

# PANDEAE WILD CARD

The dream of eternal youth

Narration and report by  
Michael Nitsche

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## PANDEAE I

### The dream of eternal youth

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*Translated from German into English by DeepL.*

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## PROLOG

Laziness, greed and fear explain the development of people and from this results their striving for comfort, prosperity and security. But paradoxically, this very striving of people also generates the forces that destroy it again. Thus civilizations rise and fall, an eternal cycle that never seems to end.

But all eternity is a chimera and the bottlenecks in evolution, the genetic bottlenecks, are fragile in a final, apocalyptic decline of humanity. No fantastic future, no transhumanist age, but an age of darkness and slow decay are the result.

The universe seems to have lost its last hope. Can the wild card of evolution bring a turnaround?

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# 1 Post-Apocalypse



On one of the last mild autumn days, as Thomas was splitting the previously sawn wood with a hatchet, two men - or were they women? - appeared at the edge of the forest. The forest had already advanced far towards his house in recent years, so that he only noticed them very late.

Quickly he ran into the house. They had already noticed him, however. In the upper floor he tore the crossbow from the wall, plus a small bird crossbow that could be operated with one hand, cocked both and put on the razor-sharp hunting bolts.

What did they want?

Seeking cover, the two crept up to the house.

*Do they have a firearm?"* thought Thomas and cold sweat ran down his back.

They had actually put Thomas in an awkward shooting position. To aim, he would have had to lean out the window with his bulky crossbow. The distance was too great for the bird crossbow.

The two seemed to be discussing with each other and then they got louder. Thomas could hear from the muffled voices that they had to be men.

*They're fighting,* Thomas noted. Years ago, he had always been lucky and had been spared wandering hordes of marauding young men. The former village had always been very remote.

Then suddenly one of the men shouted: "We need help. We don't have any weapons! Can you help us, we saw you."

It sounded very desperate. Was this part of their ploy? Thomas wasn't sure and kept silent.

The two talked again from behind their cover, then the same voice spoke up, "We need meds - can you help us?"

"Come forward - hands up!" ordered Thomas as if out of reflex, and he was about to take it back.

The two stepped out from behind the stone wall with their hands up. One of them couldn't quite bring his right arm up; it was bandaged.

"We need antibiotics urgently. He has gangrene in his arm".

Thomas eyed the two. One was already older and somewhat smaller, with white hair, the other with the bandaged arm perhaps in his early 50s, his hair hanging down in unkempt strands on the left and right sides of his head. The clothes were torn off and both looked as starved with their long beards as two pilgrims on their way through the desert to Mecca.

"Who are you? Where are you from?"

The elder didn't answer the question, he seemed exasperated.

Groaning, the younger man spoke up, dropping his arms and his question sounding like the ultimate last, "Can you help me?"

Inside Thomas, his brain was working at full speed. Was it dangerous to get involved with these two? Did they really need help or were they setting him up? Even if they were setting him up, didn't it kind of matter? How high was the risk for him? Obviously, the two of them were taking a high risk as well.

He looked at her again.

"Show me your arm!"

The younger man unwrapped him and Thomas could see for himself the reality of the final stage of this body part.

"I'm coming down." Thomas put down his crossbow, locked the room as a precaution, and went downstairs. The two men were father and son, who had lived like him in an old house somewhere, as they informed him briefly.

The arm was beyond saving. Something had to be done immediately. Thomas remembered a movie that contained very realistic scenes from the 18th century and suggested sawing the arm off immediately. The two had no choice.

Thomas found a few more penicillin tablets.

Bert, his father, held Kevin down, who had swallowed some pain pills and had a wooden gag put in his mouth.

Thomas tied the upper arm tightly just below the shoulder and began to saw. Hot oil was ready on the stove.

Bert kept his eyes closed almost the whole time. Only Kevin moaned, always threatening to pass out. The sounds of the saw as it reached the bone made Kevin faint with a groan. Bert immediately straightened him up and splashed cold water on his face.

Thomas marveled at himself, he had never done anything like this before. He was aware that his little knowledge could be fatal to Kevin. But what role did death even play anymore? Why were they trying to survive? When had the critical point been reached and the survival instinct suddenly turned into the death instinct? Why hadn't that point been reached long ago?

Thomas acted out of the motive of hopelessness, which always made a last attempt expedient, for a hundred per cent probability of anything was rare, even in the face of death.

Thomas poured some of the boiling hot oil over the wound and with needle and thread he roughly sewed the skin together over the bone stump.

Kevin got the first penicillin tablet, the expiration date of which was years ago.

After three days Kevin was 'out of the woods' and his arm stump began to heal.

Thomas went hunting with Bert now and found it quite good not to be alone anymore. If he heard voices now, it was either Bert or Kevin and not those of his lonely brain. The two of them were trying to make themselves useful. Thomas learned that they had been tracked down in their den and were to be rehabilitated. The only way they could save themselves was to escape, but they lost their homemade hunting weapons in the process and Kevin got the bullet wound in his arm.

*Why are they as brainwashed as I am, Thomas thought, and not trade this miserable life for the sedate and statistically longer life of a eunuch in the new human society? What kind of irrational pride was that, to die as a man, as perhaps one of the last men here somewhere in the wilderness?*

The wilderness offered little comfort now. Canned food reserves had long since run out, and daily meals consisted of cabbage, grain meal, turnips, and venison, plus some variety from the garden, at least in the warmer seasons.

*Soon we'll have to tan the hides,* Thomas thought as he handed out the last of the clothing to Bert and Kevin.

Kevin did the cooking as best he could with his remaining arm and was always scowling when the other two went hunting.

There were still a few bottles of wine in the cellar, which were further decimated on special occasions. One such occasion was the successful operation on Kevin's gangrene. There were still enough apple trees and from the apples collected by the three of them a wine matured in old bulbous glass vats.

The cider was also urgently needed to bring some relaxation at least in the evening. The mood between Bert and Kevin worsened from day to day. Kevin, at the beginning of his midlife crisis, didn't want to understand that his current life should already be the final state. He rambled on about robbing a woman and starting a family in the wilderness further north. Bert then declared him mad. Although he would have liked grandchildren, too. Bert always considered himself fond of children, even at a time when there were more animal lovers than child lovers and children interfered with everything, careers, vacations and leisure. Demands for all-day care for the brood were increasingly heard by the politicians of the day, and were soon introduced across the board in Western industrialized nations.

Then again Kevin blamed his father that he would now perish miserably here as a cripple, as he called himself. Bert howled silently to himself and thought more and more about suicide. Thomas had to intervene and placate more often. Once, when he came back from fetching wood from the shed, he had to stop Kevin from going after Bert with the knife.

Winter now always came very quickly at the beginning of November. The climate had stabilized within ten years after the previous dramatic rise. The devastating storms had become much fewer and the winters kept their persistently low temperatures until spring.

The hunt in deep permafrost and a snow cover of half a meter was difficult and every day the traps had to be run. Cabbage and turnips would have brought Thomas through the winter but not Bert and Kevin. What remained was the meat of the wild animals and that was not in abundance in winter. The resin of the trees and blackberry leaves served as meager supplements. Cider gave some comfort in the evenings, but even that soon had to be rationed.

Christmas, that ancient festival of hope for the end of winter, was approaching. In past years Thomas had always formed a small supply of hazelnuts, dried apples and pears into a patty with coarsely ground rye seeds and baked it. So it was this time also. Candles were long gone. What remained was the constantly sooting and smoking pine chip.

With a lot of effort Bert had set up an open fireplace with a working flue in a room on the ground floor. There they met now in the last days before Christmas with a glass of the cider, which so slowly increased its alcohol percentage.

Bert was 65 years old and sometimes memories rose up in him that produced strange images. He saw himself sitting at the computer again, roaming through forests, canyons and abandoned old temples, hunting for the flesh of strange animals and constantly on the lookout for trolls or skeletons with swords that would suddenly emerge from caves and pounce on him without warning. He didn't care much for the detective stories his wife watched on TV almost every night, preferring to go off as a lone hunter and fulfill the orders of the mages or the king in his fantastic cyberworld. Playing on the computer had been a balance for him. Out of laziness, as he always called it himself, he had learned the profession of a carpenter, but had dropped out because of the low pay and since then had tried to keep his head above water with repairs and support for women who had problems with the computer. The wife and mother had run away from Bert and Kevin and their shared computer mania when Kevin was just 13 years old.

*What irony of fate,* thought Bert, *when one still has to experience all this in bitter reality, what was so fascinating as a game. Was it perhaps this, this eternal 'playing the lonely hunter' of men, that had brought this catastrophe upon mankind?*

"No," Thomas commented in one of their evening conversations, when it wasn't about the day-to-day problems of eating, "it was this deceptive <keep doing what you're doing> that can never exist

in reality. At some point, inertia wins out and much-needed change is sidelined. You just want to make the existing a little better so it's even more enjoyable."

"Yeah, is that so wrong," Kevin interjected, "my dream of the future looked very different. Robots you could play with, maybe love, virtual realities that would bring the ultimate emotional thrill. Medical and technological solutions to any physical or mental shortcomings or infirmities. A life that would last at least 150 years. Living in a pleasantly good climate with swimming in the sea, climbing in the mountains and fishing in the rivers. Alongside that, entertainment, fun and sophisticated art, perhaps, who wants it. An ethically clean slaveholding society, the unclean things done by robots, that would have been my dream."

Kevin had worked for a while in a software company as a programmer, but only reorganized or created new databases.

Thomas grinned at him, "At least now you can go fishing all you want."

"What's not to go?" resumed Bert. "We gambled away this dream, simple as that. We've only been dreaming and not really doing anything about it. We developed better and better tanks, fighter planes, missiles, warheads, plus better and better computers that could direct weapons even more accurately and devastatingly. And as you saw, nothing was developed for nothing. Everything was used," Bert noted resignedly.

*If I wasn't such a coward*, he added, *I would have given myself the bullet long ago.*

"If I believed in a God, then we men would have been punished for it. At least then I would know why the nuclear finale brought the end to us men. But weren't the women at least somewhat to blame for the whole mess?" Thomas looked at Bert questioningly.

"Yeah sure they were, they had to suffer through it."

"Where was the critical point," Kevin was still pursuing his robot slave master dream, "where was the crucial switch that would have steered us into a different future?"

Perplexity.

None of the three had the strength to think about this point anymore.

For the next few days, Kevin again pursued his idea of robbing a woman and going into hiding in the wilderness. He turned to Thomas, who was in his late 60s, hoping to find understanding from him. Bert ran the traps and was not in the house.

"Can you help me get to a woman?" Thomas rolled his eyes upward. He'd put that subject aside a long time ago.

"I mean it!"

*How desperate Kevin must be*, Thomas thought, *to try to do with one arm what he couldn't do at full strength.*

"What do you need me for, an uncle or godfather or?"

