous tone.

For a while, he and Armin sat opposite each other like two cow-boys in an old Western, about to face off in a duel.

"Then I will make sure," Jochen said finally, "that the muck sticks to *your* shoes when NEMAS goes down the drain. What do you think your bishop will say when breadwinners of families are out in the cold because of you?" he asked sharply. "I'm sorry, but to me you're just an extortionist, and I wonder what you really need the money for."

Henoch had never liked his younger brothers, and the disdain was mutual. As for Jochen, Henoch regarded him as little more than Armin's sidekick, just like when they were children and the two of them used to play tricks on him to get revenge for his patronizing and snitching. Armin realized that from now on, no matter how things turned out today, Henoch would even consider him his enemy.

In any event, Jochen's threat seemed to have left some impression on Henoch. So, Armin did the math in his head once again and said, "One and a half million. That's my final word."

"The extortionists are you and not me," Henoch spat hatefully. "Very well, I give in! But there has to be a resolution here and now, along with the other one."

Armin now realized how astute it had been of Friedrich to bring a laptop and printer to the meeting. Also, his friend seemed rather unaffected by the argument, as if he'd anticipated nothing else. "Draft something, Friedrich," he said.

At that moment, Beata shoved her chair back noisily. She was as white as a sheet and said, "Excuse me! I'm going upstairs to the bathroom for a moment."

"Do you need help?" Armin asked worriedly.

"No, no, I'm fine."

So, he stayed to finish the job.

After Nine Men's Morris, we had brushed up on our knowledge of checkers and crazy eights as well. And still there was no sign of life from Dad and the others. While I peeked ever more frequently at Grandma's antique grandfather clock, Elisabeth played with unflagging devotion—perhaps because, as the poor thing had confided to me, she had so many household chores in addition to her schoolwork that she hardly found time for such idle pleasures.

What in all devils' names could the old folks have been doing for so long? Dad had mumbled that all each of them had to do was put their John Hancock on a piece of paper. "We'll be done within an eyeblink." Had they run out of ink? A few minutes ago, the door had opened outside in the hallway, and I had hoped white smoke might finally rise from the drawing room. But it was just someone climbing up the creaky wooden stairs.

From the sounds of it, that someone now seemed to be making his way down again—or at least trying to. Because I suddenly heard a rumble and a sharp cry. Grandma! Elisabeth and I jumped up at the same time and ran to the door. I yanked it open and raced up the stairs, where Grandma practically fell onto me.

"I can't hold her on my own!" I shouted.

Now Elisabeth did something I wouldn't have thought her capable of: in one movement, she grabbed Grandma, who must have stumbled halfway down, by the shoulder while I leaned into the banister and formed a buffer between her and the stairs. Together we managed to stop her fall and help her regain her footing.

"Are you all right? Have you hurt yourself?" I asked.

Though still gasping heavily, her chest heaving, she shook her head.

Uncle Jochen and Dad, who must have been jolted out of their conclave by the racket, were now with us. They carefully helped

Grandma down the stairs and into the living room. I rubbed my aching shoulder, and Elisabeth blew on a finger with a pained expression. Apparently, she had torn a nail in the rescue operation. Despite our wounds, I raised my hand; she understood and raised hers, and we high-fived. The two of us nodded at each other in satisfaction. From then on, I looked at my cousin through different eyes.

We followed the others into the living room, and I remembered something important: Grandma's nitroglycerin spray to calm her heart! I hastily rummaged for it in her handbag on the hall dresser, found it, and hurried into the living room with it.

She was still sitting in her armchair, breathing heavily, while Dad and my uncles clucked around her like panicked chickens.

I put the spray in her hand, and she inhaled a few puffs. It seemed to help immediately because her breathing quickly returned to normal. "Thanks, you two," she said gratefully. "You saved me!"

Then she turned to Dad and my uncles with a look of wrath I had never witnessed before. "Take an example from your children! I never, ever want you to talk about one another like that in front of me again! Or you might just as well stay away from here for good."

This was followed by silence and embarrassed looks.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Dad said after a while. "It's a bit difficult sometimes. But we're done now and just need your signature."

Something really bad must have happened in the drawing room, because Dad and Uncle Jochen didn't give Uncle Henoch a second glance, despite Grandma's threat, and they didn't speak to one another either. We said our hasty goodbyes, and I was just able to cast Elisabeth a comradely glance before we were out on the street.

"Do you believe it?" Dad exclaimed to Mr. Kussmaul. "So, your inklings proved to be right once again, Friedrich."

The embarrassment about having just witnessed such a family drama dripped almost out of Legal-Fritz's big ears. He shrugged and said, "Look at it this way: we can proceed as planned, and one and half million more or less should hardly make a difference."

Now Dad looked at Jochen: "Shall we go out for something to eat together?"

Jochen shook his head. "I already have a date with Cordula."

Uncle Jochen and Dad's assistant? Well, well, what a surprise! It was the first time I'd heard about it.

"And how about you, Friedrich?"

"I can't either. Today it's our regular meeting—*Jour Fix*—at the Free Democratic Party, and it's been a while since I have shown my face there. But go ahead and take your daughter out! Isn't she the heroine of the day?" He patted me on the shoulder, but, thanks to God, not where I'd hurt it.

The three of them looked at me with admiration, which made me feel a little awkward. "Oh, let's eat at home, Dad! You're just trying to spare yourself from cooking. Because today it's *your* turn, in case you forgot!"

Everyone laughed, and we finally got in the car and went home.

## 27

I didn't waste much thought on my uncles' quarrel during the drive. While Dad had lapsed into a brooding silence, my thinking moved in a completely different direction. Its starting point was Uncle Jochen's casual mention of Cordula. Dad was now a widower, and that raised the question as to how long he would or should remain so. For my sake as well as his own, he would marry again sooner or later, I assumed. He wasn't the kind of person who could stay alone forever and talking to Mom's soul by way of a candle, like me, would hardly do for him.

Thus, the question of my future stepmother boarded my train of thought. Here, of course, both his and my interests had to be considered. Cordula, who would have been putty in my hands, was no longer an option. With her, Dad had truly let a sex bomb slip through his hands. But as he was practically an old man by now—I mean, he's forty-three!—what did he need one for? Besides, it might bother



Mom. Anna, on the other hand, who would cause me even less trouble than Cordula, was also taken; recently, in fact, she had even talked about wanting to marry her Polish boyfriend soon.

Next question: What if Dad were to go hunting on a dating platform or land a NEMAS employee, like Uncle Jochen had? That represented a considerable—indeed, unacceptable—risk for me. My stepmother didn't even need to abandon me in a forest, as happened to the famous Gretel; it was enough for her to complain about my socks lying around.

A known risk is generally preferable to an unknown one, they say in the military. So, my thoughts inevitably ended with Wenna's mother, Victoria. Things had already sizzled a little between her and Dad on my birthday. Victoria was gentle, even though she was a teacher and could be strict when necessary. More or less, she was like Mom, albeit two years younger, which at least wouldn't leave Dad any worse. I couldn't say much about his taste in women, and Vic certainly couldn't compete with Mom's beauty, but God knows she wasn't ugly. Besides a romantic streak, she had something girlish and fresh that might enliven Dad. She would not cause him or me any difficulties beyond what was always to be expected, I surmised. Plus, she could cook reasonably well for an Englishwoman, and she was Wenna's mother, which meant my second BFF would be my stepsister—not some sassy brat who had to be reined in by me first. Mom, on the other hand, wouldn't have to be too jealous or worry about Dad.

Finally, I also wished it for Vic herself. Wenna had always been going on about how they lacked money and how her mother felt lonely. So, Cinderella would have her prince, and all live happily ever after.

Thus, it all came down to Vic, and now it was time for me to fan the tiny flames of passion from my birthday party into a blazing fire. An idea how to go about it already formed in my mind.

Later, when Dad and I were sitting at the table eating the spaghetti with tomato sauce that he had cooked, I said casually, "Tell me, Dad, Mrs. Peters went to such trouble with my birthday . . ."

He raised an eyebrow, and I thought I detected a hint of a blush. "Yes?"

“Wenna told me she bought a washing machine and tumble dryer on eBay, but now the seller won’t deliver them to her as he promised, and she can’t manage to pick them up on her own. Can you maybe help her?”

“And where does that seller live? Not at the southern end of Germany, by any chance?”

“No, somewhere in Hamburg. Do you think we could get it into Mom’s car, or would we have to rent a van?”

Dad pursed his lips and didn’t even realize he had already fallen into my trap. Instead of thinking about whether he even wanted to do Vic this favor, he just thought about how he could do it. “It should probably fit into the station wagon,” he said after a moment’s thought. “But I can’t carry a washing machine on my own, so you’d have to help me.”

“I’m thinking of our barrow in the cellar that can even manage stairs. If you pull it up and the three of us push from below? Besides, they have an elevator there. Of course, you’d also have to help her carry the old devices down to the cellar.”

“And when is the whole thing supposed to take place?”

“Oh, maybe on Monday evening? If she doesn’t pick them up soon, he’ll sell them to someone else. They’re supposedly brand new; the man is all of a sudden moving abroad.”

Dad reached for a napkin and wiped his mouth, which was stained with tomato sauce. “That should work,” he said. “Okay, let’s do it, then. As you say, she’s gone to so much trouble, I’ll have to return the favor anyway. Will you make the appointment?”

“Sure,” I said, inwardly triumphant.

We ate in silence for a while. Until Dad asked out of the blue: “Is she actually popular as a teacher at school?”

“Uh, not particularly,” I said. “She’s considered very strict,” I claimed, trying to conceal my own possible interests.

Dad tilted his head and grinned. “I don’t believe that now.”

I returned his grin with a quiet smile. Dad’s thoughts were already moving in the right direction.

Of course, everything ended up being a trifle more difficult than expected. We were sweating and panting profusely when we had picked up Vic's appliances, moved them from downstairs to upstairs and upstairs to downstairs, and connected the new washing machine and dryer. For, as it happened, the elevator in her house was out of order on that very day. So, we stood together in Vic's kitchen, exhausted like elite soldiers after a tough combat mission and celebrated our victory with apple juice (Wenna and I) and beer (Vic and Dad). Right then, Dad noticed a puddle of water under the fridge.

"Dear me, I have no idea what it is," said Vic. "Everything here has grown a bit old."

That *was* true. The kitchen and other furniture dated back to the time when she'd moved to Germany with her husband, who had earned good money as an oncologist at Hamburg University Hospital—until he died. Now she was struggling to pay the rent on the luxurious four-room penthouse apartment. According to Wenna, her mother only managed this because the landlord hadn't raised the rent in ages, which Vic feared would happen sooner or later. The car she had driven ahead of us was a rickety Honda well into retirement age.

Good thing Dad was here now. Although he couldn't replace her car, he quickly pulled out the fridge and soon found the cause of the leaking condensation: a clogged valve between the condenser and the drip tray. Using the tools he had brought with him "just in case," he cleaned the valve and solved the problem. Vic now gazed adoringly at him and seemed on the verge of throwing herself in his arms. The way to peoples' hearts leads through their stomach, they say. But that was only half true. For the tender half of humanity, it went through the toolbox. Meanwhile, my six-foot-three-inch Dad seemed to grow several inches taller; it did him so much good to play the role of the male hero in a simple, unambiguous way for once, without finding himself caught in a tangle of intrigues and conflicting interests, as was the case with NEMAS.

Likewise, he no longer looked at Vic as his daughter's teacher but as a woman. He measured and weighed her, so to speak, with his eyes and thoughts, also but not exclusively in physical terms; just as men

do with women they have just met when they think they are unobserved. Could she . . .?

Stowing away his tools and getting ready to leave, Dad said suddenly, "How about the four of us going out for a meal together? I still owe you something for my youngest's lavish birthday party. A bit of lugging around and rattling tools is no compensation. So, can I invite all the ladies to a restaurant?"

Vic beamed as if he had proposed to her. "But only if it's not too expensive," she said modestly.

I mentally rubbed my hands together. It couldn't have gone better, not even in the *date doctor's* script in "Hitch." *Hollywood come true.*

Dad had chosen a fish restaurant near NEMAS. Once we were seated, he explained why: "It's a simple place, but the fish is as fresh as can be and the preparation is impeccable," he said. "I come here often, with family, business visitors, or after sailing."

I could essentially agree with that, although "simple" wasn't really true. While I studied the menu with bored routine, Wenna was engrossed in it, casting anxious glances at the assortment of eating instruments at the next table. In addition to the usual fish cutlery, there were even lobster tongs and a bowl of lemon water. It was obvious that she didn't go to restaurants often. Even Newton, who crouched at her feet, looked intimidated.

Vic had dressed up for the occasion. She was wearing silk stockings, a suede skirt, and an embroidered, tight-fitting blouse, and she smelled of perfume. Dad had at least combed his hair and shaved and—at my urging—used a little of the musky aftershave I'd given him for his birthday. Only Wenna and I had remained our modest, natural selves.

"You sail?" Vic picked up on Dad's remark.

"Yes, it's a family tradition, even after what happened to my father. We sold his boat after it was salvaged. It was damaged, and, besides, well, the thought of it . . . Jochen and I used the proceeds to buy a new, smaller one we both use. We took over Dad's mooring, close by in Billwerder Bay. The marina of Moorfleet is smaller and more intimate than the one in Hamburg."

Vic nodded with interest. "I've never been in a sailing boat in my life," she confessed, "even though I'm a child of the coast myself. My parents' house is only a few miles from Cornwall's coast."

"That's impossible!" Dad called out. "So, you're a landlubber. Well, it seems I'll have to take you on a little trip as a freshman sailor."

Vic blushed, and the two exchanged a look. "Yes, maybe. I just hope I don't fall overboard. The boats look so tiny and wobbly to me."

"*I've sailed before,*" Wenna interjected. "Last summer on the GSH introductory sailing course. Remember, Mom? You don't fall off the boat that easily, but you might get seasick."

This seemed to raise fresh concerns for Vic. Nevertheless, she said bravely, "I'd definitely like to try it out."

"Couldn't we go sailing as a foursome?" asked Wenna.

I indicated with a discreet shake of my head this was not a helpful suggestion. The next date of the two should by all means be a tête-à-tête.

"I'm afraid the boat is a bit small for four, or even three," said Dad. (Fortunately.)

However, before he could choose a date for Vic's sailing course in his diary, the waitress appeared, and we ordered our food. I opted for prawn skewers and the local specialty: a North Sea flounder called plaice, prepared Büsumer style, with lemon, crabmeat, and capers. Dad and Vic went for fish soup and crab salad, respectively, followed by Finkenwerder-style plaice, a variant with fried bacon. Wenna, who was afraid of choking on fish bones, chose salmon variations and had-dock fillet wrapped in herbs. For this, she didn't need finger bowls or lobster cutlery, either.

Dad, picking up on Vic's previous comment about her origins, said, "So, you're from the Cornwall part of England . . ."

"Not only that: Mrs. Peters is actually a real Cornish noblewoman," I remarked, causing Dad's eyebrows to register surprise.

"You can call me Vic," she said to me, slightly embarrassed, then joked: "Except in class. As for the nobility, we are merely baronets, which is the lowest level of the English landed gentry and is passed

down only from father to eldest son. So, I'm not a noblewoman myself."

"True nobility comes from within," Dad parried charmingly, which made Vic's face light up. "Anyway, Cornwall is supposed to be very beautiful. I've never been there myself."

"Beautiful, yes, but contrary to what the TV pictures suggest, also poor. Mining used to be the most important industry there. Today people tend to make a living from tourism or work in London during the week. My father and brother have turned the manor house, which actually dates back to the seventeenth century, into a hotel. There was never really a place for me there. That's why I studied in London and moved to Hamburg with Arthur without much regret."

The mention of her late husband threatened to steer the conversation in an unfortunate direction, so I chimed in, "You really must tell Dad about the Celtic sacrificial stone, Vic." That was something Wenna had confided in me.

"Oh, that," she said, even more embarrassed. "It's more of a tourist trick, really. Tintagel, the supposed seat of King Arthur, is not far away, and there are many monuments from that time in Cornwall. Nobody knows whether the stone in the grove on our property was truly once a sacrificial stone. Dad claims it was and lets groups of visitors make offerings of food and drink there. It's good for business. He even named the hotel Druids Grove Lodge."

The mention of drink and food offerings suddenly triggered something in me. I thought of the man at my mother's funeral, the grains of wheat, his old Norse verses. Was there a secret connection here? After all, the Celts and the Germanic tribes had been something like buddies. Was it, I thought, no mere coincidence that Dad and Vic had met? Suddenly it seemed to me that the two of them were destined for each other in a manner far beyond my purely worldly motives.

Especially as I knew Vic's indifference to be just an act. Wenna had also confided in me that when she and her mother visited Cornwall, her mother would place offerings on the stone in memory of her deceased husband. Why would she do this if she didn't attach any importance to it? Did she just not want to appear like a kooky esoteric

to Dad? Especially as she must be aware of his family's Christian background.

"Real or not, in any case, it sounds very interesting," Dad said good-naturedly.

For him, I assumed, all religion was just an oddity. But it left me pondering.

So, we talked for a while about Cornwall, sailing, and all sorts of things until Dad cleared his throat and brought up a completely new topic: "Tell me, Vic, are you interested in the opera?"

She pursed her lips. "Yes, a little. I used to go to the theater with Arthur from time to time."

"In fact, I have two tickets for Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. I got them as a present because Mette was a member of the Hagenbeck Zoo's Sponsors' Association, and we always donate something to them. I haven't found anyone who wants to accompany me yet, and Anngrit is more into pop music."

I confirmed this with a nod. I did play the trombone in the school orchestra. But opera? I beg your pardon!

"So, if you want, I'd be delighted if you came with me. Otherwise, I'll have to let them expire. I'm definitely not going alone."

"I do like Mozart," Vic said, and the two looked at each other like *that*. "When would it be?"

"Tomorrow already, unfortunately."

Vic was a little coy until she said, "All right. It would be a shame to let those tickets go to waste, wouldn't it?"

Dad and Vic smiled sheepishly at each other, and I blinked at red-faced Wenna. Would we soon be stepsisters?

## 28

Armin looked into beaming faces. He had spontaneously convened the celebration in the large meeting room when the original of the

*Ghostfish* contract signed by the Australian Ministry of Defense had arrived by courier. He had immediately forwarded it to the legal department, for them to scrutinize and okay the text—more than three hundred pages—before he and Jochen signed it. But he had no doubt that a new era was beginning for the company—and perhaps soon, a post-NEMAS era for him. If only Mette could have been here to see it!

“So, here’s to a bright future for NEMAS and all of us!” he said, ending his short address and raising his champagne glass.

The assembled department and division heads, twenty in number, not including Cordula, followed his example, and everyone took a sip.

Still, Armin couldn’t help but notice that some of his managers’ radiance seemed a little forced. It was going to be a time of change for everyone. The company agreement would come into force, and everyone here knew the order would be the signal for the Weskamps to withdraw from NEMAS at the first opportunity. Would a buyer continue to grant everyone here the authority and privileges they had accumulated over the years? Nobody knew, not even Armin. Goldmarie watched him with furtive skepticism, which reminded him of their recent conversation about his—and therefore her—professional futures. Only Jochen and Cordula seemed completely carefree and happy, standing together intimately and no longer making a secret of their relationship, even at the office.

Armin wandered around, glass in hand, chatting briefly with each of his staff. After all, the work was only just beginning. They still had to adapt the design of the *Ghostfish* to some special requests from the Australian military, set up a production line, and much, much more.

After an hour, he retired to his office. All he meant to do was quickly skim his emails and then drive home. It was Friday afternoon. In the past, he would have been getting ready to go out with Mette. They would have gone to the movies, or a concert, or out for dinner with friends; to an exhibition, or something else. Not every Friday, but most of them. Afterward, they would have made love, just like on Saturdays.



Now, only Anngrit was waiting for him at home. And what about Vic? Yesterday's evening at the opera had been nice, and later they had had a lively chat over a glass of wine in a pub. They had agreed that he would take her for a sailboat ride in two weeks' time. It would be a lie if he said he didn't find her attractive. Apart from that, she was smart and warm-hearted. She perhaps exuded even more warmth than Mette, if that was possible. But he didn't yet share the same stock of common memories and interests with her. Something was developing between them—he could feel it—but it needed to grow. Besides, his wife's death was so recent that it would feel like a betrayal to turn to someone else so soon.

On the other hand, shouldn't he make the effort to enter into a new relationship just for Anngrit's sake? She would soon reach a difficult age when she would need a female adult to relate to. Armin couldn't look after her as he should because of the demands of his job. And Vic was there now. As he had realized yesterday, he had aroused a certain expectation in her, one that he could easily disappoint. Should he tell her that he would get back to her in a year's time, when his mourning period was over?

He sighed and was almost relieved when, contrary to expectations, his phone rang once more. A foreign number. Australia, he thought at first with some dismay, but given the time difference, it was too early—or too late, depending on how you looked at it. Then he recognized the country code 001, the USA, where it was just before noon.

They had a small branch there, but who of them would call him out of the blue?

"Mr. Weskamp, my name is Greg Thomsen," the caller said in English as soon as Armin picked up. "Does that ring a bell?"

Armin didn't need to rummage through his memory for long. Maritime defense technology was a small industry. They knew each other from trade fairs and symposia, competed in tenders, and also subcontracted each other. Greg Thomsen was the CEO of Morgan-Bellcraft Government Systems, a conglomerate born out of the merger of a specialist in marine electronics and a shipyard. There, in Austin, Texas, they produced just about everything a modern navy

needed, from submarines and smaller warships to maritime surveillance technology. Except drones.

As far as he knew, Morgan-Bellcraft, or MB, had already knocked on his father's door about a takeover, precisely because of NEMAS's drone expertise, but nothing had come of it. Now the news of the final award of the *Ghostfish* contract must have spread to Thomsen at record speed, which could be explained only by an informant in the Australian navy. Besides, Armin knew from his strategy workshop in the spring that MB had a large financial cushion. So, the reason for the call was not hard to guess.

"Yes, of course," he said. "Didn't we even meet last year at the Modern Day Marine expo?"

From the large marine defense fair in Washington D. C. Armin remembered a wiry sixty-year-old with a white moustache, which had earned him the nickname "the Walrus." An ex-military man who had studied at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and had worked for several defense contractors after his military career.

"I assume you want to congratulate NEMAS on its fine commission?"

Thomsen laughed roaringly. "Yes, something like that. How much is your outfit for sale for? You're not on the stock exchange, so you couldn't just be bought up."

Armin had to strain to stifle his excitement. He hadn't expected a prospective buyer so quickly, especially one who could afford NEMAS almost out of petty cash and without much financing. But the bride had to act coyly at first if she didn't want to spoil her dowry.

"What makes you think my family would even want to part with such a gem? Especially now, when new horizons are opening up for us?"

Thomsen laughed roaringly again. "Something tells me that. We both know that we can use NEMAS's expertise, and you can use our money. So why not team up?"

"Why with Morgan-Bellcraft?" Armin replied. "There are others who would be interested in us. My phone probably won't stop ringing for the next few weeks."

“Yes, maybe, but there aren’t so many potential buyers, after all. For us, it would be a marriage made in heaven, Mr. Weskamp, and I would make you the following suggestion: we meet in person and decide whether we want to carry out a nonbinding due diligence. Once we know what price comes out of it, we’ll see what happens.”

Such an in-depth financial screening and subsequent evaluation of the company by auditors and consultants was always a prerequisite for such deals. After all, you weren’t talking about a used car. But now that he was able to shake off the last of his father’s financial legacy with the *Ghostfish* contract, Armin no longer had to worry about it.

“There’s certainly nothing wrong with having a cup of coffee together,” he said with feigned composure.

They made an appointment for next week, after which they hung up.

Afterward, Armin drummed triumphantly on the desk. He quickly shut down his PC, packed up, and headed home, eager to tell his daughter the good news.

There, the smell of burning food greeted him in the hallway, and through the open kitchen door, he heard Anngrit cursing. When he entered the kitchen, smoke was billowing through the room, and his youngest was pouring water into a pan with charred bits of food stuck to the bottom, producing a loud hiss. Then she frantically opened the window—it was a miracle the smoke alarm didn’t go off—and only now noticed him.

“Hi, Dad,” she said, all rattled.

“Hi, honey. What was there supposed to be for dinner?”

“Zurich ragout with hash browns,” she replied. “The recipe said you must use a heavy, iron pan and not a nonstick one. Unfortunately, they forgot to write that you can’t even go to the bathroom while frying. Damn it!”

Armin saw the sad remains of the ragout in the open garbage can. But the hash browns in a bowl on the kitchen worktop still looked intact. “Didn’t Anna precook anything?” he asked.

“Ha!” exclaimed his youngest, scraping the burnt remains out of the pan with a spatula. “You haven’t heard the latest! She’s quitting

at the end of the year because she's going back to Poland to marry her boyfriend. And today she stopped by for only a bit because she had a doctor's appointment."

"Oh," said Armin, disappointed that instead of sharing his good news, he had to deal with domestic problems. "That's too bad. I guess we'll have to find someone else then." He tasted the hash brown mixture with one finger and noticed it needed salt.

Anngrit filled the pan with water and dish soap. Then she dried her hands on a dish towel. "Don't think it's so easy," she said. "Anna said she could choose her positions. It was pure kindness on her part to take pity on us at all, is what I understood." She hung the towel back on the hook. "But no problem! I can study for school at night, and the nearest supermarket is merely two miles away," she concluded sarcastically.

"Honey, I'm sure we'll find a solution."

Now she gave him a meaningful look. "Maybe you do need to get married again after all, Dad."

Armin blushed. "Well, that's not something to be rushed into." He cleared his throat. "Listen, I've got two pieces of good news today: we've got the contract from the Australians, and someone has already called who wants to buy NEMAS. But that's top secret for the time being, do you understand?"

She nodded gravely.

"Anyway, I thought we'd celebrate and have dinner and then go to the movies. What do you think?"

His daughter walked up to him, hugged him, and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. "Great idea, Dad! There wouldn't have been anything to eat anyway. I'm just going to get changed."

"If you had one wish, what would you want?"

They had taken the subway to Armin's favorite Italian restaurant, and he would pay for a cab back if necessary. Tonight, he wanted to have a really good time, so he drank his way through a whole bottle of a top-notch Barbera all by himself, and it was probably the effects of the red wine that possessed him to ask this momentous question. What would Anngrit choose? A dream vacation in the Caribbean? A

horse of her own, which girls of her age seemed to need desperately, if he listened around? Or a new mother?

She raised an eyebrow and smiled a little mockingly.

He understood what she meant but reiterated: "I'm serious. With all the good news arriving and so many bad things behind us, we can afford something for once. So, what do you want? Something realistic, mind you," he qualified.

"Uh-huh! Just something 'realistic.'"

Now she thought and licked her lips. Armin noticed for the first time how she had put on a subtle red lipstick and done her eyes, presumably with the kit Mette had given her. And instead of her usual, practical, unfashionable clothes, she was wearing a skirt, a grown-up-looking, pressed blouse, and even a pair of earrings. Suddenly she looked years older and more mature—and he could see already Mette's beauty in her. Yesterday still a child and today a woman . . .

"The vacation home," she said finally. "I want the vacation home."

Armin reacted as if he hadn't heard correctly. "Excuse me, what? Which vacation home?"

Anngrit turned deadly serious. All mockery and teasing had disappeared from her expression. "The vacation home in Aarhus, which we looked at two weeks ago," she reminded him. "The one you wanted to decide for or against within a week—or rather, the one you wanted to buy as soon as there was good news about the company. And that news has arrived, hasn't it?"

Finally, his memory came back. "That's right," he said slowly. "I hadn't thought about it because of everything else."

He had been so distracted by the problems at NEMAS that he had completely forgotten about the agreement with the real estate agent: she'd intended to clarify whether he, as a foreigner, or Anngrit, as a Dane, was allowed to buy the house—and he should finally make up his mind if he wanted it. Had Inga Poulsen even contacted him? He couldn't say, as he didn't always have time to read his private messages these days.

"But tell me: Why is it so important to you?" he asked. "I mean, I liked it too, but do we need it so badly? We can rent one if we want to go on vacation there or visit Mom's grave."

“Actually, I don’t really need it so much,” she said, “but someone else does.”

“And who?” he asked, completely dumbfounded.

Anngrit now seemed miles away. “Mom,” she said. “I saw her in a dream. We’re supposed to buy it because there’s something there.”

What a strange path their conversation had taken! His daughter had seen Mette in a dream?

“And what should be there?” he stammered. At the same time, he recalled how he’d entertained this same hunch when standing in front of the house. As if his innermost self knew something that was inaccessible to his conscious mind.

She shrugged. “I honestly have no idea.” Then she said urgently, “Dad, I just think it’s meant for us for some reason. If there’s nothing there in the end, Grandma and Grandpa can use it, or we can rent it out or sell it again. Isn’t that possible?”

“Sure, it is,” he said hesitantly. “But for all I know, it could have been sold already.”

He now scrolled through the private messages on his smartphone. Inga had actually texted him two days ago. Yes, Armin could legally buy the property, and, yes, it was still on the market.

“So?”

“Yes, it’s still there,” he said.

“Dad, you asked me what my wish is, and this is it. Please!”

He looked at her for a long time. And something stirred inside him again. Mette? Was she talking to him? Or someone else? He suppressed the urge to close his eyes and shake himself. Whatever was inside him wouldn’t go away just like that.

“All right,” he said finally, feeling as if he had decided something more extraordinary than buying a vacation property. “We’ll buy it.”

His daughter looked as if a weight had been lifted from her, and she seemed to be completely back in the here and now. “Say, Daddy, now that I’m thirteen, do you think I could have a tiny sip of prosecco?” she asked, once again in a harmless, teasing tone.

He shook off his strange mood as best he could. “It’s still part of your wish,” he said with a smile.

Inga handed Dad the keys in her office as soon as the contract was signed, although he hadn't paid the purchase price yet, and some Danish authority still had to rubber-stamp the acquisition. Everything was more relaxed in Denmark, where people trusted one another. There wasn't even a need for a notary.

Shortly afterward, we were standing in front of the house—and were at a loss. At the first viewing, it had just been a crazy idea or a distraction from Mom's funeral. Then we had taken a liking to it, but more like when you go on a shopping spree and see something nice you neither really need nor can afford. Now we were here—to do what?

Dad jingled his keys and looked at me. "Shall we unload the car first, or do you want to go on treasure hunt straight away?" he asked with a wink.

We were probably both thinking back to our strange conversation in the restaurant and the odd mood that had overcome us then. Of course, I also remembered my dream of Mom. But when we had visited her grave on the way here, nothing stirred inside me, and here, now, on a bright fall afternoon in peaceful Gammel Løgten, it seemed more like the fading memory of a fever dream.

"Dad, I never said there was any treasure here. Maybe there's nothing here at all. Can't we just go in, look at everything, put a few things away, and then have coffee on the terrace?"

We'd been out and about since the morning and had eaten only a sandwich. I had bought a bag of sweet pastries from a bakery, including the world-famous Danish cinnamon rolls I loved so much. Those we wanted to relish now.

"Whatever you say, darling," Dad said cheerfully. "It's your house, after all."

Which was not true in the legal sense. It belonged to him—or more accurately, to his bank, which had granted him a loan without any fuss in view of the good news at NEMAS. But I knew what he meant.

So, my father unlocked the door, and we went in and did what you did: we ventilated, inspected the kitchen and the bathroom, dragged in baskets of provisions and dishes as well as our suitcases, and put away their contents in the cupboards. To be on the safe side, Dad tried out the electric heaters, as it could get chilly at night this time of year.

But while I was busying myself, I had to think about “that other thing.” I had spoken to the soul of my deceased mother through a candle, and in my dream, she had stood right here in this house. Now, if a classmate had told me a story like that, I would have mocked her behind her back and labeled her a show-off—or a mental case. I had never experienced something you could call a religious feeling. Church services brought tears of boredom to my eyes. As with most of my peers, the priest’s and religious teacher’s sermons went in one ear and out the other, and my Church Grandma’s fussing would just be ridiculous if she didn’t kill everybody’s nerve—apart from Uncle Henoch, of course.

And yet it had happened—it had happened to *me*—and afterward it had seemed so natural, as if it had always been like that. It was as if you opened the closed door of a room you’d never been in before. Once you stood in it, you realized it was a perfectly normal place you just hadn’t known before. My dead mother’s soul was alive, somewhere up there, and she had spoken to me, and I just knew it wasn’t my imagination, even if no one else believed me. None of it seemed scary or frightening, or dramatic or bewildering. It was, in a quiet way, natural and very comforting.

But that didn’t help me to understand what else was in this other world apart from my mother’s soul. And, above all, what was I supposed to be doing here in this house.

We were now finished with our provisional inspection and stowing away our luggage, and Dad entered the conservatory and opened the door to the terrace. We would have our first meal here on the large, round table in the center. I put coffee on and arranged the sweet pastries and crockery on a tray. In the meantime, Dad was inspecting the garden, as I could see through the conservatory that was aligned with the kitchen–living room. Something seemed to irritate his



pronounced sense of order, because he suddenly began to move around the large, reddish granite stones, which aesthetically framed the lawn against the slightly elevated forest behind the property.

In itself, this should not even warrant me to shrug. Dad was, like most engineers, a stickler and liked to see every item in its right place. But suddenly I remembered the white-clad figure of Mom in my dream. She had been standing in the conservatory, looking out into the garden and exactly to where I thought—no, I now knew—Dad was working!

I dropped the last of the cutlery onto the plates with a clatter and ran through the living room into the conservatory and out in the garden.

“What are you doing there, Dad?” I asked when I reached him on the stone slope. I saw that he had created a mess of stones lying around wildly, earth, and completely flabbergasted worms and snails.

“I thought one of them wasn’t in the right place,” he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Unfortunately, when I tried to straighten it out, the whole arrangement fell apart,” he said apologetically. “I’ll put it right again.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Was it this stone?” I pointed to a medium-sized one with a flattened side that was facing upward.

“Yes, why?”

“I don’t know.” I knelt down and looked at it up close. The flat top, previously in the ground, was covered in soil, and an earthworm on it was desperately looking for a new home. But there was something else. I wiped off the sand and soil with my hand and realized what it was: “There are some lines carved into it,” I said.

“Lines?” Dad, now leaning over me, frowned.

“Yes, something like circles, plus some kind of signs.”

He knelt down as well. The engravings were not deep and were also filled with dirt and difficult to recognize.

“Perhaps children who spent their vacation here carved something into it with a knife to immortalize themselves,” he said. “Then they turned the stone over so they wouldn’t get caught, and because of that it didn’t fit so well and annoyed me. And there you have your explanation.”

I shook my head. "Oh, Dad, you should have joined the Scouts as a child like me. We once tried to carve something into a similar stone in the forest with our knives. But Wenna's blade went blunt without leaving the slightest trace. Only a stonemason with proper tools can do something like that, not a child."

He shrugged. "Maybe it's some kind of tombstone that now serves a new purpose."

Instead of examining the funny spirals in the middle, I concentrated on the strange marks on the edges and traced their shapes with my finger. I recognized at least one of them: it was a rune that looked like a rhombus with legs. I thought I recognized the other, all-angular signs now as well.

"I think they're runes," I said.

"Runes? You mean it's an archaeological artifact? Some kind of rune stone?"

I looked him in the eye. "I think whatever it is, it's the 'treasure' we're looking for. The reason why we're here."

Dad looked at me, speechless. Then he felt the stone himself and traced the lines. "But even if . . ." he mumbled. "What's it supposed to mean?"

At this moment, I thought I heard a noise in the trees in front of us. I saw something in my peripheral vision—maybe a movement, but then it was gone. An animal?

"The man at Mom's funeral spoke Old Norse," I suddenly remembered. "They used runes back then too," I said. "There must be a connection. I'm sure of it."

Dad seemed perplexed. "First your dream, then this stone. And now? I don't know, Anngrit. It's almost as if someone is playing a prank on us. In any case, if it's an artifact, we probably have to report it to the authorities. You can't just simply keep it. And then they might cordon everything off for months and dig for more finds. Your mother once told me that."

"But Dad, who was playing a prank on me when I dreamt about Mom? Certainly not her?"

"Anngrit, I hate to tell you this, but, well, about this dream of yours . . ."

“And why did this stone bother you that you turned it over? To me, it looked perfectly right in its place when we were here the first time. Dad: Can’t you feel it yourself?”

He looked at me silently. “And what do you think we should do now?” he said at last.

“We clean it and research on the Internet what the runes and these spirals mean.”

So, I connected a hose to the tap at the edge of the terrace and sprayed the stone until it was completely clean. Then I took a photo of it and went into the house to look up the runes while Dad put the stone slope back in order.

The runes turned out to be an *O*, a *VE*, and a *VI*, and the three connected squiggles in the middle were called a triskele. That much I found out quickly, but, unfortunately, it didn’t tell me anything else.

Maybe it was time for a break. I looked longingly over at the tray of sweet pastries on the dining table. The coffee had long since filtered through, and after all this excitement, I was more ravenous than ever.

I was pouring the coffee into a thermos flask to take it outside when the doorbell rang. Was it already some archaeology office? Had the neighbors been watching us and called the authorities? I shook my head. That was absurd, of course. But it could very well be a neighbor who wanted to welcome us here.

I made sure that you couldn’t see through to the conservatory and the garden from the front door before I opened it. If some neighbor had come to have a look at everything, the outside area would unfortunately be closed for inspection due to urgent renovation works.

Then I opened the door—and in front of me stood the stranger from the funeral!

Had she spotted him? Although he was better prepared this time—wearing brown, inconspicuous clothing—and had bought a pair of reflection-free binoculars especially for the occasion, a kind of sixth sense seemed to have told her that someone was watching her. He ducked behind the bush. She reminded him a little of the beloved Karl May western novels of his childhood; if she was the unfailing avenger Old Shatterhand, he surely didn't want to be the horse thief.

After some fearful seconds, she stopped staring in his direction and turned back to the stone that her father had—whether deliberately or accidentally—loosened from the embankment and turned over. Slowly, Siebenthal straightened up and put the binoculars back on. Something seemed to be the matter with the stone, as she traced it with her fingers. *Could it be...*? The two of them seemed to be debating. When she later sprayed the piece of rock with a hose and photographed its smooth side, he was certain: the stone must contain the original of the drawing he was carrying in his jacket pocket! That's why He had put him on Weskamp's trail.

Then doubts arose. If it was just about the stone, why hadn't He simply shown him the way to the vacation home? Siebenthal could have removed the wedge of granite anytime from the exact spot where he was now standing. No fence had been erected between the property and the forest. All he would have had to do was to come here at night and walk down the slope. So, it wasn't about the boulder itself, but about Weskamp. Or rather about himself *and* Weskamp. *He* wanted them to meet, and this could mean only that He wanted to assign what he considered to be his mission to the two of them together.

Siebenthal stowed away the binoculars and crept as silently and discreetly as he could through the undergrowth back to the forest path he had come from.

We stood opposite each other without a word, he embarrassed and me scared to death. Not because he seemed scary or dangerous, but

because he was like a nocturnal dream figure, which suddenly stood in the doorway in broad daylight. Unlike at my mother's funeral, this time he was wearing inconspicuous brown cargo pants and an equally brown anorak, but no hat. And that reassured me, strangely enough, because I suspected he had superficially camouflaged himself like a civilian would and had been watching us from the woods—what I had instinctively noticed earlier. So, at least he wasn't a ghost materializing from the spiritual world before my eyes. Of course, I didn't know how he had found his way to the vacation home. Even less what he wanted here. On the other hand, I had a hunch.

He broke the silence. "My name is Siebenthal. I'm sorry for barging in like this and startling you. I've come because I believe you have the original of a drawing I once dreamt of."

He held out a piece of paper with a handwritten sketch on it. I looked at it and opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. Now I realized why I had expected to see him again ever since the day he turned up at my mother's funeral: the figures in the drawing were exactly the same as the ones etched into the stone.

"Do you want to see it?" I asked haltingly.

He nodded, and I led him like a sleepwalker through the house and into the garden, where the stone was still drying. As soon as he spotted it, he knelt in front of it as if before a shrine and murmured, "So it's true," devoutly tracing the grooves of the drawing with his finger.

Only now did I wake from my stupor. I had let a complete stranger into the house and shown him the object I had previously wanted to hide from prying eyes at all costs, as if I were under his influence. Or at least under *an* influence.

While the visitor examined the stone, I once again compared the pattern on it with the drawing in my hand. How did the man who'd introduced himself as Siebenthal know it, and how did he know the original was on an embankment stone on our property? Was there a natural explanation for this? Was I looking for one? I was overcome with the sensation that something enormous had happened to my

life—and perhaps to Dad’s life too. The appearance of the stranger at the funeral, then the candle, Mom’s soul, and my dream of her here in the vacation home: they were the beginning of something whose end I couldn’t even start to imagine.

“Would you kindly tell me who you are and what you’re doing here? You were at my wife’s funeral, weren’t you?”

With an energetic sweep, Armin put down the shovel he had used to tidy up the slope and looked with narrowed brows at the stranger and his completely bewildered-looking daughter.

The man detached himself from his study of the boulder and stood up. “My name is Gerold Siebenthal,” he said as politely as at the cemetery and held out his hand with a smile.

Armin shook it after a moment’s hesitation. After all, the man just looked like an eccentric scholar, not someone dangerous. Whatever it was that he might want here.

The visitor now pulled a small white card out of his jacket and handed it to Armin. “Here’s my business card. I think we should have a chat . . .”

Soon afterward, they were sitting together at the round table, where Anngrit had set out coffee, pastries, and crockery, including a plate and a cup for the guest. But no one touched any of it, while the stranger told his story.

It was the most unbelievable thing Armin had heard in his entire life. Or was it? Based on what he and his daughter had experienced recently, that remained an open question. After the visitor fell silent, Armin summed it up in his own way: “So, Mr. Siebenthal,” he began, looking off in the far distance and placing his palms on the tip of his nose in a gesture of concentration, “you claim that the god you refer to as Euródin first led you to my wife’s funeral and then to this vacation home so that you could bear witness to the discovery of this stone, which shows the original of a drawing that God made you dream of. Furthermore, this Euródin appointed you as His prophet and commissioned you to spread His message, and among other things, to found a church for Him.”

To this, Siebenthal added: “*And* to exhort His people to keep to themselves and preserve themselves until the Ragnarök of the Edda, after which a new, better world will emerge for us Europeans if we do the right thing.”

“I have a question for you now,” said Armin, returning his gaze to their unexpected visitor. “What would you do if someone turned up at *your* front door with such a story?”

Siebenthal took a deep breath. “I don’t know, to be honest. But I can’t change the way things are. But before you throw me out as a madman or some kind of fraud, there’s one thing I’d like you to consider: I may have followed you somehow and for some reason, without any divine guidance. I could have simply made up the drawing, come here secretly, and chiseled the glyphs into the granite myself—precisely because I am mad or want to clean you out with a robber’s tale. But even if I had known beforehand that you would buy this house, there is still one thing that none of this explains.”

He stood up energetically and walked over to the stone. He pointed his finger at the inside of a groove in the triskele. “Do you see this?” he asked. “That’s moss. So, the engraving must have been chiseled into it a long time ago. It couldn’t have been me—or I would have had to look far into the future to know you would be here one day.”

Armin stood up as well and stepped behind him. He was right! There were indeed still traces of moss in some of the grooves, despite Anngrit having hosed down the object.

She joined the conversation for the first time, asking, “Who do you think engraved the signs?”

“I have no idea. Maybe a Germanic seer?” Siebenthal replied, looking at her. “Besides,” he continued, turning back to Armin, “how was I supposed to know you would take the stone out of the embankment, turn it over, and discover the drawing on it? It’s obvious that it was placed with the engraved side facing the ground.”

Armin remained silent, and Siebenthal continued: “Why *did* you actually turn over the stone, if I may ask? And was there a reason why you bought this particular house?” He looked at Dad thoughtfully.

Armin could feel the embarrassment rising in him. And something else. Yes, why had he turned the stone over? Had it really been standing askew? He couldn't remember anymore. And he had bought the house because, well, because Anngrit wanted him to, especially after having such a vivid dream about her mother. What was happening to him and his daughter? He ran his fingers through his hair. "I bought the house to spend my vacations here," he replied lamely. "And I wanted to tidy up the hillside."

He looked sheepishly from his visitor to his daughter. Even to Armin, it didn't sound convincing. Anngrit, who had been unusually quiet, now looked as if she would burst if she had to keep silent any longer. She didn't doubt in the least that everything this Siebenthal said was true—that was written plainly on her face. But, thought Armin, this was nothing to be revealed in front of a stranger, which Siebenthal still was. Therefore, he gave her a warning look and shook his head slightly.

Siebenthal seemed to discern his doubts. "Listen," he said soothingly, "how about we sit down again, and I tell you a bit more about myself and what I've found out about the drawing and its exact meaning?"

Over the next hour, Armin and Anngrit learned about Siebenthal's long search for God, about the revelations he claimed to have received, about three gods and their three peoples, the consecration of souls, and the separate paradises.

"And why are there three of all things? Why not just one? Or ten?" Armin asked at one point.

Siebenthal shrugged. "They don't know that themselves. It could just be coincidence. Like nobody knows why there are so many solar systems. After all, the gods were themselves created from matter and energy in the course of the big bang."

When Siebenthal finally finished, Armin folded his hands into a roof again and placed them on the tip of his nose. "All well and good," he said. "But even if I wanted to believe you, you said that you had been searching for God for a long time. Then He ultimately heard you, so to speak. But what have my daughter and I got to do with it? I'm an engineer—not very religious, I say openly, but, on the other



hand, a member of a Christian family in which people believe in exactly one God.”

While his daughter seemed on the verge of rolling her eyes in response to her old man’s obtuseness—or lack of enlightenment—Siebenthal pursed his lips and appeared to be thinking.

“Only He can answer this for you, not me, I’m afraid,” he said finally. “Perhaps it has something to do with your private tragedy? But that’s just a guess. In any case, I can’t understand it any other way than that He commissioned us both together to found this church I spoke of.”

Armin laughed in disbelief. “Me, as the founder of a religion? Or, as they say, an apostle? I would have expected anything else in life, but not this!”

To tell the truth, Armin could well imagine the reasons for this Euródin. Siebenthal seemed like a maverick, and he didn’t appear to have a lot of money. So, he could benefit from associating with someone like him, who could help him financially and make contacts. Even if Siebenthal himself didn’t see it that way, perhaps his heavenly boss did. And he suspected that Siebenthal might be right in his reference to Mette. There had to be a connection between what had been done to her and what he had heard today, even though he didn’t see it yet. What if Euródin really *was* his god? Didn’t he have to answer His call?

Armin could feel beads of sweat forming on his forehead. What should he answer Siebenthal?

His inner struggle could hardly escape his visitor. If the man were a manipulator, a cunning trickster, he would exploit this insecurity and push him into a corner until he, so to speak, signed the devil’s contract he wanted.

But instead, Siebenthal said gently, “Mr. Weskamp, I understand this is difficult for you. I think you need some time to think about all this. You have my card; why don’t you give me a call when you’ve done so? I think that’s all we can do here and now.”

With that, he stood up.

Armin shook his hand goodbye and said, “Anngrit, will you see our guest out?”

As soon as they had disappeared inside the house, he slumped into the armchair, shook his head, and fixed his gaze perplexedly on the stone. What had happened to his life? What should he tell Anngrit when she returned? And should he call this Siebenthal?

But apparently the boulder didn't know the answer either.

The door closed behind him, and Siebenthal reviewed in his mind what had come to pass. Had he handled it right? Or had he failed? And if so, what should he have done or said instead? He had been sincere and had not pressured Weskamp into anything because he couldn't and didn't want to. Would he ever hear from him again? "Why don't *You* convince him?" he murmured reproachfully to the sky.

He was about to walk to the end of the street, where his car was parked, when he stopped in his tracks. The GPS tracker! He'd forgotten to retrieve it from the BMW. Weskamp had been driving around with it attached to the undercarriage for almost two months now. Not only was its battery nearly exhausted, but the risk of discovery during a routine maintenance at a garage increased with every passing day.

Good thing that he remembered: Weskamp's BMW stood in the parking lot in front of the summer house but did not appear to be visible from any of its windows. Glancing around, he didn't notice anyone on the small street or on the neighboring properties.

Siebenthal exhaled. Then he bent down as if tying his shoes. He reached under the car and felt around for the device, grabbed it, and pulled it off with a jerk.

Then he hurried away.

When I returned to the garden, Dad was kneeling in front of the stone, gazing at it, and tracing the grooves of the drawing with his finger. “I wonder if you can speed up the colonization with moss,” he said, looking at me. “A kind of artificial weathering, I mean—like art forgers do, for example.”

I groaned and crossed my arms. “So, you still think Mr. Siebenthal is a fraud. Once again, Dad: How was he supposed to know you were going to buy this house? He would either have had to hypnotize you or have clairvoyance—which, again, would only be possible through this Euródin. Besides, did you detect any signs on the slope that someone had tampered with it?”

“No, not really, but . . .”

I sat down at the table and reached for the business card still lying there. “MBA,” I read, and an address in a place named Boltenhagen, which meant nothing to me. The card gave his profession as “author,” whatever that meant. While Dad was still brooding over the stone, as if it would spill its secret if he just stared at it long enough, I fired up Google on my smartphone.

“Uh-huh, the book he was talking about actually exists!” I announced. “However, it has precisely zero reviews and doesn’t exactly seem to be a bestseller.” I leafed through the sample and found it difficult to read and boring. Besides, Siebenthal had said it was outdated due to his revelations. I then googled himself and came across a wine shop in Wismar, which apparently no longer existed. Boltenhagen, a seaside resort, was in the vicinity of Wismar. Finally, I found pictures and links that indicated he had worked at Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, just as he’d told us.

“Okay . . . and apparently he was indeed an investment banker . . . and he also ran a wine business.”

“Was, ran,” Dad grumbled skeptically. “What is he now?”

“Well, author—and prophet,” I said.

Dad finally detached himself from the stone and sat down at the table. “If you ask me, that doesn’t sound promising. Much more like

a failed existence.”