"I'm going to go insane here if I'm just supposed to wait to die like you guys. It's so pointless."

"It may be pointless. But what you're trying to do is impossible. If you're looking for something meaningful, then don't look for a woman. Get it through your head: women don't need men anymore, they see us as something like a mixture of animal and human. Being human is now being a woman." He avoided pointing at the missing arm and saying, "You're a cripple, get it!"

*What haven't men done to get rid of this taint of beastliness*, Thomas remembered, *and it's all been for nothing. They sent themselves to childcare, accepted that woman didn't want sex all the time, let shopping together in fashion centres pass with stoic calm. They even reluctantly got used to tediously long sex foreplays.*

Kevin didn't seem to hear. "There must be other men who have an idea like that. Maybe I'll find them and they'll have started a village, or several already."

"Look," Thomas tried to play the game, "I'll help you. But not now. We'll wait until spring." After a little pause, he added, "We'll need old maps, then we'll systematically search the area north."

With that, he was able to calm Kevin down, and even himself.

Bert came back from the traps with a fox, which they had been chasing for some time. If no one liked fox meat, they had no other choice. Still taking off the only boots that were still somewhat

usable, he began to report: "When I was at the little Auerberg, I climbed the last few meters up to the crest because I heard an engine noise."

Kevin and Thomas looked up, startled.

"Yes, there was the sound of engines. To the south, near the horizon, I could see two helicopters heading east."

"So what?" wanted Thomas to know.

"Nothing more, it didn't look like they were looking for anything. Besides, there were two of them."

Kevin immediately thought of their pursuit. It was a mystery to them how they had been found six months ago now. Suddenly armed horsewomen had appeared as Kevin was chopping wood and Bert was gutting a hare. They had made themselves at home in an old water mill. The previous owner had even installed a small turbine, which allowed them to live comfortably for the first few years, considering the circumstances. Even in harsh winters, they were able to generate enough electricity for heating by daily de-icing of the intake. Later, however, the repairs took over and they lacked a lathe to produce spare parts. So they too became more and more dependent on wood.

The three policewomen, they introduced themselves, asked to speak with them, and Bert led them into the house. One of the two women, armed with light submachine guns, inspected the hunting bows and arrows hanging on the wall. The third carried a sniper rifle. Kevin put on a blackberry tea.

Politely they inquired about the circumstances of life in the wilderness and whether they were the only ones who lived here. Bert readily gave information, he was not aware that anyone else lived in the area. On their hunting expeditions the two met no one else.

After this polite chat, things soon became more serious. The patrol leader explained to them that under the new laws, it was no longer permissible to live a life unaffiliated with any community. The new regional communities, she avoided saying states, were now united in a world community and had passed the appropriate laws. Every person would again have precisely defined rights and duties. All those who did not yet belong to a community had the duty to register. This was also connected with the right to live and work within such a community. Of course, the society also cares for its members in case of illness.

"What does that look like specifically?", Bert wanted to know, "do we get a pass now and have to pay taxes?"

"No," was the categorical answer, "there is only one chip that is placed under the skin and the residence must be in an approved settlement."

"And who funds the state?"

"There is no state, what people want they have to do themselves and they do it in communities. Everyone works according to their abilities and gets according to their needs."

"And who determines what those needs are?", Kevin wanted to know, it sounded too social utopian to him somehow. Surely that couldn't work for long. What was the guarantee that the needs didn't get the upper hand?

"You'll find out exactly when we get you to Selena. That's where we're headed now, it's a long way and we have to get to the rally point before dark."

"How did you find us?" Kevin still wanted to know, but got no more answer.

Both were still given permission, at their request, to get a few personal things from upstairs. One of the women went with them.

Bert and Kevin still had an escape plan from the days when gangs of adolescent young men roamed the neighborhood.

With all his might Kevin tried to land his fist in the pit of her stomach. She countered in time but Bert managed to push her over the table. They disappeared from the room through a door behind the curtain, hurrying across a dark floor space to a hatch. From there they leaped to the roof of the woodshed, and from there to a meadow. Diagonally to the house and each in a different direction, they tried to reach the undergrowth of the woods particularly close on this side of the house.

They could still hear screaming and the hammering of a machine gun behind them. Just as Kevin got the first branches of the underbrush in his face, he felt a sharp pain in his right forearm and heard a single gunshot. He had just kept running without looking back.

The escape route also took into account that they could be pursued with horses and dogs. So he ran for stretches along a stream, turned into a small rivulet in the water and then hurried back up a sandy slope.

Three hours later he met his father on the bank of an old waterhole that had been a quarry very far before their time and was very hidden.

Only now did Kevin take a closer look at his arm. The shot had shattered the bones of the forearm just below the elbow. While running, he had tried to stop the bleeding. Using his teeth and his still usable hand, he had used a sleeve of the T-shirt to tie it off.

Bert struggled to put on a bandage, which he managed so tolerably.

Towards evening she could still see the firelight of her burning house from a distance.

For three days they made their way north. The little resin of the trees, edible leaves and, if they were lucky, a few worms they found under decaying tree bark, had to serve them as food. They knew that further north there had to come an area that was already slowly depopulating in normal times. Lack of jobs had left only old people, who naturally dwindled in number as time went on.

Then they spotted a fine plume of smoke and decided under all circumstances, even if they should fall into the hands of a police patrol again, to head for this spot. The arm was already aching and discolored. It was their last hope. The three deserts they found on their way were all very thoroughly destroyed, and it would have taken too long to find another cellar in the ruins that had food.

That's how they found Thomas.

For the next few days, the helicopters and speculation about what they were doing here in this deserted area played an important role. They hadn't heard or seen an airplane in years. There were no more contrails in the sky. Kevin was of the opinion that they had started looking again, for such men as they were, who had perhaps already founded villages, with children. And in his mind's eye he saw little boys running across a meadow after a ball.

For the fire they tried to take very dry wood, which gave off little smoke.

Shortly before Christmas, the snow had already reached a height of almost half a metre, and if it didn't snow much more, the height would remain until the end of March. Thaw, which had always occurred at Christmas in this area decades ago and which dampened the Christmas spirit on which every advertisement relied, was no more. The Gulf Stream had already dried up before the rapid rise in sea water and had led to a climatic exodus in the areas even further north.

The mood of the three became more and more depressed and there were even more frequent fights. As soon as Bert wasn't around, Kevin started again with his plan to start a family. He had probably had a girlfriend once and still remembered it. But at that time he couldn't start a life partnership, because he couldn't find a job and no income after his professional graduation and had to move in with his father by necessity.

Thomas got on his nerves until he threatened Kevin with beatings if he couldn't wait until spring to do it.

Then Thomas thought again: *It's only Kevin who still finds meaning in this miserable existence. Bert is perhaps still alive because of his son. And I, he asked himself, am I afraid of dying? Isn't that too little to go on living?*

He went to the deep cellar and inspected the remaining supplies. In a wooden box there were still a few bottles of red wine that had a shelf life of at least ten years.

*They're still drinkable* though, Thomas thought, *what lasts ten years lasts another ten.*

Tuna in tin cans with long expired guaranteed shelf life. Two jars of pickles that somehow kept forgetting to bring upstairs.

Then there was the bricked up and plastered wall niche that Bert and Kevin knew nothing about. He had created it when there was still a danger of looting. It contained a few gold and silver coins behind the thin layer of brick and mortar, a Swiss Army knife well impregnated with wax and wrapped

in oil rags, a larger burning glass for making fire, fishhooks, homemade stainless steel arrowheads, and in a small silver pillbox were 20 grams of sodium pentobarbital, the last gentle sleeping pill that would kill him in a hopeless situation, if possible without much pain.

The anteroom to his bunker, as he still called the deep cellar, was full of objects he could no longer use, either because they were broken and could no longer be repaired, or simply because, as with the camping gas stove, the gas was missing. Only to throw away the junk he could not yet decide.

What had once been the Christmas season was drawing ever closer. All three had decided to make an effort, that they wanted to spend this time without much stress. Thomas had already inwardly said goodbye to his last bottles of red wine, he would sacrifice them at the latest at the turn of the year. Somehow they had to start with something new in the coming year and if it was the search for other scattered men. Even Bert now felt they had to do something, he would help Kevin find a woman, rob and go with them into the wilderness.

Thomas believed they would have more success looking further north or east for other men than robbing a woman from the south.

Finally they came up with the idea of combining Christmas and New Year's Eve and celebrating on the solstice. What should also be the old festivals and the old calendar, for a new beginning also new festivals and a new calendar had to come. Since they were dependent only on nature anyway, the sky lights should show them the time.

In the house they searched for old clothes, tried to repair them. From leftovers they sewed backpacks. From well-dried ash wood they sawed, carved and sanded three new hunting bows. Thomas took care of making new bolts for the two crossbows and together with Bert made arrows with iron tips for the bows.

The repair of old shoes was tackled and lists of equipment still to be made were written.

Everyone was so busy with the various chores that they almost forgot about their new solstice celebration.

"So, no more work today," Thomas announced around noon on December 21, "tonight at midnight we celebrate the beginning of a new year."

He divided the others, "Bert, you worry about the room, come up with something. I don't want to see Christmas balls and other kitsch anywhere though. Kevin, you and I will take care of the food and drink, I think that will be the main thing."

Bert grumbled to himself, but then disappeared into the nearby woods to fetch brushwood.

Kevin tried his hand at making flatbread, which he enriched with leftover dried apples and sunflower seeds. He wasn't convinced it would taste any better than the bland stuff they'd always had to eat before.

Then he set to work on the feast roast, which consisted of venison, which they still had plenty of in their now always frosty pantry. Along with streaky, home-pressed oil and a few dried herbs, it went into a pot on the simple stone stove in the kitchen. Salt was a big problem in their kitchen; Thomas had been lacking it for a few years. His uncle had never thought of it for such a long time of survival and kept far too little in his stash.

Evening approached and Bert put plenty of wood in the fireplace, they didn't want to freeze that evening.

He had fetched fresh, green spruce branches from the forest, too much for the decoration of their fireplace room, so he suggested to burn the rest outside to also create an external symbol for their new beginning. Thomas and Kevin agreed.

The starry and icy cold night came, the constellation of Orion rose above the horizon in the southeast, the moon set in the west. In the old farmhouse, Thomas, Kevin and Bert sat by the fire, drinking deep red Bordeaux and eating roast venison with crumbly flatbread.

They talked about what the New Year would bring them in terms of adventures, new challenges. And somehow they seemed happy, perhaps it was just the wine that brought such much needed relaxation that they even began to sing old songs. Around midnight, they no longer knew the exact time, they burned the pile of brushwood outside and smelled the scent of fresh pine smoke. But the

cold soon drove them back inside. Inside, fresh wood was laid, the wine and the fire in the fireplace made each of them tell cheerful stories from their past.

Kevin thought he had heard a noise once and asked the others if they had heard something too.