I shrugged. “Wasn’t Muhammad some kind of camel trader and Jesus a carpenter? They certainly didn’t become famous because of their professions. And I think an impostor would have written a book about how to get rich in a hundred days rather than this dry-as-dust stuff.”

“Maybe,” said Dad. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I can’t decide. You’d have to do some more research on him. What am I actually supposed to make of what he told us? These three gods with their—what did he call it?—‘soul consecration’?”

“Well, I think it sounds perfectly logical,” I decreed. “The people in the world are so different, I don’t believe they can all come from one god or that one god should be responsible for everyone. It’s a real revolution! All this stupid stuff about the world being created in six days, virgin births, miracles, and so on. Who still believes this nonsense?”

“Oh, please! Your grandmother, for example, and your Danish grandparents, who, incidentally, are coming to visit tomorrow.”

I had always thought Grandma Beata to be off her rocker, so she wasn’t worthy of a reply. A trickier case were my local grandparents, who I believed to be smart. “Well, I think they might just be pretending. Besides, if you explain to them that Christianity is yesterday’s news and there’s something new now, they’ll change their minds.

“And isn’t it great we have our own God?” I enthused. “So, in the end, even that EU thing could become a big hit.”

Dad frowned. “Just because you think it’s great doesn’t make it true.”

After that, he seemed to be lost in thought and remained stubbornly silent.

“So?” I asked finally. “Are you helping Siebenthal to found a church?”

“Of course I’m not going to do any such thing,” he declared. “I don’t know yet whether I can believe him, nor do I understand

anything about it, nor do I have the time. What we're both going to do now instead is get everything shipshape for your grandparents' visit—and then we're going to eat at the nice inn I saw in town. And apart from that, I don't want to hear any more about it!"

I knew it was pointless debating this with him right now. Nevertheless, I noticed that he carefully stowed Siebenthal's business card away in his wallet instead of crumpling it up and ditching it. Nor did his thoughtfulness match the *basta* tone with which he had ended the discussion.

"And what are we going to do with the stone?" I asked instead. "Are you going to report it to the antiquities authority?"

He blushed. "No, that would just get us into all kinds of trouble. We'll put it in the trunk and take it home with us. I don't want your grandparents to see it tomorrow, either. Besides, I think it would be better if you didn't tell anyone."

I nodded. At least there was one thing we could agree on.

The visit from his ex-parents-in-law, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law had gone reasonably well. Although the former warmth and cordiality, if it had ever truly been there, did not return, everyone pulled themselves together for Anngrit's sake, and Karen even accepted the key to the vacation home Armin offered her at the end.

Apart from that, he had found some time to think about Siebenthal's visit and the stone, undoubtedly the strangest, even most disturbing, experience of his life. Anngrit adored this "Tritheism" and its prophet with as much unreserved enthusiasm as the latest boy band sensation. He, on the other hand, wanted to feel the man out first before asking himself whether there might actually be something to his religion. That's why, after crossing the border, he left the interstate near Flensburg, prompting a scowl from his daughter.

"I think I heard a car noise," he explained, "and I'd rather make a detour to a garage to have it checked out," he explained.

"A noise? I didn't hear anything," said his daughter, who generally thought him to be blind, deaf, and probably gaga. "Besides, today, on Sunday, are they even open?"

“Believe it or not, your old man does know the Internet exists. Yes, this one has an emergency service on Sundays. And if you keep furrowing your brow like that, I’ll have to give you one of those expensive creams for your next birthday.”

As he steered the car into the commercial area, he noticed a gas station right next to the BMW dealership garage. “If you want, you can buy something there in the meantime, like cookies, or if we need something for home.”

“No, I don’t want any cookies, and we don’t need anything. I’ll heat up Grandma’s pies,” she said, looking at him suspiciously now.

Fortunately, she was using the women’s bathroom at the dealership, so he was able to explain his problem to the master mechanic on duty without her overhearing. The man, who didn’t seem overly shocked by his request, drove the car to a free pit, and got down to shine a rod light underneath the car.

After a while, he climbed back up, and said, “Well, there’s nothing there. The underbody looks a little lighter in one place, so something might have stuck there. But that could be deceptive or have all sorts of reasons. I don’t want to make any claims here. I also looked in the engine compartment,” he added. “Professionals attach it there and connect it to the battery.”

Armin thanked him sheepishly and returned from the workshop to the customer area.

Anngrit was sitting at a table, leafing through magazines. She looked up when she noticed him and asked, “And? Has he discovered the cause?”

“No, but he’s checked everything, and it’s all fine. We can drive home without worrying.”

Of course, by now she had realized—or at least guessed—the real reason for making this stop. She put back the magazine she was reading and gave him a triumphant smile. It wasn’t hard to see what lay behind it.

God didn’t need a GPS tracker to follow him.

Armin heaved the stone, which might have weighed close to a hundred pounds, out of the trunk and placed it on a furniture trolley that Anngrit had already brought from the garage. She had hopped out of the car as soon as they pulled in the driveway and made preparations as if for a new pet in need of care and shelter. Odysseus hadn't failed to notice his mistress's new darling and sniffed disgruntledly at the uninvited competition.

Inside, Armin rolled the new housemate into the living room, where his daughter had spread out a plastic sheet over several layers of blankets so as not to damage the parquet flooring. He laid the stone down on it and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "So, what's next?"

"First, we have to clean it properly. I'll get the pressure washer out of the garage," she said.

"I think, first we have to clear out the car and put the food in the fridge, don't we?"

Grumbling, she helped him, only to immediately turn her attention back to the stone as soon as she had impatiently slammed the fridge door shut. As promised, she dragged the pressure washer into the garden and assembled it there, while he rolled the stone from the living room back outside through the open patio door.

Stupidly, it was only after he had hosed it down that he realized the moss residue had been removed too. Thus, his theory of artificial weathering had become a moot point already.

"Can I color the grooves red later?" asked Anngrit, carefully touching the stone like a fragile patient.

Armin could hardly believe his ears. "This maybe is an important historical artifact, and you want to paint it?"

"Not paint, but color," she corrected him. "That's what they used to do. Have you never seen a rune stone in a museum? Besides, I would use acrylic paint. It's water soluble, and you can get it off easily. In any case, the drawing would then be much more impressive."

That might be true. As it was now, at first glance it could be mistaken for some weathered scrawl. Nevertheless, he somehow resisted

it—like much of what he had heard and seen in the last few days. “We’ll talk about it later,” he decided. “Where should we store it anyway? I don’t want to leave it out in the open for everyone to see. After all, it’s theoretically illegal for us to have taken it to Germany.”

But his youngest had already formed precise ideas about that as well. “We can put it in the antique wooden box in the attic, where Mom used to keep the Christmas decorations,” she said. “This we’ll place in the living room and put a tablecloth and a vase on top, so no one gets the idea to open the lid just like that. That way we can always keep an eye on it—and yet nobody sees it.”

It sounded like a flawless plan. “That’s how we’ll do it,” he said. “Do you need help with the box?”

“No, I’ll do that. Just rest, Dad.”

Instead of sitting around idly, he went into the study. As always, he became aware of the proximity of Mette’s own home office, to which a connecting door was always open. So far, he hadn’t had the heart or the courage to put away her things or even consider it. At some point, it would be inevitable, though. It made him think of Vic, with whom he was going sailing next week. For her sake alone, he would have to do something if things became more serious between them.

But now there was a more pressing matter at hand. He closed the door, sat down in his swivel chair, and dialed Friedrich’s number on his smartphone. When his friend eventually picked up, Armin discerned classical music in the background. Friedrich was probably sitting in his living room, listening to Brahms or Beethoven, drinking a glass of wine—and studying files at the same time.

“So, how does it feel to be the newly fledged owner of a vacation home?” his friend greeted him.

Armin had justified his decision to buy a property in Denmark by noting its proximity to his wife’s grave and Anngrit’s Danish roots. Now he decided to leave it that way and not mention the stone—because then he would have to comment on it one way or another.



Given that Armin still didn't know what to make of it, he had to keep it to himself. But that didn't mean twiddling thumbs, either.

"Fine, the house is really great," he replied. "But tell me one thing, Friedrich: you surely must have employed a detective at some point in your career as a commercial lawyer?"

Friedrich's surprise was discernible even through the phone. "Yes, a few times. Cheaters on sick leave, even something to do with industrial espionage once. Why do you ask?"

"As a matter of fact, someone recently made a business proposal to me, but before I consider it, I want to find out a bit about him. How much would something like this cost, and how long would it take?"

"Well," said Friedrich, "that depends on who or what it's about. I'd need to know a bit more."

Armin looked at Siebenthal's business card, which he had pulled out of his wallet and placed on the table in front of him. "An MBA, formerly an investment banker, now a private scholar of sorts, apparently ran a wine shop in Wismar until recently. I could send you his card. That would give you a starting point."

Friedrich didn't ask if Armin wanted the fellow investigated due to a botched wine delivery. Instead, he said, "Wismar, you say? I think I can offer a cheaper and quicker option here: a former client of mine, a Hamburg restaurateur, now runs a traditional restaurant there on the market square. If your business partner is or was a wine merchant, he might know him, because the local innkeepers are usually the first people you approach as customers. The better ones don't buy their wine in the supermarket.

"Besides," he added, "Lars is the kind of guy who gets to hear all the gossip, a better source than the local rag. I can ask him under the seal of secrecy, without mentioning your name, of course."

Relieved to have done something, Armin agreed. They chatted for a while, then he hung up.

In the living room, Anngrit had already prepared the chest, a tablecloth, and a vase, which Odysseus sniffed at curiously as he did with any change to his territory. From the kitchen, Armin heard the clatter of dishes, and the appetizing smell of Karen's homemade pies wafted into his nose.

When he entered the kitchen, Anngrit was filling the tomcat's bowls with fresh water and food. As soon as she saw him, she gave him an inquiring look, and he knew already what was coming: "Have you spoken to Siebenthal?"

Of course, the phone call hadn't escaped his daughter's notice, just as little else remained hidden from her. "No," he said. "To Friedrich. It was about something business related."

She straightened up and wiped her hands, wet from spilled water, on her jeans. "And when are you going to do it?" she asked in a tone that you would use to remind a severely ill person to finally make an appointment with a doctor.

"Give me a few days. It all has to settle first."

"But only a few days. Promise?"

"Don't I always do what my daughter says?" he muttered with a sigh.

## 33

Armin hung up the phone. A lot had happened since Greg—they were now on a first-name basis—got in touch with him three weeks ago. The two had met for an initial confidential meeting at the Sheraton at Frankfurt Airport and agreed to initiate a due diligence. Consequently, Armin had officially launched the project "company sale" at NEMAS. Since then, a lot of hardworking hands and minds had been busy compiling the necessary information and—of course—presenting the prospective bride from her most beautiful side. And all of this was taking place alongside the preparations for fulfilling the *Ghostfish* contract. Armin composed an email with another long list of things that Thomsen needed and sent it to those in charge. He informed Cordula that the American would be arriving in Hamburg next week with a delegation from Morgan-Bellcraft, so that she could make all the necessary arrangements.

No sooner had he hit Send than his phone rang again, and he recognized Friedrich's number. Because of the sale, he assumed, although this time he had involved his friend only marginally. As Friedrich had neither the capacity nor the expert knowledge for such a transaction, Armin had commissioned a large auditing and consulting group to handle it.

"Are you calling about Morgan-Bellcraft? Greg just—"

"No, not that," Friedrich interjected. "It's about your Siebenthal. Or is this not a good time for you?"

If Armin was honest, there would *never* be a "good time" for any of this. If he didn't have to endure his daughter's reproachful looks every day, he'd prefer to forget the whole matter altogether. Since the stone was in the wooden chest and he didn't have to look at it every evening, he at least managed to block it from his mind occasionally.

"No, it's fine," he said, slightly agonized. Armin stood up with the phone in his hand and closed the door to the anteroom. "Go ahead. What have you found out?"

"Well," said Friedrich, "my former client does indeed know him. Siebenthal once invited him to a tasting. Lars even bought wine from him, but apparently only a little because it was too expensive for his restaurant. The man seemed like a serious businessman, he told me, even if he wasn't exactly a sales genius. But that's the case with many who quit their jobs in midlife and discover a passion for wine. I've seen it happen in other cases. He even knows his house right on the Baltic coast, run-down but still worth a fortune, given its prime beach location.

"But the really interesting thing," Friedrich said excitedly, "is that Siebenthal's former sales assistant now works as a waitress for Lars, and what she has to say is quite something. According to her, he didn't resign from Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank but was fired both times. His marriage broke up as a result, and he tried his hand at wine, spending more time tasting his wares than dealing with customers, if you know what I mean."

Friedrich paused before continuing: "And to top it all, he didn't pay the social security contributions for her and other sales help and even got into trouble with law enforcement. Soon after she resigned,

the store went down the drain. Since then, he has declared himself a writer and religious expert, without anyone taking him seriously.”

Armin had had no idea what his attorney’s investigation would reveal; it had been a purely precautionary measure. Now this gentleman, who had seemed quite respectable, turned out to be bankrupt, a fraudster, and a complete failure. Perhaps his daughter would be heartbroken when she found out. But wasn’t it better to disappoint her now rather than later? And wouldn’t it be plausible for someone like that to develop religious delusions and see themselves as God’s chosen one?

Nevertheless, how *had* the stone ended up on his property, and how could Siebenthal have known about it? And what about Anngrit’s dreams and his own feelings, which could not simply be shaken off?

“That’s not exactly good news,” he said slowly.

“So it seems, at least,” Friedrich replied. “However, I don’t know the nature of your dealings with him, and it’s none of my business. But as a lawyer, I know witnesses often say things that aren’t true or at least distort reality, even in court. So, you should take all this *cum grano salis*. I just want to point that out.”

“Okay, I see,” said Armin, torn again. Perhaps Siebenthal had dismissed the woman for some reason, and now she was spreading nasty rumors about him; that had happened once to him, too. “In any case, thank you for your prompt help, as always. Be sure to write me an invoice and send this Lars a crate of wine at my expense.”

He knew he would never receive a bill from Friedrich, neither for his time nor for the wine. For him, this was a favor for a friend, and Armin would have to return it in other ways.

After he hung up, he paced restlessly around the room. On the one hand, he could now close the Siebenthal chapter for good. Even Anngrit might understand this in view of the news, although he didn’t really believe it. On the other hand, perhaps Siebenthal’s alleged failures weren’t so bad in reality. True: giving up a career at Deutsche Bank to open a wine shop in a not very affluent area well known to be a beer-drinking stronghold didn’t exactly speak for realism and competence, even if the rest of the woman’s accusations weren’t true.

But then again, you first had to be offered a job at Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, neither of which was known for falling for impostors and fraudsters. And if he hadn't been happy in his bread-and-butter job, hadn't the same been true of Jesus and Muhammad? Perhaps Jesus had been an awfully bad carpenter. Anngrit might be right there. Wasn't a break in one's life, he wondered, quite to the contrary the prerequisite for becoming involved with religion in the first place? That was certainly the case for his brother Henoeh.

Anyway, Armin couldn't rule it out. And hadn't he suffered such an existential crisis himself? He went to the window and looked out at the illuminated company parking lot and the dark waters of the Elbe beyond. What secret was hidden in them, he suddenly asked himself. Was Mette waiting for him there? What advice would *she* give him? Was she trying to call to him? Sometimes . . .

He shook off the feeling for which he had no name. It was neither fear nor hope, but a vague premonition of things he knew nothing about yet.

At last, he decided that the only way to discover the truth was to confront Siebenthal directly. Let him address the accusations. From that, Armin would make up his mind: Was he just a madman or a fraud? Or a prophet, indeed? He fished the business card out of his wallet and picked up the phone.

## 34

On the evening Siebenthal was to come over to the house, Armin rushed home from the office. Still wearing his suit and tie, he popped the pasta casserole Anna or Anngrit must have cooked in the microwave, opened a bottle of wine, and poured himself a glass. He took a sip before trotting upstairs to greet his daughter.

There, he knocked on her bedroom door and went in when there was no response. She was sitting at her small desk, her laptop open

and a notepad and pen next to it. She was wearing earphones connected to her smartphone; probably, she was listening to music, which was why she hadn't heard him. Once she noticed him, she took them out.

"Hi, Dad. I have a physics test tomorrow," she said. "Can you explain the law of inertia to me? After all, as an engineer, you're a specialist."

Already thinking about Siebenthal and aware that she'd procrastinated studying until the last minute, he said drolly, "Sweetheart, inertia is when you don't deal with the material until the evening before. And it's a law that you don't get far in life with that attitude."

She stuck her tongue out at him. They both knew that her asking for help was as much an act as his strictness. Anngrit always brought home good grades and certainly understood the law of inertia.

"You're still dressed so smartly," she observed. "Do you have to go out again?"

"No, but I have a visitor. Something business related."

"Here?" She raised an eyebrow.

"A special case," he said vaguely. "Anyway, unless there's a fire, I don't want to be disturbed."

She sighed theatrically. "I wouldn't have time for it. Not even *when* there's a fire."

He grinned. "Well, happy learning, then!"

Back downstairs, he looked at his watch. He had fifteen minutes left for his dinner and a glass of wine.

It didn't take the gift of clairvoyance for me to guess who Dad's "business" visitor was. The three days of respite he had insisted on had already turned into four, and the only official visitors he received at home were workmen—and therefore history after the remodeling of the attic had been canceled with Mom's and Magnus's deaths—his tax consultant, or his buddy and confidant Legal-Fritz. But my money was on possibility number four.

As a preparatory measure, I took out my earphones and pricked up my ears. When I heard the doorbell ring shortly afterward, I closed the laptop and crept downstairs. Dad had already escorted the visitor

into his home office, so I padded quietly into the kitchen and got Mom's kitchen funnel out of the cupboard. With that in hand, I sneaked into her office next to Dad's. As I'd suspected, he'd closed the connecting door for once. I knelt in front of the keyhole, peeked through, and saw Siebenthal sitting on a chair in front of Dad's desk. As silently as possible, I put the funnel to the door and my ear to the grommet. I could understand them both perfectly.

"It's the essence of what was revealed to me," said Siebenthal in a matter-of-fact tone, as if citing the results of a scientific study. "I just revised it a bit afterward."

Armin took the ring-bound folder, which contained perhaps thirty to forty pages. "The History of the Gods and Men" was written on the label on the cover. A ring binder instead of stone tablets—well, then! The prophet himself wasn't wearing a flowing robe and sandals on his feet, either, but dark-gray trousers with creases and a sporty brown checked jacket. The felt fedora he'd worn at the funeral sat on the chair next to him, on top of a worn, brown, leather bag from which Siebenthal had taken out the folder. Armin leafed through it curiously. The text was written in a large font and double spaced; it was more than God had been able to supply Moses with on the famous tablets, but by no means a new Bible or a new Koran. Still, several subheadings caught his eye: "The Origin of the Universe and the Gods," "The Consecration of Souls," "The *Urvölker* of Mankind," "Euródin's Mission."

"Thank you very much," Armin said, closing the folder. "If I may, I'll read through it later. First, I appreciate your coming here. We met the other day under, shall we say, unusual circumstances."

Siebenthal just nodded and looked at him expectantly.

"And back then, you told me a few extraordinary things about yourself, but also about a, well, joint task we had to fulfill." He cleared his throat. "Now, it seems normal to take some interest in the person who says such things, and it just so happens I know someone who knows you, and he told me a few things about you that we should clarify before we get into that," he said, placing his hand on the folder. "By the way, would you like a glass of wine or perhaps a cognac?"

"No, thank you, I'm good," said Siebenthal. "What are these things they've told you about me?" he asked with a furrowed brow.

Offering him alcohol had been a first test, which he had at least passed. Armin really didn't feel comfortable with what he was doing. But done it had to be.

"What I was wondering," he continued, "is how do you actually become a prophet? What kind of person is that? You told me in Denmark you were an investment banker until you went in search of God, who you found after dreaming of the drawing, the same as the one carved into the stone on my property." He paused.

"However, the acquaintance I mentioned told me you were made redundant from both Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank. Is that correct?"

Siebenthal did not look at him in embarrassment, but with an anger he had not expected. "Listen, Mr. Weskamp, I don't know who you were talking to about me and what I should think of the fact itself. In any case, I've never been made redundant anywhere in my life. Goldman Sachs had to downsize, and I took the opportunity to leave with a severance package and see the world for a while, something I'd never had the chance to do before.

"I left Deutsche Bank because I could no longer stand my job. The eternal chase for money, the pointless late-night meetings, colleagues who would sell one another out for a promotion. I had long since started looking for *the other*. My wife, by the way, didn't understand this and divorced me, which I don't blame her for. She later married a bank manager in Bogotá, where she originally came from." He leaned back and raised—mockingly?—an eyebrow. "Can you live with that answer?"

"Yes, I can," said Armin after careful consideration. It was now one of the more embarrassing situations of his life, but there was no turning back. "And after that, you opened a wine shop in Wismar, but had to close it again because . . .?"

"Because the lease had expired, and I would have needed a new location, and the business wasn't yielding what it should have. I wouldn't open a wine shop in that place again. I wanted to go to the Baltic Sea—for spiritual reasons, as I now realize—and everything was



too expensive for me at the more affluent seaside resorts.”

“Do you know anything about wine?”

“Why, yes, a little,” said Siebenthal, now with noticeable sarcasm in his voice. “I even attended courses to prepare myself for the trade.”

“But now there seem to be rumors,” said Armin, coming to the worst accusation, “about irregularities in the payment of employees’ social security contributions . . .”

Siebenthal opened his mouth and closed it again. His face flushed, but obviously out of anger, not shame. “Now I know where all your ‘information’ came from: Lieberknecht! You know, I suspected the woman of stealing from the till, even if I couldn’t prove it. That’s why I sacked her, and now she’s obviously spreading rumors about me. There were technical problems at my tax advisor, everything was made good, and there were never any proceedings about it.

“You know, Mr. Weskamp,” he said indignantly, “perhaps you should have made the effort to go to Wismar in person instead of relying on hearsay. Then for sure you would have seen for yourself.”

They remained silent for a while. Finally, Armin asked, almost against his will, “And what are you living on now?”

“On my savings,” Siebenthal said icily.

After an uncomfortable silence, he continued: “Why did you actually make me drive here for an hour and a half? If I seemed to you to be such a shady character, a crook, an impostor, why didn’t you just throw away my business card, report the discovery of the stone to the authorities, and forget about the whole thing? Could it be *that you know or at least suspect it’s true?*”

Siebenthal looked at him piercingly in a way that both embarrassed Armin and made him uncomfortable. “Or else why are you spending your time with me? Or should I get up and leave? It’s entirely up to you!”

Armin wanted to say something but somehow couldn’t and Siebenthal reached for his hat and briefcase.

Behind the keyhole, I sucked in a sharp breath, and by a hair’s breadth, Mom’s funnel fell out of my hand and clattered to the floor. How dare Dad talk to Siebenthal like that! He put off the prophet of

the god who was harboring Mom's soul because some mean bitch and thief I would have seen through immediately had slandered him. Men! And what was almost worse: he had betrayed me, twice now. First, he stopped at a garage because of an alleged car noise, because he didn't trust Siebenthal; and now he was secretly making inquiries about him and trying to hide his visit from me. Well, you just wait! I would certainly remember that. If he was betraying me, then I could do the same thing to him.

Now that Dad had already thrown the child cold-eyed in the river, I had no choice but to initiate my retreat before I got caught. I picked up the funnel and got ready to stand up.

But strangely enough, I didn't hear any chairs moving.

## 35

"Please, stay seated," Armin said quietly. "I'm sorry if I have offended you with my questions. I just had to know."

Siebenthal hesitated, but finally set his hat and briefcase back on the chair. "I think I can understand that," he said in a conciliatory tone. "After all, it's a matter of enormous importance. Perhaps I would have done the same."

"A matter of enormous importance," Armin repeated thoughtfully. "As we've now got the awkward part behind us, maybe we can talk about that," he said, leafing through the folder again and reading it for a while. "For example, you said the other day the gods can't influence matter and therefore there are no miracles. But how did the drawing end up on the stone, and how did you find me and therefore it?"

"Well," said Siebenthal, "the first thing is simply explained. I don't know who engraved the drawing in stone. He didn't reveal that to me because it's obviously not important. But it may have been—as I said the other day—a seer or someone else to whose soul He had access.

And just as He made me dream of the drawing, He showed it to the stonemason, who preserved it for posterity. That is why the gods seek contact with intelligent, conscious beings in the universe: because, unlike themselves, they can change it, just as the unknown artist could engrave the stone.

“As for the second thing,” he continued, “He just remembered where the stone was and made you buy the vacation home and directed me there.” Siebenthal scratched his nose as if something was embarrassing him. “The gods see things and in ways we can’t imagine. But the only ‘miracle’ is how they have connected their spirit with ours via the bridge of the soul. And it’s only a miracle because we can’t explain it scientifically, which may be the case at some point, though.”

“That makes sense,” said Armin. “Shaping the universe, you’re saying. That leads me to the mission you were talking about last time, which,” he added cautiously, “you said was probably addressed to me as well.”

Siebenthal nodded. “Found a church,” he quoted, “and exhort His people—that is, us Europeans—to keep to ourselves and preserve ourselves until Ragnarök, an end-time catastrophe, after which we may rise again like a phoenix from the ashes.”

Armin leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. He let the sentence, which had sounded even more outrageous because of the matter-of-factness with which Siebenthal had uttered it, run through his mind again. But he couldn’t make himself understand what it actually meant. He turned his gaze back to his guest. “If you don’t mind, let’s go through things systematically. That’s what I do as an engineer. First of all, what exactly is meant by ‘Europeans’? Everyone who lives here in Europe?”

Siebenthal shook his head. “No, that was the case at the time of the *Urweihe* fifty thousand years ago, when the *Homo sapiens* coming from Africa divided themselves into three *Urvölker* in the region around Mount Ararat. Later, however, Europeans colonized half the world, and today the USA, New Zealand, and Australia are part of Euródin’s empire too. On the other hand, that’s not true of everyone who lives there, because the other *Urvölker*, in turn, began to settle in

European territories and are doing so to this day—see, for example, asylum immigration. And Africans and Asians do not become His children by settling among Europeans. They remain the children of the other gods, because He has not consecrated their souls.”

“But then isn’t *European* just another word for ‘whites,’ *African* for ‘blacks,’ and *Asian* for . . . er, how do you actually say ‘yellows?’”

Sieenthal smiled. “Have you ever seen an Asian with yellow skin? East Asians are as white skinned as Scandinavians; that alone makes it nonsense to talk about ‘whites.’ It doesn’t mean anything. Moreover, the gods are not concerned primarily with race but with the state of consecration of the soul. I don’t know if I mentioned it last time, but after the *Urweihe*, the gods everywhere in the universe—we on earth are not the only civilization in question—agreed on certain rules of consecration. A child is always consecrated to the god of its parents; that is the rule of inheritance,” he enumerated. “But if the parents belong to different gods or no gods at all, the child is not consecrated at all, because then they would not be able to decide who it should belong to without arguing. That is the rule of rejection.

“If, on the other hand, one parent belongs to one god and the other to none, the child is assigned to the god of the consecrated parent. Because in this case, it can again be decided without a dispute. This is what I call the healing rule. So, to put it this way, if people of the same race father a child, there is no problem. In the case of different races, the child is not consecrated and must therefore go through life without divine blessing and the prospect of paradise. However, the resulting half-breed can father a child with a purebred, which, in turn, is consecrated.”

Sieenthal paused for a moment. “As a result, this leads to limited racial mixing. Someone can genetically carry up to a third of non-European genetic material, but their soul will still be consecrated by Euródin. That can be shown mathematically.”

“Mathematically . . .” mused Armin. “Which would mean you’d have to analyze a person’s genetic material to know which god is responsible for them. Is that even practicable? And is it so easy to determine the origin genetically?”

“On the latter, yes,” said Siebenthal. “Every DNA test for private individuals evaluates so-called *ancestry-informative markers* in the genetic material, so it can be determined quite accurately. As far as the former is concerned, the gods themselves certainly don’t need a DNA test; they know it anyway. Unfortunately, since they cannot influence matter, they cannot write it on the foreheads of the newly consecrated children. If in doubt, Euródin could reveal it to me, for example, but that would certainly be time-consuming, and it wouldn’t prove anything. They would simply have to believe me. A DNA test is probably easier.”

Armin rubbed his chin. “So, we’re talking here,” he said slowly, “about a religious division of humanity—not in theory but ultimately in practice—on the basis of race. There has been something similar before in the twentieth century, as we all know . . .”

“Of course,” said Siebenthal. “But can we change it?” He raised his hands. “It’s a theological reality that, at best, we could ignore. We can’t choose our religion, we’re born with it, and so it’s a question of ancestry and therefore as well of race.”

Armin had never considered himself a racist, and everything in him resisted such an idea. Nevertheless, what Siebenthal said sounded so logical and truthful, he felt as if it had sounded within his soul a hitherto silent chord. Postwar Germany had rendered racism taboo because of Hitler and the Holocaust, among other things. But what if it was something innate, precisely because the soul knew instinctively who was a child of the same or another god? In other words, what if racism was not a cause but a symptom of a deeper truth that could not be changed by reeducation?

Armin searched for an objection. Finally, he asked, “But what I don’t understand about this is: How come the gods have never told people this before? I mean, there has always just been talk of one God for everyone.”

Siebenthal shook his head. “The ‘talk’ has actually never been like that. Judaism, for example, the origin of monotheism, is a classic tribal religion. Nowadays, this is just swept under the rug because it doesn’t fit in with the liberal zeitgeist. Jesus and Muhammad, on the other hand, may well have meant all people when they spoke of their

God or Allah. And Islam, to this day, claims to be the only legitimate religion for all of humanity. Whether they originally did this with the approval of Vili, their god, I don't know. However, I suspect that today at least it suits Him. Because in this manner, He can infiltrate the *Urvölker* of His brothers. What is essential, however, is that the ancient Europeans never believed their gods to be responsible for all of humanity—and Asians even today don't believe it. At least implicitly, they only ever referred or refer to their own people."

The mention of the ancient Europeans gave Armin a new thought. "But now obviously," he said, "nobody in Europe believes anymore in Odin or Jupiter or whatever they were all called. How could Euródin have allowed his own people to desert him like that? Because Christianity, I understand, does not belong in Europe?"

Siebenthal shrugged. "I've wondered that myself. Maybe He just rolls his eyes when He hears us and says to Himself, *if only they knew!* Maybe He just couldn't stop it. Maybe it's even part of a plan. The ways of the Lord are inscrutable—the Bible is at least right about that. However, it is true that Christianity is equally out of place in Europe as is Islam. It is just an outdated version of the religion of the African god."

That, too, seemed logical to Armin, or at the very least consistent. "Let's go further," he said. "We have now clarified who is European and therefore belongs to Euródin. Now, you say—or rather He says—we should build a church and 'keep to ourselves.' Why, I ask? Why can't we all sit in the same church, whether our souls have been consecrated by one god or another, and mix with the others? Is it about worship? Or do we have different rules to live by?"

Siebenthal smiled indulgently, as if he considered the question naive. "Well, worship is the least of His concerns. What counts for Him—as for any good father—is His offspring thriving, not kneeling before Him. A little respect, I suppose, yes. As for the rules, they haven't been revealed to me in detail yet, so I beg for your patience.

"But to come back to the 'keep among themselves': we now see that humanity consists of three families—four, if we consider the unconsecrated as one as well. And what would be the point of a family if it did not stand together and nurture and promote its own? What

father or mother would want to have children if their progeny treated them like strangers? And their siblings too? We are Euródin's family, and He expects us to behave like one."

"But what does it mean in concrete terms? That's the question!" Armin exclaimed. "Is it a kind of new apartheid? Are we no longer allowed to share a room with the others? No longer allowed to shake their hands?"

"Of course not," said Siebenthal. "And I would like to emphasize one thing here: us being committed to our God doesn't mean we are better than the others. We are just different. Something of our own. The gods are equal, and so are their peoples. There is no 'master race,' and He rejects colonialism, imperialism, and slavery—if not on moral grounds, then because in the end they always turn against the oppressor in one way or another. If the European settlers in the American South had taken the trouble to pick their cotton themselves, there would now be no racial issue in the USA. Today, people are crying out for foreign labor because their societies have failed to produce sufficient offspring or want foreigners to do cheaply the work they themselves deem beneath them. Greed, stupidity, and short-sightedness destroy every civilization sooner or later," he concluded with unusual vehemence.

Siebenthal paused, apparently to calm down. "But let's leave that alone. No, what He's asking us to do is to think of our own family first and show solidarity with them. That doesn't mean we wish others ill but that we help our own first and foremost. We should see ourselves as companions in destiny, honor our ancestors, and take care of our descendants. We should be proud of our history and plan the future of our own people and not that of 'humanity'—a term which makes little sense to me anymore. It follows from the theological rules for the consecration of souls that we should marry only among ourselves, because otherwise we risk bringing unconsecrated children into the world, which benefits neither them nor anyone else. And just as every family has its own home with a living room and a Christmas tree under which it sits together, so Euródin's church should be the home of Him and His children."

Armin was not yet satisfied with the answers, as plausible and well sounding as they were. “Nevertheless, I ask: What would be the practical consequences for society, for politics, if all this became the norm? Would the right of asylum be abolished? Would non-Europeans then have no rights or fewer rights? Would they no longer be wanted here at all? And what do we do with those who are supposed to leave but don’t want to? Do we lock them up in camps? Or worse? And what do they do to us out there when we get this message out to the people? I mean, after all, that’s obviously unconstitutional. Not even a certain Far Right party here in Germany would dare to demand that.”

Siebenthal stroked his beard and looked at him thoughtfully. “As far as that is concerned, I can reassure you completely. I have thought about it and have come to the conclusion that ‘keep to themselves’ cannot be meant in this way, especially in view of the other part of the mission, ‘to preserve themselves until Ragnarök.’”

He went on: “Preserving oneself, to start with the latter, first and foremost simply means having more children. We must not forget: for today’s contemporaries, provided that they belong to the right side of the political spectrum, the main problem is foreign infiltration. But in truth, the much more serious problem is the lack of births. Euródin’s *Urvolk* is simply dying out.

“With a fertility rate of one and a half per woman—a figure that more or less all Western societies are heading toward—a hundred fifty children are born from an initial population of two hundred, with seventy-five of them being women. If those, in turn, each have an average of one and a half children, the generation after next will consist of just over a hundred people, or one-half of the initial population. In just over a hundred years, you are down to one-third, and after three hundred years, you are virtually extinct.”

“But politicians have been trying to raise the birth figures for years, using a lot of money and hardly having any success,” Armin objected.

“That may be so. But nevertheless, we must correct it—for example, by making having children a religious duty. Not all, but some of the plight is due to feminism. In earlier times, women considered it their natural duty to give their husband children—and he considered



it his natural duty to accept this gift. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, however, freed us, along with religion, from other burdensome duties as well and allowed us to pursue only our own personal happiness. In truth, however, they have literally cut us off from our roots, from our God, and from the community of destiny with our people. They have turned us into free-floating isolated existences, which will no longer reproduce and drift away in the universe without a trace, like steam from a pot whose lid someone has removed to 'free' the contents. Mr. Weskamp: I am not even sure whether Euródin will continue to run a paradise for the souls of His children if they no longer reproduce. What right would such a people have to the love and loyalty of their god? How can someone who is himself the child of his ancestors justify remaining childless? And to make that clear: I'm not talking about a return to patriarchy and women again being the property of their husbands. Rather, it's about it being the duty of women to bring birth to children *and* of society to make that possible without them ending up with the short end of the stick."

"Do you yourself have children?" Armin interjected spontaneously.

"No," Siebenthal admitted. "I don't have them for various reasons, none of which I'm proud of. But it doesn't solve the problem if everyone makes the same mistake as me. Anyway, to come back to our topic: to a large part—perhaps the most important part—staying among ourselves and preserving ourselves relates to this: having as many children as possible—but European children—which, in turn, means marrying only each other. That is the core of our task—and not the change of any political realities."

Armin shook his head. "Even if that's the case, I can't imagine how—"

Siebenthal interjected, "Mr. Weskamp, I can't imagine it yet either. But the task may not be as big and unsolvable as we think. Because now I'd like to address your concerns about politics and what the authorities and courts of this country might have to say on this." He took a breath, as if gearing up to make his point.

"We said at the outset that Euródin's people consisted of all those whose souls were consecrated by Him. Meanwhile, I'm thinking this

needs to be modified: it consists of all those whose souls have been consecrated by Him *and* who profess Him and live according to His rules. And these are the only ones we are concerned with. The others? May they die out because they don't want to steal food from African children's plates, or prefer to go on skiing vacations, or as women make a career like a man, or whatever. Euródin will be able to do without them as we will. Do you know the only white population group in the USA that is not shrinking but actually growing?"

Armin shrugged.

"They are the Amish. They multiply because they are believers and therefore put the welfare of their community above their personal well-being. And because they only intermarry, they do not mix with others. We, in the church that we are to found for Him, must become the Amish of the European *Urvolk*. Thus, the only thing counting for us is the fertility rate of our own women and not that of the whole society, which will eventually die out. If we form communities in which we marry among ourselves and have as many children as possible, who can stop us from doing it? Civil liberties should still extend that far, even in this country. And as for allowing only Europeans into our church? After all, it does not serve the salvation of the others if they worship an alien god instead of their own. That's why we won't want to ban Islam from Germany, and it's none of our business whether Muslim—that is, African—women wear or must wear a headscarf or a veil. Yes, in many respects, we would be more tolerant than today's zeitgeist, because we don't interfere in the affairs of the others at all."

"But wouldn't that mean forming a state within a state?" asked Armin slowly. "A kind of parallel society, like the Muslims are accused of doing today?"

"And isn't this obviously permitted and successful?" Siebenthal replied. "I now call it the Inner State, the one in which we gather and live according to our rules. To the Outer State, we are, if not loyal, then at least law-abiding. We're not planning a revolution, we're not even forming a party, we're peaceful and politically completely neutral."

Armin shook his head. "I don't know. It's as if we were retreating into a refuge in the country that once was our home. We're turning ourselves into an, shall I say, endangered minority?"

"We will be that at some point anyway," said Siebenthal. "And nothing we do can change it. But it doesn't matter, because nothing here in the West can be saved and kept alive in the long term. The last part of our mission says: 'to preserve ourselves until Ragnarök.' Do you even know what that term means?"

Armin pursed his lips. "Something to do with Richard Wagner's opera *The Twilight of the Gods*? The end of the world, anyway."

Siebenthal tilted his head. "That's only half the truth. It's the end of the old world and the beginning of a new one. I don't know what form it will take and what will be affected, whether it will be a threat to humanity as a whole or just to us Europeans. But in any case, the modern, liberal welfare state of the West will not survive it, regardless of whether the decline is caused by external events, internal strife, or a mixture of both, which I think the most likely. The Outer State will decline and die on its own, and then our Inner State will inherit it—but only the part of it we think is good."

"But isn't that cynical?" Armin objected. "We're watching the patient die so that we can then plunder his corpse? Shouldn't we be trying to turn the tide instead of taking refuge in a lifeboat? I have to say, this was never my attitude." He was already talking about "we," Armin realized. Siebenthal had taken him that far by now.

"That's not cynical, it's unavoidable," Siebenthal disagreed. "I am firmly convinced of this. No new government will solve the problem of the aging population and the lack of births, no government will make the foreigners who are here leave if they don't want to. And none will eliminate the conviction having been nurtured in people for centuries that the state owes them to remove all risks of life from them. We are facing a threefold crisis: a demographic one, a religious-cultural one, and what I call an ochlocratic or mob rule one, by what I mean: the overstretching of the welfare state. All of this can be turned back only in a zero hour, namely Ragnarök, and we must prepare for it in numerous ways. On the other hand, we must not rush

into the wheel of history. We must wait until it comes to rest on its own.”

With that, Siebenthal ended and looked at his wristwatch. Armin realized they had now been sitting together for an hour and a half. “Mr. Weskamp,” his guest now said, “we could talk on about all these things for a long time and may have to do so sometime. But now that I’ve hopefully answered one or two of your questions, I’d like to ask you: Can you even imagine building a community like the one I’ve just outlined, with me, and of course with others who we still need to find?”

Armin leaned his elbows on the desk and put his head in his hands. He looked deep into Siebenthal’s eyes while all sorts of thoughts pinballed around in his mind. He thought about the anti-racism plaque at the company entrance, which the works council had recently inaugurated with great fanfare. Although he couldn’t have cared less about Henoeh’s opinion, Armin worried about his devout mother’s reaction. And what would his friends and neighbors say? He and Mette had chosen to live in Gross-Flottbek because it was a quiet, middle-class neighborhood, and Anngrit’s school was nearby. Hadn’t Esther—his neighbor and a Green Party district representative—just on Saturday three weeks ago rung his doorbell with a petition urging the German government to accept more African boat refugees in Hamburg for humanitarian reasons? He had signed it, albeit more to avoid attracting attention and to keep his peace.

He had no illusions about what all these people would think of Siebenthal and his Tritheism. Nobody would care about all those fine distinctions between race and divine consecration status, between Inner and Outer State. It was possible that the grand plan Siebenthal had mapped out was not illegal, although he still had to check on that. But in any case, they would be outcasts, untouchables, *Nazis*—which these days took far less than what he had heard in the last hour and a half.

But, again, what if it was true? Was Mette watching him from above, and if so, what would she advise him to do? Wasn’t he convinced in his heart it was true? Shouldn’t he then act accordingly instead of cowardly ducking away—something he had never done? He

could still negotiate details with Siebenthal, including what he, as an engineer, could possibly contribute to the founding of a religion. But this was about the fundamentals.

Another concern suddenly flashed through his mind: *What would Greg Thomsen think?* He was an active Methodist, that much he knew. Surely, he wouldn't let religious convictions scuttle a business deal of this magnitude. But what if there was a scandal? Although nobody could take the *Ghostfish* contract away from them, when it came to future projects, NEMAS remained dependent on the goodwill of politicians. Would the firm be excluded from tenders because it was run by someone who no longer represented Western values? Or rather, by someone who only represented Europeans, but no longer "humans"? Armin didn't think that was out of the question. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more inevitable it seemed.

"Mr. Siebenthal," he said finally. "I believe that some, perhaps even much, of what you said could be true. But I have to think about it. And even if it is: I'm an engineer, not a founder of a religion, and I have a responsibility to my family, as it is a Christian one, as you should know by now. And I oversee a company with almost two thousand employees, which I am in the process of selling. Due to time constraints alone, I cannot promise you any help for the time being. Nevertheless, I thank you for your visit, and I think we'll talk again."

To stress this, Armin picked up the ring binder with Siebenthal's revelations and waved it.

His visitor nodded and didn't seem too disappointed. He probably hadn't expected any other answer. "For my part, thank you for your time and attention," he said politely, reaching for his hat and briefcase.

"And give my regards to your daughter," he added, shaking his hand at the front door.

Armin noticed that it had started to drizzle outside. He watched Siebenthal holding the briefcase over his head like an umbrella as he walked to his car.

And, absurdly, for a moment, the makeshift rain cover seemed to him like a halo.

To put it mildly, Dad's answer didn't go down well with me. First, he had wanted to kick Siebenthal out as a crook and a failure—and now he was putting him off till doomsday. He would rather leisurely sell his company and wait until Grandma had passed away and Uncle Henoeh had choked to death on a gobbled-up piece of cake. Since this evening, at the latest, those two were to me just the unworthy fifth column of the African god. And while Dad mulled over the matter endlessly, and poor Siebenthal was all alone, Europe's body lay bleeding out on the floor! I could have screamed with disappointment.

Instead, I stole out of Mom's study and snuck up to my room.

Armin looked at the clock. It was half past ten and high time to go to bed, as he had another twelve-hour day ahead of him tomorrow. But he was far too upset to sleep. Should he wake Anngrit and let her in on it? He had a guilty conscience about having received Siebenthal behind her back; on the other hand, it hadn't seemed right to have the conversation in the presence of a thirteen-year-old who had to take a physics exam the next day. A small betrayal, but necessary, because he knew exactly what she would think of it and what she would press him to do. He needed the opinion of a trusted and unbiased third party. Someone he could call at such a late hour.

As expected, Friedrich wasn't asleep when he rang him up. He never went to bed before midnight and didn't mind driving the fifteen minutes from his house in nearby Othmarschen. Meanwhile, Armin went down to the cellar to fetch the bottle of Premier Grand Cru Bordeaux he had promised his friend as compensation. On the way back up, he continued to the upper floor and opened the door to Anngrit's room a crack. It was dark and quiet inside, but he could make out her sleeping form in the bed. He felt the urge to stroke her head and adjust the comforter, as he had done in the past. Then he feared she would wake up. He carefully closed the door and headed

downstairs to the living room to set up the glasses, uncork the wine, and open the chest containing the stone.

As soon as I was confident Dad was back downstairs, I threw off the comforter and switched on my nightlight. I crossed my arms behind my head and thought hard. At least I tried, by grasping and contemplating some of the thoughts that were wriggling around in my head like eels before they slipped out again. The outlines of a plan finally revealed themselves to me. But it meant I had to go sneak into Dad's study again.

I was about to tiptoe downstairs when the doorbell rang for the second time this evening. Another visitor! Who could it be? I crept to the banister, from which I could see part of the hallway without being seen myself. When I spotted Legal-Fritz's enormous skull, I knew someone else besides me couldn't sleep after Siebenthal's revelations.

Friedrich bent down to the stone of offense. He traced the bright red lines on it without touching them. "You found it like this? Freshly colored? That surprises me a little."

"No," said Armin, sounding embarrassed. "That was Anngrit. She said it had to be like that, and she could remove it anytime without leaving traces. Originally there was moss in the lines."

Friedrich stood up with a groan and slumped into the armchair. The wine glass and decanter stood untouched on the coffee table in front of him. They hadn't even taken the time to pour a glass for themselves since Armin had begun telling him the most incredible story he'd ever heard, and that meant something. Bewildered, he leafed through the ring binder with Siebenthal's "The History of the Gods and Men" again. While a clearly wired Armin recounted the events of the past few weeks in a rapid-fire delivery, he had skimmed the contents and thought he had understood at least the most important points of Siebenthal's "Tritheism." But now, Armin wanted to know whether this was all sensible and good and if the man, whom he had only seen once from afar at Mette's funeral, could be trusted and whether he should help him found a church for Euródin. He sighed. That was a tall order, even for an old friend.

"You're sure it's not a scam?" he asked. "I mean, how he came across you and how the stone got there?"

"Of course, it could still be some elaborate hoax," Armin conceded. "But how does that explain my . . . sensations and Anngrit's dreams about Mette? He'd have to be able to control our thoughts, which wouldn't be a logical explanation, either."

Armin reached for the decanter and poured them a glass, his hands trembling slightly and spilling a few drops. Friedrich had never seen him like this before. His friend had always been a calm, sober and rational man who had never been able to get into any kind of "sailor's yarn." As far as he knew, this included religion in any form as well. Now he seemed as upset as a schoolboy confessing his first love. Of course, there was the recent trauma of his wife's death. But could that alone explain his demeanor?

They clinked glasses rather dutifully, and Friedrich noted casually that the wine was excellent. "So," he said. "Let's assume this Sieben-thal is not an impostor, and let's further assume he actually received messages from that Euródin. Or rather: let's leave completely aside the question of whether it's true. Which religion has ever been proven? Instead, let's ask ourselves what it *means*."

Friedrich swirled his wine and studied the streaks forming on the glass. "For some, it would be the downfall of the West if it came to pass. A throwback to the time when people worshipped tribal gods in whose name they smashed in one another's heads. It would be like the end of the Enlightenment, religious freedom as we know it, global human rights, and the right to asylum and the like. Theoretically, this could even lead to a global race war, if we understand these *Urvölker* in this way. It's not just left-wingers who might get hysterical in the light of that."

Friedrich put down his glass and looked Armin in the eye. "To others, it might not appear to be the downfall of the West, but, on the contrary, its salvation," he reflected. "I've never cared about this religious stuff myself; you know that well. But as a contemporary who claims not to be completely oblivious to reality, and as a Homo politicus, I have come to the conclusion: without religion as a foundation, a community cannot exist in the long term. Neither does it have the



strength to produce enough offspring nor to put aside one's own well-being in favor of others and defend the common good. Today we're living off our substance in every respect," he noted. "Are the antifa guys fighting against Putin in Ukraine to defend the values they claim to stand up for? Do you find them in the Red Cross and the volunteer fire department? Not to my knowledge. They prefer to destroy what is their own in order to disguise their nihilism, in a self-destructive and therefore essentially perverse attempt to give their own lives a higher meaning."

He looked up at the ceiling and rubbed his chin. "From that point of view, the real question is not whether Siebenthal's religion is true, but whether it is useful or harmful, moral or immoral, if you like. And again, how do you decide that without a religious worldview as a basis? So, if racism were the price we must pay for the survival of our culture, would we pay it or not?" He let the question hover in the air.

Instead of answering, Armin posed a question of his own. "You say it's one thing for some and the opposite for others. Where do *you* stand, if you don't mind me asking?"

Friedrich pursed his lips. Yes, where did he stand? Like every West German of his age, the horror of German history was impregnated into his mind. On the other hand, was a repetition of Auschwitz even a real possibility? Or was it just a specter of horror to distract from the real problems? "I would consider this Tritheism dangerous," he said at last, "if the situation were not different today from what it was in the nineteen thirties. In fifty years' time, the question might be who put whom in camps. Hitler had to deal with only a small percentage of Jews, whom he puffed up as a huge danger and scapegoat. How would it have turned out if a quarter of the population had been Jews? What I see as the real danger of this Tritheism is a civil war both within, let's say, the whites, and between them and other ethnic groups, which will soon only be a minority in absolute but not in relative terms. On the other hand, the question is whether this won't happen anyway . . ."

"So: useful or not? Moral or immoral?" his friend asked mercilessly.

Friedrich noticed he was feeling warm. He rubbed his forehead, as he always did when he was faced with an intellectual or moral dilemma, which was sometimes unavoidable in his profession. He hesitated, played with his wineglass again and didn't look directly at Armin when he replied finally, "I do think it's a way of uniting the Europeans and preserving our culture. I also think it's one way, perhaps the only way, to have more children again. Siebenthal is right about that, I think. Of course, you could argue that we should abdicate peacefully, leave the field to others, because you think your own culture is compromised, or outlived, or if you refuse to perceive others as being different at all. Then you wouldn't need it."