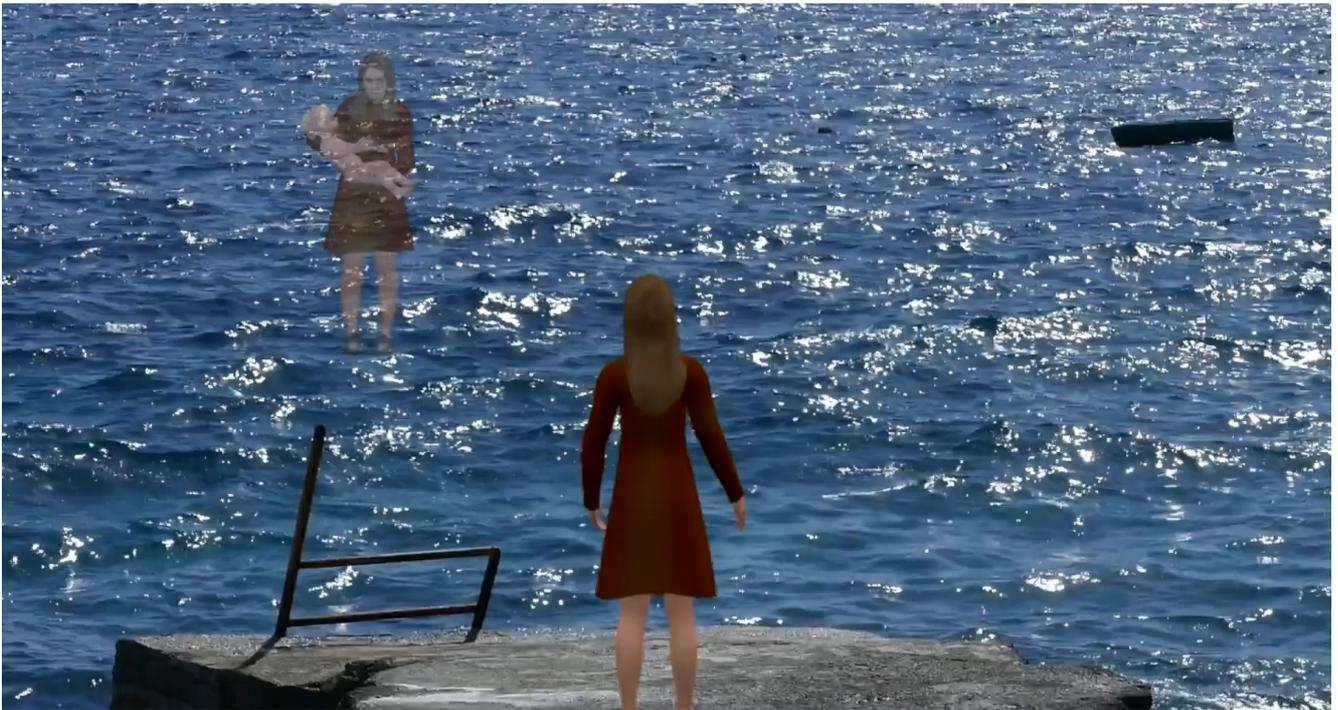
"You might hear the mice wanting to join in the celebration," Thomas reassured him, "here, let's have one last glass for today."

Kevin forgot, maybe he didn't want to hear that distant engine noise, not at a time like this.

Three days later this engine noise would have been heard again after midnight, only this time everyone was already sleeping their deep sleep. There was no morning after for the three.

A helicopter landed the next day in a clearing nearby. Three armed policewomen examined the smoking debris of the house and the surrounding area and then disappeared as quickly as they had come.

## 2 thousand years later - Emma



When Emma decided to raise the disabled child, she had virtually no choice. Not only did she feel lonely, she was lonely and had been for a very long time. When she retraced her life so far, she found that she had been lonely since her school days. She spent a lot of time then alone in a corner of the garden or later on the steep cliffs of the sea.

Emma had an opinion of herself that she was just average in everything, a mediocrity out of all the other kids. She wasn't ugly, no one was ugly anymore unless she had an accident. In her class at school she was always just average, not only in achievements, but also in height and weight.

No one noticed her. When they got a new teacher for gardening, after a quarter of a year she still didn't know her name.

This was so extraordinarily frightening to her that she probably wouldn't have been particularly startled if she had only seen her reflection as a pale shadow.

When groups of two or three were divided at school and the number of pupils did not add up, she could be sure that she was always the remainder after the decimal point: Eight groups of 3 pupils each Rest Emma. Rest Emma, that was always the partial result.

She knew no passion for any singer or artist, she never doted on any teacher, nor did she ever need to blush when her beloved walked by. There was never a beloved in her life so far. Later, she could not appreciate the methods of masturbation learned in class. She had very different ideas, ideas that were outlawed in school. She felt guilty when she found out that a candle far inside her gave her the satisfaction she missed when playing with other girls.

Emma waited and dreamed, she couldn't even tell exactly what she was waiting for and dreaming about. Her favorite imagination before sleep was to swim like a fish through the boundless sea and float over all the reefs and seabeds.

She had inquired about this unusual work with the handicapped children because it required her to travel to the edge of civilization and culture. This decision was something like a well-planned suicide for her, but without a sudden end. But she did not go so far as to consciously hear it as an inner voice within herself.

It would be 12 years and after that she was at the other end. And what that end might look like, she felt no curiosity about.

She had never been particularly curious, not even in her best childhood memories when her mother's friend was alive.

Her mother lived with an older woman who died a little too soon. Emma was 6 years old. From then on she didn't have much of her mother and all attempts to get her out of her permanent melancholy failed.

At that time they lived in a small settlement not far from an old, very large metropolis. Except for a few round hills, there was nothing left of the former city. A small part of the harbour, which could be called huge a thousand years ago, was still used by a few fishwives, who also repaired a small old breakwater again and again, so that they could moor their boats behind it.

The mother owned a handloom on which beautiful cloth was woven. Twice a week she helped in a mechanical spinning mill, which also had a dye works attached. For this she got the yarn for her weaving especially cheap.

There was always something to do in the garden and what grew there could feed mother and daughter well all year round with fresh vegetables. An olive tree gave enough olives, even wheat grew with good yields. What they didn't need to live on and most of the cloth their mother wove, she sold or traded at the market for pots, poultry meat and other things still needed in the household. Sometimes they had a few chickens in a small run for eggs, but then they sold them again alive for soup chicken. Emma's mother couldn't stand the sight of blood, let alone slaughter a chicken.

Many tools that they did not need so often, such as expensive hoes for tilling the soil, also seeds, they exchanged with the neighbors.

People also met for certain festivities where music was played, dances were held, cakes were eaten and sometimes wine was drunk.

When Emma was little, she also, like any child, romped around the gardens with the others, playing tag, hide and seek, kissing and tickling, climbing trees and swinging in hammocks.

Mama's friend liked her, Emma knew that too. Sometimes she got something secretly from her, usually a small sweet treat, for which she then thanked her with a kiss.

When this friend died of a stroke within a fortnight, Emma was very sad for a long time. Paralysis of the whole body caused the friend to slowly die of emaciation. Her body could no longer absorb food.

Looking at the situation in retrospect, Emma became convinced that her mother had only had her because of her friend. All attempts, including those of her unconscious "it", to conquer her mother failed. Soon after the death of mother's friend, "It" began to wet the bed again and then later, in the onset of puberty, "It" tried once more, in an almost fatally desperate last attempt, to draw attention to Emma through anorexia.

When the house of healers came to the conclusion that Emma could no longer be helped, they sent her home to her mother with a lot of advice. She followed some of them. She sat her down on the pier, fulfilling her wish, so that she could watch the fishwives and feel the sea, which Emma loved.

When she had been sitting in a comfortable chair by the water, wrapped in blankets, since morning, and the sun was approaching the horizon, a fishwife came up to her: "Hey, what are you doing here, it's long past noon. Aren't you even hungry? I've been watching you all the time over there from my nets."

Emma was slow to turn her head and slow to come back from the half-sleep that had just made her glide like a cloud over the water.

"I'm not hungry," she replied wearily, "I have some food and drink here." She pointed to a small bag woven from raffia.

"Not hungry? You're sick or you wouldn't be sitting here like this." The woman had stood wide-legged beside her, shading her from the sun. Emma estimated her to be at least ten years older than her mother.

"I'm not really hungry either, I broke a net today and I couldn't save it. Must have got caught in something on the bottom so much and I tried to force it - well, now it's just gone."

After a pause she continued: "But you still have to eat. I'll heat up some fish soup from yesterday and we can eat something together. You need something warm!"

*I don't want to*, Emma thought defiantly, but the woman had already disappeared to one of the small wooden huts, not a hundred meters behind the pier. After a while she came back, bringing a folding chair, a jug and two cups. The jug was steaming, and the smell of spicy sea assailed Emma.

*Now the sea comes to me*, she felt for a brief moment, still thinking of her last dream.

The fishwife smiled at her and poured half a cupful, a chunk of nondescript fish meat sloshing in with it.

"Taste it." She held the cup out to Emma and Emma sipped some of this broth, and since it was no longer hot, she tried a small sip as well. The soup, other than being salted, really wasn't very seasoned. She drank the cup down in small gulps. Afterwards she felt very weak and tired, and with the last of her strength she fought against gagging. The stomach did not yet want to understand that it was only the sea that had finally come to Emma now.

"I'll come back later and bring us some tea," she heard the woman say, getting quieter and quieter. She disappeared again into her dream world and flew over the sea.

Emma didn't know where she was floating to, the sea had no end. But she felt now that she was flying and she also had to be careful that she didn't slide down too low to the water. Before that happened, she opened her eyes and saw the fishwife sitting on the chair.

"You were sleeping so soundly you didn't even wake up when I dropped my spoon clinking on the pavement," Wella greeted her as she introduced herself later.

Wella, the fishwife, actually had tea with her, black tea, not an everyday drink.

"He'll perk you up, I promise," Wella laughed at her.

"Are you alone," Emma wanted to know, and she was immediately annoyed that she had asked so directly. She felt instinctively that she had hurt Wella, or touched things she had better not touch. But it was probably obvious, why else could she care for her.

"Yeah, guessed right," Wella gave a thoughtful reply, but didn't want to dwell on it and disappeared in the direction of her fishing nets.

In the evening her mother came to fetch her again. At least today she could keep two spoonfuls of the porridge she got in her little kitchen in her stomach. She told her mother about the fishwife and that she wanted to sit by the sea again tomorrow. Her mother smiled for the first time since - Emma couldn't really remember the last time her mother had smiled at her.

The next day the weather got worse and it started to rain lightly in the afternoon.

Emma ate with the fishwife again, but later, because she had been at sea since early morning and had to deliver the fish. Emma also had the impression that Wella had come back early from the catch because of her.

Emma was slowly getting better and she visited Wella whenever she could. When she was feeling even better, they also went fishing together at sea.

One day Emma asked her mother if she could move in with Wella, at least for a week. Mother smiled again and a tear appeared in the corner of her eye.

Emma had turned 14, was now living with Wella and visiting her mother at regular but long intervals.

Emma tidied up the house and garden, helped to prepare the fish for the market and mended the clothes. Sometimes she even went to sea with them, but she didn't really enjoy this work. In Wella she had found a friend whom she preferred to all other women and girls, and somehow she had ideas for more intimate relations. But she didn't dare to talk about it with Wella and Wella didn't give her the opportunity to do so.

It was a lonely life. Wella had no other friends, nor did she want any, so they fitted together quite well. Contact with neighbors was limited to the bare minimum. Wella didn't quite fit in with the others either, her figure was underlaid with fat in different places than most other older women.

In their first week of living together, she asked Wella about her past and if she had had any steady girlfriends.

Wella was reluctant to talk about how she had grown up in a house with three wives and two other children. Emma nevertheless had the impression that, despite all the hardships, it must have been a very nice time.

"You look wonderful," Wella said as she watched Emma wash, "you're going to be a very beautiful woman someday. Actually, you already are one." Wella had to laugh but it sounded kind of sad.

"I had a friend, back in that house, in the middle of the woods," Wella began, somewhat haltingly. She was two years older and left two years early, at twelve she was picked up and taken to a town. When I was twelve and had to go away too, and had got through everything all right, I then began to look for her after a few years."

"What had you survived?" wanted Emma to know.

"The operation," Wella answered shortly.

Emma didn't let up, "What kind of surgery?"

Wella searched for words. How should, could she explain it to Emma?

"You have to know, Emma, all humans aren't born perfect. The three of us all had a hernia like this here on our lower abdomen, some of our organs had bulged outward, what remained in your body." She pointed to her lower abdomen between her legs. "And that hernia needs surgery when you're about twelve."

Emma looked incredulous.

"You know that in the old days children grew up in people's wombs until they were big and strong enough to breathe and eat on their own. Now many of the little children are already growing up in an artificial womb under optimal conditions."

"And what does that have to do with your hernia?" asked Emma, still incredulous.

"Yeah, sometimes it doesn't quite work out with the artificial uterus and it just happens to rupture every now and then. Fate."

"But now, after the operation, you are a real woman, aren't you?"

"No, Emma, I'm not a real woman. What came out of there, the hernia from the abdominal wall, can no longer be operated into it.

And after a long pause, she added, "I can't feel what a woman feels."

Emma didn't let up, "So what about your friend, did you find her?"

"Yes, later, just briefly. That was a year ago".

In Wella's mind's eye, Seba's nightly visit appeared. But she didn't tell Emma that, or what Seba told her about how she had woken up due to a mistake during anesthesia and had to watch everything without being able to react. Seba, like Wella and all the others from the blockhouses, had come to a training camp after their operations. There, for two years, they learned how to use tools for logging and woodworking, or how to recover metals and smelt them in small smelting furnaces. After that, most came north, to guarded labor camps for resource extraction. These centers were far from the rest of the settlements. From the industrial settlements, more than a thousand years old, which were nothing but hilly landscapes overgrown with forest, they tried to extract metals, sort them and cast them into ingots that could be further processed.

Wella had been one of the few who received training in fishing and then, after a compulsory year in harbour fitting out, could go out on their own with a boat to catch fish. After the training they were divided among different coastal areas.

Seba had then found out where Wella had gone. And years later, Seba was at Wella's door one night. She had come up to Wella's without permission and without being recognized. With tears in their eyes, they embraced.

Seba reported then that they, these transgendered relics of a previous human era, would soon no longer exist and that these blockhouses would be dissolved. There was hatred in her eyes at this. "We have been terribly cheated," Seba kept repeating, "we will not put up with this any longer!"

Wella learned that Seba lived underground, but did not reveal where.

"Wella, we need you - later," and after a long pause she added, "And better ships. We need you for that, you know the sea" Wella looked at her in astonishment and disbelief. What was she to make of this? "Who are you, I understand nothing."

"You'll find out later," Seba laughed, "can you help me? I need some things from the market and I need to get on as fast as I can." Seba pulled out some gold and silver coins from her smock. Wella was amazed, she had never seen gold coins before. The next day Wella got the clothes and food for one of the silver coins. That night Seba said goodbye, "Look at the ring, it's our identifying mark." Seba took out a silver ring from a hidden hem pocket of her smock. It was a heavy silver ring with a gold cross and two small dark red stones on either side. The equal length bars of the cross grew slightly thicker towards the ends.

"Anyone with a ring like that is one of us. You can trust those." Seba took Wella's head in her hands and gave her a kiss. "When I come back, I'll take you with me and then you'll know everything. And don't tell anyone about me being here, and especially about the ring. It's better that way, for you and us, if you know as little as possible now." Seba hid the ring again. The next evening Seba hugged Wella again and then disappeared into the night with the now heavier bundle. Wella still had that parting image of Seba in her mind's eye.

Emma learned from Wella how to tie nets, how to gut fish, but what she liked best was catching fish herself with a small harpoon that she had carved herself with a knife under Wella's instruction. Twice she had to carve the tip from bone, because the first time the shaft had become much too weak from the small barbs. She sailed a small boat in the harbor basin along the pier and soon knew where the larger fish hid in small caves and holes.

Fishing was not so easy, because where she saw the fish under water, it really was not. She always had to aim at a different spot in the water, and when the harpoon slid into the water, it made a bend and hit or passed by. It took a lot of patience for Emma to get a good estimate of the angle of the tilt. Wella helped her by tying pieces of wood to stones and sinking them in the water. Then she could practice on that.

She stayed at Wella for about two years, then she was old enough to start an apprenticeship year. She decided to work in the garden, field and forest. To do this, she had to leave the small port town and move further inland. Both her mother and Wella were able to visit her only once, after half a year.

Towards the end of that year she got the news that Wella had not returned from a storm at sea. A month later, the news also hit her that her mother had died very quickly of an incurable disease.

Emma was sad and at the same time relieved, she admitted to herself. The responsibility of eventually having to care for her elderly mother had been lifted from her. At the same time, for days she had the feeling of falling into a bottomless pit.

*I don't have a girlfriend, she kept stating in her melancholy hours. Don't I want one? What am I still here for?* she asked herself and found no answer. Then it suddenly became clear to her: *If I don't learn again how beautiful a rose is, then I must die.*

Emma decided to take care of such children who were born with such a hernia as Wella and needed to be isolated from the rest.

She applied and was accepted.

### 3 Genetic experiments



Even in her prime, Anna loved to leave the labs via the serpentine of a long staircase rather than take the elevator. When she climbed up from the depths of the ancient lava river and slowly first mosses, ferns and then the first plants appeared on ledges and rocky niches, she had a feeling of being reborn. Then, at the very top, she could already see the leaves of banana trees from below, framing the entrance to her subterranean world. She loved this island with its partially still visible black lava fields.

Towards the end of the apocalyptic conditions on all continents, the isolated location of this group of islands in the Atlantic was chosen for the cryopreservation of selected female oocytes and male sperm. The autonomous and alternative energy supply guaranteed a long stability of the frozen pellets, especially since everything could be done very secretly here on the island at that time in the turmoil of the wars. The infrastructure was still there and holiday planes did not bring tourists to their hotel castles for a very long time.

Later, embryos also grew in the underground facilities. Even later, when peace prevailed and the facilities were no longer needed as safe and trouble-free reproduction facilities, genetic research moved into the lava bubbles and now hollow lava rivers.

Anna was responsible for the reproduction of sperm cells and their genetic stability and development. She had been in charge of this department for ten years and could look back on a long succession of predecessors. It had also been about that long since she had broken up with her girlfriend and now lived alone. A smart woman doesn't need a girlfriend, she noted that old wisdom about herself as well. What woman was going to put up with her in the long run. She had her work, it filled her up and there was this idea of "eternal youth", this ancient dream of mankind had gripped her. Her life belonged to this dream, and she directed all her experiments towards it. There was enough material and there were no moral objections to genetic manipulation with the puny remains of the original male gene pool. She had received unrestricted permission for her small team.

Anna didn't think much of the fitness programs to keep herself seemingly young, walking to the labs every day was enough for her. A little calisthenics every morning gave her the sense of her body

that she needed. She didn't need to spend a year of her life jogging only to live maybe six months longer.

She walked across the desert-like and very barren landscape to the housing complex by the sea, a woman approached her, striking in the simplicity and coarse material of her smock. She had to be from the Continent. When they were level, the strange woman bowed and addressed her, "May I simply address you and ask for an important conversation?"

Anna marveled at her unusual form of address. Was she supposed to be amused or what was hiding behind it?

"Who are you and where are you from?"

"I am from the continent, and am sent to speak with you." The strange woman bowed again.

"Sent by whom? If someone wants to talk to me, they sign up and then they get an appointment to talk. So what's the point! Sign up and then we'll see" Anna wanted to go on, but the woman held her by the arm.

"Please hear me out, it's important! I'm from the Sperm Reproduction Reserve, which you preside over."

Anna stopped, puzzled. For a short time she remembered. When she succeeded her predecessor, she had spent a day at a village center. She had arrived in the helicopter around noon, had taken a brief tour of the poultry, goat, and rabbit rearing stations, the woodworking shop, the stores, and the common areas. A water-powered mill served to grind grain and also as a primitive sawmill for wood. A smokehouse spread its smell all over the center. About twenty women were employed in seeing to the rearing of the sperm reproducers kept isolated in isolated log houses. There was no time left for one of these blockhouses, she flew back in the late afternoon. The area was very remote from the next settlement and she had to go further to the next reproduction station, only from there she could fly back by plane.

"My name is Seba and I grew up in one of your log cabins."

Feverishly Anna considered, she had not been aware until now that these - what should she call these people - knew why they were there. Was she really one of them - and what did they want with her? Most of the time, after their transformation in the north, these reproducers were placed in work camps, as far away from the rest of society as possible.

As if Seba had guessed Anna's thoughts, she added, "Yes, I come from the old industrial areas of the north. Only the fact that it is now possible again to exchange goods even for metal money has made it possible for me to be here."

"Let's go this way, it leads to the sea and past the settlement," Anna decided. She had to get rid of this Seba quickly and above all unseen.

Seba told Anna about the discoveries the former seed producers had made about themselves. While searching for metals in the weathered rubble mounds of the old industrial sites, she had also found documents about the civilization's past in some old bunkers that were still in fairly good condition. They had then formed a secret organization.

Anna and Seba sat down on a flat stone by the sea. The gaze of both wandered over the gentle waves to the horizon.

"What has prompted us to appear here before you is the decision of the Supreme Senate to stop the reproduction of sperm cells altogether."