"So would you be for or against if you had to vote yes or no?" Armin asked harshly.

Friedrich was now sweating like he used to as a student during exams, when he had to decide on one solution or the other and had to rely solely on his instincts, not on watertight arguments. "I'd probably be in favor of it," he mumbled finally. "Of course, only if you completely distance yourself from any violence, anything illegal. I . . . am simply not prepared to give up everything we stand for. Everything we once were. And it's the first way out I've ever seen. My party—you can forget it," he said with a dismissive gesture. "Even all the conservative think tanks I know are just idle talk. But maybe it's my soul, consecrated by Euródin, that's speaking out of me right now," he added jokingly—though the moment the words left his lips, he wondered whether he was trying to be funny or not.

"Does that mean you believe in it? Or do you just want to believe in it because it's useful?" Armin asked slyly.

Friedrich puffed out his cheeks like a blowfish. "Now, you're asking me about something that I heard about for the first time just an hour ago. No miracle has happened before *my* eyes, and I've only seen the prophet himself as a somewhat ill-dressed funeral guest. Maybe I *could* believe in it one day, I don't want to rule that out. At least it sounds reasonably logical and rational, and this is something."

Armin nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer. "Do you think it's even possible without legal problems, as he seems to think?"

If, as he wants with his 'Inner State,' you just stay among yourselves, procreate, and spread the faith? And exclude everything unlawful?"

"Phew, here you're asking me something again," said Friedrich, scratching his forehead. "The idea is undoubtedly clever. Why plan a coup if it's going to fail anyway? He also assumes that the 'Outer State' will go down the drain of its own accord in this Ragnarök and, as I understand it, doesn't even want to take it over because he would then have to continue paying the pensions. It's just that . . . I'm not an expert on right-wing extremism, but from what I hear, all you have to do nowadays is rehearse some old folk dances, and lights are flashing up at the German secret service. Especially when children are involved, they react very quickly. But ultimately, you won't know until you try."

"And *should* I try it? *Should* I help him?" Armin looked deep into his eyes.

Friedrich shrugged. "Only you yourself can know this. In any case, I'd wait until I had sold the company. I wouldn't even want to be associated with him before then. And after that . . . You must realize what you'll have to deal with. Your circle of friends will change over, that's for sure."

"Does that apply to you too as well?"

Friedrich shook his head. "Of course not. Firstly, you are and always will be my friend, and, secondly, I'm not completely averse to it."

"Could you even imagine taking part?"

Friedrich took a deep breath. "The question comes too soon; I've already said that. In any case, you'd have to pay me for my loss of clients," he wisecracked.

Then he looked at his watch. "Armin, it's late, and I have appointments tomorrow; you probably do, too. Shall we leave it at that for now? In any case, thank you for taking me into your confidence. And I mean this seriously. If there was ever an opportunity to meet this Siebenthal, I would definitely take it."

Armin looked sufficiently relieved to leave him to his own devices with a good conscience. Friedrich stood up and took one last, pensive look at the stone as he walked away.

“And say ‘hi’ from me to your daughter,” he said in parting. “Oh, by the way, what does *she* think about all this?”

Armin sighed. “You know how they are at that age . . .”

## 37

I had to abandon my second listening post that evening without having achieved anything. I heard only Siebenthal’s name mentioned behind the door to the living room before being forced to retreat; otherwise, Dad might have seen me through the glass section. So, he summoned his intimate at the witching hour, this time to get theological, rather than legal, counsel. And I had no doubt that Legal-Fritz would advise him to forget about what he considered to be a wildly implausible matter and get a good night’s sleep instead, citing alleged legal pitfalls and provisos.

If Dad continued to deceive me like this, I would have to bug the house. But it wasn’t what mattered now. An hour later, after the sounds from the bathroom and the closing of Dad’s bedroom door convinced me that my old man had laid himself to his undeserved rest, I crept downstairs again. In his study, I discovered the ring binder with “The History of the Gods and Men.” Unbelievably, there was a red wine stain on the cover—so the two of them had shamelessly made it a coaster for their drinking binge!

I whipped out my smartphone and took a photo of Siebenthal’s business card, which Dad, being pathologically orderly, had stapled to the folder. Then I switched on the printer on the sideboard, opened the clips on the folder, took out the sheets, and made four copies of each. Finally, I clipped them back into the folder, put everything back as before, switched off the printer, turned out the light, and stole back to my room with my paper loot.

This time I really went to sleep. “Dear Euródin,” I murmured, “wouldn’t it have been smarter if you had appointed *me* prophetess?”

You can see for yourself how the two of them are getting on!” With this gentle nudge, I dismissed my god and sank into the arms of Morpheus, God of sleep, who, as I now knew, was just another emanation of my beloved Soul Father.

The fanfare of my smartphone alarm seemed to rouse me just seconds after falling asleep. I fumbled for the night light switch, found it after ages, and turned it on. I got up with difficulty and staggered to my small mirror on the wall. A ghost with chalky white skin, eyelids as swollen as after a boxing match, and twenty years older than me stared back at me. In my current mental and physical state, I couldn’t possibly take my physics test. At best, I might be able to prove Newton’s law of gravity by crashing my tired skull on the slab of the school desk. But I had better things to do anyway.

Originally, I had planned to stay in bed and bone up for the test until Dad had left for work. Now I hurried so that I could still catch him. In preparation, I stuck a finger down my throat in the bathroom and vomited bile into the toilet bowl to complete my picture of misery. Downstairs in the kitchen, Dad was stuffing down his rolls with jam and cheese, which he would probably live on for the rest of his years.

Ordinarily, he’d be intently reading emails and messages on his smartphone, but this morning he seemed lost in thought. As soon as I croaked “Good morning,” clinging theatrically to the doorframe as if I couldn’t stand upright, he looked up almost aghast. It couldn’t have been my appearance, because after I told him I’d been throwing up all night and had probably eaten something bad yesterday, he just mumbled, “Oh, really? Do you want to make yourself some chamomile tea?”

“Dad, I can hardly stand on my feet,” I said, sitting down on my chair, trembling.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” he asked, now exhibiting at least a little concern.

“No,” I said in a pitiful tone. “But can you write me an excuse for school for once?”

If Mom were still alive, she would have instantly made the connection to the impending physics test and initiated a thorough investigation into the matter. But he just said absently, “Sure, of course.”

Before he could change his mind, I went to the kitchen drawer, where I had stowed away the forms so that they always be at hand as needed. I pulled out one and presented it to him together with a pen. He dutifully signed it without even entering a date.

“Do you want Anna to look after you today?”

“No, no. I’m fine,” I said quickly, because having her here was the last thing I needed.

While I timidly sipped a glass of milk, he hastily finished his breakfast.

He was already standing in the doorway when I asked him off-handedly, “How was your business visit last night, by the way? I didn’t notice anything.”

“It was all right,” he stuttered, red-faced. “We’ll have to talk sometime, but right now I really don’t have time.”

So, he left, and I thought, *well, you asked for it!* I emptied the stupid glass of milk in the sink, poured myself some coffee, and prepared a hearty breakfast. In fifteen minutes, Marina would come to pick me up, and I would inform her that, firstly, I was officially indisposed, and, secondly, I was scheduling an emergency meeting of the String Quartet immediately after school.

Nothing less than the future of Europe was at stake.

## 38

I whiled away the morning by taking an extensive beauty sleep. Furthermore, I opened the chest with the stone, arranged the piles of paper with Siebenthal’s revelation on the table, and made detailed notes about what I wanted to say and suggest to the members of the SQ.

Before I knew it, the three of them were standing around the stone. (Four if you counted Newton, who was sniffing it curiously.)

“So?” I asked, my cheeks glowing with excitement. “What do you think?”

Sephine yawned. “A: if you’ve gone among the sculptors, I’m afraid I can’t pay you much of a compliment, Scha-dear. It looks like the scribbling of a child. B: What have *we* got to do with it? Is *this* supposed to be the salvation of Europe? I must remind you that I have piano lessons later. C: What’s it supposed to represent anyway?”

“You did this while you were ditching the physics test?” Wenna seconded incredulously.

“I think it looks like a magical formula,” Marina piped up dreamily. “Is it something like the philosopher’s stone?”

“What fools you are!” I exclaimed. “The only one with at least a little brain is Marina. Of course I didn’t make it myself! It’s an ancient artifact, and my father and I inexplicably found it in the garden of our vacation home in Denmark. Sit down and listen to me. It’s the most incredible story you’ll ever hear, except that it’s true and of the utmost importance.”

I hid my disappointment at their ignorance as best I could and began my presentation: how it had all started with the outlandish stranger at my mother’s funeral, and Sephine’s scented candle, and my mother’s messages from Valhalla. How we then discovered the stone and how immediately after we had done so, a stranger appeared mysteriously at the front door, who possessed a copy of the engraving he never could have been able to see before. How the man then explained the drawing to us and with it the doctrine of the three gods and their *Urvölker*. And told us about the mission Euródin had given him: namely, to bring Europe and thus his own people to Him and save them from annihilation.

Finally, I held up Siebenthal’s printed revelation, “The History of the Gods and Men.”

“But now, unfortunately, my father wants to hang Siebenthal out to dry due to his cowardice in the face of the left wing and the Christian enemy,” I said, arriving at the final appeal address. “But we can’t allow this man—this prophet—to fail and thus abandon our own

future! That's why I have thought up the following: we'll distribute anonymous leaflets at school to shake up our classmates. I've already developed a sample, right at the bottom of your pile. I even have a name for us: we'll call ourselves the ECA, short for Euródin's Children's Army—so 'ECA' instead of 'IRA', after all we are a liberation movement as well."

I looked expectantly at my audience of three, whose eyes had grown bigger and bigger as I spoke. Now they looked at me, puzzled, and rustled the papers in their laps. Even Newton stared at me with concern. At least none of them had dared to giggle.

Wenna placed the back of her hand against my forehead. "Are you sure you're not ill after all? When you have a fever . . ."

"You'd better not be telling us some cock-and-bull story," Sephine butted in, adopting a threatening tone. "Maybe I should feel honored that you ascribe magical powers to my scented candles. *Mais, ma chérie!*"

"Well, I think it's all logical and right," said Marina. "That's exactly how I already imagined it all in my head. Three gods, three paradises, that's how it must be! Then, at least we'll be rid of all the others in heaven!"

"Of course it's the only civilized idea," countered Sephine. "But that doesn't make it true, does it?"

I had to restrain myself from stamping my foot. "But it's not just an 'idea'! Why else did my father receive Mr. Siebenthal for two hours yesterday, and why did he consult with his best friend, a renowned lawyer and politician, into the night afterward?" I said, exaggerating a little. "And why was Dad so weird this morning? And do you really think I chiseled the drawing into the rock myself?"

"True enough," Sephine mused. "Considering, you're all thumbs, Scha-dear . . ."

Wenna was now waving my flyer. "Even if I believe it—and, of course, it would be cool if it's true. But what do you think they'll do to us if they catch us with *this*?"

I shrugged. "Then we'll become martyrs and get a double portion of dessert in paradise. Besides, I'm sure there's an eleventh commandment in Tritheism too."



"I don't think it's fair to ask us to join in just because you're telling us all this," said Wenna. "We weren't there when you found that stone, and we've never met this, what's his name, Siebenthal."

"Why don't we all go to him?" Marina suggested, and all eyes turned to her.

"Well, yes, there's something to that, Cinderella-dear," said Sephine.

"Exactly! That would be a possibility," Wenna seconded.

Now everyone was looking at me, and I felt hot and cold. I had planned an anonymous action, the originator of which only the Soul Father knew. Now I was supposed to call Siebenthal to see if he would receive four underage brats for a private audience that not even their parents knew about. What would he say to that? But then I remembered how he had given Dad his card in Denmark, saying that he could be called anytime, and how he'd specifically asked my father to pass along his greetings before departing last night. So why not?

Sephine interrupted my thoughts. "Where does your prophet live, anyway? In a cave in the mountains?"

"Nonsense, in a seaside resort on the Baltic Sea," I mumbled absently. I had already reached for my smartphone and googled the train connection.

"Boltenhagen," I added, which made the other three pick up their phones as well.

Marina was the first to cross the finish line. "Two and a half hours and thirty euros per person to Grevesmühlen, then onwards by bus," she announced. "Or we can take a Schleswig-Holstein ticket. Then it's just forty euros for all four of us!"

"But trains are dirty," Sephine complained.

"You can pay for a cab, if you like," mocked Wenna.

"They're dirty too."

Then something occurred to me: "We still have the String Quartet's war chest," I said. Originally, we wanted to use it to visit an ice cream parlor and go to the movies. Well, Europe's future had its price.

"When do you want to go anyway, honeys?" asked Sephine with a yawn. She had probably been up all night cramming for the physics test.

"How about Saturday?" I suggested. "Dad has something planned, and we can say we're all here together at my place."

Wenna blushed, because we both knew that my father was going sailing with her mother that afternoon. And afterward? Well, ahem.

"Actually, I have riding lessons then," said Sephine. "*Mais bon!* I am willing to make a sacrifice. In any case, our parents mustn't find out. *Maman* would kill me. She was brought up a strict Catholic."

"Of course, strictest silence is ordered," I said. "After all, we're an underground army from now on."

The others looked at me meaningfully.

"Well, see you on Saturday then," said Sephine. "You're buying the ticket, Scha-dear? And don't forget to bring your 'Fleurs d'Amour' and don't wear any jewelry, darlings. Trains like this are often held up. And if this Siebenthal isn't available, let me know in good time, will you?"

After they left, I spent an hour sneaking around my smartphone like Odysseus around the freshly cooked vegetables he occasionally had to eat. In the end, I pulled myself together and dialed Siebenthal's number. I had made a pact with myself beforehand: if he picked up, I would bravely do my duty. If he didn't, my friends would get to hear a story about the prophet having embarked suddenly on an indefinite trip around the world.

He answered on the third ring.

"Uh, hello, Mr. Siebenthal," I stuttered. "I'm Anngrit Weskamp. Mr. Weskamp's daughter," I added idiotically. "You gave us your card in Denmark and said we could call you at any time . . ." Which, of course, really had applied only to Dad.

"Is there something wrong with your father?" he promptly asked after a pause, sounding not a little bewildered.

"No, no," I said quickly. "It's just that I told my friends about the stone and about you, and they were so fascinated by everything, they really want to meet you. Besides, I have a few questions of my own," I rattled on. "That's why I wanted to ask you if you could perhaps spend an hour with us this Saturday?" Then, to lend the endeavor an

official touch, I lied, “Also, we must write an essay on religion for school.”

There was a long silence at the other end, which made my forehead break out in sweat. By now, I was almost wishing he would really set off on a longish trip by Saturday. How had I come up with the crackpot idea of Euródin’s Children’s Army in the first place? That’s what happens when you want to do something good for your God!

“Does your father know about this?” he asked finally.

“No—or rather in a way he does,” I stuttered, before launching into another lie I had concocted beforehand. “My uncle Jochen has to go to Rostock, and he wanted to drop us off at Boltenhagen Beach and pick us up again in the afternoon. So, we thought we could just drop by,” I said, as if we were old acquaintances who spontaneously popped in while they happened to be in the area.

“Well, if that’s the case . . .”

On the other end of the line, the call presented Siebenthal with a considerable dilemma. He was pretty sure that her father knew nothing about his daughter’s plans, and also that he would be adamantly against the visit. It was not for nothing he had received him in conspicuous secrecy, when he could have at least asked Anngrit to come downstairs just to say hello. After all, she had been there in Denmark, too.

On the other hand, what would He want? That was what really mattered. Should he keep Tritheism a secret, or was it just not meant for children’s ears, and if so, why? Was there something indecent or illegal about it? Moreover, he had sensed from the beginning that Anngrit had a special connection to Euródin, even more so than her father. Should he risk alienating the girl? Was he even allowed to? If he turned her down now, he might lose her forever. And, well, seeing as how they were in Boltenhagen anyway . . .

“What time would you come?” he asked.

Afterward, I was drenched in sweat, as if having finished an hour of judo training. I would rather get into a fight with all the bullies at

school than ever have to make such a phone call again. But all's well that ends well.

Or had my troubles only just started?

## 39

It's about the future of Christianity, and not even Deutschlandfunk is interested in it anymore," Henoeh huffed, pacing back and forth in his office. As per his instructions, his assistant, Meinhard Lahm, had contacted Germany's public radio station and proposed it assign a feature news story on the burgeoning Jesus Now! Movement, but had been met with utter disinterest.

A good two months had passed since the start of his covert election campaign—covert because Bishop Leutheusser had still not officially announced his resignation. Henoeh expected this in three weeks' time, shortly before the fall synod, at which he planned to announce his own candidacy for the succession. And for that to happen, he needed results on all fronts. The easiest part was always to spend your money, he mused. Of the €1.5 million he had licked out of his brothers' pockets, much of it went to an architectural firm charged with designing The House of Christ almost overnight. They swore up and down that it would be ready in two weeks. Another sizeable sum of what Henoeh regarded as atonement money for his father's disreputable weapons business had secured him the right of first refusal for the designated plot of land in Sankt Blasien. The rest he used to support Bohrmann's Jesus Now! movement.

After all, the House of Christ was not conceived as just another swanky conference and training center for the EKD, of which it already had more than enough in view of the shrinking number of church members. It was to become a Christian conversion center. But in order for this to happen, Henoeh needed conversions and reports of these conversions, and, unfortunately, he lacked both. The figures

Bohrmann now had to report to him on a weekly basis were so low that Henoah could easily have chiseled them into stone tablets from Mount Sinai instead of entering them into an Excel sheet. And this despite the fact that a whole hundred parishioners, motivated by generous pocket money, were now roaming the neo-pagan landscape of Baden along with him.

And where there was nothing to see, no journalists were lured from their warm and cozy editorial offices into the cold reality of an increasingly unchristian country. Apart from a few brief reports in local newspapers, of which hardly anyone took notice, Lahm had not been able to arrange anything. His inquiry to the local public TV station regarding a feature on Jesus Now! had been answered by saying that the idea would be submitted to the relevant committees—which meant that Leutheusser’s successor would long be retired by the time a decision was made.

He could fudge the numbers, that was the least of his worries; after all, paper didn’t blush. What he needed was a real miracle—and that never happened on paper but only in sound and vision.

Lahm crouched anxiously in his chair as Henoah prowled through his office like a predator in search of prey. But what was the point of dressing down his faithful lieutenant? It certainly wasn’t Lahm’s fault that things weren’t going as planned. Bohrmann’s, maybe? More likely, but an old mule didn’t change into a stallion, no matter how hard he tried. Bohrmann had worked hard in the meantime, Henoah knew that. He just didn’t have much success. Nobody would turn a reformed alcoholic in his mid-fifties into a revenant of Christ, bursting with charisma and youthful vigor. Furthermore, deep down, Henoah suspected it wasn’t the wrong man but the wrong time. The sands were running out for Christianity slowly but inexorably. Nonetheless, at least he himself should end up as the hero of a glorious if dying era and not as the failure of his family.

He stopped orbiting the room and sat down. “Meinhard, dire situations sometimes require difficult decisions,” he said. “If the press isn’t interested in what we’re doing and the conversions are only trickling in for the time being instead of flowing into a broad stream of faith, we’ll just have to help it along.”

Lahm looked at him questioningly.

“As I said back then: if the local TV doesn’t want to do it, we’ll make the feature ourselves. Ask around for a suitable production company and tell them money isn’t an issue, the main thing being that the film is finished in three weeks. You can use the footage we have wisely taken of Bohrmann and his proselytizers. We’ll just have to get a bit creative when it comes to interviews with the converts. For lack of real ones, we’ll just use actors. Furthermore, I want to have an emotional scene in the movie: a church service with beaming faces and tearful cheeks, plus a cut with Bible scenes, uplifting music, you name it. Those film folks will come up with something.”

“But that takes months,” protested Lahm.

“Didn’t I say money doesn’t matter?” replied Henoah. “There must be enough producers with an order gap and unemployed actors. Let them work day and night. We must always remember what happens if it will be Zölsch-Brink—then perhaps the last chance to bring about a turnaround in faith will have been lost. Then it’s the end of the road, Meinhard, the reign of the whore of Babylon!”

Lahm nodded, but not particularly eagerly. “If I understand correctly, the actors are only supposed to pretend they have returned to the Christian faith or have joined it,” he said slowly. “But isn’t that . . .?”

Henoah shook his head at such obtuseness and shushed him with a wave of his hand. “Look at it this way: we’re not lying, we’re just anticipating the truth. Belief is as contagious as nonbelief. Seeing these inspiring stories of men and women brought to Jesus Christ will persuade many of those in the audience to join the Lord’s flock. It’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy, so to speak. Then I—*we*—win the election and put Jesus Now! on a new footing. We’re doing God’s work, Meinhard, so a few, er, fictional elements or exaggerations will certainly be allowed.”

Lahm was now smiling conspiratorially. He seemed to be gradually catching fire, perhaps feeling like a friar of a secret order in a historic novel who saved humanity from the reign of evil through his fearless actions. He seemed to be thinking. “When you say money is no

object, what exactly does that mean? I mean, I need to know what the maximum budget is.”

“Half a million,” Henoah replied without hesitation. “But it comes with a nondisclosure agreement from everyone involved. You have to make that clear to them.”

“Well, I’ll see what I—”

“One thing though, Meinhard,” he interrupted. “I’m not that solvent right now. The DACH or House of Christ project has even stretched my funds. We therefore need to finance it differently. From the emergency fund.”

That was intended for urgent repairs or humanitarian crises. But, he assured Lahm, nobody would notice if he borrowed money until next spring. And truly, didn’t this qualify as an emergency indeed?

New worry lines appeared on Lahm’s forehead, and Henoah added, sotto voce, “This is only a temporary measure. I’ll let you in on something you must strictly keep to yourself: my brothers are in the process of selling NEMAS. It can only be a matter of months—afterward, we’ll be swimming in money.”

What a difference the choice of personal pronoun made! The *we* had conjured up a sparkle in Lahm’s eyes. No doubt he saw himself not only as the future right hand of a bishop but also as a close confidant of a rich man. Not without good reason, as Henoah had always rewarded loyalty; besides, he would probably have to pay for Lahm’s silence.

“Very well then, I’ll get straight to work! Just one more thing,” Lahm remembered. “What will Bohrmann actually say about it? I mean, when he realizes the film isn’t entirely, well, true to reality?”

“He won’t say anything about it,” replied Henoah. “Because he’ll never get to see it. Trust in the Lord, Meinhard—and in me. And now get to work!”

Ever since I had received the Weihrauch HW40 air pistol as a birthday present, it had been sitting enthroned on my bedroom shelf when I wasn't taking it apart, cleaning it, putting it back together, and experimenting with the adjustable sights for the thousandth time. How I had longed to try it out with Uncle Jochen in his gun club!

However, as he and I reached the place, other things were on my mind. My call to Siebenthal and tomorrow's pilgrimage to Boltenshausen made the caliber of the air pistol seem even smaller than it was. Nevertheless, I felt important as I entered, gun case in hand, my name in the shooting journal under the eyes of the shooting warden, together with my uncle, who had to formally supervise me.

Jochen greeted the other shooters, almost all male and German, high-fived them, and exchanged a few words here and there. He still knew some of them from the navy. The club had become his second home after his divorce from my ex-aunt, a dumb, superficial blondie who had been unfaithful to him while he was fighting in a NATO mission against Somali pirates. The lot of a war hero. At any rate, in my eyes he had improved by leaps and bounds with Cordu.

As the former commander of a warship, my uncle was also the boss in the ring here. After all, the weapons under his command on board the corvette Erfurt had been in a different league than the toys the boys here were having fun with. Jochen had taken up shooting merely as a hobby after leaving the military. Once, Dad asked him what he wanted with those tiny-caliber guns. My uncle replied inscrutably, "You never know what you might need 'em for."

A twinge of guilt ran through me when I thought of how I would use my dear, unsuspecting uncle as an alibi for Siebenthal. A justified white lie—but a lie, nonetheless.

Eventually we went to the ten-meter range for the air guns, and he explained to me how to use the weapon, the correct stance when shooting, and other things I already knew. I fired a few shots, and when he saw I could handle it, he entrusted me to the care of a fellow shooter and went with his own gun cases to the thirty-meter range for



the live handguns in the separate room where I had already shot his Glock.

I didn't shoot particularly well at first because I didn't know the gun yet, and the sights weren't set correctly despite my dry practice at home. After a while, though, it went better, and I got into the meditative state that sport shooting is all about. I immersed myself in the target until my body became one with it and the gun. I didn't pull the trigger so much as I *slid* into the shot without moving a superfluous muscle, because every tiny tremor leads to a deviation from the target. The real secret of shooting is not aiming but holding the weapon steady. In other words: not a sport for jumpy guys.

Time flew by, and the tin of round diablo balls I was shooting was almost empty when Uncle Jochen suddenly appeared next to me, making me flinch.

"Not bad at all for a start," he said, looking at the electronic display above the lane, which documented the shooting results. "Now, we must celebrate the debut of our young shooter properly! Shall we have a glass together?"

I already felt like an old hand as I walked with him—gun case in hand like a mechanic clutching his toolbox after work—into the pub part of the gun club. I sat down at a table on the edge, while Uncle Jochen walked up to the bar to order me an orange juice and himself a beer. On the way back with the drinks, he exchanged greetings with a few other acquaintances before sitting down across from me.

"Here's to our future shooting queen!" he said, and clinked glasses with me.

I acknowledged his flattery with a smile.

"I've hardly been coming here lately," he continued, "with everything that's going on in the company, and I can already tell I've gotten a bit worse because of it. Remember one thing, Anngrit: you learn to shoot by shooting, and you unlearn it by not shooting. So, always keep at it!"

I nodded seriously. "What will you actually do if the sale goes through?" I suddenly thought to ask. "I mean, then you'll be unemployed, in a way. Dad wants to set up a marine tech company

somewhere. Would that be something for you too? Or are you going back into the navy?"

He shook his head. "I'm an officer in the reserve, so I'm still part of the navy. But as long as the Russians or the Chinese don't attack us, I only take part in exercises. Active service is over for me. I could retire, of course; my share of the sale is worth more than enough for it, but lying around on my back is not my thing, you know. I'll probably start something with information technology and security. I studied that and have all sorts of contacts," he said with a wink.

He took a sip of beer, then asked me, "And what about you? Still a marine explorer or a general?"

It was as if my uncle had torn open a carefully closed door inside me with his innocent question. Everything I had suppressed during my concentration on shooting, the discovery of the stone, Siebenthal, Mom's voice from Valhalla, my trip to Boltenhagen tomorrow, suddenly stared back at me from there. Perhaps I would become neither a marine explorer nor a general but something for which I yet didn't have a word.

"Do you actually believe in God, Uncle Jochen?" I asked abruptly, startled at myself.

He looked at me half astonished and half amused. "What makes you ask me that? Do you want to be pope now? In that case you'll not be allowed to shoot with live weapons, I can tell you that much!"

Against my will, the door inside me opened wider and wider, and the things stored behind it tumbled out without me being able to stop them. "No, I'm serious," I said. "What happens to us after we die is an important question. I now know that Mom's soul lives on, it's there somewhere." I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

Uncle Jochen no longer looked amused at all. "Well, if you say so, then I believe you, Anngrit. I also think there's something there, but you can't grasp it. At least, I can't."

"Can you imagine," I probed further, "that there isn't just *one* God, but three? Because I know Mom is not where Uncle Henoah believes, but in a place exclusively for us Europeans. We have our own God, just as the Africans have their own, which is, in fact, Uncle Henoah's Christian God and at the same time that of the Muslims,"

I gushed. "And the Asians have theirs too, and every god has his own paradise. That explains why Europeans always get on better with one another than with the others, even though at GSH we always have to pretend otherwise."

Uncle Jochen almost dropped his glass of beer. "Say, where did you get *that* from? Did you read it somewhere?"

Fortunately for me, whoever had taken charge of my head let it be now. Otherwise, I would have betrayed the stone and Siebenthal and everything else that Friday afternoon in the gun club. "No, I just know," I said. With that, I emptied my glass and avoided looking at Uncle Jochen. "But maybe it's just nonsense," I muttered, wishing I was somewhere else.

"Um, but if there are three gods, which one of them created the world?" asked my uncle, apparently having acquired a taste for the topic through my careless chatter. "Or did that happen three times too?"

"It came into being on its own, just like us humans," I murmured into my glass. "The gods only consecrate our souls."

Uncle Jochen's eyes now had the diameter of the muzzle of a ship's cannon. In the end, Cordula saved me, because the ringing of his smartphone stopped him from asking any more questions. Apparently, she was expecting him for some Friday night's pleasure. Suddenly he was in a hurry to leave, and those strange three gods no longer seemed to be of fervent interest to him.

We drove home in silence. My uncle glanced at me from time to time with a mixture of astonishment and amusement, as if his niece had turned out to be something he had never thought possible.

"See you at the next training session, then," he said when we pulled up in front of the house. "And next time, tell me a bit more about your three gods, eh?"

He winked at me, and I didn't know whether he was making fun of me or being serious.

I ran into the house with my head burning.

We set off early the next morning, and everything went like pie until we had left Hamburg behind us. After that, we endured the first suffering of our pilgrimage: a horde of bawling, beer-smelling soccer fans wrapped in tasteless scarves and fan jackets boarded our carriage. Apparently, soccer was also being played in Lübeck, where we had to change trains. How it must have made Euródin weep to see his *Urvolk* behaving like a horde of monkeys!

So, we changed carriages—and were thrown from the frying pan into the fire. At the next stop, three Arabs got on, squeezed into the aisle next to our group of seats, and hissing to one another in an alien tongue, spread a mixture of garlic and discount shower gel scents.

“Can’t you tell Newton to bare his teeth for once?” I whispered to Wenna.

But she just pulled a helpless face. Rather, our supposed four-legged protector looked as if he longed to crawl into her lap. The ride among all the strangers pleased neither him nor Seph, who incessantly summoned her “Dieu” today. At least she had put in an extra shift in her chemistry lab, and now each of us possessed her own bottle of the “Flowers of Love” scent to ward off uninvited admirers.

Well, the Arabs eventually left the train, chattering eagerly, and without having cleaned their fingernails with a saber or some other bold action, and we finally unpacked our chocolate spread sandwiches and orange juice. We ate and chatted, and the other three speculated about what awaited us in Boltenhagen. Would Gerold Sieben-thal hover above the floor like a fakir or clap his hands so that the empty dining table was suddenly bursting with goodies? I shook my head at so much oafishness, even if it was only an act. Meanwhile, a pastoral, late-autumn landscape full of meadows, forests, and black-and-white cows passed by at a leisurely pace—until the train stopped abruptly on the open track.

The journey would have to be interrupted for a while due to an operational disruption, a voice squawked metallically over the loud-speaker. A suicide? Terrorists? Or had a railroad official just fallen

asleep over his switch desk? When nothing happened after more than an hour, I started to worry. My time plan was by now messed up. I reckoned I'd have a free run until at least nine o'clock in the evening, which was how long Dad and Vic would be sailing and then going out for dinner. That let Wenna off the hook, too, but not Marina and Sephine, who were expected home punctually for dinner.

"Don't you have to tell Siebenthal we'll be late, Scha?" Marina asked shyly.

That was the next problem. But how could I justify the delay? Uncle Jochen was supposedly driving us there and back. Should I invent some story about a breakdown or an accident? I decided it was better to come clean—one couldn't take the lying too far. So, I texted him, being watched goggle-eyed by the others, to say that my uncle had unexpectedly had to go away on a business trip, we had taken the train instead, and would be up to two hours late because of a service disruption. That should suffice.

Siebenthal, not a man of many words, replied after a short time with "Okay." After a total of one and a half hours, during which I had been able to count all the blades of grass outside the window, we finally set off again. Without further incident, we reached Grevesmühlen, from where we had to continue by bus. With only a minute until departure, we stormed out of the train like armored infantry from their personnel carriers and chased to the departure platform of the bus—which, however, just showed us its taillights with a sneer.

"*Merde*," said Sephine, probably hoping our French didn't reach that far. "The journey of the three wise men from the Orient couldn't have been more exhausting," she complained.

Well, the next bus arrived, and we finally reached Boltenhagen. It was another mile along the coastal road from the bus stop to Siebenthal's house. Within minutes, we reached the sea. The Baltic seemed to share our excitement, its waves splashing exuberantly against the rocks of the cliffs in front of us. We stopped for a moment to enjoy the fresh breeze, the smell of seaweed and iodine, and the sight of the cliffs, below which you could scramble over rocks and sand endlessly.

"Maybe there are caves there!" exclaimed Marina.

Wenna had something else on her mind. "In any case, I'm going to the beach with Newton afterward," she said. He seemed to have understood, because he was already pulling impatiently on the leash.

"Well, actually, we should be turning back already, my dears," said Seph, glancing at her watch. "I have to be home for dinner under all circumstances."

"But we can't go back without seeing Mr. Siebenthal!" Marina cried in dismay.

"Can't you call home and say you're having dinner at my place?" I suggested. "Then we have until nine o'clock."

Sephine sighed. "All right, otherwise, Cinderella-dear will die of grief. Let's just hope this prophet of yours is available to speak to us at all and isn't already floating off to heaven on a cloud."

The prophet's home proved to be a disappointment. Surrounded by neat little houses to the left and right, the once presumably yellow color of the crumbling plaster of his property had given way to a dirty gray-brown. The front garden consisted of a lawn that had at least been mowed and two overgrown rose bushes as the only ornament. The slabs leading to the entrance were uneven and partly cracked, and one side of the property was occupied by a decrepit shed with an advertising sign reading "Weine & Meer Wismar." The only showpiece of the dreary ensemble was a relatively new-looking Volkswagen Caddy station wagon, fittingly painted in Bordeaux red.

The others said nothing, but disillusionment was written all over their faces. "The stable in Bethlehem didn't have a golden dome, either," I hissed at them, marching undeterred toward the front door.

I pressed the well-worn doorbell button, the black coating of which was already peeling off, and it seemed like the first miracle during our visit that not only did the thing work but also did the front door open seconds later. Siebenthal was wearing light-brown corduroy pants and a worn gray slipover with a sand-colored shirt underneath. He had pushed a pair of gold-colored reading glasses into his hair like sunshades, as if my ringing had roused him from brooding over ancient prophecies—an impression reinforced by his tousled

beard. But he made up for all this with a beaming smile. “Welcome to my hallowed halls!”

We giggled, and the ice was broken.

Siebenthal led us through a dark hallway with doors to the left and right, the last of which opened into the living room. A piano stood in one corner next to—an unusual combination—a bass guitar with an amplifier. Otherwise, there were walls full of bookshelves, a dove-gray suite of armchairs and couch, a table with chairs, and a stereo system. What I couldn’t detect was a TV.

“Shall we sit outside in this balmy fall weather?” he asked. “I’m usually out there.”

We didn’t mind and followed him out through the patio door. When I looked around, I understood why he had chosen this house, despite its being located on the noisy coastal road and expensive all the same. While you couldn’t see the beach below the dune from here, you were afforded a panoramic view of the sea across the entire horizon! Even I could have developed religious visions here.

On the large, newly laid and roofed terrace stood a big table with six chairs, set with coffee tableware. Another small table occupied a corner, mysteriously covered with a black, velvet blanket reaching down to the floor. The lawn in front was planted with flowers, there were neatly trimmed hedges on the sides facing the neighboring properties, and a new-looking wooden fence with a door closed off the garden to the seaside. It suddenly seemed a different property. Frontside phooey, backside hooey—what might be true for Siebenthal himself. In any case, the garden looked like his second living room.

“We still have to brew the coffee, and I left the cake in the kitchen because of the flies,” he said. “Will you help me carry it, Anngrit?”

I nodded, and something in his gaze alerted me that this wasn’t the only reason he wanted to be alone with me.

“But first, let’s introduce ourselves,” he said, clearing his throat. “I am Gerold Siebenthal, former hunter of the Mammon and now faithful servant of my God. And whom—apart from Anngrit, of course, as we already know each other—do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

I started with Seph, who would otherwise have been mortally offended: “All three are my best friends. This here is Josephine; she’s

from Toulouse and represents glorious France,” I said, following a sudden inspiration.

“Uh-huh! *Enchanté, mademoiselle!*”

He bowed slightly and held out his hand to her, which she accepted graciously.

“And that’s Morwenna, but everyone calls her Wenna,” I continued. “She comes from lovely Cornwall and represents glorious England.”

“Delighted, miss!” he said with another bow.

“And this here is Marina. She’s from Kharkiv and represents the glorious Ukraine, which she, well, had to leave due to certain circumstances.”

Siebenthal bowed again, held out his hand to her, and opened his mouth to say something, but then seemed to be at a loss.

“*Ochen priyatno*,” Marina helped him, and he repeated it bumpily. In return, she beamed at him, as if he had given her a precious gift. It struck me now how she had a kind of religious gleam in her eyes all the while.

“Did you . . . lose someone there?” he asked.

“No,” said Marina. “We fled right after the war broke out. But everything is in ruins there now,” she explained, looking adoringly at him, nonetheless.

“I see . . . It’s a terrible crime. Europeans against Europeans—something that must never happen again.”

We observed a minute’s silence for poor Ukraine.

“And who do *you* represent?” he asked, finally turning to me. “Glorious Denmark or glorious Germany?”

“I represent everything,” I said, blushing, and everyone laughed.

“A truly European round,” he mused, scratching his beard. “You go to school together?”

I nodded. “The Global School Hamburg, an international school.”

“Maybe that means something,” he murmured. Then he leaned down to Newton, who sniffed between his legs with moderate interest. “But I don’t think we’ve been introduced yet. *Und wie beisst du, alter Junge?*” he asked, petting his fur.



"You'll have to ask him in English," said Wenna, full of pride of ownership. "He's not multilingual like us."

He tried again in English—"So, now, what's your name, old boy?"—earning him a half-choked "Woof!" in reply.

"He wanted to say 'Newton,'" Wenna explained.

"Newton? Well! A glorious name and unusual for a dog."

"The breeder had named him *Charlie*," she said, "but Mom and I thought it was dumb. One day he knocked over a bowl of fruit on the couch and watched the apples tumble to the floor with interest. Mom thought he must be exploring the laws of gravity, and that was when we switched to Newton."

Siebenthal laughed heartily.

I cleared my throat because it was time for the four wise women from the Occident to present their gifts. "We've brought something, too," I said. I pulled Seph's scented candle out of my backpack first. "Incense, gold, and myrrh we can't offer; but Sephine made this candle herself!"

He looked with pleasure at the beautiful candle, cast in the colors of the rainbow, while I took out the stand for it that I had bought myself in a craft store where Mom sometimes had shopped. The bronze piece was decorated with a snake ribbon ornament, typical of Nordic culture. "This is the matching stand," I said. "I thought the motif would fit the theme."

"It really does," said Siebenthal appreciatively. He placed the stand in the middle of the patio table and then put the candle in it. "Thank you very much, although, of course, it wasn't necessary. You've already had to spend a lot on the journey here." He fixed me with a penetrating look, and suddenly I knew the pleasant part of the day was over for me.

He cleared his throat. "Shall the two of us take care of food and drink, then? We'll find something for our illustrious master too," he added with a glance at Newton.

With that, our host left the terrace, and, while the others sat down and relaxed, I followed him, for better or worse, with a sense of impending doom.

In the kitchen, Siebenthal closed the door behind us, took his reading glasses out of his hair, folded them, and placed them in his shirt breast pocket under his slipover. He leaned against the kitchen worktop, on which a thermos and two foil-covered fruit tarts stood ready, and crossed his arms.

“So, why did you lie to me? Your uncle never intended to drive you here, did he? You’re all here without your parents’ knowledge, at your age and at a time when anything can happen on the road. You, of all people, should know that!”

The blood rushed to my face. Instead of saying anything back, I stared defiantly at the ground.

“Of course, I’ll take you home in the car right after you’ve eaten your cake. Even if nothing has happened, can you imagine the consequences for me and for . . . the rest if your father and the other parents hear about this?”

“I’m sorry,” I stuttered finally. I had fantasized that by my heroic deed, I would save Europe like a Joan of Arc. Now I stood there like a stupid little girl who had brought about a disaster through her pig-headedness. “But it’s not that dangerous,” I said defiantly. “After all, there are four of us, we have pepper spray and a dog, and I do judo.”

Siebenthal merely acknowledged this with a shake of his head, and I added quickly: “If we had told our parents, they would certainly have forbidden us to come here. So, what alternative did I have?”

Siebenthal laughed sarcastically. “Isn’t that the whole point of parental bans: children not doing what they’re not supposed to be doing? And you’re overriding it by simply doing it in secret!”

“I was so disappointed with the way my father sent you away that I thought I had to do something,” I mumbled. “I mean, it can’t go on like this, can it?”

“So, you were eavesdropping?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued: “Then you’ve obviously misunderstood something. Your father was just asking for more time. If, on the other

hand, he hears how I received his underage daughter behind his back and influenced her . . .”

Now I'd had enough. My shame faded and instead I felt anger boiling up at the unfair treatment. The money we had spent on the trip and the presents alone! “But he won't find out! Neither from me nor from my friends. We are secretive, and you would have a hard time finding people like us again! Besides, I won't let anyone influence me,” I said angrily. “I made contact with my mom's soul in Valhalla through one of Sephine's candles, if you must know. And it was only because I dreamt about her that Dad bought the vacation home in the first place, and if I hadn't been there, he wouldn't even have spotted the engraving with his mole's eyes. And where would that leave us now?”

I crossed my arms and pouted my lower lip. At last, I seemed to have made an impression on Siebenthal. The sternness disappeared from his gaze, which was now overcast, and he scratched his beard again. Once in full swing, I continued: “And besides, just because Euródin has appointed you as his prophet doesn't mean He belongs to you alone. He belongs to me and my friends too, and no one can forbid us to worship Him just because we are minors!”

Siebenthal left his beard alone and started a staring contest with me. Like most people, he lost it in the end and said with a sigh, “All right, you may be right about that. While you're here, what can I do for you?”

“Answer my friends' questions,” I said, like a shot. “And, furthermore,” I added, following an idea that had popped into my mind out of nowhere, “I want you to hold a rite with us.”

“A rite?” he repeated in a disbelieving tone, as if he had never heard of such a thing.

I crossed my arms again. Which of us was now the founder of a religion? “Yes, something to show Euródin how we believe in Him and will stand up for His cause,” I said, spinning my idea further. “We can take an oath, for example, and then the others won't betray us. Besides, isn't us coming from different European countries a sign?” I hadn't forgotten Siebenthal's thoughtfulness earlier.

"Maybe," he murmured. "However, I think you have to be older to profess a religion."

"Oh, yeah?" I replied. "No one has ever asked me if I want to go to church. And Sephine is Catholic and received her first communion four years ago, and her parents decided that, too. How can parents just dispose of their children's souls like this? Don't we have any rights of our own?"

"Well, you might have touched here on a sensitive spot I haven't thought through yet," he acknowledged. "But what makes you so sure that your friends even want to profess Euródin? They can't have heard of Him until recently."

"All you have to do is ask them," I parried. Then I added proudly, "None of us does what she doesn't want." I was sure, though, that they would agree. Sephine had always mocked her parents' Catholicism, Wenna seemed more involved with the Celtic sacrificial stone on their property in Cornwall than with that funny Anglican Church thingamabob, and Marina was already so impassioned, it seemed as if she longed to throw herself at the feet of her Soul Father. And how could a soul not know which God it belonged to?

"All right," Siebenthal said finally. He took the foil off the two cakes and studied them like auspices. "Let's have coffee first," he finally said. "Then we'll see."

## 43

I was brimming with satisfaction. Just fifteen minutes ago, Siebenthal had raked me over the coals and threatened to drive us home straight-away. Now he suggested meekly to the four of us, "To round things off, we can have a little ceremony afterward—only if you like, of course."

"Oh yes!" Marina squealed, her eyes shining so intensely that you could use them as flashlights in the dark.

"A ceremony? How romantic!" said Sephine. "But we'll have to wait until the sun goes down. Then we can do it back by the cliffs and look out to the sea."

"And we can use your scented candle," Marina suggested. "Maybe deceased relatives will appear to us like to Scha. Maybe Wenna will see her father again!"

Wenna frowned, irritated. "Shouldn't we make a sacrifice to Euródin?" she suggested instead. "Isn't that what you do?"

"Best with blood," said Marina, who seemed to be bursting with ideas today. "Those are the most valuable," she added knowingly.

"Oh, and which one of us has the most valuable blood? Certainly not me," Wenna remarked sarcastically.

"By the way, are there human sacrifices in your religion, Mr. Siebenthal?" Sephine asked casually, as if it were a mere technical detail.

Even Newton was caught up in the general excitement. His gaze broke away from the tinned sausage we had served him, and he looked as if he were about to join the debate, barking.

For Siebenthal, on the other hand, things were getting too lively. "Ladies, please! If I may, I would like to tell you something about myself and what the god to whom you are so eager to make a sacrifice has revealed to me."

He then presented to us a summary of his life, his spiritual development, and what Euródin had revealed to him. He even showed us the stone under the little table at the edge of the terrace. It was a boulder from the coast, not unlike *the* stone, only gray instead of reddish. Underneath, he wrote down questions on slips of paper for Euródin to answer, which He sometimes did and sometimes didn't. The velvet-covered table served as a ritual table, as he called it; the word *altar* was too Christian for him. It was at this table, facing north, that he had called on Him for the first time, Siebenthal revealed, which drew duly impressed looks from us.

Questions were allowed at the end. Wenna went first. Leafing through her copy of "The History of the Gods and Men," she asked, "You write that all the other gods of the European pantheon are just other names for Euródin, so to speak. Thor and Freya, for example, are famous ones. But can Europeans use any name they like for Him?"

I know, for example, the Irish particularly worship Lugh, the warrior god, and the mother goddess Dana.”

Siebenthal nodded. “That should be possible, as long as you accept that they are just different names for Him. Of course, the same rules of Tritheism always apply; there can be no variation in dogma and cult. Therefore: own names, as well as forms of representation, yes, but no own religion. We Europeans must never fall out over our faith again.”

We nodded seriously. It made sense, like everything he had told us.

Now Sephine pulled her copy of Siebenthal’s paper out of her handbag. I saw yellow marker notes peeking out of the sheets. The old nerd! “*Alors*,” she said, “you’re writing about this Helheim, where the scoundrels go. But what I don’t understand is whether you are also punished there if you have harmed someone who has *not* been consecrated by Euródin, such as an African or Asian? Isn’t He primarily concerned with His own people?”

Siebenthal seemed just as perplexed by the question as I was. I would never have come up with it. “A perfectly valid question,” he said. “Yes, why would He punish one of His children if they had killed a stranger but nothing bad for His own people would or could come of the deed?” He thought for a moment before continuing: “First of all, that’s a big but. What if the victim’s relatives start a campaign of revenge? Or even just remember it for the future and treat us the same way? Blood feuds have been known to destroy kingdoms. Besides, anyone who harms another without a good reason is not a good person and cannot, I think, expect a reward in Valhalla, regardless of the victim’s consecration status. That even applies to animals.” He looked at Newton. “The dog doesn’t have a soul consecrated by Euródin, either. But would you think it right that someone who mistreats him should not be punished for it?”

We shook our heads in dismay.

“I’m convinced,” he continued, “Euródin simply won’t tolerate anyone near Him who tortures or kills creatures capable of suffering, whether human or animal, whether consecrated by Him or one of his brothers, without justification. Whether Vili and Vé see it the same way, however, I don’t know.”

The last sentence made me shiver. Could Vili and Vé be rogue gods, heavenly Lord Saurons who even applauded their people when they tortured and killed the children of the others? I thought of the Islamic suicide bombers, who were convinced they would go straight to paradise if they blew up “infidel” children with them. I could never believe that Euródin could be such a god.

“Right, so we can’t harm the others for no reason,” Sephine said. “But does it mean we have to help them?”

“That depends,” Siebenthal replied. “If it’s a situation in which we would expect them to help us too, then yes. Apart from that, each *Urvolk* is only responsible for itself.”

“And all the refugees?” asked Wenna.

“Well, no member of an *Urvolk* has the right to settle among another just like that, and civil wars and other problems there are basically none of our business. It would be different if someone were accidentally stranded here. Then you help him temporarily. But these are questions for politicians—questions that neither you nor I can answer—and you should think very carefully about what you say. Or rather, as with everything else today, it seems, you shouldn’t say anything at all. It will only get you into trouble.”

Siebenthal appeared embarrassed, and for the first time, as if he regretted getting involved in the discussion with us. “But surely Adolf Hitler is in this Helheim because he did so much evil?” Wenna now asked.

“Hitler is a criminal in Euródin’s eyes if for no other reason than he made war against his European brothers and sisters,” he said, sounding relieved that the issue of refugees was off the table. “Like Putin, by the way. As for the Jews: a valid reason to kill them would have been only if they were an existential threat; in other words, in self-defense. But that was not the case. On the contrary, they were peaceful and useful members of society, just scapegoats for everything that had gone wrong in Hitler’s eyes. A fantasized specter.”

Siebenthal took a sip of coffee before continuing: “By the way—because that is sometimes wrongly supposed—antisemitism was never an issue in the Germanic religion. Rather, it stems from Christianity because of the crucifixion of Jesus and because the Jews had

also persecuted the early Christians. In addition, Hitler never referred to the Germanic religion; this is often merely supposed as well because he used a few runes and a pseudo-Germanic symbol such as the swastika. On the contrary, Hitler was an avowed Catholic until his death and explicitly declared Christianity as the moral foundation of the Nazi state.”

We thought about that for a while, relieved that Hitler couldn’t just drag his Soul Father, who must have been horrified by him, down into the mud with him.

“But something else,” Sephine now said. “If I’ve understood correctly, the gods are beings of pure spirit. Therefore, they can’t torture anyone with red-hot pincers or throw them into burning pools, after all. So how can they punish anyone at all?”

“But they can inject it into your head,” Wenna said in a lecturing tone.

“*Project*, if anything,” Sephine corrected huffily.

“What Morwenna says is basically true,” said Siebenthal. “I dreamt about it recently. The gods can not only make souls feel pain, but they can also make them feel the suffering they have inflicted on others during their lives. That is much worse! The resulting torment is so intense it penetrates every fiber of the soul and gradually destroys it. That is why you only suffer Helheim for a short time. Afterward, Euródin releases the soul purified to Valhalla or lets it expire.”

We shuddered—at least I did—and, probably to comfort us, Siebenthal added, “But only a few go to Helheim; just the really bad guys. Character flaws, some stupid things you’ve done—nobody has to worry about that. He overlooks it like any loving father. However, we can meet the souls of the victims of our bad deeds up there, and that’s pretty unpleasant even without Helheim. I would therefore think carefully about what I do in life.”

This last statement gave us pause. “And what else is it like in Valhalla?” I asked, trying to broach a lighter subject. “Do they have pizza there every day?”

Siebenthal smiled. “In a way, yes, and you don’t even gain weight.” He looked at the plundered cake plates, and we giggled guiltily. “Because you consume them only in your mind,” he continued. “Just as



the torments are immaterial, so are the pleasures. You can relive everything beautiful you have experienced in life as often as you like. Norse mythology depicts Valhalla as an inn where warriors who have fallen in battle sit at tables and are served by the pretty Valkyries—a male fantasy. In truth, you women can sit up there and enjoy yourselves just as much. Euróðin treats his daughters no less than his sons,” he said. “You might even say the greatest heroes for him are not the warriors but the mothers. Because without them, we wouldn’t be.”

We nodded with satisfaction. “And do you really stay in Valhalla forever?” asked Marina. “You could get bored, after all.”

“No, you stay there only as long as you want. When you’ve had enough, you simply close your eyes. Then Euróðin lets your soul fall asleep peacefully. Many people just want to see again the loved ones they left behind, their children, which is possible with His help. This is how you could find contact with your mother,” he said to me. “But when everyone you’ve known in life has come to you, and you’ve enjoyed everything beautiful one more time, most people decide it’s enough.”

Siebenthal now turned his gaze pensively upward. “Furthermore, I now believe the gods have a vested interest in taking in their consecrated souls. They thereby increase their own substance in a way I can neither understand nor describe.”

“Like the *einherjar*?” I asked. This part of the Norse sagas had naturally always fascinated me the most.

“That could be the true core of the myth,” said Siebenthal. “I assume the Valkyries or angels or spirits of mythology are, at least in part, simply former earthly souls who now, embedded in the spirit of the gods, take on new tasks. A kind of second life.”

“Do you think Mom could be such a Valkyrie now too?” I asked.

“Perhaps. However, they are more likely to take the souls of younger people, such as children who have died, because they are more malleable. But I don’t know that for sure.”

“And what about transmigration, or reincarnation?” Marina wanted to know.

Siebenthal took a deep breath. “Well, as far as that goes: from what I know, souls arise from consciousness as part of biological devel-

opment. They were not created by the gods but merely modified so that they can make contact with their god of consecration. They install a kind of lock to which they have a key. For a rebirth, the naturally created soul would have to be exchanged for one from the gods' supply—an organ transplant of the living heart, so to speak. That must be dangerous, if it is possible at all. As far as I know, Euródin doesn't do it, either, because He can't or doesn't want to. And what would be the point? Again, I can't speak for Vili and Vé, though."

"And animals definitely don't go to heaven?" Wenna asked, looking wistfully at Newton.

Siebenthal shook his head. "To the extent that they have any consciousness at all, they obviously do not develop a soul that the gods can access. But because of their lack of consciousness, or only rudimentary consciousness, they have no concept of the future and thus of their own mortality, and therefore no fear of death, which the gods would have to take away from them. I maintain that an animal, which does not suffer from pain, hunger, or any other reason, lives a happier life than most people, because it feels no remorse for the past or what it has missed out on and is not worried about the future."

Truly, Newton didn't seem to feel guilty that he had let us feed him cookies on the train, and had now devoured a large tin of sausage, and was even casting covetous glances at the cake on the table. Wenna would have to put him on a diet tomorrow for his own good.

Siebenthal looked at his watch and then at the sea, over which the sun was already low. "We could go on discussing this forever," he said, "and perhaps there will be an opportunity to do so. But right now, I think we need to get a few things ready for our ritual."

## 44

Vic was as excited as a teenager who during her first driving lesson had managed to steer and change gear a little without crashing the car into

a tree. While sailing out on the water, she hadn't fallen overboard, as she had feared, nor had the mast whipped around to whack her in the head when they jibed. She hadn't even gotten seasick on her and Armin's short voyage down the Elbe toward the North Sea and back into Billwerder Bay.

"Now we have to celebrate your maiden voyage properly," said Armin, mooring the boat at the jetty.

The trip had done him good as well: Vic's company, the sunny autumn weather, the fresh sea air, and above all the distraction from everything that had been bothering him—no, tormenting him—over the past week. He had spent Saturday morning at the company and learned that he had to fly to the USA next week for the sales negotiations. But above all, of course, he couldn't get that most memorable evening out of his mind. Sentences of the conversations with Sieben-thal and Friedrich haunted him at every opportunity and intruded upon everything he did. Furthermore, he felt guilty about not having been honest with Anngrit. He would have to talk to her at some point. But until then, he first had to come to terms with himself.

Back on shore, Vic, unaware of all this, organized her clothes: a fleece jacket under a windbreaker and a pair of functional outdoor pants, as he had recommended. The wind could pick up in any weather and chill you without your even realizing it, and you'd rather not wear cotton clothes that would drink up water if you inadvertently wound up in the sea or got drenched by a wave.

Armin couldn't help but notice her breasts as she stretched out like a cat, visibly relieved to have solid ground under her feet again. She was shorter than Mette and more . . . womanly. Her reddish-brown curls framed a round, cute face that looked either mischievous or girl-ish, she had wide hips, and, well, a notable rear. Something stirred in him that he hadn't felt for a long time. It was hard to believe that she hadn't had a steady relationship since her husband's death several years ago.

As he looked at her furtively, Armin noticed an unusual silver pendant she had pulled out from under her blouse. He had never seen anything like it before and curiously stepped closer to look at it. They were three intertwined elliptical circles.

"That's a trinity knot," she said, noticing his interest. Vic dangled it in front of him. "It symbolizes birth, life, and death and the elements of water, earth, and air. It's worn by many who, like me, feel connected to the Celtic tradition."

They were now very close, and Armin inhaled her scent and heard her soft breathing. Suddenly he felt the urge to press her into his arms and kiss her. No one was watching them, and she wouldn't resist, he was sure. He took a step toward her, and her mouth was already moving in his direction. But there he was again, the little man in his brain who interfered with everything he did these days. Armin suddenly remembered the sacrificial stone on her father's property in Cornwall. It was as if the Celtic symbol had woken the tiny buddy inside him from his temporary slumber, and now he kicked Armin's shin and whispered, *Don't you want to tell her? Don't you have to tell her?*

The magical moment passed, and their mouths moved away from each other again. Embarrassed, Vic put the pendant around her neck. "So, shall we go for something to eat?" she asked, sounding disappointed. "The sea air does work up your appetite. Or have you changed your mind?"

"No, no, of course we'll go," Armin stuttered. He hesitated, took a deep breath, and came to a decision. Better bring it to an end one way or another. Maybe then his tormentor would at least leave him alone for a while.

"I'd just like to show you something at home first."

Vic curled her lips teasingly and raised an eyebrow. "Like your stamp collection?"

"No," he said seriously. "Something else."

Sephine collected blooms from the rose bushes in front of the house while we stowed all sorts of things in our rucksacks: an incense burner, a bag of honey-colored crumbs, which Siebenthal explained were amber, and, to my astonishment, a triangle. He pulled all of this out from under his ritual table. Then I grabbed Sephine's scented candle and the matches on the dining table, and we followed Siebenthal into the kitchen.

“What we’re going to do is a *Sumbel*,” he explained there. “A ritual drink combined with a libation.”

He opened a cupboard door, behind which were all kinds of bottles and cartons, and was about to pull a box of apple juice from the shelf. But Marina spotted something else next to it and begged, “Oh, please, can’t we have the cherry juice? Then we can imagine we’re drinking blood.”

I frowned. What abysses were to be found in a person you thought you knew!

“Besides, you drink it at these Viking festivals,” she added. “I’ve read about that.”

“I know what you mean: Viking blood,” said Wenna. “But for that you mix the cherry juice with honey wine.”

“That, I don’t have,” said Siebenthal. “And you can’t have alcohol; I’ll draw the line here. But cherry juice? Why not?” With a sigh, he pulled it from the shelf.

Finally, a simple wine carafe found its way into my rucksack, which Siebenthal pulled out of a cupboard compartment after rummaging around for a while.

“Traditionally, of course, you would use a drinking horn,” he said. “That’s still usually made from real cow horn, by the way. But my ritual equipment, like the rite itself, is still all improvised.”

When we looked disappointed, he added with a raised finger: “But that’s never the point, remember that! Euródin will look at what is written in your hearts and souls when you offer Him a sacrifice, not whether it comes from a golden plate.”

Presently, Sephine came into the kitchen and proudly presented a handful of pale yellow and red-and-white marbled rose petals. Siebenthal placed them in a small freezer box, and we set off.

We left the property through the small door in the fence and climbed a path down the dune to the beach. On the way to the cliffs, Wenna let Newton run off his sumptuous meal by having him retrieve pieces of branches. Sephine and Marina were walking behind me, engrossed in conversation, so I took the opportunity to have a tête-à-tête with the prophet himself.

"I saw the piano and the bass guitar in your living room," I said. "Can you play them well?"

He smiled. "No, not really. I had piano lessons as a child, and as a teenager I played bass in a rock band. Now I just pluck a few riffs and lines now and again as a reminder of old times. Playing the piano is something I took up again some time ago. It distracts me and inspires me from time to time."

"Sephine plays the piano very well," I said. "It's a family tradition. Her mother even gave recitals."

"And you? Do you play an instrument too?"

"Yes, trombone in the school orchestra, but more because so few of my schoolmates want to do it."

To my amazement, Siebenthal laughed uproariously. "Trombone, of all things! Well, if I had had to guess!"

I furrowed my brow. What was *that* supposed to mean?

"And what else do you do in your free time?"

"I go to the Scouts, do judo, and I read a lot. Mostly spy novels now. I'm also interested in military history. My uncle was a corvette captain in the German navy, and he's currently teaching me how to shoot. That's where my nickname 'Scha' comes from. With a mixture of bravado and embarrassment, I explained, "It means 'Sharp Anngrit,' because I'm as good a shot as a sharpshooter."

Siebenthal laughed again. "Well, Euródin seems to have chosen a future commander for His *einherjar*! By the way, don't you want to call me Gerold, Scha? Now that we're brothers in faith, so to speak?"

He held out his hand to me, and I took it proudly. If only Dad knew!

"And how are you going to proceed, Gerold?" I asked. "I mean, the four of us are just kids and shouldn't tell anyone anything, and my father doesn't seem to have the time or doesn't feel like it."

"I'll probably write a new book, the nucleus of which will be 'The History of the Gods and Men,'" he said. "With that, I'll stand on a wine crate from my liquidated business and preach to people in marketplaces. No, seriously, I don't know yet. Time will tell."

We had now reached the end of the beach, which led into a narrow, rocky path that ran along the cliffs. The waves crashed against the

rocks, and the foaming water covered the sand between them. The sun was now so low that it cast a red shadow over the sea. Fortunately, no one was there but us, because what would other sunset watchers have thought about the man and the four young girls and the strange things they were doing there?

We chose a suitable spot with reasonably flat, large rocks close to the water, directly under the cliffs.

“Are there actually caves here?” I asked.

“No, not as far as I know.”

We emptied our backpacks and poured the cherry juice into the carafe as Siebenthal explained the background of the *Sumbel*, an important ritual for the Germanic tribes on festive occasions, during which they swore oaths, called upon the gods, and always let them have a little sip. We then placed the censer between stones, and Siebenthal lit the charcoal tablet in its center with tongs and a lighter. As soon as the charcoal turned white, he placed it back on its bed of incense sand and sprinkled amber over it. Vapors with a dark, aromatic scent immediately rose up. He placed the cap on the vessel and then lit Sephine’s candle, for which we had in the meantime erected a windbreak made of stones.

Nevertheless, the candle naturally flickered, prompting Siebenthal to remark, “An uncertain flame, still, like the path lying ahead of us. But in any event, a beginning.”

I looked meaningfully at the others. Siebenthal had said “us.”

Now he pulled a compass out of his pocket, and balancing on the stone, aligned himself in a direction that I, as a Scout, recognized readily as north. “Just do like I do,” he then said.

Consequently, we faced north too while he struck the triangle twice, apparently initiating the ritual. He then placed his hand over his heart and bowed slightly. He would explain to us later that a European bows to his god but never kneels before Him, and the Christian prayer posture of folded hands was once the gesture of submission of serfs.

So, we bowed with our hands over our hearts as Siebenthal called out, “Hail, Euródin! I and these children have gathered before you today to acknowledge you as our God, who guides us and will judge

us one day. As a sign of our love, we offer you these petals. They are a symbol of the new life that may blossom in the house of your faith and a pledge of our faithfulness.”

He took the freezer box from the sand, opened it, and scattered the rose petals into the water, where the sea hesitantly accepted them, as if it didn’t know what to do with them at first. Then he said, “Hold hands!”

We balanced on the rocks with our hands locked together and watched the flowers drift out to sea. There was something poignant about it, and I thought of my mom and wondered if she could see me from up there, and a tear ran down my cheek. Marina next to me had wet eyes too. Was she thinking of someone, too?

Finally, Siebenthal let go of my hand, and the *Sumbel* began. We now stood in a circle as best as the slippery, sharp rocks would allow. Siebenthal took the carafe, raised it, and said, looking up to the sky: “Hail, father of our souls! We raise this vessel in your honor and let you partake of our drink.”

He poured a sip’s worth, the *Minneschluck*—or sip for the Gods—into the seawater between the rocks, took a drink himself, and passed the carafe on to me. I took a sip too, then handed the carafe to Marina, and so the cherry juice made the rounds. When everyone had drunk it, I assumed the ritual was over. But Siebenthal raised the carafe, which had come back to him, again followed by the words “Now let’s remember our deceased.”

He paused so that everyone could do this, and this time Wenna, who was half orphaned like me, was the most emotional. We passed around the carafe a second time. When it reached Siebenthal again, he cleared his throat and said, “Now, the third round of the *Sumbel* is traditionally reserved for the oaths.” He looked at us seriously, in turn, then continued:

“The five of us have gathered here today to invoke you and pledge our loyalty and love to you. But for the time being, no one is to find out about our bond. Therefore, each of us swears to keep everything that has happened here today to himself, to his honor, and before his God.” Now he raised the decanter and said solemnly, “I swear it on my honor and before my God!” and took a sip.



With that, he passed the carafe on, and one by one we took the oath.

Afterward, we packed up and walked reverently back to the house, across the now completely deserted beach, which was enveloped by the gathering darkness as if by a blanket. Wind and water would remove the traces of our ritual overnight. Then everything would be as it was before—and yet the world would no longer be the same for us.

Later on, we would realize that, strictly speaking, we had sworn only to keep our visit to Siebenthal a secret. There had been no mention of our not telling anyone about Euródin or not perform any rituals of our own. I chalked this up to a mere oversight on the part of Siebenthal, who had not been able to think about the text of the oath beforehand.

Nevertheless, it would have dramatic consequences.

## 45

Vic kneeled in front of the stone, while Armin told her about the find, about Siebenthal's visit, about his feelings or visions—if you wanted to call them that—about his daughter's dreams, and above all about his helplessness. She looked alternately at the artifact and at the man she had fallen in love with right at their first encounter, at Anngrit's birthday party at her home. There had been some advances from men since Arthur's death, but she believed it had to be the right one again, just as Arthur had been the right one for her. And while she was about to find out if Armin could be it for her and she for him, and was nearing a yes, he turned out to be something else—or at least something else beyond what she had seen so far. Armin was tall and handsome, and being well-to-do, he could offer her and Wenna the security they needed. Above all, he instilled confidence and a feeling of being protected in her, just like earlier on the sailing boat, which she had been so afraid of.

Now he was telling her the most fantastic story she had ever heard, except for the legends her father had invented to lure a few more tourists to the family's hotel. And suddenly he didn't seem strong and self-assured but very insecure, almost anxious. Or rather: he seemed like someone who no longer trusted his own mind.

Why was it like that, or did have to be like that? This Gerold Siebenthal he told her about didn't seem to doubt his sanity, but rather sounded like someone who had finally found the role of a lifetime. His self-confidence could stem from the fact that he had fabricated everything to make a career as a cult leader. Money, submissive young women, a sense of power, the prospect of making himself immortal. Or he could simply be crazy, something she ruled out with Armin—her instinct told her that. Of course, Siebenthal could also be so convinced because it was true, and unlike Armin, he didn't resist it.

What did she think of it herself? Obviously, Armin's problem was that he was not religious. He had immured himself in what he considered to be the rational, "real" world. She knew that from Arthur, who, as a doctor and scientist, had mocked her own religiosity as irrational but ultimately harmless "women's stuff." Nothing worth paying attention to. And now someone, be it Siebenthal or someone way up there, had hacked a hole in this wall with a pickaxe, and Armin was amazed, or horrified, to see that there were things behind it he could not have imagined in his sober mind. But instead of adjusting his world view, he preferred to see an ophthalmologist.

As for her, of course she believed in the Kingdom of God. She believed she possessed an immortal soul, just like Arthur, who was now in the afterlife he had never believed in and where she would see him again after her death. Beyond that, she had never been sure. She had never believed in Christianity; all those Bible stories had seemed too strange and implausible to her. Instead, she had instinctively turned to the old Celtic gods, but in a way that was probably called pantheism. Of course, there was no Mount Olympus up there with bearded men and blonde, curly-haired women; God was a spirit who permeated everything, no more and no less, and He was the guardian of people's souls.

Nothing else seemed to be taught by this Siebenthal; only that there were three “spirits” instead of one, a small difference, albeit one with possibly enormous consequences. Was it true? How was she supposed to know? However, Vic’s soul told her that the spirit responsible for her probably had nothing to do with the one on which the Bible was based. Her god was the one of the Celts, who was supposed to be identical to this Euródin. She simply knew this, just as you knew whether the person standing in front of you was your own mother or a total stranger. So, Christianity could be a lie or not, or everyone would be right, because there were three gods, and everybody just meant their own. The latter was the most likely possibility for her.

And what about the stone? Armin had said he couldn’t rule out one hundred percent that it was a fake. That, among other things, made him waver. But what did he mean by “fake”? After all, the stone was a real rock, and the engraving was on it. Did it matter whether Siebenthal had carved the lines in himself or an ancient seer or stonemason? The real question was whether the symbols were the expression of a divine truth or merely human imagination or invention, and this could hardly be determined scientifically. The only “proof” seemed to be that Siebenthal could not possibly have known that Armin would discover the stone.

Now Armin sat helplessly on the couch and raked his fingers through his hair. A confident, carefree captain just moments ago, he had become a picture of misery. Like a seriously ill patient, he seemed to be waiting for her diagnosis. She couldn’t bear it any longer and got up and sat next to him. Then she took his hand.

“Listen, Armin, God really does exist, I know that,” she said. “Whether it’s the one this Siebenthal is talking about or something else, I can’t say for sure yet. But it seems quite possible to me he’s right. I’d have to meet him first. But in any case, you don’t need to be ashamed of it. If you really were chosen by that Euródin, that’s something to be proud of!”

“You think so?” he asked. “I’ve never thought of it like that. It is, or at least was, just strange to me.”

“Because you fight it. Sometimes you’re a little too rational. Allow the things that are in you and don’t reject them. God can give you tremendous energy and strength. I don’t know if I would have gotten over Arthur’s death without my faith, and maybe it will help you get over Mette’s passing, too.”

Suddenly there were tears in Armin’s eyes, and Vic hugged him and laid his head on her chest. While he cried quietly, she stroked his hair. How much pent-up grief, how much suppressed fear must lie in his tears? Her hero had given way to a small, frightened child; but the hero would reappear, because, as a mother, she knew that there was a hero and a frightened child in everyone at the same time. And she would help him to find his inner hero again.

“Do you know there’s something else I haven’t told you about the Celtic stone on our property?”

“What?” he asked, looking at her from below with teary eyes.

“They say very special energies are inherent in such stones. That could apply to yours here, too. At night, couples sometimes sneak into our grove and make love next to it. Because it is said that a child conceived near it will be particularly clever and beautiful, and the gods will adopt it as their own.”

“And is that true?”

Vic smiled. “I haven’t tried it yet,” she said.

Then she gently lifted his head from her chest, stood up, and began to undress.

As promised, Siebenthal drove us home. Befitting my rank, I had claimed the passenger seat, while the other three squeezed together in the back, and Newton enjoyed the panoramic view through the Caddy’s rear window. Still enraptured by the majesty of the ritual, we hardly spoke at first. Rain was now pattering against the windows, as if the weather had finally decided it had obliged us long enough by not disturbing our ceremony.

At some point, Marina crowed from behind into the silence, “Mr. Siebenthal—I mean, Gerold—may we buy amulets with Nordic gods, I mean with European god emanations? Then we would have a memory of this day!”

"Well, why not?" Siebenthal replied, puzzled. "You have every right to do so."

"And can you consecrate these amulets for us, so that they are a real connection to Euródin and not just something bought? We would wear them under our clothes, of course, so no one can see them."

I saw him frowning next to me. "Consecrate an amulet so that it forms a connection to the Soul Father?" he repeated in amazement, as if the thought had never occurred to him. "Your soul is the connection to your God. So, why do you need an amulet for it, consecrated or not?"

"But I think Marina is right," Sephine interjected. "We're just simple girls, Gerold, and not prophets like you. We could imagine it much better this way."

"Oh, yes, please!" Wenna begged. The idea of possessing an amulet consecrated by the prophet himself electrified us all.

Siebenthal took one hand off the steering wheel to scratch his beard again, a harbinger of a decision, as I knew by now. You could tell how the matter had gone too far for him already. Perhaps he was also worried that—promise of secrecy or not—sooner or later we would proudly present such a badge to our friends. But in the end, he was powerless against the wide eyes of four begging young girls.

"All right," he said with a sigh. "I don't even know how I'm going to do it yet, but I'll think about it together with Him up there. After all, others might want it, too, one day. Send me the pendants, and I'll send them consecrated back, preferably to Scha. But don't show them to anyone for the time being!"

"To our Scout's honor!" I said with a serious nod, and that was that.

So, we drove on in the rain and the increasing darkness until a murmuring started behind me and Wenna whispered something in my ear shortly afterward. "A great idea," I whispered back.

Marina counted "three, two, one"—then, to Siebenthal's amazement, we burst into song, crowing euphorically to the tune of "Oh, Christmas Tree":

Oh, Euródin-God, oh, Euródin-God,

we are your dearest children.  
Not only during summer's heat,  
but also winter's snow and sleet.  
Oh, Euródin-God, oh, Euródin-God,  
we are your dearest children.

We ended with a round of giggles and high-fived ourselves. Even the usually dead-serious Siebenthal allowed himself a smile, although he grumbled, "You'd think we'd done the *Sumbel* with whiskey instead of cherry juice."

"By the way, Gerold, are we at all allowed to celebrate Christmas anymore?" asked Marina once we had calmed down.

"Why would you want to celebrate the birth of the prophet of an alien god?" he asked, glancing in the rearview mirror.

"Because we get presents?" Wenna suggested, triggering more giggles.

"The customs with the fir tree and the presents aren't particularly old, you know," he said. "It only developed in the course of the nineteenth century. Before that, people mainly celebrated Easter, the crucifixion and resurrection, as well as the anniversaries of the saints' deaths. Today's Christmas is more inspired by a much older pagan festival, Yule. This is celebrated a few days earlier, on December 21, usually the day of the winter solstice," he explained. "That's when your ancestors once sacrificed to Odin, and you can also commemorate Euródin on that day."

"In England, Christmas isn't celebrated on the twenty-fourth, like it is here, but on the twenty-fifth," said Wenna.

"And in Ukraine on January 6," added Marina.

"It's all illogical and stupid with this Christmas," I declared. "They can't even agree on a date."

"If there is a correct one at all, then it is the twenty-fifth," said Siebenthal. "Strictly speaking, you don't celebrate the birth on the twenty-fourth, but the labor pains. And January 6 in Orthodoxy is still based on the old Julian calendar. But ultimately, all these dates are merely the result of completely speculative calculations. People didn't use calendars back then, and no one has ever come up with a birth certificate for Jesus."

"Maybe we'll have to celebrate your birthday instead?" Wenna said flatteringly.

"Over my dead body," Siebenthal declared. "I'm not even celebrating it myself."

"Well, I don't mind what date," said Sephine. "The main thing is that we don't miss anything. *Maman* would have a crisis if she wasn't allowed to decorate the tree, and I would, too, if I didn't get the promised saddle."

"What, for that matter, will your grandma say when you suddenly celebrate Christmas three or four or however many days in advance, and er, pay homage to a different god?" Wenna asked me unexpectedly.

I didn't know how to answer that. The exuberance in the car gave way to gloominess when we thought about the powers of repression awaiting us at home. In policy class, we were taught that in modern Western countries only the happiness of the individual mattered, which people should be able to pursue in their own highly individual ways. And this went for religion, too. But young as we were, we understood very well the difference between theory and practice on this point and would soon experience it the hard way ourselves.

Many years later, I would talk to Siebenthal again about that day. He assured me he hadn't had any ulterior motives for his behavior but had just wanted to be nice to us like a grandfather to his granddaughters. He would never have dreamt of having set in motion a chain of events that would change all our lives.

Siebenthal dropped me off last, so it was around nine at night when I got home. The lights were on—which meant the candlelight dinner with Vic that Dad had planned after her maiden voyage must have ended unexpectedly early. Had they fallen out? Or had she fallen overboard as feared and was now in some hospital intensive care unit? But then, Wenna should have received a message, I thought. In any case, I would have to face some unpleasant questions about why I was so late. At least that was what I thought.

Instead, Dad tried to stuff two pizza boxes into the garbage can inconspicuously, looking embarrassed. Strangely enough, it didn't smell as much of pizza in the kitchen as it did in the rest of the house.

"So, how was your day?" he asked with feigned cheerfulness.

"Quite nice. And yours?" I asked meaningfully.

"Very nice, too. Vic liked the sailing."

"Weren't you going to eat out?" I said, looking at the pizza boxes.

"Um, we decided to have something brought to us."

Now I already suspected something and stifled a grin.

"You've already eaten, I assume," he said.

"Yeah, sure," I lied. What else was I supposed to say? I'd sneak something from the kitchen later, because a few pieces of cake wouldn't sate a newly baked warrior of faith.

"By the way," Dad said, "I have to fly to the USA on Tuesday because of the company sale, I found out this morning. How would you like to sleep over at Wenna and Vic's? Or should Vic come here once a day to check on things? Of course, I can also ask Anna."

Well, well! Could I already hear wedding bells ringing in the distance? "No, I'd rather stay here," I said, "but Vic is welcome to visit me. You don't have to call Anna."

"But you're not up to any mischief, are you?"

I smiled sweetly. "Who, me?"

Dad blushed to the back of both ears.

Odysseus had been sitting in the kitchen doorway listening patiently to our conversation, but was now meowing to indicate it was about time I took care of him instead of chatting idly. I stroked him, and with a final wink in Dad's direction, went ahead of our tomcat into the living room to let him out into the garden via the patio door, as I did every evening.

In the living room, I immediately smelled Vic's perfume and another scent I had sometimes noticed in my parents' bedroom when I had ordered them down for breakfast on Sunday mornings. Up there, Dad and Vic had probably also eaten the pizza during a lull in the proceedings, because its smell seemed to come from the upper floor.

And I noticed something else: I had laid the cloth covering the chest with the stone at a slight angle, which I had memorized, so I



could see if anyone had been tampering with it. Now it was lying bolt upright—no doubt Dad’s work, who couldn’t lay or hang anything askew. So, he had shown her the stone and told her everything—and Vic hadn’t run into the night screaming, but had felt, well, animated.

So, I knew everything, no matter how much Dad tried to keep me in the dark. And now, on top of that, I had the run of the place next week. With this exhilarating feeling, I released Odysseus to his nightly forays and planned my next moves.

## 46

We met again the very next day, this time at Sephine’s house, as her parents had flown at lunchtime to Toulouse on the occasion of a business trip by Monsieur Buchet to the Airbus headquarters. Thus, we were undisturbed. Thankfully, Sephine’s *maman* had baked a heap of delicious madeleines for us to devour while we lolled in the white leather armchairs in the living room and reminisced about yesterday’s events.

For example, had the petals on the waves really drifted far, far out to sea without sinking? Marina confessed that Euródin had appeared to her unmistakably in a dream last night and urged her to help build a church in His honor. Naturally, her “divine mission” provoked giggles and laughter, but Wenna claimed, too, that she had somehow felt “different” when she got up this morning. Even the usually skeptical and mocking Sephine seemed thoughtful. As for me, being already a veteran of the faith, I had to smile at my novices’ epiphanies. However, all our talk seemed to bore Newton, who dozed at our feet on the carpet. Yesterday during the ceremony on the beach, his dog eyes had registered only big question marks. I guess religion isn’t for animals after all.

First, we chose our amulets. I had spent half the night researching this and suggested Grimfrost, a Swedish supplier with a high-quality

range of Nordic memorabilia. If ordered online today—and paid using my children’s account at the savings bank—they would be delivered the day after tomorrow by DHL, whose parcel car always arrived at a time when I could intercept incoming shipments unnoticed by Anna or Dad.

“I’ll take Mjölnir—Thor’s hammer,” I announced to no one’s surprise. Just as Thor wielded Mjölnir to crush the giants in Utgard, I would use it to smash Euródin’s enemies here on earth to pieces.

Marina chose Hugin and Munin, Odin’s ravens, which He sent out into the world every morning to tell Him what had passed in the evening. Wenna chose Yggdrasil, the ash tree that spreads all over the world, binding it together with heaven and hell. Sephine, meanwhile, was not to be deterred by our ridicule from ordering a representation of Freya, the goddess of love. “Sometimes I think I’m the only lady here,” she said, shaking her head sadly.

Of course, we could afford only the stainless-steel versions. Much as we loved silver and gold, they were out of reach of our allowances. “As soon as they arrive, I’ll send them on to Siebenthal for him to consecrate,” I said, sealing the order with a swipe. “I’ll tell him to hurry. Because I have an idea of how we can use them in a first ritual—in two weeks’ time—for Halloween!”

The three of them were wide-eyed. “A ritual? For Halloween? What do you mean?” they chattered in confusion.

“May I remind you that exactly three days ago, on the day of the physics test,” I said, as if it were a world-historical date, “we founded the Euródin’s Children’s Army. You wanted to see the prophet, and you have seen him. Now the time for words and wavering is over,” I preached.

Marina and Wenna looked at me expectantly, while Sephine remained skeptical. “I don’t know, Scha-dear, first of all, who else is in your army apart from us?” she asked. “If it’s just the four of us, it would be just another name for our String Quartet.”

“Sephine is right,” Marina agreed, obviously still filled with her nightly divine mission. “I think we should form a secret cell at school. Like a brotherhood.”

"But have you forgotten that we swore to Siebenthal not to tell anyone?" I said, suddenly getting cold feet.

"We just swore not to tell anyone about what happened yesterday, and we don't have to," Wenna argued with a sophistry that would have done credit even to Legal-Fritz. "We don't even have to mention Siebenthal's name, and, of course, everyone must swear not to tell anyone. We will only widen the circle of trust."

"I don't know . . ." I said. I thought Wenna's reasoning was just mincing words. Siebenthal may have failed to phrase the oath he had required from us in a watertight manner. However, it was obvious he didn't want us to spill the beans but to leave it to him to spread the message. And it was clear as day to me, too, that if there was any trouble afterward, he would hold *me* accountable and not the others.

"Wasn't it you who wanted to distribute flyers at school?" Wenna reminded me. "Then we might as well scrap your ECA right away."

"Besides, we have a holy duty we can't miss," added Marina, eyes blazing. "Didn't you say yourself we'd go to Valhalla as martyrs?"

Oh yes, the double portion of dessert. One shouldn't babble so much claptrap.

"What, I wonder," Sephine now pondered, "is whether Siebenthal will even manage to spread the tidings. He's such a recluse; almost an oddball. Someone will have to start at some point, and your father seems unlikely to thrust himself forward. So, I think if we're extremely careful . . ."

In an unusually flattering tone, she tacked on: "And you'd be our high priestess, of course."

"All right," I said, still only half convinced. But I could no longer afford to back down. Within a few days, things had developed a momentum of their own that I would never have thought possible. "And how do you envision it?"

"We'll make the others swear the same oath, and we'll all draw a mark of blood on our foreheads," Marina fired away at once.

"A sign?" I asked back. "Do we have one?" The Christians had their cross, the Muslims their crescent, and the Jews their Star of David. And what about us? After all, Siebenthal hadn't yet come up with a symbol.

"Let's just use an *E* for Euródin," Marina suggested, and everyone agreed.

"But I hope you don't expect us to carve it into our foreheads with a knife," said a concerned Sephine. "I'm sure Euródin wants his daughters to stay beautiful. At least me."

"Of course not," replied Wenna. "We'll use pig's blood and a paintbrush."

"Sounds reasonable," I said. "But this time we'll use honey wine for the toasting. I can buy it together with Dad at the supermarket and say I need it to bake cookies."

I turned to Sephine. "Or can you make it in your lab?"

She pulled a skeptical face.

"Then there's the matter of the oath. Now, we already made one yesterday," I said. "So, we'll have to come up with something new."

We held a brainstorming session in which the words "world domination" and "holy war against the aliens" were discarded as quickly as they were proposed. After all, Siebenthal had never mentioned any such thing.

When we'd all reached agreement, I solemnly read out the text Wenna had written down on a notepad:

"We believe in you, Euródin, God of all Europeans, who protects our people and leads our souls to Valhalla. For this we owe love and praise to you, dedication to our people, and respect for each of our own. With you, we will become united and great and mighty, and without you we are lost. That is why we pledge eternal loyalty and allegiance to you today, promising to stand our ground against the other *Urvölker* and to love our own. We swear this by the sacred blood of the sacrificial animal, which will adorn our brows forever in the form of your mark."

"Forever?" Sephine repeated apprehensively. "Scha, does that mean we can never wipe the stuff off again?"

"That's just a figure of speech, Seph," I reassured her.

We then discussed who we should initiate. In a heated debate, we agreed on a preliminary list of names, all good schoolmates we often did things with and who seemed trustworthy to us. We would approach them next week.

After that, it was all about “the show,” as Sephine liked to put it. One thing was clear: we needed blood, which Wenna was supposed to get, and I needed a vestment as high priestess. For this, I would meet up with Sephine again and raid the contents of my mother’s closet. That way, she, too, would be part of the ritual, which I was sure would please her. Marina finally had the excellent idea of making a cardboard copy of the stone. After all, it was our most important relic—in fact our only one—and the original was too unwieldy for weight reasons alone. To this end, I would photograph it and measure it precisely with Sephine and assist her in making the imitation, as she was, of course, the artist.

Finally, we thought about the musical accompaniment. After all, a church service without music and singing was unthinkable. Surprisingly, Marina offered to compose a song herself and perform it on the guitar. We knew from Scout camp that she played quite well. But the fact that she also composed amazed us.

“Are you really up to that, Cinderella-dear?” asked Sephine.

“I often write songs, just for myself,” she replied defiantly.

One gained the impression that there was far more to Marina than met the eye.

“Are there even any other volunteers?” I asked. I myself had no intention of scaring off my future brothers in faith with a self-composed fanfare.

No one came forward; even the pianist Sephine apparently did not feel a calling to create her own works. So, it was decided. Next week we would ask our friends, prepare everything in the background, and meet again for dress rehearsal shortly before the ritual.

“But where should we actually do it?” Sephine interjected, leaving us at a loss. “Any rate, it won’t work at my place, *Maman* would kill me.”

Everyone looked at me, but I shook my head. October 31 wasn’t just Halloween, but also Reformation Day—and therefore a public holiday in Hamburg. On the one hand, that suited us because we were off school. What’s more: Could there be a more fitting day for our revolutionary religious project than the one in 1517 on which the great Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the

venerable Wittenberg Castle Church? Unfortunately, our parents were also at home that day. In my case, Dad had been working on Sundays and holidays a lot recently due to the pending company sale. But whether he would work on Halloween, and for how long, and from home or in the office, was anybody's guess.

"Likely my father will be at home that day," I said skeptically.

Then I had an idea: "What if we did it on the school grounds? In the basement of the future cafeteria?" The new building opposite the schoolyard, which was to house the cafeteria as well as a new library and common rooms, was still under construction.

"But it's locked. How are we going to get in there?" asked Wenna.

I shook my head. "The wooden board blocking the way to the cellar stairs is only loosely attached," I said. "You can just push it aside. I've already tried that once."

"Have you already been downstairs?" asked Sephine.

"No, not that," I said. "But we can make up for it." It sounded like a typical String Quartet action.

"But what if someone discovers us?" Wenna objected.

"How could they if we push the panel back over the hole once we're downstairs? Besides, there's no one on the school grounds that day anyway."

We were probably all torn. On the one hand, the idea of performing our ritual in a secret 'vault' was romantic and adventurous at the same time and seemed more appropriate for Halloween than gathering in our parents' living room among vacation snapshots, paintings of bleating deer in forest clearings, and the like. Still, we weren't entirely comfortable with it.

"Well," I said, "if anyone has a better idea . . ."

But no one came forward—and so it was decided.

We started our missionary work on Monday. Each of us approached the agreed candidates, as well as others we knew from parties, sports, Scouts, or whatever. I had issued the order to preferably approach boys so that we would not appear before our heavenly Father as an all-girls club. However, the results of our efforts were modest: some laughed straight in our faces, while others made dubious faces and pleaded a full schedule.

Of course, we could just outline Siebenthal's complex theology, but the adepts seemed only to listen even to these briefest of explanations with half an ear. Instead, they seemed to think it a wacky as well as "politically questionable" Halloween joke. The "blood sacrifice" proved to be the best lure, the mention of which brought a glow at least to the boys' faces.

In the end, I managed to recruit three boys: Sandro, a nice Spaniard with a mushroom haircut, buck teeth, and a disposition as sunny as his homeland. He was in my class, and I also knew him from the school orchestra. He even offered to accompany Marina on the violin for her planned song, but I declined with thanks because I thought it was too complicated.

Then Wilmar, a blond Swiss who was as serious as you would expect from a descendant of the Alpine republic and as reliable as a Swiss army knife. He was a class above me, but I knew him from the Scouts. A smart, quiet guy. Although he didn't say much, my impression was that he understood exactly what Tritheism was all about. He smiled knowingly and commented, "It's about time something happened."

Finally, I convinced Julius, who I didn't know from anywhere except that we were in the same class. To be honest, he was more of a stopgap for me. Better known by his nickname Jumbo, he was fat and unathletic, smelled of sweat, was intelligent and supposedly a computer genius, but had hardly any friends. Now he did, he seemed to think. Julius glowed with excitement when I approached him with some reserve. Truth is, he would probably have joined any group that

would have him, be it a Satanic cult or the Church of the Holy Marshmallows.

Sephine contributed François, a thin, pale French boy, harmless, friendly, and polite. Like Wilmar, he wasn't in our class, but Sephine had gotten to know him better as part of GSH's French community at some event organized by the French consulate, the Académie Française or whatever. Wenna brought in Deborah, a quiet, dreamy English girl who probably saw the whole thing as a part-romantic, part-spiritual experience. Unsurprisingly, Marina hadn't approached anyone. After all, when she wasn't with us, she preferred to spend her time with music, math, and books instead of people.

So, there were nine of us when we met on Wednesday for the preliminary briefing in a secluded corner of the schoolyard. It was well after the end of lessons, and only a few other students were still on the grounds.

I let my eyes wander over my flock. "It's very well that there are nine of us," I said solemnly, "because you must know that the number nine was sacred to the Germanic tribes. It is the triple three, which, in turn, stands for the past, present, and future; or for birth, growth, and decay. In other words, it is the number of perfection. In addition, it stands for the three gods and their *Urvölker*," I lectured.

Everyone looked at one another meaningfully.

"You don't have to do anything during our ritual," I continued. "It's all me and Seph and Wenna and Marina. Just be there on time on the thirty-first and—most importantly—maintain absolute silence! Not a word to anyone else, especially not to teachers or your parents. Otherwise, you'll incur the wrath of your God, and worse still, mine."

They giggled respectfully.

"Should we wear something special?" asked Wilmar, practical as ever.

"Um, no," I said. I hadn't thought about a uniform for the Euródin's Children's Army yet. It seemed premature, as we were only just taking our first steps. "But wash behind your ears and wipe your noses," I said—and, as if by chance, my gaze lingered on Jumbo, who



seemed to be panting even though he was just standing there quietly, letting his sweaty scent waft over to me.

"But where exactly are we meeting? You haven't said that yet," the quiet Debbie suddenly piped up.

"Oh yes, right." The four of us had already visited the place of worship in the basement of the future cafeteria on Monday and found it suitable. Instead of describing it to the others, I would simply show it to them. "Just follow me to . . ."

Something made me pause. The eyes of the others seemed to be directed behind me, expressing concern. I turned around and spotted, a stone's throw away from us, loitering at the edge of a row of bushes, none other than the annoying Mustafa, accompanied as always by his "bodyguards" Yuri and Igor. Ever since our fight on the day of my mother's death, he'd avoided me, only shooting me hostile, piercing looks from a distance, or in passing, muttering Arabic curses. Clearly, he still had a bone to pick with me. Whether he'd been following us or was standing there by chance, he and the other two were staring at us, desperate to know what we were talking about. That wasn't going to happen.

I broke away from the others and strolled casually toward the three of them. "Don't you have any homework or still have to do the washing up at Mom's?" I said with my arms on my hips. "Or maybe you fancy a little judo tournament?"

"We don't fight with girls," Igor said as contemptuously as he could.

"What do you want? Do you own the whole school?" demanded Mustafa, his eyes filled with fiery hatred and at the same time fear of another humiliation. "Do we need your permission to stand here?"

I heard footsteps behind me. The others, at least my String Quartet members, I assumed. But what was I supposed to do? The fact was, Mustafa, Yuri, and Igor did have every right to stand here as we did, and their attempt to eavesdrop might be indiscreet but not forbidden. We could have left ourselves, but the risk of them sneaking up on us out of curiosity and finding out about our secret meeting place was too high. That's why I decided to stand my ground in high-noon style with my arms crossed and my legs like two steel pillars driven deep

into the ground. As always, the weaker one would ultimately give in, and that probably wouldn't be me. In fact, after what felt like an eternity, but in truth lasted probably less than a minute, Yuri blurted, "Fuck you, you cunt!" Then he pinched his nose. "She smells like rotten fish, the rancid Danish chick. Like a fishwife, do you smell it too?"

Igor and Mustafa laughed dutifully but uncomfortably, all too aware of my famously short fuse. Today, however, I didn't feel like fighting. I just stood there and stared at them menacingly.

"Yuk! We'd better go; otherwise, we'll have her abominable stench in our clothes," taunted Igor, waving his hand and wrinkling his nose. "They're probably just practicing some nursery rhyme."

Mustafa nodded, and all three of them walked away very slowly, grimacing and fanning themselves. When they'd finally disappeared behind the gym, I turned around and looked into despondent faces. Definitely, I still had to work on my troop's fearlessness. "See? The dummies are gone!" I said with satisfaction. "I'll show you the scene of the action now."

This time we had the boys drag away the plywood board. After all, why did we have them with us? I could have left it at that, but once we were there, the others naturally wanted to know what the basement looked like. So, I left Wenna upstairs as a lookout and instructed her to call me if anything suspicious happened. I climbed down the rough concrete steps with the others and turned on the flashlight I had wisely brought with me. It was a gloomy autumn afternoon, and light penetrated only through the stairwell and a few narrow windows into the cellar.

We had decided to call the future library at the end of the long corridor home. The huge room smelled of concrete and mortar, it was damp and cold, and our footsteps and voices blended haphazardly into a muffled echo. It was like being in a cave. Rusty pieces of iron, open sacks of plaster or something, and other remnants of the ongoing construction were stacked in corners and scattered around the cement floor. To be honest, it felt a little eerie now that the twilight was blurring the contours and casting long shadows. You could imagine all sorts of things, none of them good.

“Creepy,” Debbie said promptly, rubbing her arms as if she had goose bumps despite her thick down jacket.

“We’ll make it cozy enough, *ma chérie*, with candles and all the trimmings,” Seph reassured her, although she was clearly feeling a little jittery herself.

Suddenly, we heard a scratching sound from one of the adjacent rooms. An animal? A fallen bag of mortar? Or had a homeless person discovered the premises for himself? On Monday, we had inspected the entire basement and discovered no traces of human presence. Now we were all listening with bated breath. Should I investigate the noise? But then complete silence fell again, and I decided against it. It would only unsettle the others. “Just a little mouse that we’ve disturbed,” I said, carefully avoiding the word *rat* out of consideration for the squeamish Debbie.

“Well, we’ll meet up at the entrance next Tuesday at four thirty sharp.” We had chosen this time because it was already starting to get romantically dark at that hour, but we would make it back home in time for dinner, so that our parents wouldn’t suspect anything. “Otherwise, you’ve seen it, and we can call it a day.”

I led the group back outside, shining my flashlight inconspicuously into the outgoing rooms on the left and right. I saw and heard nothing—yet at the beginning of the corridor, I had for a second an uneasy feeling, as if my innermost being knew more than my mind. Should I go back and have a look? But the others pushed on behind me, and the feeling passed. I walked on.

At the top, we dragged the board back over the stairwell. While we said goodbye to the others, Marina, Wenna, Seph, and I stood next to the stairs for a moment. “Did you notice anything?” I asked Wenna.

She shook her head. “No, nothing at all, why?”

“Just like that. We thought we heard a noise.”

So, we made our way to the bikes without any worry.

The next days were filled with feverish preparations. Amid all the hustle and bustle, the amulets arrived, freshly consecrated by Siebenthal. I had sent them on to him as soon as they arrived from Sweden, and now they were back. I took them out of the little box in front of the others, unwrapped them from the tissue paper, and ceremoniously handed Sephine her Freya figurine, Marina her pair of ravens—Hugin and Munin—and Wenna her Yggdrasil world tree. I then scrutinized my own Thor’s hammer, looking for any indication that Siebenthal had done anything with it at all. How did you recognize a consecrated object? Did it glow in the dark? Did a tingling sensation run through you when you touched it? But nothing like that happened, and I began to feel a little disappointed.

Sephine noticed it first. With her sensitive perfumer’s nose, she first sniffed her Freya, then the tissue paper, and said finally: “Something . . . a resin, and something plant based, like green tea or withered leaves.”

“Oh!” we cried out and immediately sniffed our own pendants. Now I smelled it too, more on the paper than the metal, to which scents clung less well. Siebenthal must have hung the amulets over fumes from a “magical” mixture of herbs and a resin—amber, I supposed, as he had used that on the beach as well.

But that wasn’t the end of it: Marina let out a sharp cry, as she had obviously discovered something on the back of her two ravens. She squinted and held them up to the light. “It says ‘Marina!’” she exclaimed.

Now everyone was examining their pendant, and I deciphered “Anngrit” in tiny letters on the back of mine.

In the same way, Wenna discovered “Morwenna” and Seph, “Josephine.”

Good thing that I had written to Siebenthal about who owned which amulet! (Well, he could have guessed that the Thor’s hammer was mine.) He must have bought an engraving machine especially for us. He would later explain to us how he had first soaked the amulets

in purified Baltic Sea water with ground amber—a mixture he called Aqua Baltica and now stockpiled in large quantities as the equivalent to the Christian holy water. He then dried them over the smoke of charred ash leaves and drove over them in the four points of the compass with a consecration hammer, which is basically an XL version of my Thor’s hammer—for Thor was the god of consecration. While doing it, Siebenthal intoned, “Salute and honor to you, Euródin! In your form of Thor, graciously consecrate this amulet, so that it may bind Marina’s (or whatever the name was) soul to you!” Finally, he engraved the pieces one after the other.

In principle, this is how he consecrates amulets to this day. Theologically, he would explain to us later, it was not magic in the sense of an event outside the known laws of nature, something which, as far as he knew, did not exist. Rather, the effort associated with the consecration aroused God’s attention and encouraged the owner’s soul to open up to Him. It was therefore a form of communication between Him and His human being, just as a friendship bond or a wedding ring symbolizes and thus strengthens a connection between two people.

However, we didn’t care about such theological subtleties. We were bursting with pride and were infinitely grateful to him. What an effort he had made! He had actually invoked Euródin on our behalf, and, at least we thought, secured us a loge seat in His spirit. Thus freshly motivated, we set about the task for which we had gathered in our living room: the dress rehearsal of our ritual.

Marina performed her song, which was met with general enthusiasm, except for Sephine’s criticism that she had used end rhymes instead of Germanic alliterations, whereupon Marina almost hit her on the head with her guitar. “Why don’t you do it yourself if you know everything better?” she exclaimed with a venom I had never seen in her.

Wenna defused the situation by pulling out a jar of liquid from her backpack, the color of which was perfectly aptly described as “blood red.” She passed the butcher’s pig’s blood around like a grail liquid. On the way here, she’d had Seph spike it with aspirin as a precaution, to prevent it from clotting prematurely.

Seph, in turn, now wearing the hat of the sculptor instead of the chemist, had brought her model of the stone with her. It was only a cardboard cube, really, but she had spray-painted it black and then used a brush to add the signs in bright red, so that the imitation was in some ways even more impressive than the original and looked downright diabolical.