Anna stared at the sea, as if she had to find a point of orientation in this vast plain of water. Of course, sperm cells were no longer needed. Genetic engineering had come so far that it had been possible to do without them completely for several generations. Human embryos could now be safely and healthily grown via virgin birth; embryos could even be grown from two eggs with a halved set of chromosomes. And the artificial wombs were so technically advanced that conventional rearing in a human womb was no longer necessary and was only carried out at the special request of the woman. It had not always been so. After the apocalyptic events of the last age, the world population, now consisting of women, had fallen dramatically below the one million mark and was very slow to recover.

But what was she to answer Seba? After all, it was the male part of mankind that was considered the main cause of the apocalypse and almost complete destruction of all mankind. Why should that part still be preserved? He had long been superfluous and useless.

Anna found herself on the defensive, "What would be wrong with that?"

"Nothing, except perhaps that most of the people must live now as they did two thousand years ago. Very few live a myth as you do here on the islands."

Seba paused, thinking of the libraries he had found and the long secret studies of the human past.

"Evolution is stagnant and if catastrophes, perhaps from outer space or from the world of microbes, are coming to mankind, it might be better if..."

"No, the old models of masculinity are obsolete," Anna immediately interrupted Seba, "there will not and cannot be a going back. There's no point."

"But couldn't one imagine an evolution of the male part, free of the no-longer-used traits from the animal kingdom?"

Anna was sure that evolution would have to work without the relic of masculinity. During her education, she had learned that polarization was only a temporary stage in evolution, a stage that consisted primarily of finding survival strategies and of competition between species. One species, humans, had prevailed and had become the dominant species. Now a new stage of evolution was at hand. The cruelty, ruthlessness and relentlessness against the other species and also against themselves had led to the near disappearance of man.

Both sat in silence, looking up at the darkening clear blue sky over the sea. In the west, the evening star was already shining above the horizon.

Seba knew things looked bad for their cause. Weren't they just trying to preserve their kind, wasn't their selfishness just shaped from childhood and the understanding of nature that sprang from their particular male biology? Weren't they all just mourning that particular childhood and its loss?

"Perhaps there could be a new thrust in evolution that would take us there, perhaps even to colonize space." Seba deliberately avoided the word conquer, which she had found in the ancient writings.

"Sustainability and conservation are the foundations of society."

"But isn't there a sense missing, a goal? Where is this supposed to end? Just meeting basic needs in the present and the future, and at a low level?"

Anna found no answer that would convince Seba. And she, did she have an answer for herself?

"Anything else leads to disaster, we know that from practical experience a thousand years ago," Anna tried to end the conversation.

Seba didn't give up, with one last, desperate argument she tried to get Anna to think.

"Perhaps there are other models of societal development, non-violent ones, oriented toward intelligence and a sense of community, that still have motivation for the future? Can't this motivation come from the tension between two sexes?"

Anna didn't know whether that should be outrageous or rather amusing. This Seba had no idea what a tremendous effort it took to keep what little computers and planes and other technical equipment at this level. It had become less, not more, Anna found for herself. Was there not a great weariness in the Society? Was this Seba perhaps right and there was a lack of a goal that was perhaps unattainable, but acted as a goal nonetheless? What were the motivations for her life today?

"You may be right about motivation, though in a different way than you might think. I too know the past and the claim at the time: having success with the opposite sex, or more specifically, love between the sexes would always have been one of the main factors of motivation for society. If this fell away, as the opposite sex fell away, it would probably always look sad.

Yes, and with that we have the problem, you as a not quite female actually didn't get it.

Love, however one may define it, is in the first place the mature healthy object relation to the environment, to the nature of things, to the surroundings which man experiences and in which he lives.

You inevitably make the typical mistake of perceiving emotional relationships as well as their nature of motivation only as an exchange taking place between people of different sexes, but whether

you are a stupid bitch or a wonderful woman must inevitably always be seen as subjective in the eye of the respective observer!

A large part of all male writers, poets, philosophers and scientists of that time described the effect of nature, its perfectly formed beauty, described the power, the struggle, the elegance and the interplay of the many systems and their striving for dominance, conquest and oppression - and devoted only - if at all - a minor importance to couple relationships.

Do you seriously believe that the men of that time always donated their voluntary, self-forgetful and often depriving scientific work and fascination, their sense of the artistic, the logical or the living to a superior image of women?

Far from it, woman was a social appendage, sometimes a necessary convention to society, but rarely the muse or inspiration, however artful and overemphasized that had to become.

And you want to get that back?

No, there won't be.

Women, now liberated, can also produce what men could. But is it still meaningful in a world dependent on sustainability?"

Seba looked sad. Anna continued, and she realized that she was simply robotically repeating what had been drilled into her during the many leadership cadre trainings.

"If we wanted an expansive society, it would be possible without male elements. But the Earth can't handle that. The experiment is over. Evolution has reached a new level where masculine principles are meaningless and therefore undesirable."

Besides, she knew the supreme senate, the constitution couldn't be changed, not by any fantastical philosophical reasoning, the Guardian Council and the commissioners with their veto power already made sure of that.

What Seba apparently did not know was that he had been given permission to continue a small part of male reproduction for research purposes, with the aim of preventing the shortening of chromosome ends and defective cell division. In addition, a complementary repair complex was to be created on the basis of stem cells, which also aimed at a constant renewal of organs.

The prolongation of life, was that an answer to the question of meaning?

No, thought Anna, *that's not the answer, that's just an ancient selfish dream of man. No individual can accept his death at full physical and mental capacity.*

Anna had already implemented her concrete ideas on how this could be done and was now waiting for results. She wanted to make use of the special properties of the so-called Y chromosome, which is threatened with extinction.

"So, let's get to the point. So you want to preserve your kind, and all because of your childhood."

"Yes, and it's because of our childhood memories. All of us wish for that time back. Compared to life afterwards, it's been like a myth, comparable to the life you Chosen live here on the island and in your secluded centers."

Did these reproducers have any claims on human society at all? Anna had never considered that; she had never seen any in breeding. Had this been intentional?

*Rearing! Aren't they people too, at least in their childhood?* Anna thought, and she slowly became aware that she had only been doing her job and had not cared about these so-called reproducers. She could not imagine anyone longing to return to such a childhood, a childhood in isolation and with this relic, this rupture. Women had been the higher humans in evolution, and thus the only ones logically suited for sustained human development. But had evolution, at least in technical terms, perhaps come to a halt, or perhaps already been on the way back? And could this almost lethal fatigue be halted by a new masculinity? Didn't this also require a new femininity?

"How did you get here on the island?" Anna wondered at herself. How was it even possible to end up here undetected. How could she engage in such a conversation that made her wonder so much and that she really shouldn't be having.

"With a sailboat. We have the gold and silver to do it." Seba, despite the hopelessness for her mission, couldn't help but grin. Slavish work in the north, in the piles of rubbish and debris, had yielded money after all, in addition to the knowledge they had hitherto hidden.

"And what specifically do you want from me?"

Seba was silent for a moment. Did she have a chance? She had to try.

"We don't want reproduction to stop."

"This has been slowly phased out and the village centres disbanded. The children have all been operated on. The decision was made in 994, eight years ago."

Seba took a deep breath, "This is what we feared." The certainty of her worst fears produced a deep disappointment. Seba almost felt sorry for Anna. "Aren't there any sperm banks left, or have they all been destroyed?"

Anna could only confirm the annihilation.

There had been irregularities years ago. One even had the suspicion that something had been stolen or perhaps destroyed in an overzealousness. So far, there had been no clarification of the case. Therefore, the immediate destruction of the remaining stocks had been decided, except for her research project and that was now subject to particularly strict control.

"We're too late." Seba sat slumped on the stone. Now Anna felt sorry for her, and in a fit of pity that she later grieved over and kept second-guessing, she told of her research project and the one village center with the three log cabins that remained. But the reproducers were all genetic experiments that no longer possessed any originality. If everything went according to plan, perhaps in three to four years they could begin experimenting and bring the first genetically designed embryos to birth maturity.

Seba remained silent and Anna realized she was swallowing and fighting tears.



She wanted to know where the center was. Anna could not and would not say.

"Can we stay in touch, can we do something to help the project?" *Our last hope*, Seba thought, but she was already not saying that.

"The best way to help is not to show up here anymore! After all, it's bordering on a miracle that someone like you showed up here unnoticed." Anna didn't know if it was amusing or serious somewhere that she had met Seba in such an unusual way.

*Where did this Seba get information about*

*me*, Anna wondered, that *she could literally intercept me here*.

"Maybe we can help after all." Seba pointed to the ring on her left hand. An ancient silver ring with three flat plates slanted against each other. A raised golden cross of beams stood out on the middle and larger plate. The bars thickened slightly toward the edge. A round dark red garnet was set into each of the left and right plates.

"That's our identifying mark." And after a pause, Seba added, "If anyone else shows up here and she has a ring like that or something, you can expect unconditional help from her. Oh, and here I have another present." Seba took out of a pocket of her smock a gold chain with a jewel pendant. A clear green emerald stood out on it.

"The piece we found while mining metal up north. It can be wound up and contains a memory for computers. We don't know if it still works, though. Perhaps you have a use for it."

Seba thanked her and with a bow she took her leave, then disappeared into the darkness through the cliffs.

Anna was still sitting on the stone in the growing evening chill. The waves of the Atlantic rushed periodically onto the beach. It all seemed unreal to her. Then she looked again at the jewel in her hand. Thoughtfully, she walked up the cliff and made her way to her bungalow condominium. Wasn't it her duty to report this incident?

## 4 The last male gene pool



Emma travelled north by train for several days, arriving in a small town. The newborn babies were already there and also two other young women. They were given injections so that their breasts swelled and produced milk. Then she had pretty little Nanina. All the babies had a little silver plate under their skin so that they could be identified at any time with a special lamp.

They received the appropriate training in a baby house that could one day accommodate many more women, how to deal with the little ones, what to do about the various illnesses, and the skills they had to teach the children. Emma specialized in reading and arithmetic, she had always enjoyed that herself in school. During this time each woman already had her baby with her in the little room.

Emma was especially anxious when handling Nanina's hernia. She had been told that one had to be careful, that one should not touch too roughly and that one could also stroke something if the baby did not want to stop crying.

Nanina was a lot of fun for her. She talked to her when they were both alone and she could almost watch Nanina grow. When she compared her baby with the others, she always felt she had gotten the most beautiful one. All the others bleated like little sheep, only her Nanina sounded unmistakably beautiful.

When Nanina was one year old, she drove to the centre of her village in a horse-drawn cart with the two other women. They had to make three more stops along the way and the area became more and more remote and uninhabited.

When they finally arrived at the village center, she was very disappointed. There were only a few wooden houses, a guest house with a library, storehouses and animal breeding stations for chickens, goats and rabbits. This place must have been much busier at one time. Now five women took care of the upkeep.