For my part, I presented the remaining cult objects: a silver bowl for the blood, once a Christmas present from Church Grandma; a fine paintbrush to inscribe the holy *E* on our foreheads; and whatever candles and candlesticks I could find around the house. Finally, I retired to Dad's bedroom to start the fashion show. With Seph's help, I dressed up like a Celtic princess: I wore the ankle-length, white, and subtly embroidered silk dress Mom had bought me for special occasions, but which I hadn't worn until now, as well as a black silk cape that had belonged to my mother, and black patent leather shoes with heels. The highlight of my outfit was a leather headband, purchased online, with a metal ornament in Celtic braid style on the front. My crown, as it were.

Dressed up like that, I returned to the living room, where Wenna and Marina applauded enthusiastically.

So, we were well prepared.

The next afternoon was the day. We had made the bare, cold basement room at school as cozy and spiritual as we could, placing scented candles providing light and pleasant scents in the corners and around the altar—a wooden board, laid on bricks and covered with a tablecloth. A camping lamp from our garage, covered with yellow paper, added more warm lighting. And instead of pews, we had spread cement sacks in a semicircle around the altar, upon which lay the bell that Mom had used to call me to the Christmas presents—the equivalent of Siebenthal's triangle—as well as the paintbrush, the bowl containing the blood, and a sheet of paper on which I had written down the opening address and the text of the oath, just to be on the safe side. Finally, for the *Sumbel*, a carafe from our kitchen, filled with a cocktail of cherry juice and honey wine known as Viking blood.

Behind the altar was a platform made of wooden pallets— like the cement bags, the stones, and the planks leftovers from the construction crew. A white sheet was draped over the pile and “the stone”— Sephine’s cardboard copy, that is—was enthroned upon it.

The only thing missing were the adepts. Marina, Seph, and I waited nervously for Wenna, whom we had left upstairs as receptionist, to lead them into the sacred vault. Would everyone come? Anyone at all? And would they be amazed? Or laugh their heads off? I suffered the doubts and torments of every host, only a thousand times over; after all, I would not just be embarrassing myself in front of my friends but also my God. What did *He* think about what I was doing here? Did it amuse Him? Move Him? Or, on the contrary, did He find it presumptuous? I listened into myself but heard only my beating heart.

Then I heard noises and voices. It had started!

## 49

Everyone had come and looked around like visitors to a museum. Particularly Seph’s sinister cardboard shrine and the blood in the bowl attracted astonished as well as uncertain glances. While the four of us shivered in our festive, thin dresses, the others had turned up in jeans and thick jackets. Marina sat down next to me on a sack with her guitar already leaning against it, and we spread our novices out on the sacks around the wooden altar. Sandro sat on the far left, François next to him, then Debbie, the stoic Wilmar, and Jumbo, who seemed to be sweating even in the cold. Finally, Wenna and Sephine took seats at the edge.

I regarded it as a good sign that no one was giggling; on the contrary, a reverent mood seemed to prevail. Accompanied only by the hissing and sputtering of the candles, I began reading my speech: “Dear friends, thank you all for coming. As you know, today we want

to solemnly found Euródin's Children's Army, to the honor and glory of our God Euródin, who has consecrated our souls and protects them.

"Each of you will swear an oath, and I will draw an *E* in blood on your forehead as a sign of our alliance. That we will seal with a *Sum-bel*, a ritual drink."

I paused in case someone wanted to say something, but only a cough and the scuffing of a sneaker echoed through the cellar. So, I began to explain the drawing: "This here," I said, pointing to the cardboard stone with my arm, "is a copy of a stone I found with my father in the garden of our vacation home in Denmark, and the drawing that you can see here, just painted on with paint, is carved into the rock of the original. We don't know by whom and for what purpose, but presumably a long time ago. If you know a little bit about it, you will have noticed that it is a so-called triskele and runes."

Everyone was now eyeing the stone curiously, and I continued: "The meaning of the drawing would probably have remained hidden from us forever; but then, just as we found it, a stranger appeared. He told us that Euródin had instructed him to travel to where we were in order to see something—he didn't know what—that had entered his consciousness in a dream. And this stranger, whose name we are not yet allowed to reveal, is our prophet! He explained to us that there are three gods and peoples consecrated by them: the Europeans, the Asians, and the Africans." I pointed my finger to the triskele in the middle. "The three spirals stand for the three Primordial Peoples who had their common origin in Africa. But then they split up after they had migrated north into Central Asia and were consecrated by their respective gods, Euródin, Vili, and Vé, and thus adopted as their children. The runes next to the spiral circles stand for their initial letters, whereby the so-called Othala at the top left is actually an *O* for Odin—but He is now called Euródin because He is the god of not only the Germanic tribes but also the Celts, Slavs, Greeks, Romans, and so on, hence of all Europeans."

With that, I turned back to my audience and looked at them seriously. "And as every father demands of his children, every god also expects loyalty and allegiance from his people, and that they help one



another, as is customary in a family. By the way, Vili is just the Edda's name for Allah or the god of the Jews and Christians. Of course, you know him from religion lessons, but, in reality, he is only the god of the Arabs, Turks, and Africans. Vé stands for Brahma or Buddha or all the other Asian gods, whatever. They just don't know yet that there's really only one for them."

I pursed my lips and said, "I've already explained some of this to you at school. Have I made everything plain so far?"

Now Debbie raised an index finger, as if in school. "But aren't runes forbidden because of the Nazis?" she asked in a squeaky voice.

I would have expected anything but that. How did she come up with such an idea?

"Forbidden? Now, how can you ban something that, after all, exists?" I replied, flabbergasted. "There are rune stones in every museum in Denmark. Besides, Hitler was a criminal who is now stewing in Helheim and with whom our God has nothing whatsoever to do," I repeated what Siebenthal had taught me.

Then Sandro spoke up: "Scha, this man in your garden, this, uh, prophet? I don't understand why we're not allowed to know his name. Why does he want to remain secret? Doesn't he have to spread his message everywhere?"

That was a tricky point. I couldn't very well admit that I had taken matters into my own hands without Gerold's knowledge. "He'll show himself when the time is right," I speechified instead. "Only a chosen few should hear the message yet. Perhaps you will be allowed to meet him once you have taken the oath," I promised, knowing full well that this was a bold statement. Strictly speaking, we had followed a spontaneous idea. How to proceed, if and when we should tell Siebenthal about our underground army—we hadn't thought that through yet.

Suddenly it wasn't just Sephine's candle scents hanging in the air but also a skepticism that threatened to displace the solemn atmosphere we had started out with.

François scratched his fuzzy head and looked at me intently. "Scha, you say you found the original of the stone—a boulder, I suppose—in your garden," he said slowly. "And then this prophet shows up

because his god, Euródin, led him to you because he knew something was there. Right? But couldn't the stranger have put the stone there himself and later just pretended that God had shown him the spot?" He frowned. "You're asking us to just take your word for it? Without proof?"

François had said it mildly and politely. But still the mood threatened to turn from skepticism to mutiny. I had never encountered this during the preliminary talks, probably because everyone had thought it was just a wacky Halloween rage. Now they realized I was dead serious, and for the first time seemed to ask themselves whether I wasn't just fooling them or suffering from delusions.

"What 'proof' do you expect from me?" I replied as a blush shot up my cheeks. "You can only feel the existence of God in your soul, you can't prove it. And as for the prophet—that's a complicated story. All I can say is he couldn't have put the stone there and then 'discover' it. But you would have had to be there to understand that," I said helplessly. Not even Wenna, Sephine, and Marina rushed to my aid.

So, I decided to reveal something I had previously confided only in the three of them, plus Siebenthal and Dad: "As you all probably know, my mother was murdered recently. And I saw her in Valhalla and received messages from her. That's how I know it's true," I said defiantly. "And do you think I'm a liar or a lunatic?"

Everyone was now looking at me critically and seemed to be asking themselves exactly that, and for the first time, I felt the need to sink into the ground. In the end, it was François himself who saved me. "No," he said hesitantly, scratching his head again. "Not really."

"Me neither," Jumbo agreed, albeit less thoughtfully than euphorically. There was more of a loyal companion in him than in the others, I began to suspect.

Wilmar was introspective, as if he were questioning his inner self.

Sandro pulled out his smartphone and asked, "Can I take a photo of the stone? I mean, of the copy?"

"No," I replied gruffly. "You're not allowed to take any photos, because, as I said two weeks ago, everything must remain secret for the time being. I'm sorry."

Sandro put away his phone.

But now Debbie raised her finger again. “Even if I believe you, you talked about an oath we’re supposed to take. Are we at least allowed to first find out what exactly it’s about?” she asked with her chin tilted up rebelliously.

“Of course,” I said. “I would have read that to you anyway.” I took the sheet in front of me on the altar and read the oath:

“We believe in you, Euródin, God of all Europeans, who protects our people and leads our souls to Valhalla. For this, we owe love and praise to you, dedication to our people, and respect for each of our own. With you, we will become united and great and mighty, and without you, we are lost. That is why we pledge eternal loyalty and allegiance to you today, promising to stand our ground against the other *Urvölker* and to love our own. We swear this by the sacred blood of the sacrificial animal, which will adorn our brows forever in the form of your mark.”

I looked up from the page and added, “The ‘forever’ is meant only in a figurative sense, naturally. Of course, you wipe the blood from your forehead when you leave.”

“But like a secret ink, it’s still there,” Jumbo interjected, and everyone laughed.

I took advantage of the relaxed atmosphere to move on before the mood changed again. “So, shall we get down to business? Or does someone not want to swear allegiance to their god after all?”

When asked like this, no one dared to object, and I signaled Marina to begin her song. But she shook her head, and silently forming words with her lips, pointed to the Christmas bell. Oh, right! I first had to initiate the ritual and call upon the Soul Father. So, I went into reverent contemplation and adopted the prayer posture that Siebenthal had taught me: my right hand on my heart and my upper body bent slightly forward. Then I turned into a position half to the right, half facing the audience. This was the direction that I had determined previously to be north using the compass Uncle Jochen had given me. I then rang the bell twice and let the sound echo in the room.

“Soul Father Euródin,” I said, placing my hand on my heart again, “we have gathered here today to swear faith and allegiance to you and

to found the Euródin's Children's Army, for your honor and our salvation. Please accept us as your children and help us in what we do."

I gave Marina the signal once again, and this time she picked up her guitar and began her song. She sang in a languorous voice:

“Euróooooodin, you heavenly one at our side,  
look at your people, how they suffer in the night.  
But now a wise man has appeared from the sea,  
who leads us to you and fills us with glee.  
Euróooooodin, you heavenly one at our side,  
see your people longing for your light.  
Eternal allegiance we swear to you,  
and never, ever it will us rue.  
Euróooooodin, you heavenly at our side,  
we love you with all our might,  
how we do love our brothers,  
for whom we will act as true mothers.  
Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin,  
forever you will be,  
Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin,  
and keep our souls wee.  
Euróooooodin, you heavenly one at our side,  
look at your people, how they rejoice and are alight.  
For now, a wise man has come out of the sea,  
who fills us with your majesty.  
Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin,  
forever you will be.  
Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin,  
fill us with courage and your light let us see.  
Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin, Euróooooodin,  
forever you will be.”

Perhaps it wasn't the best song ever composed, but it moved us to tears, especially because Marina accompanied it with melancholy chords and sang in a voice full of longing. Everyone clapped spontaneously after she finished, which made me frown. Ovations like at a pop concert appeared unseemly for a religious ceremony. So, before

Marina, intoxicated by her success, delivered an encore, I cleared my throat and said with dignity, "Thank you very much, Marina. Now let's move on to the oath."

This was Sephine's cue, the problem being that even the High Priestess had to be "anointed" first. So, she stepped up to the altar and read the text of the oath to me from the page, stumbling through the sentences. "I swear it," I said briskly, nonetheless. Now Sephine reached for the blood bowl and brush, and back in her true element, painted a perfect *E* on my forehead, as I would later discover, even after everything that would happen.

For the sake of simplicity, she stayed right there, and now I read the text to her—without getting confused. "I swear it," she said with elegant ease.

Unfortunately, the *E* I then painted on her forehead looked more like a messy blob. The fine arts had never been my field, but I would get enough practice tonight. I swore in Marina next, followed by Wenna, and eventually Debbie.

Unsurprisingly, the trouble started with her. She seemed to be plagued by misgivings and was pushed to the altar by Wenna like a stubborn child to school by its mother. When she saw directly in front of her the bowl of blood, which she had previously seen only from yards away, she blanched. "I don't think I can do this. I'm going to faint," she whispered.

"Nonsense," I said. "It's just pig's blood. Don't you ever eat blood sausage?"

"No! Never!"

"Now you take the oath, and then we'll see," I ordered. I read the text to her, and paralyzed by the idea that blood was about to be drawn on her forehead, she mumbled in a resigned voice, as if sealing her death sentence, "I swear it!"

Then I took her by surprise, like an army surgeon who has to perform an amputation without anesthetic on the battlefield. I suddenly grabbed her head, she reflexively closed her eyes, and in no time my unwilling sheep wore a spidery *E* on her forehead.

At that moment, I noticed a flash out of the corner of my eye. Had someone taken a photo? Sandro?

I would never be able to tell. Because immediately afterward I couldn't see anything at all anymore, and all hell broke loose.

## 50

Siebenthal hadn't heard from Armin Weskamp or his daughter for two weeks. What might they, especially Armin, think about everything he had explained and suggested to him? He probably didn't know yet. People often needed time to change their lives and their views of reality. It might even have taken himself a long time, despite his epiphanies and revelations, had his soul not been prepared for this since childhood.

No matter. Weskamp would get back to him sometime, and until then, there was enough for him to do. His "The History of the Gods and Men" needed to be revised and expanded. He had just completed a chapter on the history of mankind's development, the Second African Migration northward, which had led to the separation of the *Urvölker* and the *Urweihe* in a process he now referred to as the "people's fork." Its handle stood for Africa, the prongs for Europe and Asia, and the farther people had migrated up this fork, the more they differed from ancient African man. In this sense, the Scandinavians were the most European Europeans and the Han Chinese and Japanese the most Asian Asians. North Africans, the Turkic peoples, and Semites were transitional forms, still closer to the primordial African man, as were the Indians and other South Asians.

He had to call the manuscript something else, he now believed—perhaps "The Three Gods, Their *Urvölker* and the Future of Europe" or simply "Euródin" or "The Profession." The latter seemed to him an apt name for the new religion, claiming universal validity as far as Euródin was concerned. The word Tritheism thus referred only to what was common to all three gods.

Having tried out a few designs, he had also decided on a sign—a logo, as they say nowadays—that still had to be finalized by a professional designer. It consisted of a dot surrounded by two circles and a stylized flame or leaf, and he always carried the sketch as a tightly folded piece of paper in his trouser pocket, just like his dream drawing back then.

To Euróðin, all of this might be just smoke and mirrors. It was the content that mattered—and precisely for this, Siebenthal needed His help once again. He knew his mission, all well and good: to spread the message, found a church, and exhort the people to keep to themselves until Ragnarök in order to create a new world afterward. But what was the concrete content of their faith, the catechism? The commandments, as the Bible called them, or the equivalent to the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism? How was he to found a church if he couldn't provide this?

That was why he had once again placed a note under the stone beneath the ritual table with a question for Him. And for days, Siebenthal had been tingling from time to time, and had been about to sit down at the desk and hammer into the keyboard what He had revealed to him. Sentences or scraps of sentences, first outlines, and versions emerged in him. But before he could grasp them, the tingling sensation was gone again.

He was sitting at the piano practicing a simple Mozart minuet when something rose up inside him again. But this time he felt it was really happening! He ran into the study, threw himself at the PC, and maltreated the keyboard as if his life depended on it.

After a few minutes, he stopped typing and breathed heavily. Despite the coolness in his study, his hands were damp, and sweat was gathering under his armpits. He read through what he had entrusted to the paper and realized: once again, He had only placed the core principles in his soul. Revelations were like seeds that were deposited in the earth. There they gave birth to a plant, which only gradually matured into a flower. Its basic design was contained in the seed from the beginning, but not the exact shape and number of petals and branches.

So, he revised the text several more times, rearranging and reorganizing it. After an hour, he pulled a document out of the printer that might be for keeps:

### Profession of the Fifteen Truths and Obligations

I acknowledge Euródin as my God and Soul Father and thereby recognize the following:

1. Since the dawn of time, these three gods have existed in the universe: Euródin and the alien gods Vili and Vé.
2. They are beings of pure spirit and have created neither the universe nor life, yet they consecrate the souls of their accepted peoples, here on earth as everywhere.
3. On earth, Vili consecrates the souls of those we call Africans, Vé the souls of those we call Asians, and Euródin those of our own people, the Europeans.
4. Euródin will consecrate the souls of my offspring only if the soul of my mate is consecrated by Him as well or by no god at all. That is why I shall not father children with those of alien gods.
5. After my death, my consecrated soul will be kept by the Valkyries and taken to Valhalla, where the Soul Father will judge it according to my deeds in life.
6. If I have led a proper life, my soul will be able to dwell in a state of peace and happiness in His spirit for as long as it wishes.
7. If I have led an evil life, my soul will have to atone for my deeds in Helheim as long as it deems just to Him.
8. After death, the souls of those consecrated by the alien gods go to places in their own spirit, remote from Valhalla. The souls of the unconsecrated wither and fade away.
9. Through my consecrated soul, Euródin can bestow me with strength, courage, wisdom, and serenity, provided I listen to Him. But I alone am responsible for my deeds.
10. The gods are only able to affect the souls they have consecrated. They cannot influence matter and cannot perform



miracles or magic. That is why I must never ask Euródin to do so.

11. I can ask Him for leniency and support for others; for myself, I shall ask only for what He is able to do and what is due to me or benefits His people.
12. All those whose soul He has consecrated are my sisters and brothers, whom I am to love, protect, and keep, provided they profess their faith in Him.
13. I owe allegiance to Him and His people. Never must I betray either of them in favor of the alien gods and their peoples.
14. Furthermore, I owe to preserve and multiply His people until Ragnarök, after which we will create a new world. Then we and He will be one, and all strife will end.
15. Those whose souls are consecrated by an alien god or no god may be our guests but can never be part of our covenant.

Siebenthal read it through one last time. Number four, prohibiting procreation with the alien consecrated, as he had come to call the children of the other gods, was probably the most controversial because of what had happened in twentieth-century Europe. But it was unavoidable, because no unconsecrated souls were allowed to be created.

The emphasis on free will in number nine seemed important too. A god who was not omnipotent but exerted only a certain influence on the souls of his children could no more be blamed for all the evils of the world than parents could be blamed for the misdeeds of their adult children.

He had hesitated at number twelve and checked with Him again before adding “provided they profess their faith in him.” But now he was sure of it. There was no unconditional brotherly love in the Profession, neither toward strangers nor toward one’s own. Anyone who denied or even betrayed their own family and their own god had lost any claim to support.

Number fourteen also included the duty to provide for offspring—taken for granted in all human communities until it was

abolished in the liberal West along with many other things that had previously gone without saying.

Finally, number fifteen, which referred only to the community of the Professing and thus the Inner State. Contact with strangers was not forbidden per se, but they were foreigners who were not allowed into the inner circle. The Outer State, on the other hand, which was doomed to die anyway, was free to do as it pleased.

He stretched and looked at the clock. It was afternoon and it had darkened outside, and he switched on the desk lamp. He folded the two sheets of paper with the commandments and put them in the side pocket of his trousers along with the draft logo, so that he could look at them whenever he wanted. Time for a cup of tea and a snack.

He headed into the kitchen, put on some tea and made himself a sandwich. After the tea had steeped, he walked back toward the study with a plate and the cup—and dropped both in the middle of the corridor. For a scream pierced his insides, a scream from someone he knew very well!

Siebenthal didn't care about the shards on the floor. He reached for his phone and dialed Anngrit's number. She didn't answer! He shoved the phone in his pocket, grabbed his wallet and keys, threw on his jacket and hat, and hurried out the front door to his car. With the engine humming, he selected Anngrit's Hamburg address from the list of recent destinations on his navigation device, then put the vehicle in drive.

## 51

It took me a few seconds to realize that what was blinding me was the beam of a flashlight. I shielded my eyes with my hand and saw none other than my enemy Mustafa standing in front of me, pointing the lamp at me like a ray gun, because it wasn't so dark in the room that you needed extra light. Behind him stood Yuri and Igor.

It was like the fox suddenly standing in the chicken coop. Debbie let out a squeak, and she slipped away from me while I was still holding the blood-soaked brush over her forehead and scurried into a corner like a frightened mouse. The others had jumped up, but then stood stock-still with their mouths open.

"Put the lamp down, or I'll knock it out of your hand!" I cried. "What are you doing here? You're interrupting something important!" I made a move toward him.

Mustafa lowered the lamp, knowing full well I would not hesitate to physically assault him. In return, a grin spread across his round, pudgy face. "The question is: What are *you* doing here?"

He looked around calmly, while Igor and Yuri stood by stoically like two Kremlin guards, with pinched faces and arms crossed. "You think you're so clever, but you're so stupid," he said, turning his gaze back to me. "We realized the other day you were up to something and followed you. We tricked the redhead you left upstairs as a lookout. There's another blocked-off entrance at the back of the building, something you probably don't know. We went in there and overheard you. So, we thought we'd drop by and see what dirty things you're up to here."

He looked at the bowl of blood and then glared at us one by one. "So, you have drawn blood on your foreheads for your 'god,' this 'Eroding'? And sworn some kind of oath, I've heard. And you, you're the priestess. What if I want to swear an oath to Him too?" he suddenly asked in a sly tone.

I put down the brush and crossed my arms. "That's not possible. Euródin is only for Europeans. For you, Allah is responsible."

"Besides, it's pig's blood, nothing for the likes of you," snapped Wenna, who had overcome her shock.

Mustafa grinned maliciously. "So, you're fucking racists and founding a fucking Nazi religion here. Ms. Scharnagel will be extremely interested in that."

That invoked in my mind the image of our cold, narrow-minded school principal. I couldn't yet fathom what the consequences of the barging in of the three would be. But it dawned on me they could be disastrous.

Mustafa then looked at the pedestal with the stone copy. “And this is something like your shrine?” He turned to Igor and Yuri. “Take photos of everything.”

The two of them whipped out their smartphones with triumphant faces, and I wondered whether I should intervene.

But I didn’t get the chance. Mustafa now took a step toward the platform and reached out for the cardboard stone. “And this we’ll take with us as proof. My uncle knows someone at the newspaper who’ll finish you off!”

“Hands off!” I shouted. He had disturbed and humiliated us, threatened us with the principal. But I would never allow him to steal what belonged to us. To our God.

But unlike the first time we fought, on the day of my mother’s death, Mustafa didn’t back down. “Do you think I’m going to let you tell me what to do, you fucking bitch?” he shrieked.

As soon as he grabbed Sephine’s work with his left hand, I struck his arm with the edge of mine. Not hard enough to snap a bone, of course, but a blow like that, as practiced with padding in judo, would certainly leave a good-sized bruise.

I could not have foreseen what happened next. Mustafa, crying out in pain, let go of the cube and dropped the flashlight. The next moment he retrieved a folding knife from his pants pocket, unfolded it with a flick of this wrist and brandished the flashing blade in my direction. “You filthy cunt! You disgusting piece of shit!” he screeched, his face contorted with rage. “I’ll stab you like a pig!”

I screamed and instinctively jumped back.

Suddenly I sensed movement behind me. Jumbo reacted first. “Hey!” he shouted and jumped in, ignoring the danger.

Moments later, a phalanx of boys stood defiantly between me and Mustafa. And that was a good thing. Because my vision suddenly turned black, and I slumped down on one of the plaster sacks. My heart was racing, and I was shaking. We hadn’t even brought Sephine’s pepper spray! An image appeared inside me, a picture of my mother. And I had death before my eyes, hers, mine, so suddenly, out of the blue, almost. “Watch out, watch out, Anngrit!” I heard inside me. “It’s happening so fast!”

When I had halfway composed myself and understood what was going on around me, I saw Mustafa, still screaming, still wielding the knife, being grabbed by the arms and dragged to the exit by Igor and Yuri.

"Let go of me! I'll stab her! I'll kill her!"

"Come on," grunted Yuri. "Put the knife down, and we'll get out of here. We've photographed everything. We'll finish them off."

Mustafa calmed down just as quickly as he had snapped. "It's okay, let go of me," he said, trying to shake off their grip. They released his arms, and he closed the knife and slipped it back into the pocket of his leather jeans. Only now could I see it properly. Its handle was made of polished wood and brass, as show-offs preferred it to the light, robust, plastic models used by soldiers, hunters, and other professionals. And the blade, perhaps three inches long, was made of polished rather than nonreflective steel. Above all, I remembered how he had opened it with one hand. A one-handed knife that he wasn't even allowed to carry!

After stowing it away, he bent down to pick up his flashlight. "You'll pay for this, I swear!"

He spat on the floor to confirm it, then hastily left the room with Igor and Yuri in tow.

The immediate danger seemed to be over. But what now? I clung to my plaster bag like to a life raft and tried to breathe calmly and deeply. The others stood there dumbfounded and looked at one another in bewilderment. "That was attempted murder! We should call the police!" declared Jumbo, looking in my direction.

"But the question is: What happens now *here*?" Wenna replied.

Sephine came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right, Scha-dear? That was horrible! Oh, the scoundrel!"

I nodded. "I'm all right now. I just need to sit for a moment. I—I had to think about Mom," I said quietly.

She nodded sympathetically. "Should we pack up and then really call the police?"

By now, I had regained my composure, and my mind was working again. “No, we started it, and we must bring it to the end. That we owe to our God. We’re almost finished anyway.”

Sephine looked doubtfully at the others. Sandro, François, Wilmar, and Jumbo still had to be sworn in, and then there was the *Sumbel* as well. Needless to say, the mood had been shattered. Sandro and François looked as if they would rather be anywhere else, and Debbie frantically rubbed the *E* from her forehead with a handkerchief as if it were the mark of Cain. Only Jumbo looked determined, while Wilmar radiated a calmness as if none of this had affected him. Whatever else we did or didn’t do now, it wouldn’t change the consequences of Mustafa’s attack either way. At least that’s what I believed.

“How is it? Do you want to carry on?” I asked the boys.

François scratched his head once more, embarrassed. “Actually, I have to go, to be honest,” he said, avoiding my gaze.

“Me too,” Sandro joined in.

“And me!” Debbie added hastily.

Wilmar, on the other hand, who hadn’t said a word all day, crossed his arms.

“Well, I’d like to take the oath. I’m not going to let them intimidate me.”

“Me too,” Jumbo agreed.

“Right, then let’s get on with it,” I said, and stood up shakily. I didn’t deign to give François, Sandro, and Debbie a second glance as they hurried off. That’s how the wheat was sifted from the chaff.

I began swearing in Wilmar and Jumbo. Between the scent of the flickering candles and the dignity of the oath, the solemnity of the moment returned. When Marina finally lifted our “drinking horn”—a simple water carafe filled with “Viking blood”—from the floor, we had almost forgotten Mustafa and his henchmen. She handed me the carafe, and I offered the toast: “Dear Euródin, we raise this vessel in your honor and let you partake of our drink.” As I had learned to do, I tipped the *Minneschluck* onto the floor, took a sip myself, and then said with holy gravity: “I swear silence about everything that has happened here.”

I let the carafe go round, and one by one, everyone drank from it and took the vow of silence. So absorbed were we in the ritual that at first we didn't notice how disaster struck us for a second time. The drinking vessel had reached Wilmar when Wenna let out a strangled cry and pointed in the direction of the exit.

The school janitor was standing there.

## 52

Because of the NEMAS sale, Armin had to spend Reformation Day in the otherwise deserted office. He'd just finished a phone call with Greg—because in the United States, where people secretly shook their heads at the holiday-happy Germans, Reformation Day was, of course, a normal working day.

Nevertheless, he was packing up when his cell phone rang unexpectedly. It was Friedrich's office number, which in itself was not remarkable, as his friend often spent Sundays and public holidays in his law office. Armin assumed he was calling about the sale. Now that the first phase of due diligence had been completed, and they'd begun tackling the details, Armin had asked his friend to take a second look at the mountains of paper that his consultants and his legal department were busily heaping upon his desk. Just yesterday he sent him an extensive email.

"Howdy, old friend. Have you read it yet?"

"Armin, I'm not calling about NEMAS. It's about Mette."

*Mette.* The name went through him like a knife, and he struggled not to drop the receiver. An icy chill gripped him, just as it had when he'd entered the sterile tiled room in the forensics department to identify his wife's body. The last few weeks had been so busy as to crowd out any thoughts about her murder. *Mette.*

"What is it? Did they . . .?"

"It's best if you come over to my office," Friedrich said in a tone that made his guts freeze.

He dropped everything and drove through almost deserted city streets, his apprehension growing with each mile he got closer to Friedrich's glass-and-marble office overlooking the Outer Alster—Hamburg's swankiest neighborhood. As he finally pressed the front door buzzer, his entire body went numb.

Friedrich received him behind the door, dressed, like Armin, in comfortable jeans and a sweater instead of elegant lawyer's threads. Wordlessly, he led him into his office, past an unmanned open secretarial area, which heightened Armin's sense of unreality.

"Have a seat. Do you want a drink?"

"Maybe a glass of water," he said hoarsely.

Friedrich poured him a glass from one of the bottles on a filing cabinet and sat down. "Well," he said. "They've found Mette's murderer."

Armin said nothing, just looked at his friend apprehensively.

Friedrich took up a file in front of him and leafed through it. "This is a copy of the investigation file," he said, "which the public prosecutor's office faxed to me last night. I only read it this morning, and, well, I thought I should let you know straight away." He cleared his throat. "They questioned the suspect three days ago and then remanded him in custody because it's a murder and he's apparently a flight risk. So, he is currently in prison."

"Who is it?" whispered Armin.

Reading the file, Friedrich said, "A certain Hamid Abdullah. Like his family, he comes from Afghanistan. His father apparently worked as a driver, interpreter, and go-between for the Bundeswehr until they left Kunduz. They then flew the family to Germany because they were allegedly threatened by the Taliban and granted them asylum here. Since then, the five of them have been living in a council apartment in Hamburg-Jenfeld and are apparently keeping their heads above water with small jobs, presumably moonlighting, and social benefits. The suspect apparently never made it through high school, dropped out of apprenticeships, and collected some misdemeanors



such as fare evasion and drug charges. He is currently unemployed and is twenty years old—if his papers are to be believed. This, in turn, despite his being of legal age, means he will probably be sentenced under juvenile law.”

Armin knew—as everyone else—that German judges routinely made use of the legal possibility to sentence offenders between eighteen and twenty-one as “immature young adults” under juvenile law like teenagers, not minding that the public had little sympathy for that.

Friedrich slipped on his reading glasses. “They finally found him through his buddies,” he continued. “Apparently, on the day of the storm, the three of them had consumed alcohol in the Volkspark and crack cocaine. When the rain broke out, his buddies fled, but he stayed behind and then . . .” Friedrich paused and put his hand on Armin’s, who was struggling to control his trembling. “Or should we talk about it another time?” he asked gently.

“No, no, I want to know. Now.”

“Anyway,” Friedrich went on, “when the other two heard about the murder, they remembered how Abdullah had boasted once about hiding an iron bar in the park, just in case, and that he had stayed behind. When they asked him about it, he apparently reacted guiltily. But the police could have easily never found out about Abdullah: it seems that neither of his pals could be bothered to contact the police. One of them, however, blabbed his suspicions to his girlfriend. He broke up with her shortly afterward, whereupon she immediately went to the police.

“They took Abdullah into preliminary custody and ID-ed him, as there were fingerprints and DNA traces, and during questioning he made inconsistent statements. It came to light that he had booked a flight to Turkey and a connecting flight to Afghanistan. This led to a second interrogation, this time before the magistrate. During the arraignment, he made completely implausible statements and was therefore taken into custody.”

“Has he confessed, apologized? What does he have to say for himself?” Armin asked quietly. How could someone who had done something like that do anything other than collapse in shame?

"He . . ." Friedrich broke off and fingered his reading glasses nervously. "I'd like to spare you this, but you'll find out anyway. First of all: no matter what he says, he'll be convicted on the evidence alone. At any rate, he first claimed not to remember anything because of the drugs and alcohol. Then he claimed that he had sheltered from the rain together with Mette, they talked, and she then practically threw herself at him, and they had consensual sex.

"Afterward, however, she told him that her husband would beat her to death if she, a white woman, had intercourse with an Afghan refugee and that he should never find out. And suddenly she pulled out her pepper spray and had an iron bar in her other hand, which supposedly happened to be lying next to her in the grass, and threatened him with it. He then took it from her and struck her with it in self-defense. Because she continued to fight back, he finally strangled her and then lost his head and fled."

"That's . . ." Armin stammered. It was as if the murderer had raped his wife a second time here and now in front of him. A final humiliation with which he tried to ravish Mette even after her death, mockingly celebrating Armin's and her suffering. As if he had masturbated and peed on her grave.

"But that's not all," Friedrich continued in a low voice. "He even went so far as to claim it was all the fault of the Germans, who were racists and interfered in Afghanistan uninvited, and since then he's had to live here like a dog."

Armin and Friedrich looked at each other silently. They knew exactly what it meant: Siebenthal had been right about everything. *Enjoin them to keep among themselves*. This was the result when you submitted to an alien god and some airy Western philosophers elected by no one. The crime was joined by mockery, which was also a revenge for the presumptuous and unjust policies of the West, formerly as colonial exploiters and today as moral know-it-alls and world police.

"What happens now?" asked Armin, aiming at the process, but realizing the more serious question lurking deeper down: What *should* happen next?

Friedrich limited his answer to the legal side. "Trial in six months," he said with a shrug. "Our judicial system doesn't do it any faster. The

maximum sentence in juvenile law is ten years, even if it were genocide. Because he was under the influence of drugs, he is going to be granted mitigating circumstances. I spoke to a friend of mine, also a criminal lawyer, and according to him, eight years is all he'll get."

Eight years for two lives and not even an apology. And then defiling her name and reputation on top of it.

Armin tasted bile in his mouth as he left the office. He felt powerless and beaten down like never before in his life. If only he were already up there together with his beloved Mette.

But he had to think of Anngrit.

## 53

Eckert's nickname at school was "Master Eckert," in allusion to a German philosopher and theologian with whom he shared only the perpetually grumpy face, however. Usually clad in work shoes and a gray smock, with blue work trousers and a checked shirt underneath, our janitor was now standing in the cellar entrance in clogs, jogging bottoms, a T-shirt that stretched over his paunch, and an outdoor jacket, which he had obviously thrown on in a hurry. Mustafa had apparently rousted him in his official apartment on the edge of the school complex despite the holiday; and like him, Eckert had armed himself with a flashlight.

Despite his corpulence, he made the way from the entrance to us in three big, cat-like leaps. "What are you doing here?" He stared at me, probably sniffing the center of the illegal proceedings in me, if Mustafa hadn't told him already.

"We, uh . . ." For once, I was at a loss for words. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

"We're just exercising our religious freedom and have borrowed this room to do so," Marina replied instead in a cheeky tone. She had

a notorious talent for saying the right thing at the wrong time and would have done better making claims about a Halloween prank.

Eckert fixed her with a scornful look that made it impossible for her to maintain eye contact.

“Borrowed, have you?” he sneered. “Firstly, entering the building site for any purpose is forbidden. It’s trespassing. Secondly,” he thundered, looking at me now, “a classmate”—he dug a notepad out of his pocket—“Mustafa al-Sharani al-Aziz, complained that you attacked him and used racial slurs. I know you, you’re the Weskamp girl, aren’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer but continued: “His father has already informed the police.”

Now it was our turn to be outraged. “*He* called the police? Now, that’s rich coming from him!” Wilmar said, bristling. “He attacked Scha with a knife and threatened to kill her!”

“Exactly, and we can testify to that!” Wenna chimed in.

“But he says he only defended himself with a nail file after you nearly broke his arm.”

Scornful laughter broke out. “A nail file like a girl? Unbelievable!” Sephine exclaimed derisively. “So, he’s not just a pathetic liar, he’s a wimp.”

Eckert started to come down on her, but, meanwhile, boiling with rage, I beat him to it. “First of all, Mr. Eckert, I only struck him on the arm because he tried to steal something that belongs to us.” I glanced at Sephine’s stone imitation. “Secondly, it wasn’t a nail file, but a forbidden one-handed knife!”

“That’s right!” attested Wilmar. “I saw it too. Did you search him?”

Eckert wheeled around and looked at him grimly. “How is that my business? It’s his word against yours, and anyway, he showed me the nail file. The police or the school administrators will sort out the rest.”

As obvious as Wilmar’s question seemed: How was Eckert supposed to know that the nail file was just a ruse? And as vain as Mustafa was, it didn’t seem implausible to anyone who knew him that he was carrying one.

“Besides, Mr. Eckert,” said Sephine, now just as angry as I was, “it may be that we shouldn’t be here. But are we ruining anything? If you

hadn't disturbed us, we would have cleaned everything up, and all would have been the same as before. But if you treat *us* like criminals instead of this scoundrel, my father does know a lot of people!"

"Do you think you can intimidate me, missy?" he spat out. "You're all in for some nasty surprise, I can tell you that much. What's that blood in the bowl and on your foreheads anyway? Human blood?"

Wenna stamped her foot. "I don't believe it! It's pig's blood from the butcher! Last time I checked, it wasn't illegal to draw it on your forehead!"

"No. But your schoolmate claimed you wanted to sacrifice *his* blood. He also talked about racism and Nazi symbols."

We were speechless in the face of Mustafa's mad lies. We should have contradicted it all, but here and now it wasn't possible, I realized with anguish.

Eckert opened his notepad again and brandished a ballpoint pen. "That thing over there has got runes on it. So, I'll take it with me as evidence. I'll also write down your names, and Principal Scharnagel will decide what to do with you."

We stood there frozen while he asked us our names and wrote them down. Once he'd finished, he said, "And now you all clean up here. And real fast!"

Silently, looking down like convicts, we extinguished the candles and tidied up the room, which was now lit only by the camping lamp. Wenna tipped the blood back into the jar and screwed the lid shut. As we couldn't pour the Viking blood back into the juice bottle, Jumbo drank the carafe empty without further ado. We stowed everything away in our backpacks, dismantled the altar and the pedestal for the stone, and stacked the sacks, bricks, and boards neatly in a corner.

Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I began to stuff the cardboard replica of the stone into its carrier bag, as if I'd forgotten it was to be confiscated. But as I was about to make off with it, Eckert grabbed my arm. "That stays here, Miss, I said!"

Red-faced, I handed it to him. After this final humiliation, I slunk out of the cellar like a beaten dog.

At the top of the stairs, the group of us mumbled our goodbyes, then, with shoulders slumped, hastened off into the night, glad to be mercifully swallowed up by the darkness. They say that success has many fathers, while defeat is an orphan. I had never felt so alone in my life, not even after the death of my mother, and never so desperate.

It was only now that I truly realized what Mustafa's lies and Eckert's catching us red-handed would mean for me, for us, maybe even for my God. There would be a scandal and we would be pilloried, although actually *I* had been the victim and Mustafa had told a bunch of mean lies. I had nothing against him or his ilk in principle. I had only defended Marina, then he had insulted me, and I had taught him a lesson. Then I had wanted to prevent him from spying on me about something that was none of his business, had referred him to Allah for his own good and stopped him from stealing from me.

I had, I thought, done everything right and yet everything wrong. But in truth, I hadn't done everything right, I realized now. No one had called me to do what I had done. Not even Him, if I was honest. Instead, I had allowed myself to be talked into it by the others because I had craved to play the role of high priestess. Vanity, presumption—you name it. And even though I thought we hadn't formally broken the oath we had made to Siebenthal at the ritual, in reality I had stabbed him in the back. Of course, no one should have found out about it. But wasn't that always a possibility to be reckoned with? How was I supposed to explain it to him? Or to Dad, who would find out inevitably? Dear God, forgive me!

Red with shame, hot tears streaming down my cheeks, I picked up my pace until I was running. At home, I slammed the front door behind me, thankful that Dad was at work. Up in my room, I opened the closet and threw the rucksack inside, then tore off my high priestess costume as if it were on fire, stuffed it under the bed, and randomly put on a T-shirt and a pair of leggings.

I threw myself into bed and texted Siebenthal. "Gerold, I've done something terrible. I'm so sorry." Then I hurled the smartphone on the floor, pulled the comforter over my head, and cried into my pillow.

For the first time in my life, I wished I was dead.

“Dad?”

Armin took his head out of his hands and straightened up in his chair. How long had Anngrit been standing in the doorway? He struggled to shake off the torpor that had possessed him since learning about the poisonous lies of his wife’s murderer and abuser. It was still spreading within him, trying to steal his breath, his strength, and his courage to face life.

“What is it, Anngrit?” he asked hoarsely. “You don’t need to cook anything. I’m not hungry.”

“Dad, I have something to tell you.”

It was only now that he realized through the veil surrounding him that she was in tears. Her hair was disheveled, she was holding on to the door frame and seemed to be trembling all over. He jumped off the chair and clasped her in his arms. “Little bunny, what on earth has happened?”

While she told him everything, crying on the couch, something changed within him. At first, he had frowned, thinking, *Dear God, that too!* Not only had she overheard him talking to Siebenthal, not only had she gone to see the man behind his back, but she had even performed a religious ritual with her friends in some school basement without permission and been caught. Some of the details he didn’t understand, nor was he interested in them, and her report was incoherent, rambling, and full of holes.

For example, he didn’t quite understand what it was about this Arab boy who had sneaked in and was now claiming that she had hurt him and racially insulted him. It seemed to him to be just another looming disaster in his life. But then something emerged in her breathless, gushing report that changed everything.

“He did *what?*” he shouted, grabbing her and shaking her so that she widened her eyes in fear. He hadn’t hit her once in his life, not even a slap, and very rarely shouted at her.

“He . . . he pulled out a knife and said I was a dirty bitch, and a cunt, and he would stab me,” she stuttered. “I thought about what

happened to Mom and backed off. Then the other boys saved me. But afterward he told the janitor I had almost broken his arm and that he had defended himself only with a nail file. But it was a forbidden one-handed knife, Dad! And the janitor believed him and not me, when I was only trying to prevent him from stealing the stone!”

She burst into tears again.

Armin took a deep breath. “Anngrit, listen to me! I’ve just found out who your mother’s murderer was and how he justified his actions. I didn’t want to tell you, but now I think you need to know. It was an Afghan refugee. He ambushed her in the park, maybe under the influence of drugs. But that’s not all: he claimed that your mother had intercourse with him voluntarily and that she attacked *him* afterward, and he was only defending himself.”

Anngrit opened her mouth. “But how can he do that!”

Then her look told him she had understood. They stared at each other for a long time. Finally, he said, “I’m going to call Siebenthal now and tell him I will found a church for Euródin with him. My reputation, the company—I don’t care about them anymore. What are they worth if the dearest things I own are taken from me? I’ve been watching it for too long.”

Anngrit pulled a tissue out of the pocket in her leggings and blew her nose. “Okay,” she said in a muffled voice. “But you don’t need to call Mr. Siebenthal. He’s on his way anyway.”

In response to his questioning look, she continued: “I wrote him a message to apologize, but later realized that he had already called me before, at the time when . . . And I had a text message saying he was on his way to Hamburg and how was I doing. Then I wrote him I was okay, and he replied that he was relieved, and everything would be fine.”

Something about that struck Armin as odd. “You say he set off before he even knew? But why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, Dad. Maybe he felt it—somehow.”

Armin suspected this could become important. But there were more pressing matters at hand. Even if Anngrit’s terrible experience had finally opened his eyes, it was still necessary to think through the possible consequences and take countermeasures. First, he called



Friedrich and asked him to come over immediately. Then he called Jochen, because the fraught situation, if it went public, would presumably affect him too in terms of their selling NEMAS. Besides, he'd felt for some time now that he owed his brother a frank word. They had never kept secrets from each other before.

He caught Jochen driving to a Halloween party with Cordula. Armin remembered his brother mentioning it in the morning. Now he just said that something important concerning NEMAS had come up, but also something private.

Jochen promised to come over immediately.

Just as Armin hung up, the doorbell rang. Of course it couldn't be Jochen yet. Neither Friedrich. Siebenthal? From outside he could hear children shouting, "Trick or treat!" Right: Halloween. The kids were probably ringing everywhere. Should he even answer the bell?

In the end, someone was standing in the doorway who he should have called too, he now realized. Vic looked deeply worried and Wenna next to her seemed to have been crying, like Anngrit.

"Come in," he said.

Wenna and I sat next to each other on the couch, wrapped in Mom's cashmere blanket, nibbling cookies and drinking the tea Vic had made for us—in the firm English conviction that no crisis in life couldn't be overcome with a hot cuppa.

Vic was sitting next to us on the sofa. On armchairs across from us sat Legal-Fritz and Jochen and Cordula, who had arrived almost at the same time. The two of them added a bizarre touch to the gathering, as my uncle was dressed as Mephisto, in a black and red costume complete with cape and tiny horns, while Cordula was probably impersonating Lady Macbeth, judging by the bloody plastic dagger attached to her medieval robe full of artificial blood splatters. The masks that completed their disguises dangled around their necks.

Dad opened the war council.

"Thank you for coming so quickly. There was," he said, wringing his hands, "an incident at Anngrit's school today that could lead to a scandal, which could also reach NEMAS and, in the worst case, even affect the sales process."

Despite the general consternation that now set in, he added: "But that's just one thing and almost the least important. First, the scandal: Anngrit and her friends secretly organized a religious ritual in the basement of their school, which led to an altercation with a Muslim boy who then threatened her with a knife."

The distress all around and the looks of sympathy directed at me were more comforting than the tea and the cookies.

"Subsequently, this boy went to the school janitor and claimed that Anngrit made a racial slur against him, then attacked him, and that he had merely defended himself—and that with a nail file, not a knife."

"Do I understand correctly that there are witnesses to back up Anngrit's account?" asked Legal-Fritz promptly.

"Yes, my daughter's friends. However, Mustafa himself has brought two friends with him who may testify on his behalf."

"How old is the boy?" asked Friedrich.

Dad looked at me for the answer. I shrugged. "He's a grade level above me. He could be thirteen or fourteen."

"He's fourteen," Vic said. "I checked."

"Well, then he'd be just of the age of criminal responsibility," said Friedrich. "However, . . ."

"Exactly," said Dad. "Even if he was, as a juridical layman, I don't think anything would come of it."

Into the baffled silence, Uncle Jochen turned to me and asked, "This religious ritual—it wouldn't happen to have anything to do with what you told me about the other day at the shooting club?"

Blushing, I studied the contents of my teacup and remained silent. When I dared to look up again, everyone except Cordula was exchanging knowing looks.

Fritz cleared his throat and said, "Am I right in assuming, Armin, you also want to tell the others about it on this occasion?"

"Vic already knows. But, yes, I think it's time my family found out too—at least my brother and Cordu."

Dad went to the chest, took down the cloth and the vase, opened the lid, and showed them the stone. Then he told them about the discovery of the stone in the vacation home, Siebenthal's appearance, his

visit to us, his writing and his teachings about the three gods and their *Urvölker*. My secret visit to Siebenthal was mentioned too, which prompted me to return to studying the patterns in my tea.

"I'm beginning to understand the 'racist insult' thing," said Jochen. "Anngrit didn't let the boy join in the ritual because it was Vili and not Euródin who was responsible for him."

"That's right," said Dad. "Theologically, that's absolutely true. But we all know how it's perceived these days."

"And what do *you* think of it?" Jochen asked cautiously. "I don't mean about this incident at the school, but about the matter itself."

Dad remained silent and did something I very rarely saw him do: he blushed like a schoolboy. "I—," he began and broke off again before he finally brought himself to say, "I believe it. My heart and soul tell me so, everything I've experienced and seen and felt inside me tells me so. I have therefore decided to found a church together with Mr. Siebenthal for Euródin."

He fell silent, and I noticed beads of sweat on his forehead. It must have been the hardest thing for him to say in all his life. How I would have liked to comfort him now!

"So far, I've hesitated because I've never been what you'd call a religious person, to my mother's chagrin," he said with a bitter smile. "Moreover, of course, because I'm seeing the consequences. But two things happened today that changed everything: the one you know now—my own daughter's life being threatened by an Arab boy. About the other thing I found out today as well." He looked at Fritz. "Namely that Mette was violated and killed by a non-European as well, an Afghan refugee, who on top of it spread disgusting lies about the crime, which I won't go into here, and blamed us, the host society, because we were racists and interfered in the affairs of his home country uninvited. In any case, I conclude from this that our God, that Euródin, is right when he demands we should stay away from the others and protect and preserve our own people until the day when our sick Western civilization collapses, and we establish a new community on its foundations."

He sat down on a chair. "I think you should know this, not least because of the consequences, whatever you think of it yourself."

The others, but especially Jochen and Cordula, didn't seem to know whether they should be rather horrified or impressed by all that had been revealed.

"You've talked only about yourself," Jochen said finally. "But what about us? After all, we're also the children of your God, if I've understood correctly. And we're stuck in the same, excuse me, shit that the leftists have got us into. Wouldn't we be allowed to join in if we wanted to?"

"Of course, of course," Dad replied quickly. "I just didn't want to appear like one of those women with their leaflets on street corners. Anyone who helps me and Siebenthal will be welcome."

"Well, I think it's all sound and right," said Cordula. "When you hear it like that, you wonder why nobody thought of it before. We're on board, aren't we, sweetie pie?"

Uncle Jochen seemed a little embarrassed, probably due to the "sweetie pie," but he nodded in agreement.

Fritz, the eternal lawyer, cleared his throat again. "We've already talked about it. If only, with all due respect to your testimony, we had the opportunity to get to know this Siebenthal."

"That would be my wish, too, Armin, if I may say so," Vic said modestly.

"That's no problem at all," said Dad. "He's on his way here. Shouldn't he have arrived already?" he asked me.

"He texted another message earlier," I said. "He's stuck in traffic outside Hamburg."

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

## 55

Siebenthal looked somewhat startled at the number of people crowding the living room—he hadn't expected that, of course. Then he rushed over to the couch, greeted Wenna wordlessly with a hand

pressed on her shoulder and knelt in front of me: "Scha, are you all right? I heard you screaming."

Had I screamed? I couldn't remember. Maybe. But what amazed me and everyone in the room was how he had obviously heard this scream almost a hundred miles away in his house on the Baltic Sea. I certainly hadn't screamed *that* loudly.

"I, yes, no, there's nothing wrong with me," I stuttered into the astonished silence. "It was just an Arab boy at school who surprised us and had a knife with him. I'm so sorry, it's all my fault, I just wanted to . . ." I didn't get any further, because I'd dissolved in tears again.

"You performed a ritual?"

"Yes, I did. We got a few classmates involved because something had to happen, after all, and then first those jerks came and then the janitor . . .

"I beg your pardon," I whispered. "And Euródin's and everyone's."

"It was the idea of all of us," Wenna said. "Scha is not the only one to blame."

Siebenthal looked at her, then gave each of us a sympathetic squeeze on the arm and stood up. "No one is to blame but me, Mr. Weskamp," he said, turning to Dad. "I shouldn't have received your daughter and the other girls without their parents' permission. I must have triggered something in their imaginations that led to bad things."

Dad thought for a moment before answering: "Yes and no. They say all bad things have something good as well. Anyway, what that boy almost did to my daughter opened my eyes at last. Because I learned something else today: the murderer and rapist of my wife was an Afghan refugee who, in order to justify himself, even drags her name into the mud with disgusting lies and blames us Germans for everything." He paused to give Siebenthal a chance to digest it.

Siebenthal just nodded. Neither satisfaction at having been proved right nor disgust was written on his face. It was merely what he had expected, and, I read in his face, nothing else than He had foreseen.

"I told you three weeks ago during your visit," Dad continued, "that I needed more time to reach a decision. Now I have come to it: I would like to build a church together with you to our God—and perhaps together with the others in this room, if they want it and you allow it."

Again, Siebenthal only acknowledged this with a silent nod. However, he now looked at the others in the room curiously. His eyes settled on Uncle Jochen and Cordula in their silly outfits and registered irritation. The two of them were visibly embarrassed under his gaze.

Dad cleared his throat and said, "But perhaps I'll introduce you to the rest first. You already know my daughter and her friend Wenna; the one next to her is Wenna's mother, Victoria, who is also my daughter's teacher—and, well, we have come to know each other in private as well," he said, blushing. "This here is Friedrich Kussmaul," he continued, "a good friend and lawyer, whom I have also taken into my confidence as far as you are concerned. Finally, my brother Jochen, co-managing director of NEMAS and before that a senior officer in the German navy, and next to him, Cordula Möller, my personal assistant and his partner. By the way, you seem to be on a first-name basis with my daughter; don't we all want to call each other by our first names?"

Siebenthal smiled. "Of course. Mine is Gerold."

"Well then, Gerold, welcome into our midst."

Siebenthal now shook hands with everyone. He then looked around for someplace to sit, whereupon Cordula got up and fetched him a chair from the dining table. Sitting down, he placed his hands on his thighs and looked at us expectantly.

"What would interest me," Friedrich asked cautiously, "you said you heard Anngrit scream. Over such a long distance—how can I imagine that?"

"Actually, it wasn't me who heard her screaming, but the Soul Father," he replied. "Of course, the gods are not unaware of what happens to their children here on earth. And as my soul was in communion with him at the time anyway because of something else, He let me hear it too—because I was supposed to know and then come here, I assume. Unfortunately, I can't make direct contact with the souls of

my brothers and sisters myself. So, I can't read minds," he finished, earning a few laughs.

"But then couldn't Euródin have warned Anngrit by reading the attacker's thoughts in time?" asked Fritz with razor-sharp legal logic.

Siebenthal pursed his lips. "There are several problems here. The attacker was an Arab, I understand, and therefore a child of Vili—which is just another name for Allah. But the gods, as far as I know, at least, can establish a connection only to the souls they have consecrated themselves, not to those of their divine brothers. So, Euródin was unaware of the boy's intentions. Nevertheless, he may have seen that someone was sneaking up who didn't belong there and could have warned Scha about it. He may even have done so, but then another problem arises: many warnings from our Soul Father go unheeded because we first have to learn again in atheistic times to listen to the voice of our soul, which is the only connection to the gods. If the consciousness has never learned to communicate with its soul—to listen within itself, as it were, and thus upward—then we throw away to the wind not only all the warnings but also all the advice from our God. Even I still have to train this muscle, and Scha was perhaps too distracted at the time to hear it."

"That reminds me," I said in response. "When we visited the cellar for the first time and passed a room, I had a feeling that there was some kind of danger. I just ignored it because I didn't want to upset the others and moved on. Now I think it was Mustafa and his cronies who were spying on us, and He tried to warn me!"

"Quite possible," said Siebenthal. "Not everything is as simple and perfect as we tend to imagine it, somewhat naively. In a way, the gods are like us humans: they are neither omniscient nor infallible, and their communication channel with us is more like Native American smoke signals, which are easily overlooked or misinterpreted, than like a modern data highway. I know He doesn't like it and is looking for ways to improve it. But for now, it's the way it is."

He paused before continuing: "Furthermore, we have to let go of the idea that the gods see everything or even *want* to see everything. They interfere in our lives only when they see an important reason to do so. They have their own priorities and values, and I don't know if

they would warn every pedestrian of an approaching car even if they could. I think it has something to do,” he said, searching for words, “with their understanding of fate, free will, and personal responsibility. After all, they already care about our souls, which is the most important thing, from their point of view.”

Although no one in the room seemed to be completely happy about it, I thought it had to be accepted. If you thought it through to the end, we would end up being nothing more than puppets in the hands of the gods, who would do us no favor by protecting us from all evil. Wise parents allowed a child to burn its hand on the stove once so that it could learn from it for the future. And the gods obviously didn’t see themselves as our nannies or our spiritual overlords.

“Values and priorities being a cue,” Dad said into the general silence. “You told me last time about the mission that you—that we—received: spread the message, found a church, and exhort our brothers and sisters to preserve themselves and remain among themselves until Ragnarök, which can take many forms and of which no one knows how and when it will come. But what exactly is the message, apart from the fact that there are three gods who consecrate the souls of their three peoples? Can we be more specific?”

Siebenthal nodded. “Yes, we can do that. I said earlier that my soul was in contact with the Soul Father at the time that he communicated Scha’s plight to me. And this was the revelation of what I call the Fifteen Truths and Obligations, and they answer the question of the divine value system. In it, the survival and prosperity of his *Urvolk* are paramount, not the happiness of the individual, which, of course, he still wishes for each of his children.” He pulled two mightily crumpled sheets of paper from a pocket of his cargo pants and handed them to Dad.

Dad read through the two pages and when he had finished, he asked, “Can the others read it too?”

Siebenthal made an approving gesture. “Of course. Nothing I do or will ever do is secret.”

So, the sheets made the rounds. Wenna and I read them together, and we nodded to each other. Everything was clear and sensible and basically seemed self-evident to us.



Finally, it was Vic's turn, and she frowned. "I understand all that, and I can agree with it, except . . ."

"Number four, not begetting children with aliens?" asked Siebenthal, apparently unsurprised. "Aryan certificate, racial defilement? Like with the Nazis? That's what bothers you?"

"Yes," Vic admitted. "It just feels wrong after everything that happened during the Nazi reign."

"Well," said Siebenthal, "first of all, it's not something we can discuss like a party platform. It's the will of our God, and I think He has good reasons for it. If we father children with what I call an alien consecrated—in other words, with a predominantly African or Asian person—this child will have an unconsecrated soul, and who is this supposed to serve? Certainly not the child. It must get by without the advice and comfort of its God and will not enter paradise. And for what? Don't you have enough choice among your own people? The gods will certainly not change their rules of soul consecration, for which they have their own good reasons, in order to adapt to our current political correctness.

"The other thing," Siebenthal continued, "is that this is not a proposal for a political order but a personal promise to our God. It binds only those who profess him, and only those who profess have the right to demand it from their fellow brethren."

"But after Ragnarök?" Armin interjected. "When the Outer State has perished and we create a new one, what is our mission?"

Siebenthal pursed his lips. "As I understand it, there will be things the community judges and things only God may judge when He receives our souls in Valhalla. It will be justified to tie questions of financial support, residency, and citizenship rights to that. But to throw someone in prison for fathering a child with an alien consecrated? We would be presuming too much with that."

"Gerold, even if that's the case," said Friedrich, "do you really have to emphasize it like that? Couldn't we start off in a more harmless way?"

Siebenthal smiled thinly. "Pardon me, Friedrich, but eating your cake and have it too? This is, like all the Fifteen Truths and Obliv-

gations, a mandatory commandment. We can't keep quiet about it or play it down."

"What irks me more," said Uncle Jochen, "is that we are apparently not allowed to do anything until this Ragnarök. We're supposed to sit back and watch our country, the whole West, end up in ruins? As a soldier, I have to say, that's not something I like."

"But it's unavoidable," Siebenthal replied. "You can't stick your fingers in the spokes of the wheel of history until it has come to a standstill of its own accord. You would only be crushed. Besides, there can be no question of us sitting back; we have enough to do as it is. I would like to point out, for example, that number fourteen also calls for us to multiply, which means our people as a whole must grow again. Getting our brothers and sisters to do this is a mammoth task in itself. And one, which, it seems to me, is often overlooked by those who prefer to indulge in fantasies about how to get rid of all the foreigners they don't want here. But the survival of our rapidly shrinking population depends on a turnaround in the birth rate and not on deportations or closed borders."

Siebenthal paused and surveyed his small but attentive audience. "And this trend reversal, dear friends, will affect our lives, especially that of women, more than anything else. Derided "dull" housewives and mothers will become the new heroines—and quite rightly so. As an investment banker, I have helped to get billion-dollar deals off the ground, and yet I take my hat off to every mother. What is the creation of a world empire compared to the creation of life? And only women can do this, and they can and must be proud of it. However, here the Western 'invention' of emancipation stands in the way."

Siebenthal sighed and rubbed his forehead. A silence fell while everyone digested this.

What was there to think about, I asked myself. In the meantime, the saying that 'every child understands that' took on a whole new meaning for me. Could it be you *had* to be a child to understand certain things?

"So, we're not doing anything illegal, just building a community that lives by its own rules but otherwise abides by the law?" Fritz asked, once again looking out for legal pitfalls.

“Exactly.”

“Then I’m in, for Europe’s future.”

“Us too,” said Jochen and Cordula almost simultaneously. “And I don’t mind if it’s controversial,” my uncle added. “As a soldier, you don’t run for the hills at the first contact with the enemy.”

All eyes now turned to Vic. She blushed and said with a sigh: “I wish it wasn’t all so difficult, but I get it: it has to be done. So, let’s do it and hope for the best!”

Dad nodded. “As far as I’m concerned, I’ve already said that, and these Fifteen Truths and Obligations don’t change anything for me.

“And what about you two?” he asked Wenna and me with a wink.

We looked at each other, then I said with a nod of my head, “Of course we’re in. Nice of someone to ask us!”

“And what happens next?” Dad asked Siebenthal.

Before Gerold could answer, Vic announced, “What happens next is that Cordula and I are fixing everybody something to eat. No one here has had dinner yet, after all. You men take care of the table and the drinks. Will you come to the kitchen with us, Wenna?”

Nobody expected a girl who’d just dodged being murdered to help set the table. So, while everyone stood up and made a point of making themselves busy, I remained seated and nibbled on a cookie, lost in thought. “Everything will be fine,” Siebenthal had prophesied at my moment of greatest despair.

And hadn’t I brought it about as a true martyr?

## 56

Vic and Cordu managed to put a modest meal on the table in a hurry. A soup made from tinned food and some fresh ingredients, plus bread, butter, cheese, sausage, a salad made from leftover vegetables, and a baked frozen tarte flambee. But we joyously shared our humble bread with the prophet, who said an impromptu grace: “Hail

Euródin, Father of souls! Look upon your children who have gathered here today and bless our food and share in it. May your spirit guide us!”

“Amen,” Uncle Jochen said automatically. Then he immediately covered his mouth in embarrassment. “That was probably inappropriate.”

We giggled.

“Not necessarily,” said Siebenthal. “But we should prefer to say, ‘So be it.’ That’s how it’s usually translated, and that suits us as well.”

We ate in silence for a while. Then Dad asked his earlier question again: “What do you think the next steps should be?”

Siebenthal well-manneredly finished chewing before replying: “We need to formally establish a community. A Chapter,” he said, using the English word in German as well, “that’s what I would call it, because we should use only English terms from the start. After all, Euródin’s *Urvolk* are scattered all over the planet, and English is their lingua franca. This original community, or Root Chapter, would have to be sworn in to the Fifteen Truths and Obligations in a formal ceremony. As for what exactly that will look like, I might take a hint or two here from our two young pioneers, who seem to have gained some experience already,” he said, acknowledging Wenna and me.

We were bursting with pride. Didn’t that make amends for the humiliation we’d suffered in the school basement! We had risen like a phoenix from the ashes, as our *Urvolk* would do one day. Maybe Marina would even be allowed to perform her song.

“As soon as we have the Root Chapter, we’ll start promoting my new book,” he continued, “which will contain everything I’ve explained to you and more. It’s not a Bible of course—I’m not that presumptuous. Let’s call it a basis for discussion. It will grow and change; that’s the only way it lives.”

He took a sip of wine. Then he said, “That done, we’ll set up more Chapters, including international ones, as quickly as possible. Besides, we will need a center—a property both secluded and easy to reach. I would prefer it to be on the Baltic Sea. But, of course, any other area would do, as long as it’s rural. Unlike in the past, urban air no longer seems to make you free. By the way . . .” He again

rummaged around in his trouser pocket, where the answer to every question seemed to be found. “I’ve come up with a symbol in the meantime, I call it the Covenant Sign.”

He unfolded the piece of paper and let it be passed around the table. When it reached me, I made out a kind of target with the acute accent from Euródin’s *o* enthroned above it:



“The dot in the center,” he explained, “stands for the individual; the middle circle for his people; and the outer for Euródin himself. In total, the symbol represents the threefold covenant between the individual, his people, and his God.”

In the reverent silence that ensued, Armin asked, “What should we actually call ourselves? Children of Euródin?”

“Well, possible, but it sounds too much like some cult to me,” said Siebenthal. “I like ‘The Profession’ better: it clarifies that it’s not just any religion, but the *only* religion for us Europeans that you can either profess or not. As a name for the church, I suggest simply Church of Euródin, or C.O.E for short.”

Wenna and I exchanged another triumphant glance. Didn’t it sound almost like our ECA?

“As well as spreading the message, we need to focus on expectant or potential parents and commit to working with children and youth from the outset. Unfortunately, not everyone is as proactive as our two here,” he said, referring to Wenna and me again.

“And how would we divide up the tasks?” asked Legal-Fritz.

“Well, Friedrich, you could take care of the legal matters; we’ll soon have more of those on our hands than we’d like, I fear. Armin should run the whole thing, as he’s an experienced manager. And I need you women for the youth and educational work, the organization, and for designing our future rites. I even have in mind that each Chapter should be run jointly by a man and a woman, for pastoral as well as spiritual reasons. Women have their own approaches to religion.”

Vic and Cordula were visibly satisfied that their responsibilities weren't limited to just cooking and doing dishes.

"You, on the other hand . . ." He turned toward Jochen.

"I'll take care of security," my uncle added of his own accord. "We'll probably have a lot more going on here than we'd wish as well."

"Perfect! Then we already have some kind of management plan."

I thought I had misheard. I dropped the cutlery on the plate with a clatter and crossed my arms. "Excuse me? And what about Wenna and me?"

Everyone was looking at us now.

"Aren't you two a bit young and need to go to school?" my father dared to suggest. "I can understand you, but . . ."

"Dad!"

Siebenthal hastened to add, "They can be *Young Professants* and help as *cult aids* with everything, including the rituals. Like altar boys, only with more responsibilities. Once you've finished your school-work, of course," he said, smiling.

Pshaw, schoolwork, when Europe's future was on the line! "But does that mean we too will be part of the Root Chapter and be sworn in?"

Siebenthal looked cautiously at Vic and Dad before saying, "I think so."

"And this applies to Marina and Sephine as well?"

Now Siebenthal puffed out his cheeks. "As long as their parents agree," he said skeptically.

"Of course they'll never agree!" I said, bristling. "But I demand that they're with us anyway!" I wanted to bang my fist on the table.

"Scha, let's cross that bridge once we reach it," he said amicably. "Trust me, we'll find a solution."

I was only half satisfied with the answer, but for the moment there was nothing more I could achieve. All I knew was, I simply wouldn't let him rest until the two of them were allowed to join secretly. After all, I had managed to wheedle him into everything else I wanted so far.

"I have one more thing on my mind," said Dad, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. "Maybe if we could wait just a little longer before we start. You see, in a few weeks—a few months at most—the company will be sold. Then Jochen and I will be free to do whatever we want."

"Of course," said Siebenthal. "That would also give everyone an ample opportunity to think it over. After all, it's an important step, and He up there has had to bide His time for a thousand years now and won't mind it."

"So, it's still confidential for now," Dad said, looking at me penetratingly.

I rolled my eyes.

"Okay," he said with a final air. "Then all we have left to do for now is discuss how we're going to set ourselves up for the next few days in the, well, school affair. Before we can build our new house, we'll have to put out the fire in the old one. All hell will break loose," he predicted.

Eventually, everything had been discussed, and everyone was ready to leave. The plan was for Vic and Wenna to spend the night at our house; they would dash home to pack a few things, then come right back. In the meantime, I texted Sephine and Marina: "Don't fret. Rescue near. CU tomorrow. Your high priestess."

But Siebenthal remained seated and kept everyone from standing up and departing. "Isn't today Halloween?" he remembered rather belatedly. "Do you actually know the original meaning of this festival?"

"All Hallows' Eve, the eve of All Saints' Day," Wenna answered spontaneously.

"Yes, but All Saints' Day has only been refitted by Christianity for its own purposes, like the originally pagan Christmas. It's actually about Samhain, one of the four great Celtic festivals."

"That's right," said Vic, the experienced Celt. "The souls of the dead have a way out on this night and can haunt the living as ghosts. Hence all the customs and creepy disguises," she said with an amused look at Jochen and Cordula's costumes.

“Again, I only half agree with that,” said Siebenthal. “Because the error our ancestors made is to think that we should be afraid of the souls of the deceased. After all, they are our loving and beloved relatives! They do not exist as independent wandering beings, anyway. Rather, the bad ones are locked up in Helheim, and the good ones are sheltered in Valhalla. And the latter do indeed have the opportunity, if Euródin allows it, to visit their loved ones left behind on earth that night. To this end, he creates a channel for them to reach us, metaphorically speaking, via Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, which connects Asgard with Midgard. But there is no reason to be afraid of them.”

“But couldn’t the souls of the alien *Urvölker* want to harm us?” asked Wenna. “Maybe that’s where the creepy ideas come from?”

Siebenthal shook his head. “No, they have no power over us. Besides, they’re not interested in us at all. Why would they?” He stroked his beard and continued thoughtfully: “Here’s a suggestion: Why don’t we put some of the leftovers on plates and in glasses? Because it was the tradition at Samhain to put food and drink and a candle outside to welcome the souls of our ancestors and to signal to them that they are remembered—a custom that has even survived in the form of grave candles on All Saints’ Day. Surely each of us has someone he or she would like to remember?”

No sooner said than done. Shortly after, we were standing on the terrace, plates and glasses filled and candles flickering at our feet. Siebenthal had us all hold hands and said, “Hail, Euródin, Father of souls, please allow our loved ones to visit us on this very special night. We will receive them with greatest respect and gratitude.”

With that, he released his hand from mine and said, “Now, remember those who have passed away.”

I thought of Mom, but also of Grandpa Klaus. Vic and Wenna certainly thought of Arthur. And the others? Well, I don’t know.

In any case, I wasn’t the only one wiping a tear from my cheek at the end.

What a day! And what would tomorrow bring?



Other than Reformation Day, the following All Saints' Day, November 1, was not a public holiday in Hamburg. We had considered whether Wenna and I should simply call in sick, but that would have seemed like an admission of guilt. Dad, on the other hand, wanted to have Mustafa suspended from school because of the attack, but Vic advised against it in view of the scarce evidence. The janitor would have had to catch him red-handed with a knife in his hand. So, we reached a compromise: Dad would drive us there and wait in the car on standby. If he could, he said, he would get me a bodyguard.

"Oh, Dad! Better yet, get me a gun license!"

Meanwhile, I was embarrassed by the whole matter and condemned myself for having reacted so chicken-heartedly instead of kicking Mustafa deftly between the legs. When I thought about it, I wasn't really cut out for the role of martyr. I'd rather turn the crank of the spit myself than be roasted on it. If Mustafa ever got in my way again, he would certainly keep more than a few bruises as souvenirs.

As usual, Marina picked me up to cycle to school and was quickly stowed away in the car. I hadn't heard anything from Sephine, and Marina was too shy to talk about "the affair" during the ride.

As promised, Dad parked outside the school after we got out. He would stay there until we were summoned to see Principal Scharnagel, which Vic said would very likely happen. Legal-Fritz, too, was on call in case bad came to worse.

Thus prepared, Marina, Wenna, and I met up with Sephine at the place where we always parked our bikes. She wore a worried expression.

"Greetings to Euródin, Seph," I welcomed her boisterously. "Just think, yesterday's supposed disaster was in truth a smashing success. We have—"

"*Scha-chérie*, if I may interrupt you," she said peevishly. "This has been on Instagram since last night."

She rubbed the screen of her smartphone under my nose. There I saw a photo of Debbie with her eyes closed and her mouth open in

fear, as if she were screaming for her life, getting blood painted on her forehead by me. You would have thought it was her blood and she was being sacrificed to Satan.

“Shit,” I said. Her parents were probably already lawyering up and preparing legal proceedings against me. Who had invented social media?

“You can imagine that *Maman* will forbid me to have any contact with you if it gets out, which is probably inevitable. She might even take me out of school because of it,” Sephine added nervously, “and put me in a Catholic boarding school.”

“I’ll come at night and get you out of there,” I promised.

“Seriously!” She stamped her foot. “This is a disaster!”

“And I might have to go back to Ukraine because of it,” Marina prophesized gloomily.

“What pussies you are!” I scolded. “Who almost got stabbed with a knife yesterday? And am I standing here whimpering and trembling because of it? Is that why you want to deny your God? Because some dunce took a photo of a crybaby?”

Sephine squirmed. “No, but in the future, it really must be kept secret,” she grumbled and gave me an angry look.

“Wasn’t it everyone’s idea?” I reminded her. “Besides, maybe someone could have watched that no one took a photo while I was busy. But rest assured: I have sorted it out with my father and our lawyer, and I will take all the blame. You didn’t even know what it was about beforehand.”

This tactic wasn’t due solely to my sense of pride and honor. We had to protect Marina, who didn’t have rich and influential parents like me, as well as Vic, who had to earn her bread here, at least for the time being. And now Sephine was to be considered as well, so as to save her from her *maman*’s biblical wrath.

In any case, it seemed to calm them down, as did the magic word *lawyer*.

Then I recounted the unheard-of events of the previous evening, the appearance of the prophet himself, and the gathering of the apostles of the first hour, followed by the ceremonial founding of the Church of Euródin—for which actually *we* were responsible—and

our bright future in it, even if, instead of holding the office of high priestesses, we would first have to set our sights lower as *Young Professants* and *cult aids*. “Only if you can overcome your timidity, that is,” I finished sneeringly.

Marina and Seph were wide-eyed now. But before they could throw themselves ruefully at my feet for their lack of faith, the school bell rang, and we had to go to class.

Next to the entrance, I came across another surprise: Jumbo and Wilmar were standing there, obviously waiting for me. “Don’t fret,” I whispered to them. “I’ll take all the blame.”

“But what’s happening now with the ECA?” asked Jumbo, complainingly.

“We have to keep a low profile for a while,” I said with a raised finger. “Strictest silence and cessation of all action until everything has calmed down.”

The two nodded seriously. For a moment, I thought about letting them in on how the defeat had turned into a victory and recruiting them for the C.O.E., but Dad would give me a royal spanking for that.

“So that’s it?” Wilmar asked, disappointedly.

“As I said: for the time being, yes. But who knows what the future has in store for us?” I added meaningfully. And, really, I had a hunch we might team up again at some point.

They wished me good luck, and I went in.

Everyone in the class looked at us furtively, some maliciously, some incredulously, some admiringly. People giggled, whispered, and exchanged glances. I noticed that Sandro’s seat was empty. Was he indisposed or suffering from a guilty conscience? A disgusting surprise awaited me at my table. Someone had written “Nazi bitch” on my side in felt-tip pen. Sephine, who was once again imbued with the right faith, sat next to me, pulled out her pencil case, took out a felt-tip pen and crossed out the *zi* so that it was no longer recognizable and wrote *sty* over it. Next, she crossed out the *b* in *bitch*, leaving “nasty itch.”

We giggled just as Mr. Timmermann, our biology teacher, strode into the room. He was at our bench in one movement.

“Did you write that?” he snapped at Seph.

“No,” she said, “I was just correcting a spelling mistake.”

“You get rid of it by the end of the day. And without any residue!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” we chorused.

Timmermann rushed back to his teacher’s desk. “We’re doing photosynthesis today.”

So, the lesson went on until, after a half hour, what we had expected happened: the door opened and Ms. Philipp, one of the school secretaries, came in and whispered to Timmermann, who then looked at us sharply.

“Here we go,” I whispered to Sephine.

“Anngrit, Morwenna, Josephine, and Marina, you are all to go to the principal,” Timmermann bellowed in our direction.

Accompanied by our classmates’ stares and incredulous expressions, we marched off to the scaffold.

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We followed the secretary down the corridor and up the stairs until we reached the hallway for the teachers and administration. There was no sign of François, Debbie, or Wilmar. Sandro had been absent from class, and they seemed to have overlooked Jumbo. Nor did I see Mustafa and his two goons. I assumed that if they were called in at all, it would be as witnesses to our “crimes.” Instinctively, Wenna, Sephine, and I had dressed up and carefully done our hair—as defendants in court will do. Only Marina had once again not gotten the message and was wearing her usual sloppy, worn-out gear.

When we entered, Scharnagel was lurking behind her desk. She wore a white blouse and a blue skirt, stretched alarmingly at the seams, although the cookie and chocolate season had only just started.

Her dyed-blonde, curly hair framed her massive skull like the snakes on Medusa's head, and from her pasty skin, you'd have thought she needed hospice care. That at least matched the bitter, reproachful face she wore—no doubt because of us.

Luckily for us, or him, there was no sign of Mustafa. During the night, I'd dreamt of him standing next to my bed, smirking and grinning, with devil horns and aiming a trident at my sleeping form.

Matching the number of defendants, four chairs were waiting in front of the principal's desk, which was buried in heaps of paper. Scharnagel motioned brusquely for us to sit down.

Now I noticed on the filing cabinet behind her the *corpus delicti*, or, as a police detective would call it, exhibit A: Seph's cardboard version of the divine stone. It seemed to be looking at us mournfully.

"So, what happened yesterday?" she growled, while hurriedly signing some document with a scratchy pen. The pink slips to our parents already?

She looked up now, glowering at us, and I cleared my throat. "To start with," I began, "I want to apologize for entering the basement of the construction site without permission. This should never have happened. However, it should be noted that we didn't damage anything and cleaned everything up, and there was no danger to anyone."

Scharnagel wanted to interrupt me, but I continued unperturbed: "As for what occurred as such: First of all, everything was entirely my idea. It was merely supposed to be a Halloween joke, and the others were just helping me. Secondly, I can only shake my head in disbelief at rumors on WhatsApp and Instagram of this being 'a new religion.' That 'Euródin,' of course, doesn't exist except in my imagination," I said, thinking, *Forgive me, Soul Father!*

"Neither are there a prophet," I continued, "three *Urvölker*, or whatever else. Naturally, the drawing on the cardboard stone is entirely made up as well."

It was the strategy that Legal-Fritz, Dad, Vic, and I had agreed on at home. I was to deny our God to save him from being crucified by the Pharisees of the Left. As a ruse of war, so to speak.

Naturally, this would turn out to be a lie once the C.O.E went into action. But by then, Dad would have sold the company, and I would

be at a new school. While Sephine and Wenna watched this indifferently or saw through it as a tactic, I noticed that Marina was almost in tears and about to contradict everything. As a precaution, I stealthily kicked her shin under the table.

Meanwhile, Scharnagel's brows drew together. "And what's the point of such a 'joke'? Is that how you want to live out your racism?"

"Me? A racist?" I exclaimed, genuinely outraged. "It was more of a historical pagan play or a kind of religious experiment." To this I added, incorporating some mild exaggeration: "I will sue anyone who makes such claims, or, I should say, my father—who, incidentally, is waiting outside in his car, with his lawyer next to him—will."

This did make an impression on Scharnagel, who was probably doing the legal math in her head. She had to be painfully aware that she wasn't dealing here with any Tom, Dick, and Harry, but with the Weskamps.

"And the fact that you racially insulted your classmate and almost broke his arm, was that a pure 'fantasy' too?"

"In what way did I racially insult him?" I inquired.

"Well," Principal Scharnagel said, leafing through the papers in front of her. "According to the letter the lawyer for Mr. al-Sharani al-Aziz, Mustafa's father, faxed to me this morning, you said that as a Muslim he wasn't good enough to take part in the ritual. We do not tolerate such statements at GSH under any circumstances," she said with a steely voice.

"But, oh, please!" I cried. "That is *so* completely wrong! I was just saying it wasn't good for him. Because, you see, in my pure fantasy project, there were different gods for different people, just for fun, and if Mustafa worships one god but, in truth, belongs to another, then his real god must be furious about it. Wouldn't you think?"

Scharnagel shook her head as if she had never heard such nonsense in her life. Still, she had to realize that one couldn't possibly construe it as an insult. "And what about the broken arm?"

"Firstly," I replied, "he wanted to take something that doesn't belong to him, namely the cardboard stone behind you. And aren't you allowed to defend yourself if someone wants to take something away from you? Secondly, one would do me too much honor if they think

that I, as a thirteen-year-old with a few judo lessons, could break the arm of a boy a year older with a palm strike. If Mustafa makes such a claim, he will have to prove it in court. Slander and false accusation are criminal offenses as well, according to my father's lawyer."

Scharnagel threw the letter she had been holding onto the desktop. She seemed already to be sick and tired of it all. "I don't know which of you is lying—you're probably all lying together!" she said, exasperated. "But you do realize I have to keep the peace and protect the school's reputation. The media are already calling. Can't you just apologize to Mustafa?"

I couldn't believe my ears. "Apologize? For what, please? For dodging his knife when he tried to stab me? For him calling me a cunt and other things? Are you actually planning to expel him from school for that?"

"It's testimony against testimony. He claims it was just a nail file and a self-defense reflex. You also allegedly threatened to 'sacrifice' him. He only wanted to secure the stone as evidence because it was splattered with blood."

We looked at each other, baffled. Then Sephine laughed out loud. "But, excuse me, Ms. Scharnagel, that's just red acrylic paint! Incidentally, all of us can testify to everything Scha—I mean, Anngrit—said."

"Without a doubt," Scharnagel replied sarcastically.

"Did you actually search him or his room for the knife?" I demanded to know.

"And how do you think I get to do that? That's the police's job. In any case, what is indisputable is your trespassing on the construction site. For this—"

"Excuse me," I interrupted her, sweetly. "If I could just say something about that: there wasn't even a sign saying 'No Trespassing' when we checked this morning. And the wooden panel covering the cellar stairs wasn't secured, as it should be. You can simply pull it away. All the things that might happen! After all, there's no railing. My father's lawyer finds it highly disturbing."

Scharnagel looked like a beachgoer who'd waded into the placid, crystal-clear sea, only to discover too late that the water was teeming

with piranhas. I almost felt sorry for her. "In the end, it's all supposed to be my fault," she hissed bitterly. "In any case, we'll still look into the whole matter thoroughly. Don't imagine you're out of the woods yet! That's it for now. Go back to class!" she barked.

I remained seated and cleared my throat. "If you don't mind, the work of art behind you is actually our property. Or do you plan to have it examined by the police because of the alleged blood spatters?"

She looked like she wanted to stab me with one of Mustafa's "nail files." "Take that nonsense with you and get out!"

In the stairwell, we giggled and high-fived.

"You were brilliant, *Scha-chérie*," gushed Sephine, whose fear of languishing in the dungeons of a Catholic boarding school seemed to have evaporated.

"Not even detention or sweeping the yard," said Wenna just as enthusiastically. "And she stared like a cow in front of the closed stable door. We should have taken a photo."

Only Marina was disconsolate. "But we've denied our God!" she moaned. "Now we're four Judases. It would have been better if we had died as upright martyrs!"

"Oh, Cinderella-dear," Sephine replied. "I'm sure He up there can take a joke, even if you can't."

Instead of going straight back to class, we detoured to our lockers. After all, we had to stow away the cardboard stone, and above all, wanted to savor our victory a little longer.

"It's actually your artwork," I said to Sephine, handing it to her.

"You still don't get it?" she asked exasperated, obviously gripped by fear again. "*Maman* would crucify me."

So, I stuffed the relic in my own locker, where it just *barely* fit. Then I pulled out of my backpack the copy of the Fifteen Truths and Obligations I had wisely made yesterday before Siebenthal left. "These here are our Ten Commandments," I said meaningfully. "They were freshly revealed to Siebenthal yesterday, at the exact moment when . . ." I made a stabbing motion.

Marina and Sephine widened their eyes. "No! Really? A sign!" exclaimed Marina, ecstatic.



I let the two of them read it. Wenna, of course, had seen it already.

“*Très bien!*” Sephine said approvingly upon finishing. “That’s exactly how I want to have it.”

Nice of her to “approve” of her own God’s work, I thought, making myself laugh.

“There were some discussions about number four, though,” I remarked.

Sephine frowned. “And why?”

“Something ’bout Nazis and Racial Defilement.”

“*Mon Dieu*, here we go again! It’s starting to give me a migraine. But, seriously: Who would want to do it with a, er well . . . That goes without saying, I think. And as for the others, from what I’ve heard, their, um, equipment doesn’t seem much designed for our needs.”

We giggled.

“Can I take a photo of it?” asked Sephine, pulling out her smartphone. “I’ll send it on to Marina.”

“If only your *maman* doesn’t find out,” I said mockingly. “But this time it’s really top secret!”

Sephine blushed a little. Then she took her photos.

Before returning to class, we checked what was new in the digital rumor mill. There was a war raging on WhatsApp about the pros and cons of Tritheism, from approval to contempt, from parroted Antifa slogans picked up from parents to oaths of revenge citing the Koran. A case for the secret service—but they were probably spying on everything already.

I truly felt sorry for Debbie, though. It seemed like the whole school was making fun of her. Poor thing. I would definitely have to apologize to her.

Back in the classroom, the words *nasty itch* had vanished from my desk. In its place were a heart drawn in red chalk next to a blue raised thumb. Jumbo winked at me. My new admirer had probably done it during the break. I was convinced that if they would just let me, I could convert half the school to the Profession in no time. But of course, they would never let that happen.

So, I had to deprive the freshly kindled fire of oxygen through iron silence. Which may have been a good thing, too. Because fires, once started, easily get out of control.

As I was about to find out soon.

## 59

No one had approached Armin at work yesterday, or thrown him strange looks, or called him about “some incident.” His emails had just been the usual. Could they have dodged this bullet, thanks to Friedrich’s advice and Anngrit’s convincing performance before the school principal? She had told him about it last evening as if delivering an ancient heroic epic, with Ms. Scharnagel as the venom-spewing Medusa and herself in the role of a female Perseus.

But when he entered his anteroom today and saw Cordula’s face, he knew that his hopes had been in vain.

“Armin,” she said, closing the door to the hallway. “DPA just called to find out if there’s anything to the HANA story.” Deutsche Presse-Agentur was a major German news agency, relied on by newspapers, radio, TV, and other forms of media.

“What HANA story?”

The *Hamburger Nachrichten* was a tabloid that he wouldn’t even use to wrap the herring sandwiches he occasionally bought at Hamburg’s famous Fischmarkt. Based on the disinterested glances he cast at it from time to time when passing a kiosk, its “news” stories typically featured actresses’ breast implants, gas station profiteering, and politicians’ salacious sex scandals. Of course, it also ran screeds supporting the “fight against the Right,” which nowadays permeated everything except the lottery numbers. And the printout of the article Cordula was now holding up for him to see probably fit into that latter category:

*"They Wanted to Sacrifice Me to Their God!"  
Entrepreneur's Daughter Founds Racist Religion  
in School Basement;  
Muslim Pupil Attacked!*

Thirteen-year-old Anngrit W., daughter of the head of a well-known Hamburg marine defense contractor, at Halloween founded a "religion" in the basement of the elite Global School Hamburg. It features separate gods for whites, blacks, and Asians. A divine voice "told" her this after her father discovered a rune stone at his vacation home in Denmark. Runes had already been used by the Nazis to promote their ideology. Pig's blood played a role in the ritual, reported a fellow pupil who was forced to take part. A Muslim classmate surprised the student sect. He is said to have been attacked and threatened to be sacrificed to "Euródin," the "god of the Europeans." The teenage boy's father has meanwhile filed a criminal complaint. Police and school administrators are investigating.

In the photo, Anngrit—dressed up as a Celtic priestess—was brushing something that looked like blood on the forehead of a young, panicked girl. The newspaper had pixelated the eyes of both for legal reasons, but of course Armin still recognized his daughter. If anything, the pixels only made her look more sinister. Although the article disclosed neither the full family surname nor the name of the company, everyone in Hamburg would know who and what it was about.

"It appeared in the online edition this morning," Cordula said in a hushed voice. "So far, that's the only piece. I checked that."

Armin called Friedrich immediately. His friend had him read the article to him.

"The report, if you can call it that, doesn't match the facts in crucial points, if I believe your daughter, which of course I do," he said. "I'll call in a media law firm immediately. Luckily, we have enough of them in Hamburg. At the very least, HANA should have checked

with you before publishing it or asked you for a statement. After all, minors are involved. Give me the number of the DPA,” he said. “I’ll call them and HANA, deny everything, and demand that from now on all inquiries go through me.”

Friedrich paused, probably thinking. Finally, his voice came back on the line. “I will also insist that they withdraw the story until it has been verified. With every hour it’s online, it spreads. Also, give me the number of the school; I’ll call them too. And the Muslim boy’s surname. Maybe I can reach his father and convince him he’s not doing himself or his son any good.” He sighed. “I had scheduled appointments for the whole day. But I’m canceling everything.”

“Thanks,” Armin said gratefully before hanging up. He and Cordula looked at each other. “Please tell Jochen straightaway,” he said.

“I will,” she replied. “By the way, do we know who the other girl in the photo is?”

“Must be this Debbie that Anngrit told me about,” he said. “Apparently she’s allergic to the sight of blood; that’s why she looks so horrified.”

“I’m wondering, who might they have gotten all their information from?” Cordula said slowly.

Armin raised his hands. “This Mustafa. Who else?”

“But it says that a classmate who was forced to take part ‘reported’ it.”

“You’re right,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ll take care of it.”

He was about to go to his office when Cordula asked uncomfortably, “Should we inform the staff?”

“Better not. Let sleeping dogs lie.”

In his office, Armin texted Anngrit to make some inquiries at school. After that, he concentrated laboriously on the day-to-day business. *Ghostfish* and the NEMAS sale made his desk groan under mountains of paper, his email inbox was already overflowing, as it had been the whole time recently, and, like Friedrich, he had appointments booked solid all day. As a precaution, he had Cordula cancel all but the most important ones.

Anngrit got in touch first. She had spoken to Debbie and found out that a HANA reporter had ambushed her after school yesterday. The girl admitted to having “spilled the beans,” furious at having become a laughingstock. Anngrit apologized to her, and Debbie, in return, promised not to talk about it with anyone else. She couldn’t say for sure who had taken the photo and posted it on Instagram, but suspected a boy named Sandro.

“I’ve also spoken to everyone else, Dad, and everyone, including Sandro, who denies everything, has promised not to say anything more.”

So, at least the leak seemed to be sealed, and only Mustafa remained, Armin thought with some relief.

“Thank you for your research, little bunny. That was important.”

“It was the least I could do.”

“And keep your chin up, darling!”

“You keep it up!” she replied with her usual defiance. “Mine is made from steel.”

A half hour later, Friedrich called to report several positive developments. First, his threats of legal action led the *Hamburger Nachrichten*’s editor in chief to timidly withdraw the article at once until further clarification. Meanwhile, the same criminal lawyer he’d already consulted on behalf of Mette was preparing criminal charges against Mustafa for attempted manslaughter, defamation, and false accusation. “Even if nothing comes of it,” he explained, “we’re sending a message.” Friedrich was also investigating the possibility of suing the school for failing to secure the construction site.

“Has word gotten around in the company yet?” he asked Armin.

“Not yet.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best,” he replied, and they hung up.

A short time later, Friedrich emailed Armin a statement drafted by the media law firm he’d commissioned. It essentially followed the line that Anngrit had taken with her principal: they did not deny that there had been a “religious ritual” at the school, but no one had been forced to do anything against their will, and the Muslim classmate

had been the aggressor, not Anngrit. Criminal charges would be filed. Furthermore, it was purely a private Halloween joke, and the rune stone mentioned did not exist. The statement went on to say that the entire Weskamp family regretted the incident and apologized if any impression of racism was wrongly created, which was, of course, completely against their intent.

Friedrich's position had been from the outset: don't deny what simple research would reveal, and better to kowtow to the zeitgeist than face problems in the matter of the NEMAS sale. *He* up there had to understand this as well.

Finally, Armin studied the law firm's fee agreement and gasped at the amount. His youngest's missionary work would cost him a small king's ransom. With a groan, he gave Friedrich the green light and returned to his work.

But just a few minutes later, Cordula was standing in the doorway: "Brehm wants to talk to you. Do you have time for him?"

When had he ever not taken time for his works council chairman? "Let him come in," he said with a sigh.

Brehm was wearing his usual worn jacket and pale-blue shirt, which was as wrinkled as his forehead, and spread the familiar smell of tobacco around the room. What was new was the alarmed expression on his face, which was mixed with indignation.

Armin already had an inkling of what was to come. "*Moin, Moin*, Mr. Brehm," he still said as jovially as he could muster while shaking the man's hand. "Is this about *Ghostfish* or Morgan-Bellcraft?"

"Neither, Mr. Weskamp," said Brehm, sitting down. He took a folded sheet of paper from his jacket pocket, unfolded it, and placed it on the table in front of Armin. "Rather, it's about this. Are you even aware of that?"

Armin only had to glance at it. "Yes," he said, "I know it, and it's essentially untrue. I've since taken legal action, and HANA has withdrawn the report. So, it was lucky, if you can call it that, you stumbled across it at all."

"I don't even read them; a colleague showed it to me this morning," he replied. "But what do you mean it's 'essentially' untrue? Such as it is, we certainly don't need a scandal right now."

"There isn't one, either," Armin replied irritably, "unless it's a media scandal. The truth is there was a private Halloween party at the school that my daughter attended. An Arab classmate tried to force his way in, and there was a scuffle, during which he pulled out a knife and threatened my daughter. I have since pressed charges on her behalf."

Normally, this admittedly somewhat freely interpreted version of the events should have prompted Brehm to make a sympathetic statement of disgust and pity. But he obviously trusted the Hamburg "quality press" more than the managing director of the company where he earned his not-too-modest bread and butter.

Because now Brehm asked: "And this . . . religion? After all, we are an international and diverse company, and there is no room for racism and discrimination here. And these are as well the values of our customers."

"First of all, it's still *my* company," Armin said in a now steely voice. "But I can reassure you: it was just a child's joke, and I have nothing to do with it myself."

But Brehm didn't let up. "And this rune stone?"

"Of course it doesn't exist! That's just something children think up. Thank you, by the way, for the concern you expressed about my daughter," he added sarcastically. "If she wasn't so resilient, I'd have to get her psychological counsel for the knife attack."

"Sorry, I didn't know," muttered Brehm sheepishly. "Will there still be an official company statement on this?"

"Not for the time being," said Armin. The statement from the media law firm was intended initially only for DPA and HANA. "But you're welcome to spread what I've just told you." That way, Armin thought, no one could prove that it was him who had twisted the story. And telling Brehm was just as effective as sending out a circular to the workforce. Seen in that way, his visit was actually a blessing in disguise.

“Then everything’s settled,” muttered Brehm as he stood up, thanked him for his time, and wished his daughter to get better soon.

However this was meant.

With the works council chairman gone, Armin tilted the window to dispel the pervasive tobacco stench. Some things here he would miss when he took his keys out of the desk drawer for the last time.

Brehm was certainly not among them.

## 60

In the afternoon, Armin dared to breathe a sigh of relief. The *Hamburger Nachrichten* article had disappeared from the newspaper’s website, and according to Cordula, had not spread further in the press or on social media. It looked like they had just gotten away with it.

Armin longed for a bottle of red wine and for Vic, who was now there almost every day and staying with him overnight. In the meantime, and especially after the “incident” and the memorable evening with Siebenthal, he, she, Anngrit, and Wenna had grown into a family—a sworn community, even. Wenna seemed to be getting used to the idea that he could become her stepfather, and for his part, he had long since taken the quiet, intelligent girl to his heart. And all of this, he mused, had basically been brought about by his youngest’s pig-headedness, her obstinacy, but also through her determination to overcome any obstacle. She seemed to him like an angry fairy who smashed the porcelain, the shards of which then miraculously turned into pieces of gold.

He thought about wrapping it up early and dashed off a few more emails purely out of a sense of duty. Cordula had just left when there was a knock on the door, and he looked up in surprise. Goldmarie was standing in the doorway.



“Can I have a word with you?” she asked with a knowing expression on her face that gave him an inkling Anngrit’s “Halloween fun” had brought him another visitor.

“Sure, come in,” he said, suppressing a sigh.

She closed the door behind her and sat down. “I’ve heard some rumors,” she said in a conspiratorial tone. “Is there any truth to it? I had to think how you told me about the vacation home in Denmark you bought recently. Does this rune stone exist?”

In fact, Goldmarie was the only one at NEMAS whom he had told about the house—though not the stone, of course—when they had chatted privately the other day. And why not? How could he have guessed that one day he would need to cover his tracks?

Nevertheless, he repeated what he had already told Brehm: merely a Halloween party of his imaginative youngest, into which an Arab boy had burst in with a drawn knife.

“Has something happened to her?” she asked, genuinely horrified.

“No, but you can imagine what it did to me after what happened to Mette.”

She nodded seriously. But then she said something that made him sit up and take notice: “Too bad! Actually, I would have liked it not to have been a joke.”

He was thunderstruck. Had it been something in his voice, in his posture, that had made her see through the masquerade? And did that mean . . .? Why else would she reveal herself like that? Should he . . .? He dismissed the thought.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. He expected her to leave. But instead, she pulled a printout out of her gray business jacket and held it out to him. Once again, the infamous HANA piece, he thought. But when he read it, he saw it was an email from the HANA editorial team to her. He didn’t understand how they knew her office email address, but, anyway, what did it matter? After all, it was a journalist’s job to find out things not everyone knew.

The content of the email consisted of a single sentence: “Is it true that you are a member of the AfD and were the second spokesperson for its Essen district association until three years ago?”

Goldmarie, a member of the right wing *Alternative für Deutschland*? Armin realized what this meant: for better or worse, the paper had withdrawn the article about his daughter; but instead, it was digging the Internet for other muck that could be used against him and NEMAS. He and Goldmarie had spoken about politics only from time to time, and—probably an oversight on his part—he had not googled her before hiring her almost exactly three years ago. So, he had no way of knowing about any involvement she might have in that highly controversial political party. After taking up work here, she had moved to Hamburg, which, of course, meant that any party office in the Ruhr area was obsolete.

“Is it true?” he asked, although deep down he knew the answer. The comments she had occasionally dropped about politics and society only now made full sense to him. She was what they called a right-winger these days—even a Far-Right extremist—notwithstanding her being a lesbian.

“Yes,” she said simply. “What do you think of that?”

He hesitated, not failing to register her expectant tone. Cautiously, he said, “For one thing, I don’t make the political involvement of my employees any of my business. Which, besides, I mustn’t. For another: until recently, I might have frowned about it, but I’ve begun to see things a little differently.”

It was a poker game between them in which nobody wanted to reveal all their cards first. The front of the card she had now shown read: nobody will hire me if this becomes public knowledge and NEMAS is sold and the buyer, as expected, will sooner or later look for a CFO of his own confidence. On the back it said: nobody would have dug into her party membership if his daughter hadn’t performed her ritual at school. Whether it was a membership in a right-wing party or the foundation of a “racist” religion: in the eyes of the public it was all part of the same Nazi quagmire.

“What do you advise me to answer?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But what I am offering—indeed, recommending to you—is to have you represented by the same media law firm that I’ve engaged because of the article. That . . . would be in my

interest as well, and the email was sent to your office address, after all.”

In itself, Goldmarie’s party membership did not pose a serious obstacle to the NEMAS sale. But who knew what else the tabloid might dig up? And when one thing led to another?

“Thank you,” she said. However, Goldmarie remained seated and looked at him expectantly. She seemed to suspect he was keeping something from her.

He could feel a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. Should he? Shouldn’t he? His daughter wouldn’t show the slightest hesitation in his place. Didn’t he have to be brave too? Didn’t Marie, who had always been impeccably loyal and discreet and was now possibly in trouble because of him, deserve to at least know about it and be able to make up her mind? The very first card on the table had read: “I wish it hadn’t been a joke.”

Now it was his turn to reveal the next one: “Marie, on your honor and conscience, will you promise not to tell anyone about what I’m about to tell you?”

“On honor and conscience,” she said deadly serious and looked at him piercingly.

“Well,” he said quietly, “it *wasn’t* a joke. The stone really exists, and there is a prophet who is still hidden. The doctrine of the three gods and their peoples comes from him. My daughter did not invent anything.”

Marie didn’t laugh, as he had secretly feared.

“And do you believe it?” she asked seriously.

“Yes. I do. I know that my wife is up there with Euródin, in Valhalla, and not in the paradise of the Christians, which in truth is the one of the African god Vili, ultimately Allah. But—I can’t explain all that here and now.”