From here it took another three hours to reach their destination, the log cabin that would be their home for the next 12 years.

One side of the house, built of thick logs, was of stones. On the inside of this stone wall was the stove, which was also a kitchen stove. In winter he had to heat the whole house. For this purpose he had two fireplaces. A pantry on one side and a toilet and washroom on the other formed the back of the basement. A staircase led upstairs. There, under the sloping shingle roof, were the sleeping chambers.

She was greeted by Hela, her two-year-old Rona and by Sila, whose child had already been taken away for surgery. Sila stayed another day and introduced Emma to her tasks in the field and forest. From her she learned a little more about the surroundings and received a few tips on how best to cope with the garden and field work.

Then a small horse-drawn wagon arrived, Sila packed up her few things, said goodbye, wished them strength, let two tears appear in the corners of her eyes, and waved to them from the wagon for a while longer.

All the women knew that the more they could provide for themselves, the greater their claim to a pension would be after the 12 years. In case of illness or total failure of a woman, they knew, there would always be a replacement. They could live here for the next few years completely free, and without the slightest existential worries.

After Sila left and she was alone with Hela, Hela suddenly started crying loudly and without long transition she went into a crying fit. Hela was 22 years old and Emma was only 19.

"You don't know what's going on here yet!" she cried, sobbing into her handkerchief. Rona sat on her knees, looking at her in amazement with her big brown eyes. "Just work, all day, and now Sila's gone too."

She seemed to regain her composure, dried her tears, kissed Rona, who sat transfixed, and asked, "What do we want for dinner tonight?"

The daily routine of the four of them had begun, until in a year's time the next woman would arrive with a little girl.

The first year, with a lot of effort, they managed to keep the garden in order so that they always had vegetables. Grain and potatoes as well as cheese, oil and meat products were brought at regular intervals by the cart from the village center.

The winter was the worst for both of them in the first year. The wood was not enough, the small supplies were quickly used up after the first cold snap, which reached minus 15 degrees, and the wagon from the village came only in a week. And Hela doubted whether he had any wood with him. Last winter he never had any with him, but then Sila was still there, she had always made sure she had enough.

Emma had to make her way into the forest, she was scared, Hela was even more scared as she kept affirming.

She took a small handcart, a hatchet, and some rope, as she had learned in training. Snow had not yet fallen. Every sound made her cringe in fright. In the distance she thought she heard wolves, but didn't even know exactly what that sounded like properly. She quickly gathered a few thin branches she could find on the forest floor. From a fallen tree, she tried to chop off larger branches with the axe. Either the axe got stuck or it bounced off so awkwardly that she sprained her hand.

She gave it up and just looked for thin brushwood, which she quickly picked up to get back home.

With the stove and the wet brushwood they had great difficulty in keeping a fire going. It smoked out to the stove flap and developed little heat, so they decided to spend the night with the children at the lukewarm stones of the stove.

The next day, right after the cold breakfast, Emma set off again with the handcart into the forest. This time she had found drier wood, she now knew better what to look for.

By noon she was back and they were able to cook a hot meal.

The next few days they did not leave the vicinity of the stove, all of them always sleeping in front of the warm stones of the stove, and it took a few days for Emma to get enough wood that she did not need to go into the woods one day. Besides, the weather changed, it became milder, and another day later it began to rain. Large white flakes then mixed with the raindrops towards evening and the next day everything was buried under a thick white layer of snow.

Nanina was so dazzled by the white splendour that she ran into the snow with her still uncertain steps in the morning, and, full of curiosity, reached in and came running back into the house crying, received with laughter by Emma.

The wagon from the village center came carrying two sacks of good, dry wood ready for the stove. There were also two goats tied up, which now belonged to them and were responsible for the children's milk. The powdered milk was almost gone by now. The goats were Hela's future task. She already knew about them, they had had one before, but it had been taken away and would come back as jerky at some point.

The woman from the village center had already figured that her wood wouldn't be enough, so she brought the sacks. But she praised Emma for making it this far on her own and not showing up at her house in a panic, which the other, newly arrived women from the two other houses had done.

In the summer Emma learned to sow sunflowers, corn and oats in the field, to plant potatoes and to grow rye. Rona already had to help her and pull out the weeds from between the plants, she also always wanted to have Emma's hoe, but it was still much too heavy for the three-year-old.

Nanina stayed with Hela in the kitchen and still often caused her annoyance when she tipped over a jug or otherwise messed something up while helping out.

The goats provided enough milk for the children and Hela even tried to make cheese, but she didn't like the smell of the goat's milk very much. The first small round cheeses smelled pungent and tasted like that, the next ones she managed better, so that they needed less and less of the village center.

Every free time, Emma drove her handcart into the woods to get wood so they would have a supply in the winter. She usually took Rona with her so Hela could be alone with Nanina and free from Rona's nagging. While Emma toiled with the big branches, the little girl gathered pine cones into a sack, and when it was full she was allowed to play. Rona's favourite thing was to poke around in little holes in the ground with a little stick, and she was always pleased when a little insect came crawling out.

If there was a pond somewhere in the forest, she threw stones into it. Emma had taught her how to bounce flat stones over the water. Rona tried it with perseverance until her first stone made a small jump once.

After the winter, which they had survived quite well, Alina arrived on 17 June with the one-year-old Sika. Now they were complete for the next years.

Hela took over the kitchen and Emma only the field and the forest. Alina helped everywhere she was needed and so there was sometimes friction, because at the same time an important work on the field or in the house was pending.

Emma mostly gave in, trying to win over Rona, who also liked to go with her, so she could still escape the annoying Sika, who was still doing a lot of diaper work.

Nanina had to take care of Sika most of the time, which overwhelmed her at first. Later she seemed to realize that she had no other choice and so she tried to play with Sika in the house and yard.

They had now also got a very young cat, called Tapsi because of her affectionate and, for cats, rather clumsy nature. Last winter they had not been able to cope with the mice. They were so clever, or the women so clumsy, that none of these freeloaders wanted to be trapped anymore. Yes they seemed to dance on the tables at night when everyone was asleep. In any case, in the morning you could see their footprints there.

There was usually a lot of time for reflection in the early days, until slowly the routine was established and more free time became available.

Emma often thought of her time by the sea in the first year, the warm but sometimes fresh breezes off the water, the winters that weren't really winters compared to the freezing cold that often lasted for weeks here.

The first winter she had great problems with washing. Only the one stove was suitable for preparing hot water. The toilet was so cold that Emma preferred not to go there for a day. Although running water flowed there all the time, piped from the stream via long wooden gutters and hollow tree trunks, everything was often iced over in winter, including the sponges and brushes for cleaning.

At times she felt so miserable and tired that she wanted to stay in the forest fetching wood and just sleep in the snow. But Nanina really kept her going, and then she looked forward to her smile again when she came back from fetching wood.

During their one-year training they had all celebrated the various annual festivals, which at first they did on their own, but now they were slowly organizing with the children.

During the full moon festivities, Alina and Hela grew closer and closer. The kiss each received from each and the ritual anointing became more intimate between the two. Emma felt bitterness welling up inside her. She was, after all, away from the house most of the time; she had, she felt, the most thankless of chores, the field and the forest. Sometimes, in the summer, when she was alone, she suddenly had to lean against a tree and hug it, hot tears running down her cheeks. She took Rona with her more and more often, at first just so she wouldn't be alone.

Rona was a pretty and lovely child, dark brown, almost black hair, full lips and an even mouth, plus finely drawn eyebrows, and large, always wondering brown eyes.

Rona had also soon found that with a pout and wide eyes, she could always change Emma's mind, even if Emma didn't want to at first.

Then when Alina and Hela put forward the wish to share a bedroom together, she agreed and moved into a room with Rona. Nanina and Sika, who were already getting along well, also moved into one bedroom.

The beds in the rooms were large, so that each could have her own quilt if she wanted. In the freezing winters, however, it was usually necessary to gather closely under a common double blanket in order to sleep warmly.

At first Emma was sad that she hadn't found the right contact with Alina and Hela, because they had been chosen to complement each other.

Alina had long black hair, a pleasant, somewhat round face and was of rather stocky build. She was very musical, had a trained voice and played the guitar. She was always cheerful and usually sang as she worked.

Hela, on the other hand, had ash-blond hair, longer legs and an elongated, rather sympathetic head, with a pronounced back of the head. She loved flowers more than anything and always made sure there were fresh bouquets in the vases. Even for the winter she dried some and put them in vases or made them into bouquets to put on the table.

*And me, Emma asked herself and found out, I'm just the average of the two. I was mixed from the two, black and white poured into a vat, stirred and ready is the gray Emma.*

The dark blonde hair that ticked into brown, the average figure, everything was pretty much the middle of the two.

In the summer there were sometimes violent thunderstorms, during which Rona always crawled under Emma's blanket, she was afraid of the weather witches, who then threw their fiery hammers wildly, but actually without any real aim. Then when the thunderstorm subsided, Rona was six years old, she suddenly asked Emma, "Where do little children come from?"

"From the Great Mother," Emma answered, trying to remember what she had learned about this in training. "There you are first very tiny and grow up in the water, like the tadpoles in the pond, until you can breathe and eat and drink on your own. When you're about a year old, you'll leave that womb and get a real mother to keep taking care of you until you're just as big as we are."

Rona was quiet and tried to understand. Emma went on, trying to get ahead of the question of why all children don't look alike: "In the big mother you get everything you need to grow properly and be healthy afterwards. You are all a little different, but you are always pretty children."

Rona was content, at least for a time, and since she was the oldest, she would probably always be the first to come with the slowly awakening questions to quench her thirst for knowledge.

After a year, she already wanted to know more. "Nanina fell on my hernia while playing, it hurt a lot. Why don't you have a hernia and only us?"

"You know, Rona, that the little children come out of the big womb and sometimes there are little asymmetries there."

"What are unsummeties?"

"They're little accidents that sometimes happen in the womb," Emma tried to explain. "Sometimes there is such a little asymmetry, such a rupture. Very few children get something like that."

More to herself than to Rona she said: "That has to do with the fact that we humans have a long evolution from the animal kingdom behind us. And our immortal soul had to go through those experiences first. And sometimes there is such a relapse."

"And the relapse, that's us?" asked Rona sadly. "It's not bad at all," Emma tried to reassure. "It can be fixed, when you're old enough you can have surgery. And then everything will be back to normal." Rona was pleased.

Emma sometimes blamed herself for caring less for Nanina and much more for Rona. It was a silent and unspoken agreement among the women that Emma showed her affection for Rona. Hela and Alina even seemed glad of it. Children, after all, were for everyone, and Alina for Hela.

At first Emma thought that Nanina might suffer from it and maybe even get jealous, but that was unfounded. Nanina had found a friend in Sika and they were becoming more and more inseparable. The two of them didn't miss Alina or Emma.

Nanina was also somehow different from Rona and Sika. Emma didn't know exactly in what ways, but Alina had noticed that too. If there was somehow a magical aura, which all the women here believed in, that they could have other women but not themselves right now, they would have been most likely to suspect one in Nanina. But Nanina had as little of an aura as all the others in the house, she was just a little different, as if she had come from another star. Nanina had golden blonde hair and large light blue eyes, she had a slimmer figure than children her age usually had.



When Rona got her shining light blue hooded gown with the richly decorated leather belt for her arrival party, she was now nine years old, and she danced and jumped over the meadows with happiness, Emma had one of her most beautiful and at the same time most frightening dreams the following night. She was walking in the woods and it was getting dark. She had the impression that she had to run home quickly because something was going to happen that she had to be afraid of.

Then a white horse with a flowing mane emerged from the dark forest. Slowly it came towards them. A current of happiness ran through Emma when she saw Rona sitting on the horse and waving to her. Rona was taller and stronger than she really was at the moment. Rona had a golden hoop in her hair, wore a blue, richly embroidered gown like only princesses wore in fairy tales. Just before her, the white horse stopped and turned around, Rona beckoned her to come along, but she couldn't, her legs seemed frozen and stuck in the ground like roots. The roots pulled her into the soil.

Startled, she woke up, the moon was shining directly on her bed and beside her lay Rona quietly, sleeping soundly with her face turned towards her. She kissed Rona softly on the cheek and stroked her hair very lightly. Rona turned over on her other side in her sleep.

Emma pondered what this dream could mean, she couldn't find an interpretation that was coherent for her.

When she thought about her life, she only had time for it at night. For hours she lay awake thinking about the flow of her life. Three quarters of her time in the log cabin at the edge of the clearing, at the edge of the pond, were over.

## 5 The elimination of the male gene pool



Hilda walked the gravel-strewn path from the helipad through the Mediterranean gardens to the main building. A breath of eternity enveloped her between these evergreen citrus plants and the old buildings, partially preserved with much effort.

Millennia passed over this place on the edge of a barely recognizable crater lake. Alba Longa, as this place was called over four millennia ago, played a mythologically important role in the founding of a world empire that, with its later religion, held large parts of humanity in a dominant spell for millennia.

Later it was the summer residence of the representative of the only true God on earth. Important decisions concerning the whole of humanity were initiated from here and then also provided essential building blocks of the Apocalypse.

An invisible shield, it seemed to Hilda, must lie over this place that it had survived the turmoil of the last millennium except for a few changes. The old buildings had to be renovated again and again at great expense. For this purpose, there was a special construction brigade in the agricultural estate belonging to the gardens, which was equipped with all the necessary machines.

The large city once visible on the horizon no longer existed. Overgrown with impenetrable scrub and pine trees were the buildings of the city that had become mounds over time. There were no more humans to resettle here for a very long time. Reproduction rates were far too low for that. The high commissariat had to mobilize all its forces to ensure that the world's population did not fall below the critical level of one million again.

The airfield of this former city, which a millennium ago had been fondly referred to as the center of the world, had been kept in working order throughout the many years. Aircraft were maintained in hangars under the control of the Guardian Council only, and only a select few commissioners knew anything about them at all. And that little was also very vague. They were special planes and

helicopters used in the final stages of the apocalypse to fight and destroy scattered terrorists. But it was becoming increasingly difficult in the attached workshops to maintain the aircraft. A third of the original stock had already to be abandoned, because it was no longer possible to repair certain aggregates. In a design office, attempts were made to find substitute solutions and to use simpler designs, designs that could be manufactured in the workshops. The greatest difficulty was in producing the appropriate materials. The technology had been so special that it was now almost impossible to achieve this quality of material.

This was not the first time Hilda had walked this way to the palace with the two domes in the east wing.

A whiff of the Inquisition and the burning of witches still seemed to be in the air for her. She was one of the privileged ones who had been taught good historical knowledge in her education. She didn't know exactly whether to associate the choice of this place with a triumph over the past dark millennia of oppression of the half, or rather of people in general, or whether there were secret and rationally undetectable connections that indicated a tradition of hidden power.

The floorboards, which had surely been replaced once every century, creaked as she approached the entrance to one dome on the fifth floor of the palace. The other dome still contained a telescope, which was also occasionally used to observe the sky. Astronomy, however, had become obsolete in the last millennium. People's eyes were fixed on the earth. There was no need for a look upwards. Priests who were also astrophysicists had tried to unite gravitation and quantum physics, God and evolution, here in this building a millennium ago, a late revenge of the heretic Galileo Galilei.

What no one on the Isles of Bliss knew, and only a few perhaps suspected, Hilda was the liaison to the Guardian Council and had a good chance of joining the inner circle in the foreseeable future. The feeling of belonging to a true and yet secret power held an irresistible attraction for her. She had finally succeeded in clearing up the irregularities in the accounting of sperm production. A container of sperm had indeed disappeared from the island more than 50 years ago, a fact dangerous in the extreme.

The office of their director Hedwiga was right next to the dome of the observatory and had a lovely view from the terrace to the small lake nearby. Hilda knew the old name "Lago d'Albano"; she had studied the history of the place in detail. Her aspiration was to be a member of the Guardian Council.

Friendly smiling, the manageress came to meet her and they sat down on the large terrace with a view of the lake. A white wooden table with three wooden chairs, also painted white, and a lounge in the same colour formed a small seating area framed by a sunshade and a few flowering shrubs in tubs. On the table was a shiny, polished, large copper vase of large-flowered flowers, the names of which Hilda did not know.

"How was the flight, my dear?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Just the last bit in the helicopter, you know I don't think I'll ever be able to get used to it," Hilda returned with a smile and sat down. Hilda had already put on her elegant ankle length robe on the plane. The shoulders were bare and Hilda liked her slim yet muscular body in this dress of blue velvet with the golden brown lace trim around the neckline. To go with it, the long, light auburn silk stole gave her the feeling of flow as she moved. She had practiced it often in front of her mirror, this elegant tossing and turning. Hooded frocks were frowned upon here, and even her leader, some ten years her senior, wore such an elegant wardrobe. Her long robe was a pale, silky shade of green. A lace border stretched around the generous neckline down to her upper arms.

Exquisite silver and gold jewelry complemented this fairy-like appearance.

"Surely you'd like some tea after your tiring flight?" Her leader poured tea from a dainty porcelain teapot into equally dainty and fragile-looking teacups with floral designs. "I chose the green tea with aloe vera and honeybush that you had particularly enjoyed last time," she added, smiling more than kindly at Hilda. The latest news from the Isle of Bliss was exchanged with Oriental serenity for the equally trivial recent events in the Guardian Council's oasis around Lake Albano.

After the second cup of tea, sweetened with the unadulterated pure granulated sugar and stirred and dissolved with a dainty silver spoon with rose decoration, the conversation approached its proper purpose. Hilda explained her written report on the seed pellet stolen some four decades ago. They

looked at the phantom images of the masculine and feminine specimens that belonged to these sperm like one looks at a special, repulsive kind of monkey. The desire to drink tea immediately vanished. Especially the almost all-skin hairiness of the masculine specimens aroused her disgust.

"Who could have an interest," Hilda still couldn't believe it, "in stealing something so heinous?"

The friendly smile disappeared from Hedwiga's face and made her look at least 10 years older, so that Hilda was startled and also had to look very serious.

"We suspected at first that it might be the neuters, that might have been understandable," Hedwiga's petrified face broke into a pained smile, "but far from it." She paused and looked at the rest in her teacup without drinking. Then she looked fixedly into Hilda's face and almost whispered, "They're animalists!"

Hilda ran hotly over and Hedwiga looked back down at her teacup to spare Hilda.

"Animalists?" repeated Hilda incredulously. She had tried to sound particularly innocent and naive.

"Yes, Hilda, frau shouldn't believe it, they still exist, these women who would love to mate with such, with such animal specimens."

Hedwiga sat back and sighed. "Have we been too lenient, have we policed too little? Is there an undercount of those who mate with these masculine dogs and pigs?" Disgust and revulsion stretched across her face, but then she became friendlier again, turning to Hilda with a slightly ironic index finger raised. "That's your responsibility - isn't it? Couldn't you genetically locate and eradicate something like that?"

Hilda tried to apologize and slid around in her chair a little nervously. "That was hard to find, it's on several chromosomes and certainly not unique. Sometimes these sections are involved and sometimes those."

Hilda visualized the difficult facts. *One would have to carry out genetic experiments, but for ethical reasons that is only allowed with the masculine rudiments*, she thought.

"I know what you're thinking," Hedwiga surmised, "Anna's experiments are being shut down, we need to look at safety before it's too late. We have no more time for so-called scientific research, or should I say shenanigans?"

Hilda felt disarmed, what was she to answer? Slowly it dawned on her what was coming. "Of all things, these three particularly animalistic muscle-bound fighting machines have been stolen," Hilda spoke quietly to herself. Disgust and revulsion would not leave her face at the sight of the pictures.

"Yeah, you said it. This is serious. If we're not careful, our civilization is in danger."

The tea grew cold in the fine china cups.

"We noticed it far too late, we felt too safe. None of us could imagine that woman would eagerly steal such a thing." Hilda looked at Hedwiga with resignation, hoping she had a solution. Hedwiga seemed to suspect this and began to develop her plan, "Nothing is too late, it may only be the first generation to be destroyed. We may also be worrying unnecessarily and these...", Hedwiga paused and the old disgust and revulsion crossed her face again, "these Animalists were just too stupid to - to get this vile reproduction going."

Hilda still suspected that the castrati might be behind it after all. They had at least been able to discover the presence of one of these subjects on the island. She had to share her concerns. "We have determined that neuters have been secretly on the island. And we don't know ..." Hedwiga interrupted her. "Of course, given the current state of the investigation, we can't rule out the possibility that they might also have an interest in saving the last masculine specimens. However, it seems to me that the animalists are more dangerous. They may also be working hand in hand. Unfortunately, we still know too little."

Hedwiga became serious and frowned, "The Guardian Council has given the problem the highest priority. The High Commissariat and the Council of the Elderly have been informed and will take the necessary legal action. Our job is to make sure there are no more mishaps. We need to lay traps and spread rumors so we can get all the leads and break up this cancer."

"And what will be my task in this?" wanted to know Hilda. She seemed to be beginning to estimate the scope.

"You will get two additional female staff members infiltrated and you will see to it that all information about the Masculine and also - ", Hedwiga paused, determination and assertiveness marking her countenance, "the bearers of this knowledge are rendered harmless. We have no other choice now. So do what is necessary, I trust you completely, you know the environment best. Take notes, there is no written order."

Hedwig pulled out her little booklet and wrote down her order in small and clearly legible print.

"And remember to always keep in touch with me. It's not going to be easy. I'll give you all the support you'll need. But we have to get through this, there's a lot at stake," Hedwiga added. They were both silent for a long time.