She nodded, and he continued. “There’s something else you don’t know that you must also keep to yourself: I found out who my wife’s murderer was on the very day my daughter held her ritual at school: an Afghan refugee. And our God, Euródin, demands that we keep to ourselves and stand up to the others. And since then, I’ve understood how right He is.”

Her blue-gray eyes scrutinized him searchingly. “I always knew it was one of them,” she said. “I told you back then. And of course we must keep to ourselves. But why does the perp have to remain a secret?”

“Because,” he said, “otherwise it would only be held against me and my faith. They would say I had invented a racist religion just to take revenge for my wife’s murder.

“But I had already met the prophet beforehand and received signs and proof that it was true. I can’t explain all this here, but in any case, I have asked the police via my lawyer not to go public with it for the time being. It will be revealed at the latest when the charges are brought, but there’s still time until then. In the meantime, I’m even glad the perpetrator is an adolescent, and the trial won’t be public.” Armin swallowed before continuing: “At least then, my wife’s last hours won’t be dragged before a sensation-hungry public.”

Marie now had tears in her eyes. She squeezed his hand on the table and whispered, “What kind of country are we living in, tell me that?”

“Anyway, it’s less and less mine every day,” he said quietly. “So: if you want to know something about it—about the faith, I mean—what I can tell you is . . .” He broke off when he noticed her hesitation.

She blushed and said, “Maybe I would want to know something first. Now, I’m a lesbian, which doesn’t exactly make my life any easier, even if it’s a bit less difficult for me than for gay men. What does that god of yours, Euródin, think of homosexuality?”

Armin leaned back in amazement. “To be honest, I can’t say that much about it,” he said uncertainly. “It’s never come up in our conversations. But even though I’m not a prophet myself, the gods do adopt the souls of their people through what we call a soul consecration. That’s why we also call Euródin our Soul Father. And what father would reject his child just because nature has given him or her a different sexuality? What biological father would do this? Speaking from my own feelings: Shouldn’t we love a child who is different and therefore has a harder time even a little more for this very reason? I am sure in my heart Euródin sees it that way. He is a loving God, not a rejecting one—the only thing that matters to Him is us being loyal to Him and His people.”

He gave her time to digest this before continuing: "As for Vili and Vé, the gods of the Africans and Asians, I can't say. But we don't need to be interested in that, either. In any case, if you decide to find out more, there is a scripture that answers a lot of things."

Marie nodded. "And this prophet? Would it be possible to meet him sometime?"

He wrote down Siebenthal's name and telephone number on a piece of paper. "I'll call him and tell him someone might get in touch with him. Everything else will be between him and you."

She took the note and stood up.

"I think I will call him," she said in the doorway. "Thank you for your trust!"

"Thank you for your compassion, and . . . I would be glad!"

They winked at each other as they said goodbye for the first time since they had known each other.

## 61

Almost four weeks had passed since Henoeh had set all wheels in motion and swept aside all scruples for his great goal of becoming bishop of Baden. The result was quite impressive: he had a right of first refusal for the plot of land in Sankt Blasien on which DACH, the House of Christ, was to be built; and, for a small fortune, the commissioned architectural firm had in no time developed a concept being presented on display boards in the foyer of the church conference center where he was today. The crowning of all was a huge model forming the centerpiece of the exhibition.

As expected, Bishop Leutheusser had announced his resignation last week. Henoeh immediately declared his candidacy and sent out the invitations for today's presentation. Among those answering his call were some of the leading representatives of the EKD Baden; quite a few synod members, who were entitled to vote in the bishop's

election; personal friends and supporters; and almost a dozen journalists. Not just because of the sumptuous buffet that went with it, he hoped.

Even Zölsch-Brink, his only rival candidate, had come, albeit—and he had no illusions about this—only to spy on him and identify weak points in his candidacy.

Sofia and the children were also here. Neat and well behaved, they sat in the first row in front of the podium, the epitome of a harmonious Christian family, with his mother next to them, her cheeks glowing with pride.

Henoch, standing bolt upright behind the lectern, concluded the half-hour presentation of his plans for the Christian meeting center and the successes of Bohrmann's Jesus Now! mission movement with the words "Now, ladies and gentlemen, dear Christian brethren, I would like to end by giving you an authentic insight into the missionary work that Pastor Bohrmann and his young, tireless helpers do day in and day out on our streets and in our squares."

On cue, Lahm, who was sitting next to him, darkened the room and started on his laptop the fifteen-minute commercial disguised as a documentary that the hired production company had flung out in record time and at record cost. The result was breathtaking: young people in whose eyes the light of God shone for the first time, who prayed and read the Bible and knelt before crosses and were baptized in a moving service full of warm, shining light and solemn music. Concluding interviews with the converts made it clear how turning to the Lord had changed the lives of the newly won lambs in a laudable way.

What did it matter that the participants were only actors? Only a few original shots of Bohrmann, whom Henoch had the foresight to have accompanied by a video camera from the beginning, had been edited in. It had been too difficult to find a double. In addition, the Holy Fire looked quite impressive with his piercing gaze, the tangled, longish hair, and the silver cross dangling around his neck and almost down to his belt. If he had been not only impressive but also successful, Henoch could have saved himself the money, effort, and risk of underpinning his candidacy with a Potemkin village. Which included

not only the film but also the dressed-up statistics he'd cited in his speech.

It went without saying that he had not invited Bohrmann to the presentation, but instead had sent him to a seminar in Tuscany, Italy, which was taking place at the same time in a princely setting, to gather his thoughts. But Henoch's audience also had to do without the personal testimony of Bohrmann's young proselytizers. After all, they might notice that they had never met a single one of the supposed converts before.

The movie ended, and Henoch basked in the applause. He stepped off the stage and was surrounded immediately by a crowd of journalists. He walked into the foyer with them and explained the intricacies of his project.

"How do you actually intend to finance the whole thing in view of a shrinking membership and falling church tax revenues?" was the question he was asked most frequently, including now.

"Well, there's me and my family too," he replied, straining to sound noble. "As you know, we are the second generation to make swords, which we would like to turn if not into plowshares, then into beacons of faith and lights of hope."

He was just finishing an interview with a local TV station when Zölsch-Brink joined him—to grudgingly congratulate him.

"That's quite impressive what you've put on here," she said, standing in front of him in unfashionable gray trousers and a loose purple blouse, which did little to conceal her fullness. Her long gray hair looked dull and poorly coiffed, and her unflattering brass-rimmed glasses looked like they had been bought either in a supermarket or at a gas station. In a way, she reminded him of Bohrmann; except that her thing wasn't the salvation of souls but social justice and solidarity with the Third World.

So, he wasn't surprised by what she said next: "What I always ask myself is this: How much suffering in the world could be ended with all the money we spend here and now alone?"

Henoch refrained from pointing out that it was *his* money. "Isn't the most important thing to open souls to God's mercy and love by turning them to Him?" he replied.

"I believe practicing mercy is more important than formally professing it as part of joining the faith," she countered.

"But, dear colleague, doesn't the extent of the charity the church can provide also depend on the number of its members and thus the amount of donations and church tax revenue?"

He seemed to have cut her off with that. "Maybe so," she admitted.

Henoch had expected Zölsch-Brink to toddle off with a few polite phrases and was all the more surprised when she presented him with a sheet of paper. "Do you actually know about this?"

When he had finished reading the *Hamburger Nachrichten* article, the blood drained from his legs, and he had to hold on to the post of the display board next to him.

"It looks like your own family is an impressive example of religious diversity in action," she said sardonically. "Perhaps you don't even need to send out your missionaries as far as to the next pedestrian zone, after all."

With that, she left him standing there.

When Lahm sat across of him the next Monday, Henoch had hardly slept for two days, and the hatred for his brother and his niece, who must be possessed by the devil, burned in his guts. Or was she not possessed by the devil at all? Was it simply a revenge plot by his brother, who wanted to thwart his election as bishop out of sheer spite? As they hadn't spoken to each other since the last shareholders' meeting, and Armin didn't seem to have spoken to his mother, either—a worrying sign in itself—he had no way of knowing.

"So, you're sure it's the only report, Meinhard?"

"I spent the whole weekend researching on the Internet," said Lahm. "Even this one no longer officially exists; you can access it only via indirect sources."

"So how did Zölsch-Brink come across it in the first place?"

Lahm shrugged. "Her personal assistant probably created a search request in Google looking for material against you, just like we did with her," he said, blushing. "She must have come across it that way, even if the names are not openly stated."



“Do you think it could just as well be a canard—a pure intrigue on her part?”

Lahm looked at him embarrassedly. All he had to do was ask his brother or his niece, he read in his gaze. “Well, this ritual at school, I do believe there was one,” he said. “No journalist could make it up like that, and I don’t think they would, either. Too, there’s talk of a rune stone and a vacation home in Denmark. Wasn’t your brother’s wife from Denmark?”

“Indeed,” Henoch admitted. It might also explain how his niece had come up with her preposterous and infamous ideas. Hadn’t the Danes been the last to renounce paganism? He had never trusted his sister-in-law, Mette. A pagan cuckoo’s egg in the Weskamps’ nest, poorly camouflaged by the cloak of the Danish People’s Church. Idolatry had been in her genes, as it was in her daughter’s, and it was only a step from this to racism and the rejection of all humanity. He had always been convinced of that.

“Very well. I’ll ask my brother about it. I just haven’t been able to reach him yet,” he lied. “In any case, the presentation was a huge success, and Zölsch-Brink seems to have only fired a warning shot. Let’s hope nothing more comes of it,” he said, though not quite believing it.

Afterward, they discussed the next steps in their campaign, for which the presentation had been merely the starting point. An hour later, Henoch brought Lahm to the door—and backed away in surprise. Because Bohrmann staggered toward him.

“Can I speak to you?” he slurred, drowning out Henoch’s secretary’s protest at the unannounced visit.

“Everything as we discussed,” he whispered to Lahm. “I’ll take care of it.”

Henoch hurriedly pulled Bohrmann into his office so as not to cause any more of a stir. The pastor’s breath reeked of alcohol; only he wasn’t holding a bottle of booze, but a DVD on which Henoch recognized the golden-eye logo of the film production company. Henoch knew that Bohrmann had returned from Italy yesterday. But how did he get hold of the film? Henoch had instructed the company not to send copies to anyone but him.

He pushed Bohrmann down into a chair and sat down at the desk. "So, you're drinking again?" he asked with a sternness that was also intended to conceal his uncertainty. It wasn't hard to guess why Bohrmann had stormed into his office waving the DVD like a trophy.

"Yes, I'm doubting my faith a little right now," Bohrmann slurred. "And it's all your fault." He raised the DVD accusingly. "Why, for example, have I never seen any of the supposed converts on it? I've never even been to the church in there," he said with a sneer. "So, this is why you sent me off to Italy during your presentation. But that production assistant sent me a copy. And I heard the figures you reported on Saturday. Did you perhaps bring them all back to the herd yourself? Henoch, doesn't the Eighth Commandment say: thou shalt not lie?"

Henoch thought feverishly. He had to get Bohrmann out of circulation as quickly as possible and shut him up. "I'm not lying," he hissed. "We've talked from the beginning about, well, anticipating the future to encourage everyone. After all, you haven't brought the expected success so far," he added coldly. "This is for the good of the church and the Lord. But what worries me is that you're drinking again. Perhaps you should get some proper rest. Besides, I want you to go into rehab again."

"Until the bishop's election?" Bohrmann asked sarcastically.

"As long as it takes."

"How did you actually finance the movie?" Bohrmann suddenly wanted to know. "It's fucking expensive! Meanwhile, the dean's office is supposedly always so tight that I have to stay in the cheapest hotels. Henoch, so you want to scam yourself into a bishopric. Why should I cover for you? No, dear sir, I am resigning from the office of chief missionary of the EKD Baden with immediate effect. Nothing good can ever come out of wrongness, I have realized that by now."

"I resent your tone and your insinuations," Henoch said, bristling. "I paid for the movie out of my own pocket, like for everything else." Which was another lie, because he had had to borrow the money from the deanery's emergency fund because his brother wouldn't hand over anything more until NEMAS was sold. Oh, that devil and his brood!

“If you no longer want to work as a missionary, go ahead! That’s your business. But then I’ll have to dismiss you without notice because of that and your alcoholism. Which also means your pension and the official apartment I got you will be invalid. To put it plainly: you’ll end up on the street.”

Bohrmann opened and closed his mouth again, and for the first time the possible consequences of his wild act seemed to penetrate his alcohol-fogged brain. He scratched his head. “Why should I do this, actually?” he asked, as if wondering about himself. “I’ve served the Lord honestly all my life without having amassed any riches. Why should I end up on the street, when I’ve done nothing wrong?”

Henoch saw a silver lining. “Listen, Matthias, you’re going through a rough phase right now. Take some time off, do your detox, and don’t talk to anyone. When I’m bishop, I’m sure I’ll be able to do something for you. Until then . . .”

Bohrmann seemed to wrestle with himself for a while. Then he burped and said, in a tone of disgust, “Your bunch is all the same. What do I care who becomes how bishop? Do whatever you want!”

When the pastor had left, for the first time in his life Henoch felt an urge for a bottle of booze himself. It also struck him that he’d forgotten to take the DVD from Bohrmann.

## 62

He was free! Hoist the sails and off to new shores! Almost exactly two months ago, he had celebrated the *Ghostfish* contract with his managers in this very meeting room. Now there was another reason to celebrate: the purchase offer from Morgan-Bellcraft. NEMAS was now behind him. Of course, the family still had to agree, but Armin didn’t foresee any difficulties there. The purchase price was almost astronomical. The rights to *Flipper* would be transferred to him all but free of charge. His youngest’s Halloween stunt hadn’t caused any more

ripples, either—at least none he would have noticed. In a word, he was on cloud nine—if such a thing existed in Valhalla.

Many people asked Armin about his future plans. *Flipper*, he always replied. Other than that: his tennis backhand, maybe sailing around the world. Of course, he didn't say founding a religion. There was just one fly in the ointment: he, Jochen, and Cordula were alone in their euphoria. For his employees, a new era was about to begin, one that would certainly be less stable and probably tougher. They would have preferred that everything stay the same, possibly with his father, the storm-probed captain, at the helm. In that, Dad's good old Neptune Maritime Systems was a mirror of society. Even the consolation prize of workforce codetermination wouldn't last long. Restructuring, relocations, changes of legal forms: he wouldn't bet on NEMAS still being subject to it in five years' time.

Thus, Armin was met with skeptical or almost fearful faces—which he could understand. With a doubt, some NEMAS employees would have to step down, as every buyer replaced a few key players. Others might not get to achieve their anticipated career trajectories or might have to suffer salary cuts. And yet, he thought, the same people who were worried about their well-paid, secure jobs here and now would wish these were their only worries in twenty years' time. Ragnarök might still be a long way off, but just as smaller foreshocks preceded every earthquake, the great crisis would also have its long precursors. He had been thinking about this recently and had begun to study some history, especially that of the Roman Empire.

But it was time to return with his thoughts back to the present. Contrary to his habit, Armin had already drunk two glasses of champagne; it was time to leave the celebration, before he slipped and said something unwise. He exchanged a glance with Jochen. The two of them and Cordula wanted to discuss what to do next in private. So, he shook a few more hands, patted a few shoulders, and left the room, tailed by the two of them.

He was almost in the hallway when someone tugged on his sleeve from behind.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?" asked Goldmarie.

He nodded. “Go ahead,” he said to Jochen and Cordula, who had stopped in the corridor with questioning looks on their faces. Then he accompanied his CFO into the kitchenette and closed the door behind them.

They talked quietly for a few minutes. Then he left her and went into his office, where Jochen and Cordula were sitting next to each other on the couch, an open bottle of champagne and three glasses on the table in front of them.

“We were just talking about what you can do with a billion euros,” said Jochen, sounding tipsy.

That was their joint share of the sale proceeds. The rest, €500 million, went to Henoch and his mother.

“Above all, we need to avoid paying tax on the book profit,” Armin replied. “The best way to do that is to set up a foundation. We’ll need expert advice and someone who can manage it professionally.”

“That doesn’t sound like my bank account manager,” said Jochen. “He tried to talk me into an in-house mixed equity fund the other day.”

“No,” said Armin, “and above all, we need someone we can trust under all circumstances. Normal banks are quick to drop you these days if you don’t live up to their ‘liberal values.’”

“Could it be that you already have someone in mind?” Cordula asked in a tone suggesting that she guessed the answer already.

Instead of responding, Armin went to the door to the anteroom and opened it. “Marie, will you come in?”

She did so and stood in front of them, beaming like a Cheshire cat.

He closed the door behind her, put his hand on her shoulder, and said to the others: “She was in Boltenhagen—and wants to join us! Welcome to the Church of Euródin, Marie!”

He hugged her, as did Jochen and Cordula.

The ranks of the apostles were slowly filling up.

The atmosphere in Beata’s salon was so tense that the click of the cap of Henoch’s showy, gold-plated pen sounded like a gunshot. He was the last of the shareholders to sign the sales agreement. In theory, thought Armin, an occasion for exuberance, champagne, mutual

backslapping, and banter; after all, each of them was now not only rich on paper but also could buy himself anything he wanted. A bishopric the one, a religion the other. Instead, they stalked one another like predators—or rather Henocho and Beata stalked Jochen and Armin.

“When can we expect the money?” Henocho asked so casually that Armin immediately realized he needed it urgently. Hadn’t the €1.5 million he’d transferred to his older brother just three months ago as a “donation”—in reality, extortion money for the change of legal form—been enough? Had he even run up debts for his presumptuous “Make me a bishop and it will rain manna” projects?

The fact alone that Henocho had not, as usual, launched into his familiar litany of complaints about how he had been cheated, that the company had been squandered, and that he would reserve the right to conduct a special audit, aroused Armin’s suspicions. “That will take until February,” he replied. “Completing such a complex transaction takes time, and the buyers are still finalizing the financing. But I don’t see any problems there.”

He could tell that Henocho would have liked a more precise answer, and this was presumably connected to the date of the bishop’s election, also in February. But what was it to him? Moreover, the handling of the sale was not the reason for the mistrust that was breeding in the room like mosquitoes in a swampy branch of the Elbe.

In fact, Armin knew the reason ever since the inevitable visit to his mother the weekend before last, something he hadn’t been able to put off any longer with the best will in the world. It had gone disastrously. Not only had Mother turned up her nose at Vic, whom he had introduced to her on this occasion, but she had also asked pointedly about Anngrit, who had flatly refused to come along. His mother then pulled out of a folder the now infamous HANA article, which Henocho must have given her. This was when Armin first learned of his brother’s ambitions to become a bishop.

Even Armin could understand that his niece being in the headlines as the founder of a pagan, racist cult wasn’t helpful to this end. He followed the same tactics with Beata as he did with everyone else: it was a surely tasteless Halloween prank gotten out of hand for reasons

that were not his daughter's fault. This was followed by the usual accusations about his and Mette's parenting methods and their lack of Christian faith. And, of course, Mother clutched her chest with a pained expression, as she always did when something didn't suit her. Armin had to swear up and down that there really wasn't anything to it, and nothing more would come to jeopardize his brother's dream, which was also hers. Since then, he had excused Anngrit's absence with a made-up, lingering illness and had called Beate only once himself.

Of course, this was not a long-term solution. He didn't care what his brother thought or what the consequences might be for him. But his mother remained his mother, even if he had had a cool relationship with her as a child, which had cooled further with his marriage to Mette, and had not even improved with her death. Since Klaus' death at the latest, he'd had the feeling that there was only room for two things in her heart: Henoch and her beloved church. Nevertheless, she had carried him, nursed him, fed him, and raised him; she had watched over him when he'd been ill in bed and comforted him when he had fallen. How could he not feel respect and gratitude towards her? How he dreaded the day when he had to confess his newfound religious convictions to her!

"Well, that's that," he said, looking around the table, as unconcerned as he could manage. "I must be off, as I want to pass on the decision to Friedrich straightaway and have a couple of other things to do."

"Me too," Jochen joined in, hastily. "I've got a get-together with some former comrades later."

With that, Henoch and Beata turned their gazes to the youngest of the three brothers, suspicion written all over their faces. What did he know about the "incident" and what did he think about it? Jochen and Armin had always been in cahoots as children, with Armin taking the lead. If it wasn't just a "joke," how likely was it that he was in a nefarious alliance with Armin?

Jochen avoided their gaze, and Henoch and his mother instead looked at each other, prompting Armin to fear that a follow-up of the interrogation at Beata's coffee table the other day would ensue.

But Beata just cleared her throat and said, "Before we part so hastily: Christmas is less than three weeks away, and I'd like us to celebrate together as a family, as we should. I expect that you will put aside your arguments for this occasion and come to me with your families. It might be the last time for me, and that is my one wish as a mother."

Of course they would come, he and Jochen murmured almost simultaneously.

"So, I'll see you in three weeks," said Beata, closing the folder in front of her. Then she looked Armin in the eye and added, "I very much assume Anngrit will also come, even if she doesn't visit me otherwise." Her suggestive, suspicious tone made him shiver.

"Of course she's coming," he said under her and Henoch's piercing gazes.

He and Jochen hurriedly set off.

As he got into his car and looked back at the Art Nouveau villa where he had grown up, a pitch-black feeling spread through him. It was a premonition of something both terrible and inevitable happening there.

## 63

It was Christmas. Two days before, on Friday, Armin had said goodbye to his NEMAS staff for the beginning winter vacations. It wasn't his final farewell: as agreed with the buyers, he, Jochen, and Goldmarie would stay on board until the end of the first quarter to ensure a smooth transition. But during his round, quite a few people already seemed to have been forgetting about him and were looking ahead to the new masters.

He, too, hadn't felt much melancholy and looked forward, sometimes with exuberant hope, sometimes full of fear. One day he woke up bursting with energy and wanted to change the world; the next, he buried his head in Vic's lap and didn't want to leave his bed. He



shouldn't put himself under so much pressure, she said. Time would tell, and Euródin would show them the way. Siebenthal now visited them every weekend, and they ate together and hatched out plans.

Goldmarie had initiated the establishment of a foundation, and they had talked their heads off about the name. All sorts of names from Norse mythology had been bandied about, but Armin insisted on calling it the Mette Weskamp Foundation. A small portion of the proceeds from the sale would go into separate asset management companies for him and Jochen—enough money so that they and their families would never have to work again in their lives, though of course they would anyway.

He had been surprised that Jochen was so willing to sacrifice most of his slice of the cake for unselfish purposes; after all, he knew his brother as someone who appreciated fast cars and a fast life. There was probably an idealist hidden in everyone, just waiting for the right opportunity to come out. He didn't need more than three cars after all, Jochen had confided to him with a wink.

But there was still something standing between them and their high-minded plans that had upset him and those around him for days: the family Christmas. Every morning, his youngest took her temperature to see whether she might have a fever. Then she wanted his permission to use the army issue earplugs Jochen had given her so that she didn't have to listen to the Christmas carols and Henoch's inevitable Bible reading.

As commander of her Euródin's Children's Army, she might well muster up a bit more discipline and persistence, had been his answer. It wasn't easy for anyone. He knew she would endure it with a stiff face and compressed lips. If nothing happened, that is . . .

Finally, he, Vic, Wenna, Anngrit, Jochen, and Cordula were standing in Beata's living room, prim and proper, with fake smiles and loaded down with pointless presents, which, thankfully, Vic and Cordula had taken upon themselves to buy. In the corner, as always, stood the overdecorated, frightening nine-foot-tall Christmas tree—the high ceilings of the historic house made it possible—with the inevitable nativity scene underneath, showing little Jesus in a crib in a stable, surrounded by his proud parents and astonished cattle. A

sweet Christian chorale spilled from the speakers of the stereo system that his father had once bought for a small fortune. Behind Beata stood—or lurked—Hench and his wife and their four children, something between a crowd of altar boys and self-righteous warriors of God, or so it seemed to him.

It had been a calculated move on his and Jochen's part to bring along Vic, Wenna, and Cordula, which those hadn't cared for in the least. It was a way of causing confusion among the enemy, Jochen, who was an expert in the field, had reckoned; a diversion tactic straight out of a military textbook. Now his mother and Hench were forced to express their delight that he and Jochen had brought their newly acquired partners to the holy feast at the first opportunity. Not even his elder brother would possess the audacity to ask the newcomers about their religious beliefs; after all, manners were always observed in the Weskamp family.

It was supposed to be a big hello, and they would politely ask one another questions without being in the least interested in the answers. Of course, his mother and Hench would gossip about Vic and Cordula afterward, because Beata for sure regarded them as legacy hunters and unfit matches for her sons, as she had done in the case of Mette. But she would rather tear out her tongue than admit it in their presence. And in all the hullabaloo, Anngrit's "pagan-racist" ritual at school would seem like last winter's snow: melted, vanished, forgotten, as if it had never existed.

So much for the plan, which initially worked perfectly indeed. After warming up with a glass of champagne for the grown-ups and orange juice for the little ones, Hench sat down, surrounded by the circle of those who loved him, as he no doubt imagined. He picked up the family Bible and read something from the Gospels, which Armin didn't care about at all, and which made him feel as sleepy as if he had already enjoyed the roast goose, red cabbage, and potato dumplings. This traditional fare would be served like every year, pre-cooked with the help of Mrs. Nowak, who was spending Christmas with her own family. The heavy meal and all the wine that went with it were probably the main reason why they had never been at one

another's throats on any Christmas evening. The sated lion is not likely to pounce.

Fortunately, Armin was awoken from his half slumber by Henoch's final "Amen." Otherwise, he would have missed a novelty that distinguished this year's proceedings: Henoch's four children and his wife performed as a family choir a Christmas serenade rehearsed for the occasion. A historic event, which the patriarch himself documented for posterity by photographing Sofia, Elisabeth, Jacob, Matthias, and Benedicta against the picturesque backdrop of the Christmas crib and the festive tree. Perhaps the footage for a home story that he would publish in some local church rag when he was elected bishop.

Armin couldn't judge the musical quality and cared as little about them as he minded the rest. All he could think about was that he only had to get through the exchange of presents afterward, then the meal, going to church together, coffee and liqueur on their return, and a final family breakfast the next morning. He didn't know where he would spend next Christmas, but most certainly not here. For better or worse, he would still have to meet his mother, but that didn't apply to his brother. There was a limit to everything.

While the house concert almost brought tears of emotion to his mother's eyes, he glanced worriedly at Anngrit. Her hitherto mask-like, somewhat haughty expression began to slip, and it looked as if she was struggling with a fit of laughter, which she might have to cover up with a cough. Cordula and Vic maintained their polite faces, Jochen was probably thinking about the new sports car he wanted to treat himself to after Christmas—a Tesla this time; only poor Wenna followed the proceedings in utter amazement, as if she had been beamed to a planet in a distant galaxy.

Now for the presents. Everyone asked or was told without being asked what their present was—except for Vic, Wenna, and Cordula, who were excluded from the general gift exchange as surprise newbies. Armin and his family would exchange presents the next morning, the twenty-fifth, observing the English custom, while Jochen and Cordula had already done so in the afternoon.

Then it was time to unwrap. Armin tore open his mother's present first. What color would the tie be this time? Or had she chosen a set of socks or, more surprisingly, a tennis racket? Exchanging gifts between people who either owned everything or could buy it anytime with their own money and to their own taste, and who, furthermore, didn't care about one another and therefore couldn't or didn't bother coming up with inspired or thoughtful gifts—all this was a hypocrisy that possibly surpassed the faith in the savior, which even many in the church no longer possessed in truth. He would ask Gerold for a theological opinion condemning the gift giving to Yule that they would celebrate in the future (with an exception made for children—maybe) in favor of donations for the truly needy.

Perhaps Armin could have prevented the catastrophe if he had kept more of an eye on Anngrit instead of losing himself in philosophical reflections and feigning gratitude for the gifted electric corkscrew. But it was unlikely. For fate was a hound dog that tracked down its prey, no matter how deep it fled into the forest or a den.

"Don't you want to put it on?" He heard his mother's sly voice.

Anngrit's head was flaming red, and her polite mask had given way to rage and disgust.

"I inherited it from my mother," Beate went on, "and now I want you to carry on the family tradition and wear it as a sign of your bond with the savior. There was an incident the other day that made us all shake our heads. Certain things are not to be trifled with, my child."

Armin glanced at the others. Vic, Jochen, Wenna, and Cordula were horrified—they knew what it meant. Even Elisabeth seemed aghast. Only Jacob and Matthias nudged each other and stifled grins, while Benedikta, the youngest, didn't understand what was going on. Sofia and Henoch, on the other hand, fixed his daughter with a somber look. Together with Beata, they formed an ominous triumvirate, eagerly watching the reaction of an accused witch who'd just had holy water splashed on her face. They must have hatched it out together, probably on Henoch's insistence.

Armin jumped from his chair. "Mother, I don't think—" he began. But he didn't get any further.

Anngrit flung the golden crucifix at her grandmother's feet. "Go to Helheim, Grandmother," she hissed. "I will never wear the sign of the African god! You are going to pay for your wrong faith, and should you fall down the stairs again, find someone else to catch you! My god is Euródin, just like yours in truth, and I already bear his mark."

She reached into her blouse and pulled out the pendant with the Thor's hammer, which, as Armin now knew, Gerold had consecrated for her. She took a step toward Beata and Henoch and dangled the amulet in front of their eyes. "This is the hammer that will destroy you all—you traitors to your God and His people!" she spat out.

Henoch backed away from her as if from the Incarnate One, and Beata let out a howl. "So, it's true!" she cried. "You're a pagan like your mother; a child of the devil! Armin, what do you have to say to that?"

He jumped to Anngrit and put his hand on her shoulder. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*—the moment had come. "Yes, it's true, Mother," he said. "Euródin is the god of us all, and He will punish those who mock Him and thus His people. I wanted to spare you, to give you one last Christmas with us and leave you in your false belief. But you had to set a trap for my daughter, humiliate her in front of everyone. Now look what you've done and apologize!"

Beata opened her mouth. "*Me?* Apologize? You—you are no longer my son, and she is no longer my granddaughter! You besmirch the honor of the family. You are possessed by a demon. Let yourself be exorcized; it's your only salvation!"

Suddenly Vic, Cordula, Wenna, and Jochen were surrounding him and Anngrit. "If my brother is no longer your son, then neither am I," Jochen said calmly. "We all believe in Euródin and will soon be founding a church for Him together with our prophet."

Beata clutched her heart. "Get out, you devils, all of you! I never want to see you again!"

They hurriedly packed up their things, leaving behind the presents, and left. As they walked out, Armin saw tears in Elisabeth's eyes, the only one of his nieces and nephews that he would ever voluntarily see again in his life. The last thing he noticed was Henoch's petrified face.

His monstrous plan to force Anngrit to her knees with a crucifix as with a brand had turned against him.

Now they no longer had any reason to show consideration.

## 64

The six of them stood outside in the cold, stunned, speechless, while the steam rose from their mouths to the sky. What had he done? thought Armin. All of them? Especially his mother! She had called them devils and said that they were to be exorcized. He had expected her to cry, to break down, to plead. Instead, she cursed him, Jochen, and his daughter. The memory of her face distorted with hatred rose up before his inner eye. If it had been done in anger or disappointment, she might take it back later. But she wouldn't. He knew that. Had she always been like this? No. Something had happened in the last few years, especially after Father's death. She had changed from a pious and strict mother into a fanatic to whom any thought of Christian forgiveness had become alien.

Armin felt a sense of shame burning inside of him. She was his mother. She had cursed and rejected him. Could he sink any lower? Or rather, could *she* sink any lower? At the same time, he felt an emptiness inside him that, oddly enough, seemed . . . *liberating*. The worst had happened. But it was over. Forever. Like a major operation that you dreaded. Now life went on, and his shame, the loss he felt—they would dissipate like his frozen breath into the air.

Anngrit plucked him by the sleeve of his winter coat. Tears streamed down her pale cheeks like when she had confessed to him what had happened at school. The angry fairy, who was now looking at the broken porcelain pieces on the floor in sorrow.

"Dad, I'm sorry. I've lost control of myself. But I can't deny my God!"

Beata had called her a child of the devil. That didn't bother her in the least, Armin thought. She felt sorry for *him*. To her, her grandmother was a deluded madwoman, a witch, an "agent of Vili," and nothing she said could affect her. If only he could let it roll off his back just as easily as his daughter did!

He reached out to comfort her, but Jochen beat him to it.

"Stop!" he said to Anngrit and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't apologize! You did the right thing, even if your words were way too harsh. A hammer that will 'destroy you all.' 'You traitors to your God and his people'—you don't say things like that to your own family. But she provoked you, and you're just a child."

"Besides," he said, letting his free arm circle in the direction of the villa, where the lights were burning festively as if nothing had happened, "it wouldn't have made the slightest difference if you'd just politely given her back the fucking crucifix. What happened had to happen, and let me tell you something: I'm glad it's behind us! We have to move on, and if our mother can't accompany us on our journey, we still have to follow it. We are soldiers, and we have a mission, and as soldiers we must overcome difficult situations and sometimes make hard decisions. As Euródin may help us, I might say."

It was the longest speech Armin could remember his brother having made, and it did the trick. "Jochen's right," Vic said, stroking Anngrit's cheek. "Armin, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I've never experienced anything so disgusting in my life. Don't worry about what she said; she'll regret it! I think we should call Gerold and pray with him for her soul and for your brother's."

"Great idea," said Cordula. "Why don't we all finish celebrating together somewhere? Why should we let them spoil our evening?"

"And I think," Wenna said to Anngrit, "you should have kept the thing, melted it down, and had a Thor's hammer cast from it. That's exactly what the Christians used to do with pagan amulets."

The tears on his daughter's cheeks had dried and something mischievous and smug crept into her face. The shards of the angry fairy were already beginning to turn to gold.

Armin realized that all eyes were now on him. They were waiting for his decision.

“Who are we going to?” he asked.

Vic and Cordula looked at each other. “To us,” Vic said.

A decorated fir awaited them at home, which, according to a hand-painted sign from his youngest, was on no account to be mistaken for a Christmas tree but was a Yule tree. As some kind of in-house religious police, she had already taken it upon herself days ago to check all the baubles, stars, and angels for forbidden Christian references. And she had thrown the Christmas Crib, which to this date they had placed underneath it, in the trash bin, and with Wenna’s help, moved the heavy stone underneath it instead.

Of course, they had discussed whether they should and were allowed to celebrate Christmas at all—apart from the obligatory visit to his mother. But it wasn’t just force of habit, but also the fact that it was a public holiday, whereas the twenty-first fell on a Thursday this year. Vic would call her parents in Cornwall tomorrow, while Jochen would pay his first visit to Cordula’s parents in Rostock. Armin had not spoken to Vic yet about how she would break the news to her family. Cordula, on the other hand, didn’t foresee any problems. Her parents more or less regarded all religion as nonsense, but Tritheism was one that at least suited their political tastes.

So now they were all sitting together at the impromptu Christmas—or Yule—dinner that they had put together from the dishes actually intended for the coming holidays: Vic’s original English Christmas pudding, Cordula’s meatballs with potato salad, Friedrich’s hand-smoked side of salmon, Goldmarie’s ready-to-fry goose legs with ready-made dumplings and tinned red cabbage, plus the leftover cheese from the fondue she had eaten with her son Hallgrimm earlier in the evening before he had gone off to hibernate in his bedroom with his new smartphone. Naturally, Siebenthal had brought the wine: a few selects from his defunct shop’s leftover stock.

Siebenthal also said grace, to which he added for the occasion: “Let us now pray for our sister Beata and our brother Henoch,” he said. “We ask you, Euródin, to have mercy on the souls of our fellow brothers who have gone astray and deny you, even though their souls are consecrated by you. When their time has come, receive them with



gentleness and understanding; remember what good they have done and how many children they have given you. We are all weak and have come late to see the light. So, forgive them their hatred as you forgive us our weakness!"

"So be it!" they replied in chorus.

Afterward, they ate, and Armin was pleased to notice his youngest's appetite, who, back to true form, quipped that religious wars always made her ravenous while heaping a second helping of meatballs and potato salad onto her plate.

Between all the food, and the wine, and the stuffy air in the living room, Armin began to feel sleepy. Foregoing a glass of Siebenthal's Mirabelle plum brandy aged in a whiskey barrel, he went outside onto the terrace with his cup of coffee. He looked up at the starry sky and listened to himself. Was He satisfied with him? He had broken with his mother, which had been unavoidable, and brought everyone here together, which wasn't much, but still a start. More would come, but little by little.

The frigid night air quickly reanimated him, and he was about to go inside when he felt someone snuggle up to him. "Aren't you freezing at all?"

He put the coffee cup down on the patio table and hugged Vic to him. "Not when I have you in my arms," he said. "You're my fire and my light."

He wanted to kiss her, but she dodged him and gently wriggled out of his embrace. "Now that we've sorted one thing out," she said carefully, "can I ask you about something else?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Anything you want. Just tell me what wish I can grant you!"

She blushed and said, somewhat embarrassed, "Well, so far, Wenna and I only have a few things here. I'm sleeping with you, and Wenna is up in the attic with some IKEA furniture. If I may ask: What do you have in mind for the future?"

Now Armin understood and became embarrassed himself. He looked at her for a long time; finally, he turned away from her and gazed up into the sky again. He listened to himself again, but this time it was not He whose opinion he was seeking. After what seemed like

an eternity, although it had probably only been a few seconds, he heard the voice he had longed for inside him. For the first time, she answered him.

He turned back to Vic, who was shivering in the icy air. Then he got down on his knees in front of her, took her cold hand, and said, "Vic, will you be my wife?"

Beata looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was half past two in the morning, and she knew she wouldn't be able to fall asleep without a pill. She had been waking up and tossing and turning for hours. She knew exactly why, even if she refused to admit it. She, Henocho, and his family had tacitly agreed not to say a word about the outrageous events from before. Instead, they finished giving presents, removed the superfluous place settings from the table, ate as usual, and discussed Henocho's plans and his family. Matthias would follow his siblings to high school next year. They were all hardworking, good pupils. "Like father, like son, in every respect," Beata allowed herself to remark. And that was all there was to it.

After dinner, they went to Christmas Mass at the church on the market square in Blankenese, and no one there missed the others. Upon returning to the house, Beata, Henocho, and Sofia drank their traditional liqueur, whiskey, or cognac, while the younger ones had hot chocolate laced with a shot of rum. Then, around one o'clock in the morning, they all went to bed. Henocho slept with Sofia in the guest room next door, the children in the former children's bedrooms under the roof.

But she hadn't been able to sleep because there was that what she would never mention as long as she lived, but what was there, nonetheless. The arrow in her chest.

She got up, walked across the room, opened the door, and crossed the corridor toward the bathroom. The streetlight shone in from the stairwell window, so she decided not to turn on the light. In the bathroom, she rummaged in the compartment of the mirror cabinet where the sleeping pills were, but much to her displeasure discovered that the blister pack was empty. Perhaps Henocho or Sofia had taken

the last two. What should she do? She decided on a cognac, which usually worked for her as well when her supply of tablets had run out.

She went downstairs to the living room and didn't turn on the light there either but helped herself to the small bar on the serving trolley in the room, which was illuminated by the streetlights. She decided to take the cognac upstairs with her to drink it in bed and read the Bible to help her fall asleep.

Halfway up to the second floor, she saw a crow or a raven through the window. The bird was sitting on a branch of the ash tree growing in the front garden facing the street. Something made her pause, and she opened her mouth in horror. The crow was so close she could look it in the eye: a black eye with an infinity behind it that wanted to suck her in. Suddenly, she felt a sharp pain. She dropped the cognac glass and clutched her chest. Her whole torso seemed to explode, and white light spread through her head.

She fell. *Next time, find someone else to catch you.*

After that, she saw and heard nothing more. But later, after an infinity, she saw something else.

*He* received her soul as her granddaughter and two of her sons had requested; without enthusiasm, mind you, but also without condemning her. She had given Him children, and notwithstanding her mistakes, had been a good mother and not a bad person, even in spite of the unforgivable things she had done and said today.

She had not recognized Him, having been seduced by His brother Vili, like many of His children, and like many who were yet to follow her.

But how could she have known better?

# Part Three

Wenna and I had emptied the dishwasher, washed the remaining dishes, and put the empty bottles in the collection box in the hall cupboard; now we made a hangover breakfast from the leftovers of yesterday's orgy and the contents of the fridge. There were salmon, soft-boiled eggs, cheese, toast, Danish rye bread, a plaited yeast bun, coffee, grapefruit juice, and one last bottle of champagne. All that was missing were the diners.

Goldmarie, Legal-Fritz, and Jochen and Cordula had all gone home to recover from the previous evening's exertions and attend to their family obligations. Siebenthal, however, had slept on the couch in the living room so that he wouldn't have to drive back to the Baltic Sea drunk. The last time I saw him was on his way to the bathroom.

Dad and Vic were first to appear. They were in their bathrobes, and I could tell from their sheepish expressions that they had not been idle during the night. According to plan, we should now unwrap our own presents that had been waiting under the Christmas tree. But they obviously had something important to tell us first.

Dad cleared his throat twice, as if Siebenthal's Mirabelle brandy, which he had partaken in after all—following his mysterious disappearance to the garden—was still sticking in his throat.

"Now, Vic and I have been together for a while, as you know," he said finally, "and, well, to cut a long story short: we've decided to get married."

Uh-huh! They must have hatched it out on the terrace last night. Wenna and I rushed over to them at the same time and showered them with hugs, kisses, and our good wishes. I considered running down to the cellar and digging out the streamers and balloons we'd used to celebrate my birthday and transform the hangover into a pre-wedding breakfast.

In any case, the timing couldn't have been better. Anna, who hardly ever came around anymore these days, was quitting for good at the end of the year, and Vic was a harmless, sweet creature with whom I would get along splendidly. Wenna could move in here

properly, and I was looking forward to the two of us training Newton to be a guard and fighting dog. Above all, Vic would hopefully restore the level of service I was used to from Mom and Anna. I had slaved away here as a cook and assistant cleaner long enough!

While we waited for Gerold to reemerge from the bathroom so that we could all toast the lovebirds, the, well, young-at-heart couple talked excitedly about their immediate plans, which, to my ears, sounded as promising as they were sensible. Vic would hand in her notice to the school before the end of the year and leave at the end of the following quarter. Of course, she would get a housekeeper, because after all, as future church mother—the Frigg of the Profession, so to speak—she would have all sorts of new responsibilities. It was becoming clear that we would probably be swapping the foul Hamburg city air for a new, preferably seaside retreat, but since Wenna couldn't live in the drafty attic under raw clay tiles until then, Dad would have it renovated in a hurry. Even if he sold the house afterward, the increase in value would cover the expense, he explained to us.

The horrors of Beata's ghoulish Christmas were forgotten in the face of all the plans and considerations. After a good night's sleep in the arms of my beloved Soul Father, it no longer seemed like a sinister Greek tragedy to me but just the pitiful drama of a blinded old woman and her ridiculous, ambition-ridden son. If Scharnagel had been a Medusa, whose head I had cut off, Grandma was a dragon whose only remaining effect was to spread disgustingly bad breath. Symbolically, I had killed this monster as well. Saint Georgina, patron saint of the Profession, that's what they would call me one day.

But fate was a devil, who always jumped out at you from a dark corner when you least expected it. Dad's smartphone rang, and when he put it to his ear, I recognized instantly from his expression that it wasn't Happy Christmas greetings from friends or from Grandma Karen, which I had secretly hoped for.

"I see . . . And when? . . . Is there anything I can do?" Dad said, interrupted by long pauses.

Before he even ended the call, I'd sensed inwardly the news he was about to deliver. My heart tightened. All the anticipation, the eu-

phoria of a cheerful, bright future that had gripped me, like the sun smiling in the sky after a week of rainy weather—everything was extinguished, while a black emptiness spread in me.

“Anngrit,” Dad said gravely. “My mother—your grandmother—died during the night. Apparently, she couldn’t sleep, so she took a cognac from the living room, probably had a heart attack on the way upstairs, and fell down the stairs. Mrs. Nowak—she called me—found her in the morning when she was tidying up, as your uncle and your aunt apparently had been fast asleep.”

He looked around in silence, and nobody said anything. *Next time, find someone else to catch you. This is the hammer that will smash you all.* The curse I hurled against her in anger yesterday now seemed like a prophecy, even a death sentence. Nobody said it. But did no one think it, either? Why had she not been able to sleep and had gone downstairs? *Because of you*, it whispered inside me. Because her granddaughter, as she saw it, was possessed by the devil. I was the cause—even if I wasn’t to blame, because she had been the one to attack me. I felt abandoned and despised, just like when the janitor had surprised us in the basement of the school. Again, I was gripped by the feeling of being an evil spirit, even if I only wanted to do good. And again, I longed to sink into a crevice in the ground.

Vic broke the silence. “What happens next?”

Dad shrugged, not looking at me. “Apparently there’s a will in which she has named Henoah as her sole heir and executor. My brother himself doesn’t seem to want to speak to me. Perhaps never again. He’ll take care of everything else, I suppose.”

At that moment, Siebenthal came into the living room, his hair still damp from the shower and a towel around his shoulders. He immediately saw something was amiss, and Dad told him what he had told us.

But unlike my father, he understood something else at once. He came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. “I know you’re reproaching yourself for this, my child. But you don’t have the slightest reason to. Your grandma is now with her true God and not with the false one she believed in. And she will be ashamed of the way she

treated you by now. And when her shame has subsided, she will look at her granddaughter with pride and gratitude!”

Everyone at the table stared at Siebenthal in disbelief. But he continued, unimpressed: “It’s Vili who killed your grandmother by turning her against her own family,” he said. “Many people up there have already regretted it and will regret it even more when they find out the truth.”

“Do you think Beata is in Helheim now?” Wenna asked anxiously.

Siebenthal shook his head. “Then they’d have to close it for overcrowding. She was deluded, but not evil. The lesson, however, for all Europeans is that no one will be able to use this as an excuse anymore once we begin to proclaim the truth. The clock is ticking, and those who betray their people and their God in the future and do not repent will be punished at some point.”

Dad and Vic nodded, and I crawled out of the crevice into which I had symbolically thrown myself. Of course, it would have been better if I could have converted Grandma. But basically, she’d had her life, and I certainly couldn’t be blamed for her heart condition.

Siebenthal sat down with a sigh. “But I don’t suppose the champagne is to celebrate this event,” he said, looking at the poured glasses.

“Um, no,” said Vic. “Actually, we wanted to ask you if you’ve developed a wedding ritual already.”

Siebenthal raised an eyebrow. “No, but that can be done,” he replied with a wink. “Unlike in classical drama, in reality, every tragedy is followed by a new beginning. So, despite everything, shall we toast to this and at the same time remember our deceased sister?”

We raised our glasses and clinked them.

## 66

Armin had left Anngrit and Vic at home and come alone with Jochen. They took their seats in the second row of benches behind Heno-



in the funeral hall. The first row was already fully occupied by him, his entire family, and his closest confidants. This raised eyebrows. As did the fact that Henoch himself gave a speech during the hour-and-a-half ceremony, alongside politicians and church representatives who were full of praise for Beata's steadfastness of faith and her civic commitment. But, that neither Armin nor Jochen played any role in the proceedings, as if they weren't even there.

Henoch had informed him of the time and place in a terse email, not even inviting him, strictly speaking, and Armin suspected he would have preferred him not to come at all. That way he could puff himself up even more like a pope carrying a martyr and saint to her grave, pointing an invisible finger at him as the murderer—or if not that, then certainly the father of his mother's murderess. Beata's scanned will had been attached to the email, probably to make it clear that Armin had nothing to do with either the estate or organizing the funeral.

What would his mother think now if Euródin allowed her to watch her own funeral from up there? Which of her children would she be ashamed of now? Thanks to Siebenthal, Armin was free of any feelings of guilt.

After the funeral service, Armin did not so much as exchange a glance with his brother as they stood at the Weskamp family grave in the Nienstedten cemetery to receive the sorry-for-your-loss sayers.

There was no end to the line of perhaps two hundred mourners. Henoch had obviously plumbed his entire address book for the occasion. Between this and his putting on a show of dignified grief, Armin suspected that the pompous, lavish celebration was primarily for his older brother's election campaign.

Nevertheless, his and Jochen's attending the funeral was the right thing to do, and certainly pleased Mother. Their sister Katharina, a distant presence since she had moved to Corfu, had only been able to bring herself to commission a wreath from there. Let Henoch and those to whom he had perhaps whispered about his brother's responsibility for the tragedy, referring to a "family quarrel," think of him what they may.

Armin sighed inwardly and stole a glance at Jochen, standing next to him with the stoic calm of a military man. Finally, the last mourner in line approached with his hand outstretched. It was Böhnisch, the local chairman of the conservative Christian Democratic Party, to which Klaus and Beata had been diligent donors.

After offering his condolences first to Henoch, then to Jochen, and finally to Armin, the small, gray-haired, elderly gentleman surprisingly accosted him—probably instinctively seeing him as head of the family. “Tell me, Mr. Weskamp, I found out about the funeral only yesterday,” he said. “There’s supposed to be a reception thereafter?”

Armin tried to hide his surprise. A reception? There had been nothing about it in the email. Baffled, he looked at Henoch, who at once replied keenly, “At my mother’s house, Mr. Böhnisch, immediately afterward. Do you know the address?”

Böhnisch nodded. “See you soon, then,” he said and left, giving Armin a strange look.

The reception to which Jochen and himself were not invited was undoubtedly another opportunity for Henoch to posture and drum up support for his election campaign. The South German accent of many of the mourners led Armin to assume that numerous big names from the EKD Baden had come to pay their last respects to the mother of their potential new bishop. His brother was even using their mother’s death for his own selfish purposes. What’s more, he probably didn’t feel the least bit guilty about it.

Well, he would have to work that out with his Soul Father one day. In any case, Armin had endured enough of the farce. He tugged on Jochen’s sleeve, and the two of them hurried off along the main path toward the cemetery exit.

They hadn’t gone far when Henoch, leaving his family behind, caught up with them from behind on the wide, tree-lined avenue, panting like a steam locomotive. “Can we talk for a moment?” he asked, bright red and out of breath.

Armin turned around and eyed him coolly. Finally, he gave Jochen a sign, and the three of them went into a side path, standing behind a tall gravestone that hid them from the other mourners.

“What else is there to say?” said Armin coldly. “You’ve managed without us so far, it seems.”

“You two and your daughter, you have Mother on your conscience,” Henoah hissed with a hatred that made Armin involuntarily take a half step back. “Out of grief over Anngrit’s blasphemy and her betrayal, she had a heart attack and fell. You know that for a fact!”

“I’d be careful what I say,” Jochen replied calmly. “Otherwise, you might end up in Helheim one day.”

“My mother is now with Euróðin in Valhalla, and she is ashamed of what you have done and are doing,” Armin confirmed just as calmly.

Henoah stared at them uncomprehendingly and shook his head in disgust. It was no use, Armin realized. They no longer spoke the same language and no longer lived in the same world—if they ever had.

“If you don’t want to acknowledge your guilt and burn in hell because of your disgusting racist beliefs, that’s your business,” Henoah spat out. “I merely wanted to ask you to wait with your shameful actions for the sake of our mother’s memory. It was her greatest wish I should become a bishop. But it’s obviously no use, as blinded and malicious as you are. Then I’ll make it in spite of that!”

He turned abruptly to leave, but Armin grabbed him by the sleeve. “Our mother up there will be praying you don’t. But let’s leave that alone. We still need time anyway, and I’m employed at NEMAS until the end of the quarter. So, you can proceed with your campaign without any worries. No one will hear from us until then. But let me tell you one thing,” he added. “Jochen and I will demand our statutory share of the legacy, so be prepared for that.”

Henoah stared at him as if wondering if he had heard correctly. “So, you would wait until . . . ? Tha— thank you,” he stuttered. “May the Lord reward you.” With that, he stomped off, bright red, without turning around again.

Armin and Jochen looked after him, shaking their heads. Then they left the cemetery.

Henoch glanced at the clock on the wall opposite his desk. It was half past two, and they should leave soon so that they wouldn't get stuck in weekend traffic on the way to Bad Herrenalb, a spa town in the Black Forest. He was going to wait for the new arrivals in the lobby of the *House of Lord*—what was the name of the convention center—as if sitting there by chance, and approach and butter up some of the unreliable ones before the vote tomorrow, while giving his own people a pat on the back. Also, he would give the odd interview to the media that would be attending the election synod as well. All this would continue in the bar in the evening.

The youth organizations were behind him. They saw a silver lining, in that they wouldn't have to end their church careers as members of an almost forgotten cult one day. Furthermore, Henoch had many supporters in the congregations and parishes. The Protestant establishment, on the other hand, rallied behind Zölsch-Brink, viewing her opponent as a parvenu, an adventurer, and a lightweight. He thought he stood a good chance, but his victory was by no means certain, so he had to keep fighting to the last moment.

"Any news about my brother?" he nervously asked Lahm, who was sitting in front of him with his laptop open and his packed suitcase next to him.

His biggest worry was that Armin would not stick to the standstill agreement and surprise him with a scandal at the last minute. Which was by no means to be ruled out.

Lahm shook his head, scanning the newly arrived emails.

"Good!" Should he be able to count on Armin's respectability for once? How often had he prayed to the Lord about that! "Then let's go, Meinhard."

He was about to shut down his own PC when a new email arrived, the sender of which stunned him: Bohrmann! What did he want from him? Wishing him luck for the election from his retreat in a Protestant monastery in Ticino, Switzerland, which Henoch had granted him following his recent rehab? The subject line read ominously, "On my own behalf." He read:

Dear Henoch,

During the time off, which I was able to take thanks to you, I have come to realize many things. So, I have come to the conclusion that the end must never justify the means. As sorry as I am for you, my conscience will not allow me to work with an impostor, even if it means trying to achieve something good. I therefore ask you to resign from your office and from your candidacy. Otherwise, I will send the attached affidavit to all synod members and Bishop Leutheusser this evening. It states that your film is a fraud, and your conversion statistics are not true.

You should also pay the money back into the emergency fund as quickly as possible, as I have evidence that you have misappropriated it.

For my part, I will continue my missionary work for the church even without your support, but this time in the right way. Ms. Zölsch-Brink has promised to set up a position for me to this purpose once she is elected.

You should see this as an opportunity for reversal and repentance and perhaps consider a period of retreat yourself. In this way, you may become aware of the unchristian nature of your actions.

With brotherly sympathy,

Matthias Bohrmann

Henoch licked his tongue. He heard a devilish laugh behind the words feigning brotherhood. Zölsch-Brink had bought Bohrmann, and apparently, on top of that, had an informant in his ranks. Possibly his secretary? Hadn't she worked for her years ago? He remembered this now, when it was too late. He had underestimated his rival right from the start.

While all blood seemed to drain from his body, he said tonelessly to Lahm, "We don't need to drive. Bohrmann has found out about us and is threatening to make it public. I will resign from all offices."

So, he hadn't failed because of his brother, he mused. But because of himself and his ambition. His desire to prove it to his father and mother. Now they were both dead. What would they think of him? In Christian terms, nothing for the time being, because unlike in Armin's pagan religion, they would only rise from their graves together on Judgement Day. Was that at all believable? He shook himself.

And Sofia and the children? He would tell them a story about how he had been the victim of an infamous intrigue. He would think of something, and the life of luxury he could now offer them through his inheritance and the sale of the family business would certainly make them bear his having missed out on the bishopric with lighter hearts. According to a letter from Armin's lawyer, the proceeds from the NEMAS sale would not be transferred until the week after next. But, he reasoned, if he went to the bank on Monday and asked for a bridge loan, he could replenish the emergency fund immediately. Bohrmann and Zölsch-Brink would not expose him if they didn't have to, because any scandal would fall back on the church itself. So, if all went well, he would come out of the affair with a clean slate.

Henoch felt a tremendous burden fall away from him, which had basically been choking him off since childhood. He searched for gloom and despair within himself—but found only emptiness and relief.

Suddenly Lahm's voice made it into his consciousness. "And what will become of me?"

Henoch emerged from his thoughts as if from a deep lake and looked at the young man in front of him, who had served him faithfully for years and whose eyes were now filled with naked fear. "You know, Meinhard, I've been flirting for a while now with the idea of buying and running a vineyard, if it doesn't work out with the bishopric in the end. If you want, you can work as my caretaker. In any case, I won't abandon you."

Lahm nodded, visibly relieved. "Thank you very much, Dr. Weskamp. Then . . .?"

Henoch generously waved his hand. "We'll talk on Monday."

After Lahm left, he emailed his resignation. He then called Sofia and told her he would not be going to the Black Forest. That done,

he deleted all the files on his PC that had anything to do with DACH and Jesus Now! He shredded documents in the copy room in the hallway, by now being the only one left in the building. He cleared personal items from his desk and filing cabinets, candlesticks, framed photos, gifts, and other memorabilia, including his DACH model made of Lego bricks. He found a trash bag in the kitchenette and stuffed everything into it.

Finally, he remembered something else: he took his family Bible and his grandfather's cross out of his briefcase. They should have served him as a good luck charm for the election. The cross reminded him of the crucifix he had made Mother force on Anngrit, and his cheeks reddened in a flush of shame.

He threw the Bible and the cross into the sack with his other belongings and tied it up to throw it into the garbage dumpster downstairs later.

Then he switched off the light and left. Tonight, he would get drunk with the finest of his wines, together with Sofia. And tomorrow would be another day.

## 67

Kimberley Jones closed the book, the e-version of which she had read two nights earlier. She looked out at the sea through the window of her apartment. It was as if something had made "click" inside her, and she suddenly saw the world with new eyes. She didn't understand what was happening to her and what the consequences would be. She knew only that God had spoken to her. And that she, in turn, had to speak to the one who had written the book.

Preferably today.

Fortuna, alias Jasmin, had been visiting Siebenthal again for some time. His lucky cat was eating a fish fillet on his terrace, and when the

doorbell rang, he thought it must be her owner again. Ms. Jensen, he remembered. He still hadn't invited her over for coffee.

But when he opened the door, a young woman stood before him. Her hair was long, black, and curly, her eyes a deep-sea green, and her snow-white skin flecked with freckles. Under a cream-colored cardigan, she sported a flowing, ankle-length white dress embroidered with floral motifs, and she wore on her head a sweeping straw hat—like a spring fairy from a fairy-tale book.

Siebenthal shook off the fantasy. A tourist who'd knocked on the wrong door in search of her vacation apartment. What else? But then why was she holding up his new book, with the golden Covenant Sign and the title *Euródin!* on the cover? He had self-published it just three days ago but had not yet done any advertising for it. They would do that together later, after the ceremonial founding of the Root Chapter. The book should just get a little used to the air of publicity, so to speak.

"Hi," said the fairy. "Did you write this?" she asked in German.

An American, he could tell immediately from her accent. "Yes, indeed," he said.

"I read through the e-book in one night and ordered the print version immediately afterward. It's so incredible! Can we talk about it?"

"Well, yes, in principle, if you like," he said haltingly. "But how did you find me in the first place?"

Her smile resembled a sunrise over the fresh, wide sea. "The address is in the imprint of the book and on your website," she said. "Besides, you bear a certain resemblance to that gentleman there."

She now showed him the back of the cover, on which his photo was emblazoned—a little vanity he had allowed himself this time. Besides, it was said that books sold better if they showed the author's face.

She held out a hand with long, slender fingers, on which he spied a strange ring that looked neither like an engagement ring nor a wedding ring. Rather, it looked like a pentacle—and now he also noticed she was wearing one on a chain around her neck.

"My name is Kimberley Jones," she said. "I'm from Texas, but my mother was born in Germany, so I speak German."



Dumbfounded, he squeezed her hand, which was firm, warm, and dry like a sun-bleached, polished branch on the beach. "But you didn't fly over here for that reason?"

"Good gracious, no!" she said with a silvery laugh. "I'm currently in Europe to collect material for my doctoral thesis and have rented a vacation apartment in Warnemünde. And when I read your book, I felt that I absolutely must talk to you about it—especially as Warnemünde is only an hour's drive from here."

This caused Siebenthal some embarrassment. He was not used to being surprised at the front door by literary admirers. "Why don't you come in?" he asked. "My name's Gerold, by the way," he added.

"Gerold," she repeated somewhat awkwardly, having trouble with the hard "g" and the long, open "o".

"Dscheraeld," he suggested. "That's the English version."

"That's a bit easier," she said with a laugh. "And you can call me Kim."

He led her through the hallway and the living room to the terrace, where he usually received his rare visitors when it wasn't exactly freezing outside.

"There's a tremendous spiritual energy in it, don't you think?" she said, looking out at the Baltic.

"Yes. That's why I moved here," he said. "By the way, would you like something to drink? I've got some homemade ginger lemonade."

"Yes, I'd love to." She sat down in one of the armchairs and cuddled with one hand Fortuna, who was eyeing the surprise guest curiously. Then the animal jumped into the woman's lap as naturally as if she had spent half her life there.

"What's her name?"

"Fortuna, or, in truth, Jasmin. But she doesn't belong to me; she just visits me from time to time."

"Cats can feel it," she said thoughtfully as she stroked her.

Refraining from a comment, Siebenthal disappeared into the kitchen, then returned carrying a tray. Before unloading it, he cleared away the documents lying on the table. This morning, Armin had sent him a brochure regarding a former farming estate near the town of Bad Doberan that he was considering buying and renovating.

He poured each of them a drink, sat down, and asked, "Are you a journalist?"

She tasted the lemonade before replying: "It's good! No, but maybe one day I will be one. I studied history, archaeology, and anthropology at the University of California, and, as I said, I'm currently writing my doctoral thesis. It's on Arthurian legend and the origins of European culture and religion. I've already done research in Ireland, Great Britain, and Scandinavia. Now I'm waiting for a friend of mine with whom I want to tour Germany, Austria, and France."

"And in this context, you have questions concerning my book?" he inquired cautiously. As if of its own accord, his gaze was drawn to the silver pentacle, a pentagram surrounded by a circle, around her neck.

"Well," she said, taking a breath, "maybe I need to tell you a little more about myself. My mother was already a Wiccan high priestess before she met Daddy at a university in the US, and *The Mists of Avalon* was one of the first novels I ever read. My mother then initiated me, too, and I ran a coven as a high priestess myself until recently. Hence the amulet," she said, gripping it with her hand. "My boyfriend, who was also my high priest, then took a wrong turn somewhere, experimented with drugs, and founded a Mithras sex cult. That's when I dropped out," she said, blushing.

Siebenthal's regret over the breakup of her relationship was limited. What did she actually smell like? He sniffed the sun, sea, forest, and flowers on her. Was there a perfume that could scent like that? And there was something magnetic about her green eyes, as if you could drown in them if you got too close. "Wicca," he said, rummaging hard in his memory. He had never taken this religion seriously and had therefore hardly researched it. He knew only that the pentacle was its symbol, and members came together in covens, as she had said. "That's where you brew potions and summon dark powers to serve you?"

She smiled indulgently. "That's what everyone thinks, but it's not what we're doing at all. It's about becoming one with yourself, with the cosmos, and with the Great Goddess and the Great God. You, the

gods, nature—everything is part of the one, great spirit, and through the rituals you funnel your own energies into the right channels and also tap into those of the universe. To sum it up, you really could say it's about harmony and energy."

Sieenthal raised a hand. "Nothing to say against it. However, I don't necessarily see a connection with what I have written and what He has revealed to me."

He looked her in the eye to see how she reacted. However, she did not look back mockingly but appeared to be completely serious. After all, he had openly called himself a prophet in the book. "With me," he continued, "there is not one female and one male god, but three. However, they are genderless and responsible for men and women alike. But then again, only for their own *Urvolk*, of which there are three as well. And I am only religiously in charge, so to speak, for one of them: namely, the Europeans. So, I'm kind of asking myself: Have you come to convert me, or to be converted, or is this some kind of . . . interfaith dialogue?"

"Yes—or rather, no," she said. "Of course, I thought about that when I read the book. It was, well, how I came across it in the first place. I was simply looking for new publications on the subject, and then your book triggered something in me. It was like a . . ." She searched for the right word.

"An epiphany?" he suggested. He leaned forward and looked at her intently, placing his index finger on his chin. His heart suddenly beat faster. Had Euródin himself sent her to him? Could it be?

"Yes, an epiphany," she said, nodding slowly. "And I've realized it's not a contradiction at all. The female and male god are just two sides, like yin and yang. They embody the male and female elements of the one God—at least that's what they believe in my branch of Wicca. Doesn't that correspond to these emanations you write about? The different roles of the divine you can imagine?"

Sieenthal took a sip of lemonade. "That's true," he said. "However, Euródin, Vili, and Vé themselves are by no means just emanations of one and the same world spirit, which is apparently believed in Wicca. They are three real, spiritual entities competing with one

another, and under no circumstances do you simply choose which one you follow or possibly worship all of them at once.”

She looked at him piercingly. “Yes, I understood that already. This soul consecration—I’ve realized I’m a child of Euródin, and, after all, only Europeans practice Wicca. It’s as if we’ve just never said it explicitly and always just talked about ‘God’ in general.” She suddenly seemed tense, which Fortuna also noticed, leaving her lap in irritation and jumping onto a free chair.

Siebenthal nodded. “The thought occurred to me myself some time ago. The Germanic tribes only worshipped Odin in general and not as a European god specifically because they didn’t realize the difference. Even what we call ‘racism’ today could arise only through contact with foreigners, through which people recognized themselves as being different in many respects. Just as children only become aware of their sexuality at a certain age. It is therefore not a step backward in civilization, but part of a maturing process, and Tritheism is the last, decisive step in it.”

His gaze turned to the sea. “If someone had preached to people two thousand years ago that there were three gods for three *Urvölker*, they wouldn’t have understood what he was talking about. Back then, even the neighbors in the next village down the road were considered ‘strangers.’ At most, people were able to think in terms of clans; everything beyond that could happen only unconsciously via the soul and its imprint by its god of consecration. This is probably why Euródin appointed a prophet only now and not a thousand years ago.”

His gaze returned to her. She was still looking at him silently and intensely. “So, you’re professing Euródin?” he asked gravely.

She nodded slowly. “Yes, as I said, I have this feeling inside me that it’s true—whether I want it to be or not.”

“Then you accept the Fifteen Truths and Obligations as well? Loyalty not only to your own god but also to your own people? To me, Wicca seems to be all about the individual and their relationship to the divine. Euródin, on the other hand, always regards the individual as part of his *Urvolk*, with rights, but also duties toward it.”

She shrugged. “If that’s the way it is? By the way, we Wiccans are by no means just egotists. I’ve always stood up for the weak and needy at the university. But Wicca gives me the energy to do it, and isn’t that also a part of the Fifteen Truths and Obligations? The comfort, advice, and strength Euródin can give you?”

Siebenthal nodded again. “That’s absolutely right.”

“And as for those separate *Urvölker*,” she continued, “when we collected donations for poor families with many children or supported the homeless, of course we made no distinction as to skin color. Is that what Euródin wants?” she asked, somewhat embarrassed.

Siebenthal sucked in his breath. “Difficult question. In any case, preference should be given to one’s own, though to what extent is a matter of interpretation. In no case is there a religious duty to help strangers, except as emergency aid in the sense of a right to hospitality—which one would claim for oneself in a comparable situation. If, for example, you were in a lifeboat in which there was still a free seat and only an alien-consecrated, as I call it, was still floating in the water, you should let him into the boat. If a like-consecrated person and an alien-consecrated person were floating in the water at the same time, you would have to rescue the like-consecrated instead of the alien-consecrated. And under no circumstances can an alien-consecrated claim long-term support from Europeans or residence in Europe.”

Kim frowned. “Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about too. For my daddy, he’s a Republican and a Donald Trump supporter, that goes without saying. But my friends and acquaintances at the university, they see it differently and would skin me alive.”

Siebenthal pursed his lips. “But you believe in the three gods and their *Urvölker*? Everything else follows from that, whether you like it or not.”

“Yes, certainly,” she said with some hesitation. “Maybe I just need time to get used to it—because of where I come from.” Suddenly her eyes turned to the ritual table, on which stood a censer, a triangle, and all kinds of other utensils and dishes. “This reminds me: How did you

to come up with all this in the first place? There's nothing about it in your book."

Siebenthal smiled. "That's a long story. Shall we perhaps talk about it over dinner? From sorcerer to sorceress, as it were?"

She smiled, looked at him scrutinizingly, and took her time to answer. Then she said, "Why not?"

Now they were both smiling, and a warm feeling spread through Siebenthal, one that he hadn't known for a long time.

## 68

In Warnemünde—the port and beach district of Rostock and not very far from Boltenhagen—Siebenthal had chosen a fish restaurant he knew well. From their reserved table on the top floor, they enjoyed the view of the harbor and the sea. And it wasn't the only thing he had done to make sure the evening could be, well, a success. It had been years that he had worn one of his investment banker suits, together with an impeccably pressed shirt. His beard was freshly trimmed, and he smelled of an expensive musk shower gel.

Kim had dressed up as well, he remarked approvingly. She was wearing a tubular black dress embroidered with all kinds of magical symbols—like a magician's cloak—but above all, it advertised her form. To go with it, she wore jingling (magical?) earrings, which, she told him, she had made herself, as jewelry design was a hobby of hers that even earned her a little money. Her perfume smelled of herbs, which, like her, exuded an enigmatic magical aura at their table—at least that's how it seemed to Siebenthal, who by now would have followed her to the gates of hell at the snap of a finger. So, who would bewitch whom tonight?

They ordered fish soup as a starter and a fish platter for two as the main course—a calculated move on Siebenthal's part, because that

way they were sharing a plate already, in a manner of speaking. Might more things follow?

Now it was his turn to tell her something about himself. So, he briefly explained his former bread-and-butter profession and what he had been up to since he had given it up. He didn't neglect to mention that he was divorced, which Kim noted with what he hoped was feigned regret. From this rather somber part of his life's journey, he climbed the ever-brighter heights, which led him to the dream of the drawing and the revelations; then to meeting Armin and his most remarkable daughter; and from there to finding the original of the drawing in a vacation home. The preliminary highlight was gathering his first apostles and the forthcoming ceremonial founding of the Root Chapter of the Church of Euródin.

"Incidentally, we make a point of using English terms right from the start," he explained. "We have nothing to do with the kind of German jingoism some simpletons bawl about here. That sort of thing gives Him the shivers." He took a sip of white wine, fittingly a Chablis and not a Riesling. In the world where He felt most at home, the wine came from Gaul—and the corkscrew from Germania.

"We will soon be opening a religious center, perhaps very close by," he continued. "We don't have any concerns about money for now. Armin and his brother have sold their family business and are using the proceeds to support the common cause." He didn't bother to mention the name, as he didn't presume that the fame of NEMAS had reached Dallas, where Kim came from.

So, he ended his report and looked at her with the proud smile of a schoolboy who had brought home an A in a class test and reported it to his mother with the expectation of due praise.

Indeed, he exclaimed: "That's great! Awesome! To be honest, I thought you were more something of a hermit. And now you already have a following!"

"Yes," he said. "I guess I'm now what they call a high priest in Wicca, or *high lord of the cult*, as we say. By the way, I plan to have every Chapter run jointly by a man and a woman—a *high lady of the cult*—like you do in Wicca. That's the only sensible thing to do."

Kim leaned forward toward him so that the scent of her magic perfume filled his lungs. “And do you already have such a *high lady of the cult*?” she asked playfully.

“No, not yet,” he said, losing himself in those deep-green eyes. “I’m still accepting applications.”

They exchanged a long look, and Siebenthal had to force himself to hold back his hand, which desperately wanted to touch her long, slender fingers wrapped around the stem of her wine glass.

Until dessert, Kim told him a few more things about herself. Her career plans—museum curator, journalist, novelist, or “housewife and mother”—all sounded vague to his ears and at the same time open to many things. Theologically, they debated a little about the transmigration of souls, which played a major role in Wicca, but, to his knowledge, was not practiced at least by Euródin. How, anyway, were the gods supposed to equip the skulls of seven or eight billion people—who could still follow the count—from a tiny bunch of primordial humans whose souls were constantly being reborn? That would be tantamount to the miraculous multiplication of bread in the Bible. Besides, as far as he knew, it was beautiful up there. Why would she want to leave the “summer land,” as it was called in Wicca, after a short stay in order to undergo the winterly hardship of a new birth and a new life?

When he asked the waiter to bring the bill, she insisted on paying half, despite his protests. While they were enjoying the rest of their wine, he finally brought up the subject that had been hovering unspoken over their heads all the time.

“You said the other day you needed to think about the whole thing a bit more,” he said. “Now, could you imagine joining us?”

She finished the rest of her glass before looking at him seriously and saying: “I am now convinced it’s true. Also, that it’s my path, my mission. In my own way, I’m just as much a seeker as you are, I’ve realized that by now. But I’m not the flower girl. If I’m in it, then only as a high priestess—or *high lady of the cult*, as you say.”

He didn’t have to think about it for long. Even if she hadn’t completely captivated him, who else was there to choose from? An English teacher, a former secretary, a lesbian accountant with a somewhat



harsh charm, and four— while being lovely and energetic—a bit too young girls. He was also sure by now that Euródin had sent Kim to him. How could he possibly refuse this gift?

“That’s no problem at all,” he said consequently. “I don’t know who would be better suited.” He then pursed his lips. “However, I won’t hide the fact that we’ll be controversial, at least in Germany. You can imagine why.”

“You mean the anti-*Nazis* could shoot me?”

“*Antifa*,” he corrected. “Well, we’re not quite there yet. But a few barbecue lighters might end up on your car tires, or, if you’re unlucky, your head might make acquaintance with a club on the street at night.”

Kim pulled down dismissively the corners of her mouth. “Daddy taught me to shoot, you know,” she said. “We have a whole arsenal at home.”

“Good for you,” he commented. “One of my brethren, a young girl, is a gun nut, too. I’m sure she’d love to talk shop with you. One more thing: for the time being, at least, we’ll be operating from Germany. Naturally, our high priestess should be on-site, at least most of the time . . .”

“That’s no problem,” she said. “As you say, for now. In five years, you’ll be moving your outfit to the US—I make that prediction that to you even as a non-prophetess. To Texas, for example. I’m sure Daddy can find us a perfect ranch there. But the vibes are better here for your project. Euródin splashes out of every wave of the Baltic Sea, then those old cult sites, that all makes sense.”

“The genius loci,” he confirmed. In this respect, he could certainly agree with all the New Age’s talk of energies and vibrations. “Shall we take off, then?”

Downstairs in front of the restaurant, she seemed to remember something: “By the way, there’s another thing I’d like to show you. It’s my ‘Book of Shadows’—an important part of my, well, spiritual development so far. I have it in my vacation apartment.”

“‘Book of Shadows,’” he repeated, duly impressed. “I certainly don’t want to miss out on that.”

They blinked at each other, blushing together.

It turned out to be a kind of magical diary and contained rituals, incantations, herbal recipes, and other things, including her own spiritual experiences, with all kinds of magical symbols in the margins and blank pages at the end.

"I copied it from my mom while she was initiating me and wrote it down by hand. That's how you do it," she explained. She sat next to him on the couch while he, feigning amazement, leafed through it like a poetry album. Luckily, she didn't expect him to contribute any entries of his own.

After awhile, she smirked, took it from him, and clapped it shut. "You don't have to pretend that you care. Basically, it's all nonsense. But there *is* something that could be important for you: it's called the Great Ritual."

"Oh?"

"The union of high priest and high priestess," she said, placing a hand on his thigh, letting a tingling sensation run through him.

"Do you do that with light or without?"

"Without," she said and switched off the lamp next to him so that only a faint glow from the streetlight filtering through the blinds illuminated the living room.

He was ready for a magical night.

## 69

What had come to pass in the three months since Grandma Beata's funeral, apart from Hamburg's typically drizzly weather and my involuntary confinement as an inmate of the GSH? For me, but also for the other pioneers of the Profession? Well, quite a lot.

There was a date in May for Dad and Vic's wedding, and we had decided in the meantime to give away or throw away Mom's things.

After all, Vic couldn't be expected to come across the legacy of her deceased predecessor in the bedroom closet or the bathroom. We had turned Mom's former office into a general one, because for the time being our home was the control center of the Church of Euródin, which we now always abbreviated to C.O.E.

In addition, the house was akin to a building site because not only was the attic being remodeled but also Uncle Jochen had insisted on securing the property with cameras, motion detectors, and a video doorbell system. These measures were the first commission for his newly established security tech and personal protection company. Lamentably, my suggestion to also set up a panic room in the basement was rejected.

Uncle Jochen wasn't the only one who had founded a company. Dad had noted down the phone numbers of several design engineers and skilled workers at NEMAS before he finally left. In the meantime, he was also the proud owner of a former shipyard site in Wismar, as location of a future *Flipper* production facility. He would have loved to set up the model of the prototype from his office in our living room, but the household's three-quarter-female majority would hear none of it. Now the funny thing was cluttering up the garage, and Wenna and I had to wriggle past it when we went to get our bikes.

Our new Anna was named Martha, who was Polish, too, and had joined us upon Anna's recommendation. She was thorough and could cook well, but was, unfortunately, not as cheerful and easy-going but rather grumpy and complaining.

Jochen and Cordula, spurred on by Dad and Vic, had made plans to get married too. A double wedding was envisaged, paying off Siebenthal's newly developed Marriage Rite straight away. He was already back at the drawing board to tackle the next rite, for what tended be the outcome a marriage. Cordu was expecting, which, in turn, fired Vic and Dad's ambitions, as they were desperate to have a child together too. But Jochen, after all, had a few months' head start, and Cordu was younger.

Legal-Fritz was now the official legal advisor of the Mette Weskamp Foundation, which, in turn, provided all services for the C.O.E.

The latter was formally as assetless and penniless as the proverbial church mouse; a precaution in the event of an association ban by the authorities, which was always to be reckoned with in our lovely, free country. Because Friedrich still had to take care of his old mandates, he would continue to live in Hamburg for the time being, even if the C.O.E. moved somewhere else.

Goldmarie was the newly appointed CFO of not only the Mette Weskamp Foundation but also of Dad's and Uncle Jochen's private companies. As long as she was still officially with NEMAS, she worked for us only on a day-to-day basis in my mother's former office. When she was here, she fascinated me with stories about her adventurous life. Among other things, she scuba dived and had a pilot's license. She would be able to teach me a lot.

Her son, Hallgrimm, a blond athlete with not only well-developed arms but also a handsomely furnished roof section, was now one of our regular guests. He was, of course, every girl's crush, and at the age of sixteen, allegedly had a girlfriend. Yet that didn't stop him from casting covetous glances at Sephine when he met her at my place.

Which brings us to the matter of the String Quartet. The rumors circulating around the school about the ritual in the school basement hadn't reached the ears of the Buchets or the Yefremenkos. So, it had brought about neither groundings nor contact bans. Everything went on as usual, and my friends took part eagerly in the preparations for the upcoming big founding ritual of the Root Chapter. For example, we sewed the vestments for ourselves and the priesthood. Of course, Sephine and Marina would also be taking part in this day of days, in the disguise of making a harmless pleasure trip to the beach.

And yet there was a hint of farewell hovering above us. In about a year's time, the C.O.E., and therefore me, too, would move to its new home in idyllic Bad Doberan, near the Baltic Sea, and by then the Profession would hopefully have become a household name—or at least a name accursed by the hateful leftist press. Even if Sephine and Marina could still travel to me, their parents would most certainly not let them. "*Spiel nicht mit den Schmuddelkindern*"—"Don't Play with the Filthy Kids" was the ironic title of a German song from the 1960s. But unlike back then, it wasn't the children of the poor and un-

educated that the better part of society should stay clear of, as they would of lepers, but those of the political Right.

While I was hardly worried about Sephine, Marina was a different case. She had been part of something for the first time in her life, and she adored Siebenthal and Euródin fervently, not to say fanatically. The prospect that the String Quartet and the Church of Euródin might soon be history for her sent her into a panic. She even suggested that Dad should adopt her. She claimed that her parents had never loved her anyway—which wasn't true at all, as I knew from my visits to her home. Well, what was I supposed to do? There was no point in mourning the misfortune before it had even happened. So, we just carried on.

I showed the three of them the plans for our religious center and home on the outskirts of Bad Doberan, as if it were their future home too. It had been chosen for several reasons, the first being its proximity to the Baltic Sea—which was vital for Siebenthal—and to the flashy beach resorts of Kühlungsborn and Heiligendamm. Secondly, because it featured a high school for Wenna and me (I rolled my eyes when Dad mentioned it), and with Rostock, a big city—and incidentally Cordula's hometown—lay nearby. Reason number three: the property featured an easily monitored driveway, was secluded and enclosed, and would therefore present uninvited guests a sizable nut to crack. The complex was to contain several residential buildings and a janitor's apartment, an administration building, a guesthouse, a training and conference center, and, at my urgent request, something useful in the basement other than a sauna and a swimming pool: namely, a shooting range. A dog kennel was planned, too; Wenna and I wanted to train Dobermans there, since Newton had proved to be a hopeless dreamer and pacifist who wouldn't even bite the postman in the leg. The icing on the cake would be the on-site helipad (there wasn't enough space for a full runway)—a playground for our air-worthy Goldmarie and part of our extraction plan, as you would call it in the military. For, as they say, if you tell the truth, you need a fast horse. Or wings.

But back to more pleasant matters. In the meantime, Siebenthal had a jewelry designer make us silver amulets in the shape of the

Covenant Sign. He then engraved them with the respective names and dates of the Covenant Rite, as our counterpart to Holy Communion would be called, plus serial numbers. This number he entered together with the name in a file for all future adepts he called the Covenant Roll. Together with the place where the covenant was made and the name of the swearing priest, the pendant would serve as a kind of membership card. We girls were to receive the prestigious numbers one to four in recognition of our invaluable services to the Profession.

Finally, we needed something to wear for the big ritual. While proper middle-class clothing was deemed sufficient for the commoners—suit and tie for the gentleman, skirt or pants and blouse for the lady—the vestments, which the four of us diligently sewed, were intended for us *cult aids* and the priesthood. We girls would wear ankle-length white robes, green fabric belts, and a green cape sporting the Covenant Sign in gold.

The *lord of the cult*, Siebenthal, was to wear a shirt, white trousers, and a blue leather belt in a snake-ribbon pattern. In addition, he would don a dark-blue cloak with the same gold-colored Covenant Sign. A black lacquered staff made of mulberry wood with a stylized ash leaf made of brass—somewhat reminiscent of a bishop’s crozier but referred to by us as the Merlin’s Staff—served as expression of his special dignity.

That left the *lady of the cult*. Like us *cult aids*, she would also wear a long, white robe, only her cape and fabric belt were red. On top of that, she was to wear a headband (like I wore in the school basement, but custom-made and definitely *not* ordered from the Internet) with a stylized silver Yggdrasil.

So, we knew how our high priestess would be clothed. But who would she actually be? The rumor mill had been churning for weeks because Siebenthal was as tight-lipped as an oyster. Finally, the day came, it was a bright Sunday afternoon, when Kimberley Jones, a mature twenty-four years old, high priestess of Wicca and—to Siebenthal’s firm will—our future *high lady of the cult* and all-mother, let our humble dwelling glow in the light of her brilliance.

We were all dazzled, some enraptured, others more like motorists blinded by oncoming headlights at night; and whether it was one or the other also seemed to depend on the gender of the observer.

Siebenthal raved about the UCA doctoral student's alleged scientific achievements as if she were one of the leading scholars of Western civilization. He was completely besotted, and it was as clear as day that the two of them were now sharing more than just table and altar. Even Dad rushed to remove a cat's hair from the seat of the armchair intended for the Anointed—as it turned out, an utterly useless feat. Because as soon as she had sat down in her black sixties retro dress embroidered with hypnotizing white spirals, Odysseus, being a male, jumped into her lap as if on cue and spread his fur around. You could imagine the other adult men in the room being envious.

Uncle Jochen, once the proud commander of a warship, clicked his heels (figuratively speaking) in her presence like an army recruit in front of a visiting four-star general—and wasn't it true that the German armed forces, the Bundeswehr, wouldn't even survive a barroom brawl without the help of the Americans? Friedrich reacted with longing and melancholy, as if in his dreams such a graceful beauty would just choose a brave knight of the legal order like him. Or perhaps she would bring her mysterious friend Greta over one day? What Legal-Fritz overlooked: beautiful girls usually team up with ugly ones. My bosom friendship with Sephine was just the exception that proved the rule.

And the ladies of the Profession? Cordula was above all things relieved that Kim was involved with Siebenthal. If the American were unattached, blood and thunder would reign in the Root Chapter. Vic was disappointed because she had secretly hoped to become high priestess and thus first lady of the Profession. But once she was done crying quietly all over her pillow at night, she would come to realize that she was much better suited to making a cozy nest for Dad, Wenna, and me. Was it true what they said about witches handling cauldrons better than saucepans? Goldmarie, for her part, watched all the excitement with amused detachment. Kim didn't seem to be her type, and naturally she wasn't worried she might steal her husband away.

And Wenna and me? It was made very clear to us who from now on would whistle and who would run. We, the proud heroines of the first hour, who had made the first breaches for the Profession with blood, sweat, and tears—literally at the risk of our lives (mine, at least)—were sent to the kitchen like maids to fetch fresh coffee for our distinguished visitor.

Even Newton licked our new mistress's fingers and whimpered submissively. He had run over to her with flying colors.

The only one who still had to pass judgment on the newcomer was the stone. If it were possible to soften one, Kim would certainly be the one to do it. When they opened the chest, and with much ado, showed it to her, she touched it for a moment with her eyes closed, seeming to search for mysterious energy beams and establish a spiritual connection with it. I nearly thought I perceived a glow that now surrounded it.

It almost seemed as if Kim were indeed brewing magic potions, as much as she denied it. You had to admit, she was young, she was beautiful, she was intelligent, she was majestic, and she possessed a magical aura, whether by birth or thanks to her witchcraft training. Moreover, Siebenthal was too practical minded not to appreciate the advantage of having an American on board his ship of faith and thus a foot in the door to the most important part of Euródin's *Urvolk*. Not to mention the advantages for him personally.

So, the sun rose for the Profession, and we little gray mice scurried around under it, startled and blinking into the burning light. But for the next three weeks, until shortly before the Covenant Rite, we would fall back into darkness again, because during that time, we learned, she and her friend would be exploring archaeological sites—not riding on a broom, but quite ordinary by rental car.

Now we had to wait and see how Siebenthal's wunderkind would prove herself out there in the harsh reality. Would she maintain her gracious composure when the bullets from the Left whizzed over our heads? But these were black thoughts for later times.

For the moment, we were eagerly looking forward to the big day.



Siebenthal had chosen March 20, the date of this year's spring equinox, as the day of the Ur-Covenant Rite. The day on which light and shadow balanced each other out, but the light grew, and the darkness receded: this was the message we were sending out to ourselves but also to our European sisters and brothers, even if they didn't hear us yet. At the same time, it was the day of Ostara in the Germanic religion and in Wicca—and of our future Freya's festival.

Once again, the venue would be the beach below the Boltenhagen cliffs—which brought back nostalgic memories for me, Wenna, Sephine, and Marina. Almost exactly a half year ago, we had stood here together at our first impromptu ritual with flower petals and cherry juice; a humble beginning that had set off the chain of events that brought us here today for the second time.

We weren't the only ones on the beach this time, as we walked in our vestments in a procession from Siebenthal's house westward to the cliffs in the early afternoon. But we didn't mind the astonished looks from the other beachgoers. I held proudly the bowl of blood, which this time came from a bull and not a pig. We didn't call it sacrificial blood, but Consecration Blood, because the lifeblood of the such-honored animal on our foreheads would consummate the marriage of the divine with nature and at the same time seal the covenant between us and our God.

Wenna waved the censer, which spread amber and herbal vapors, Sephine carried the tray with the covenant pendants, and Marina the drinking horn for the final Sumbel. The four of us walked directly behind Siebenthal and Kim, with the rest of the small congregation following us.

A folding table that we had set up before served as an altar. We placed everything there, and Siebenthal used his compass to point us in a northerly direction, with everyone looking for a reasonably safe and dry spot amidst the rocks and the surf. We expected Kim, majestically dressed in her priestly vestment, to strike the triangle to officially begin the ritual.

But after Siebenthal had stowed away the compass, he stuck the Merlin's Staff in the sand and pulled a bundle of index cards out of a trouser pocket. He cleared his throat, read the contents of the first card, and said, looking at us, in turn:

"Dear fellow sisters and brothers! We have gathered here today to fulfill the Ur-Covenant between our God and our people, represented by these twelve individuals here: Kimberley, Victoria, Cordula, Marie-Louise, Anngrit, Josephine, Morwenna, Marina, Armin, Jochen, Friedrich, and myself. Before we seal the covenant with blood and mead and through an offering to our Soul Father, I want to outline our situation, to sketch out what we have to do—and what it is our duty to refrain from doing."

He paused briefly before continuing: "First of all, we cannot help but realize that we, as a community of people of European descent, are facing an immeasurable work of destruction today, its origins lying in the spread of Christianity—in truth the outdated religion of the African god—in Europe. Initially, this alien faith brought considerable advantages to our people. Through its ties with the Roman Empire, it combined the Christian idea of salvation with the discipline, written culture, bureaucratic competence, and universal orientation of the Romans. It was the scriptural religion of the Bible that enabled the breakthrough of book printing and thus the scientific revolution, and it was monasteries, which gave rise to the first schools and universities. And finally, it was the conviction that we are all a community of Christians that, despite all the later bitter confessional wars, enabled the creation of civilizational entities going beyond clan and tribe—first in the form of medieval empires and later as nation-states.

"However, as we know today, this culture and community building Christian religion also covertly harbored the self-destructive seed of universalism from the very beginning: the mistaken belief that we are all children of the same god first led to the denial of our own true god in the forms of Zeus, Jupiter, Teutates, and Odin. Later, it led to the conviction that all people have the same rights, whether they are our relatives, the brothers and sisters of our own people, or complete strangers. Finally, it led, as we must painfully experience today, to the

complete negation of our own identity and the intrinsic value it represents.

“Although not initially visible to everyone, human equality has intrinsically always been woven into the Christian faith and was later preserved by the philosophers of the Enlightenment for the age of science. When virgin births, a creation of the world in six days, and finally the idea of God itself were no longer compatible with the scientific worldview, what was formerly an equality of all men before God was smugly transformed to the status of an irrefutable and undeniable natural right.

“The philosophers debating in Parisian and London coffeehouses were probably hardly aware of the ultimate consequences of their reasonings. The magnanimously declared freedom of religion, for example, actually served to pacify the inter-Christian confessional wars that ravaged Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and not to benefit Islam. When people then thought of human equality, they did not even have women in mind, let alone foreigners in distant parts of the world, but only Europeans.

“But the seeds had been sown and the wheel of progress began to turn relentlessly, with the first climax in the French Revolution and the last one for the time being in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1949. The age of modernity that set in afterward, with its mobility and communication possibilities, with foreigners having their rights guaranteed by constitutions, international treaties, and their ‘liberal’ judicial interpretation, finally made possible the new mass migration of foreign peoples we are experiencing to this day. And this is nothing less than the epitome of the first of the three crises we are suffering from: namely, the crisis of our identity. We no longer know where we come from, who we are, and where we should go.”

Siebethal paused and looked around his small congregation. Pulling out a new card, he continued: “And something else, something fundamental, was beginning to emerge here, which was already laid out in Christianity, too: until now, people had regarded themselves as members of a community with a common destiny whose foundations had been laid by their own ancestors and whose legacy they had

to preserve, multiply and pass on to their own descendants. But just as Jesus contemptuously said we should give to Caesar that—unimportant—which is Caesar's and to God that—important—which is God's, Christianity forged a direct bond between the individual and his god. Salvation did not lie in the community and its common worship of the common god, but in maintaining a private relationship with the Creator. This, the Christian God, linked the reward of eternal life to doing as much good as possible to other individuals in the form of brotherly love and mercy, but not to the unappreciated emperor and thus to the state or the community.

“However, if salvation is only that of one's own soul and does not lie as well in the prosperity and future of the community, it follows logically that the state and thus the community are no longer an end in themselves but only a means to an end: namely, the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number, as the self-proclaimed Enlightenment thinkers called it. This pursuit of happiness is then the noblest right of the individual and at the same time the only guideline for any state action. And isn't it tempting when philosophers, politicians, and legal scholars confirm to me that I mainly have rights, and my only duty is not to harm my neighbor?

“But who will be surprised if the unbridled individualism and egoism that must break out as a result leads to the first gradual, then increasingly accelerating decline of the community? For some, the pursuit of happiness means ‘beautifying’ other people's property with graffiti. For others, it means relying on state donations as long as the work on offer seems too unworthy, too strenuous, or poorly paid. And for still others, it means no longer bringing expensive and time-consuming children into the world because their own prosperity and self-expression are more important to them.

“Thus, the promise of individual salvation of Christianity and the philosophy of the Enlightenment slowly but inevitably leads to decline, to decadence, and to the second and third crises alongside the identity crisis: that is, the ochlocratic crisis of the incessantly proliferating welfare state and the demographic crisis brought about by the lack of children. And all three crises, it should be emphasized in conclusion, are rooted in one and the same misconception: that only the

individual has intrinsic value, but not the community to which he or she belongs.

“We, however, my dear fellow sisters and brothers, know that we would not be without our ancestors, and our descendants will not be without us. And we know that without the sacrifices we make for the community, not only will our civilization blow away without a trace as dust in the universe, but we will also incur the wrath of our God. At the end of our journey, He will not ask us, ‘What have you done for your neighbor and therefore for any homo sapiens?’ Instead, He will ask us, ‘What have you done for your own people and therefore my family?’”

Sieenthal paused again before continuing. “But what, my dears, does this mean for us? Certainly, we must set a good example, promote the community in every possible way, and bring sufficient offspring into the world. And we must spread the message of our God and encourage others to join us and thus their Soul Father. But should we also try to change the prevailing system in His and our interest by participating in political competition or by simply overthrowing it?”

The latter caused a ripple of unrest among us, and Sieenthal waited until it had subsided. “Even if some people don’t want to hear it,” he continued, “I say no! We should not and must not do this! The Soul Father has assigned us the task of preserving and increasing our people in the form of our community of Professants—what I call the Inner State—and leaving the Outer State to its inevitable doom. The processes of increasing senescence, softening, and decay have gone too far to be stopped and reversed, be it by a majority of the parliament or a military junta or an angry mob. Ragnarök is necessary and inevitable, and only on the ashes of its fire will we build our new empire—perhaps in a few decades or in a hundred years. No one knows.

“This fire does not have to be extinguished by us, but it must not be started by us, either. Not to protect ourselves from state persecution and social ostracism, but because any energy we invest in the terminally ill patient is wasted on nurturing the new thing that we need to cultivate within ourselves.

“We want to be,” he exclaimed, fixing his gaze on us, “a community of families in solidarity with one another, with many children,

who grow up to be intelligent, educated, capable, and committed to the European cause. We want to be a community that reaches out to its fellow Europeans all over the world, that unites Euródin's *Urvolk* in the vision of living peacefully and brotherly in one state and in communion with our God one day.

"Finally, we want to be a community promoting science and technology instead of viewing them with suspicion, so that one day, under the guidance of our Soul Father, we can conquer new worlds in the universe, if not the universe itself."

Siebenthal stretched out an arm and called out with a raised finger: "Dear sisters and brothers! As this last-mentioned goal shows, if we can preserve even just an ember core amid all the inevitable decline, then Europe is by no means at an end, as many think today. No, its future has not even begun!"

Siebenthal let this settle before continuing: "There is no reason for defeatism; leave that to those others. Instead, get to work calmly and cheerfully, but do not waste your strength fighting against a system that is doomed to die anyway. Therefore, to conclude my speech, I will make the following amendment to the Fifteen Truths and Obligations to which we presently will all commit ourselves: 'I vow to abide by the laws of the Outer State and will not use violence, except for self-preservation, until Ragnarök.'"

Siebenthal lowered his set of notes and tucked it away in his trouser pocket. He looked at us expectantly and was initially met with stunned silence. Even though he had taught us his doctrine of the Inner and Outer State before, the amendment probably surprised everyone. But eventually we all applauded, and his tension eased visibly.

He gave Kim a sign, and she struck the triangle twice, then called out to the Father of Souls: "Hail Euródin, guardian of our souls and keeper of our salvation! We have gathered here today to profess the Fifteen Truths and Obligations revealed to us by Brother Gerold, your prophet."

Siebenthal now shouted with a thunderous voice: "Since the dawn of time, these three gods have existed in the universe: Euródin and the alien gods Vili and Vé!"

"We profess it," we replied loudly and resolutely.

“They are beings of pure spirit and have created neither the universe nor life; yet they consecrate the souls of the peoples they have adopted, here on earth as everywhere.”

“We profess it!”

“On earth, Vili consecrates the souls of those we call Africans, Vé the souls of those we call Asians, and Euródin those of our people, the Europeans.”

“We profess it!”

“Euródin will consecrate the souls of my offspring only if the soul of my mate is consecrated by Him as well or not at all. That is why I shall not father children with those of alien gods.”

“We profess it!”

“After my death, my consecrated soul will be kept by the Valkyries and taken to Valhalla, where the Soul Father will judge it according to my deeds in life.”

“We profess it!”

“If I have led a proper life, my soul will be able to dwell in a state of peace and happiness in His spirit for as long as it wishes.”

“We profess it!”

“If I have led an evil life, my soul will have to atone for my deeds in Helheim as long as it deems just to Him.”

“We profess it!”

“After death, the souls of those consecrated by the alien gods go to places in their own spirit, remote from Valhalla. The souls of the unconsecrated wither and fade away.”

“We profess it!”

“Through my consecrated soul, Euródin can bestow me with strength, courage, wisdom, and serenity, provided I listen to Him. But I alone am responsible for my deeds.”

“We profess it!”

“The gods are only able to affect the souls they have consecrated. They cannot influence matter and cannot perform miracles or magic. That is why I must never ask Euródin to do so.”

“We profess it!”

“I can ask Him for leniency and support for others; for myself, I shall ask only for what He is able to do and what is due to me or what

benefits His people.”

“We profess it!”

“All those whose soul He has consecrated are my sisters and brothers, whom I am to love, protect, and keep, provided they profess their faith in Him.”

“We profess it!”

“I owe allegiance to Him and His people. I must never betray either of them in favor of the alien gods and their peoples.”

“We profess it!”

“Furthermore, I owe to preserve and multiply His people until Ragnarök, after which we will create a new world. Then we and He will be one, and all strife will end.”

“We profess it!”

“Those whose souls are consecrated by an alien god or no god may be our guests, but never part of our covenant.”

“We profess it!”

Siebenthal paused, exhausted. Finally, he added: “Furthermore, I vow to abide by the laws of the Outer State and will not use violence, except for self-preservation, until Ragnarök.”

“We swear it!”

Kim drew the Covenant Sign on Siebenthal’s forehead with a brush and the blood and said solemnly: “This seals the covenant between our brother Gerold and You and Your people.” She took the pendant intended for him from the tray and hung it around his neck.

Siebenthal then painted the sign on Kim’s forehead and put the pendant on her. After the two had sworn in each other, he gave us *cult aids* a sign. From now on, it was our task to have the bowl of blood and the tray of pendants ready. One by one, he drew the sign on our foreheads, sealed the covenant with the formula, and Kim handed over the pendant.

Finally, Siebenthal took the drinking horn with the mead and tipped the *Minneschluck* for Euródin into the sea, which immediately accepted it and washed it away. One after the other, we took a sip, this time without words, because everything had been said.

Kim ended the ritual with a single triangle strike, and we bowed to our God one last time with our hands on our hearts.



We all looked pensively out to sea, full of uncertainty, but also eagerly awaiting what the future would bring for us and our people. In the morning, the Baltic Sea had been choppy, as we had noticed during our preparations. But now it lay before us as smooth as glass.

“Even the sea is so peaceful all of a sudden,” Vic said, echoing my thoughts.

Siebenthal smiled indulgently. “Those who trust the sea don’t know it,” he replied.

Then he looked at us, in turn, intensely. “The storms, they are coming. Get ready!