"You'd best fly right back. We don't have any more time to lose either."

The conversation was over.

## 6 Annas wild card has no chance

Anna's shoulder-length hair, dyed blonde after the first gray streaks, blew into her face as she boarded the small plane sent by the Air Force that would then take her on a four-hour flight from the island to the mainland.

She was only surprised that she flew alone. The institute she presided over had undergone a severe shrinkage under her tenure. Only a village center with three blockhouses was now available for her genetic experiments. When rumors surfaced at the time that genetic material might have gone missing, the opinion formed that this superfluous gene pool had to be totally destroyed. Only with difficulty did she manage to preserve this one small remnant for experimentation, all the remaining frozen reproductive pellets were destroyed and the small remainder fell under these tightened security measures.

She had the impression at the time that they no longer took her seriously, which spurred her ambition immensely. Her old competitor, Hilda, from the science leadership training camp, had been very derogatory at every opportunity, comparing her institute to one for breeding pigs that were no longer needed. Anna was clear that her hatred for Hilda was irrational. After all, in grueling mind games, she had come to a similar conclusion. So what was the point of this research?

But didn't this genetic material also mean a certain freedom? Anna kept telling herself that. There were fewer ethical problems if something went wrong, since the material was inferior anyway. She had a free hand! Even if a dragon was to be the end result. Anna had to smile at that thought, despite all the bitterness and mortification. She was proud that she had prevailed and could continue this research.

The only disadvantage was that her computing time at the central quantum computer was also cut. But somehow she was baffled sometimes, the quantum computer was no longer very powerful and also prone to failure. When she estimated the gene combinations, how much time it would take, she always got a result that seemed unbelievable. Should she have made such a huge estimate? What she thought would take a thousand years or more was already calculated after a few weeks. She couldn't explain it and actually she didn't want to. What mattered to her were the results, and they would amaze everyone. The wild card of human evolution, a designed human with a practically eternal youth that was her goal and she had probably already achieved it.

She had discovered an ancient theory, more of a speculation, that could help her target the positioning of the gene snippets. The fluctuations of the gravitational field alternated between harmonic and disharmonic states, and her mimosa gene snippets responded, albeit weakly, but they responded. When she presented about this at a conference, some chuckled and one attendee even commented, "That sounds like astrology!"

"Yes, you might think," she had replied at the time, "and if there was any scientific connection to the old astrology, it can only be explained in terms of nonlinear reactions from the oscillating gravitational field. But what I have found has nothing to do with irrational astrology; it is only stable and unstable states of the gravitational field that I want to use for gene positioning."

As a result, she had a certain amount of fool's license. In her circles all irrational belief systems were frowned upon. The new women's esotericism and nature spirit beliefs that prevailed among the women's village communities were only met with an understanding smile here on the island. "Yes, if it helps them cope with life better, why not."

Her unusual approach and the emerging success would prove her right. The resulting euphoric mood, Anna found, was better than any psychedelic drug.

And then this Seba had appeared, Anna suddenly remembered, had appeared and disappeared again. She hadn't heard anything again, and a woman with this strange, masculine-looking ring hadn't appeared at her place either.

The salon of the plane was at her disposal alone. Anna had a coffee and a cognac brought to her. She flew over the ocean, below her light white clouds, in between parts of the Atlantic with a surface that looked as if it had been frozen. She picked up her document folder and leafed through it. Was it the research report that brought her to this secret meeting of the Council of the Ancients? Or was her institute to be dissolved altogether? A number of important decisions were about to be made, she guessed.

Had she thought about how this report would be received? No, she had to admit to herself, she had perhaps been too naive in her approach. She felt like a child who had discovered something and was telling everyone about it, without having any idea what she had discovered.

She had written the report and delivered it 6 weeks ago in an exuberance of triumphant feelings. In it, she documented her findings to date on the state of research in the field of protecting the ends of chromosomes. There were some promising new applications for supplementing the gene for the enzyme telomerase. Among other things, they had succeeded in the laboratory some time ago in extremely slowing down the formation of bone from cartilage, so that the cartilage cells could be enabled to divide indefinitely, at least in isolated tissue.

The quintessence of her report was that it was perfectly possible to form such centres in every specialised human tissue that would allow permanent renewal from within.

She knew the explosive nature of the results. The whole process could only be done by means of palindromes on the chromosome and a self-replication. Was it really only an ability of her archaic genetic material? Sometimes she even had the impression that uncontrolled self-evolutions were taking place on her part. She had discovered a new kind of immune system that could not be explained biologically and reminded her very much of independently operating nano-structures. Nanotechnology, however, was not so familiar to her. She came to the conclusion that she must be mistaken.

She was also too much of a scientist to think of any social revolution her research might conjure.

But she had also heard that diseases had appeared that would be impossible or very difficult to control.

These rumors also provided the alleged reason: A malfunction in parthenogenesis, the probable proportion of homozygous Genloki was too high.

An imbalance in reproduction, an imbalance she had been warning about for some time. The proportion of virgin birth in the offspring had been too high for too long, in her opinion, and the problems had been downplayed for too long. Mixing genetic material by fusing two eggs was still

fraught with uncertainty and failure, and was only used in reproduction at about 10 percent. Virgin reproduction proceeded more safely. But these problems did not fall directly within the remit of her institute.

There was a car waiting at the small airport to take them to their destination without delay.

The buildings of the Council of the Ancients were perched on a hill. Perched on the highest point was a massive domed building of granite and marble from the founding period almost 1000 years ago, at the end of the industrial age, at the end of the physically polar age, still built by the last, late sterilized men. It was strongly reminiscent of the gigantism of the patriarchal hierarchical pageantries of religion and politics from the grey prehistoric era. This industrial mania for wealth and the apocalyptic power struggles had almost succeeded in making the human race extinct.

This building, called the Pantheon, was rarely used anymore, mainly for teaching history. It contained an exhibition about the development of civilization and was divided into several sections. The first section was accessible to school children, here the history of the last 1000 years after the Apocalypse was documented.

The second section dealt with the apocalypse and the arduous transition of mankind from the bisexuality originating in the higher animal kingdom to the monosexuality of mankind. This section was also open to the budding leaders of the Society.

The third section was a pure research section, with documents also from the time before the apocalypse. Only female researchers with a special authorization had access.

The other buildings of this hill showed the different architectural styles that had followed the monumental style of the beginning.

There were wooden buildings in the butterfly style, always lovingly restored, which had arisen from the spontaneously active new attitude to life of freedom, security, harmony and eternal peace. The colorfully decorated roofs always somehow resembled butterfly wings. These times resembled a single sunny day when all the little girls played ring-around-the-rosy, tag, tickle and kiss in the green meadows with wreaths of flowers in their hair. The inside of these buildings were dancing, meditation and cuddling rooms, separated by beautiful curtains in colorful floral patterns or wickerwork of various materials. Too many ornaments, the static lightness and the soon more and more scarce craftswomen then put an end to this building style.

This was followed by the animal style. As if from the ground, the various favorite animals of the little girls grew, snails, hedgehogs, rabbits, ducks, but also mushrooms, fruits and fruits of clay. The loamy earth seemed to give birth to the girls' favourite animals and fruits. The education of the offspring was reformed and freed from all the baggage of the past. Nothing more reminded, nor should it remind, of the preceding dark epoch of physical conflict in humanity. There were no more girls from this time on, but only children and adults.

These houses were made of wooden wickerwork, thrown with clay. Roughly processed wood, mostly in its natural form, formed the interior decoration. Pure natural fibers, dyed with plants, knitted and woven into the most diverse fabrics, became the clothing of the inhabitants. In almost every house there was always a corner with stones and other natural materials, in addition to a clay oven and

various group play areas for the children. This was the dwelling place of the elemental spirits, the protectors and helpers in the house.

This style was also slowly replaced at some point and gave way to a more rational style. Buildings became more utilitarian, simpler and constructed with minimal effort. The building lodges experienced a crisis due to a shortage of women builders. Many classes were held for adults and children on how to build mud houses themselves.

Then followed an era of greater individualisation. It began with the realization that children did not need to have adults around them all day, but that they developed better when they were left alone. The larger communities of several adults and children slowly dissolved, forming smaller groups down to one adult and one child. But the latter was an exception.

If there was still enough living space from the previous, polar time of mankind for the first decades, it deteriorated faster and faster. The women's communities had to move more often, into buildings that were not yet so badly dilapidated.

Slowly, over several decades, individually usable, easy to build and maintain, small flat garden houses made of ecological building material emerged. This became the dominant building style of the common people. Renewed humanity had found its building style for centuries.

The world population remained almost constant at the one million mark. Preservation and conservation were the cardinal virtues of the following period. To preserve what had been achieved and created left enough room for a creative further development of the soul qualities of the new man.

Garden houses with their generously laid out kitchen gardens and flower gardens were also scattered around the hill of the Altenrat. This is where mainly the staff lived.

Anna stepped through the portal of the butterfly house in her dark blue hooded robe, so prescribed for scientists in the Council. She felt more nervous than usual. Was it because she wasn't a permanent member of the inner circle? But then, she never had been.

To the left in the entrance hall was a coffee bar, there sat a couple of blue frocks, among them she also immediately spotted Hilda, who was excitedly discussing with the others. Now she could also see the red cowl that the discussion of the others seemed to be about.

Should she greet the group? Anna was inwardly reluctant. There was nothing else she could do, however. With deference, she greeted the red cow, then Hilda and the other two. The discussion fell silent. The red cowl stood up and said in a coolly friendly tone, "My dear Anna, may I greet you. Circumstances require that we had yet to call you in to our deliberations. We expect you in meeting room 209 this evening at 8 p.m. I'm Alice by the way, I believe we've met before."

"Yes, I remember you from a meeting last year as well," Anna returned with a smile, and at that she finally remembered who she might be. Alice wasn't on the Senate Committee on Research. *She must be on the Ethics Council, a special division of the Senate*, she reasoned.

Alice left the group.

"How was the flight?" inquired Hilda politely. "No more exciting than usual, the weather was calm," Anna replied, trying hard to smile. "What are you doing here? I didn't know you were here too."

"You know the rumors of the sperm dust about 50 years ago, they are true to the facts and so there is no panic anywhere - not everyone needs to know."

"And what have we to do with it?" wanted Anna to know.

"Nothing that I know of, let's have another coffee instead, it always tastes particularly good here - it's just first quality."

Anna sat back and continued to probe, "Surely you've heard something about why I need to be here." One of the other bluecoats stepped in for Hilda. "There's a rumor about you too, won't have escaped your notice."

"And which one?" Anna guessed something was making the rounds from her research report, but she didn't know what it was exactly. Should she fear something, or should she rejoice at the probable success?

"My dear Anna, you know that work is being done in various places on recombining genes to increase the number of cell divisions - in ours, too, by the way - and you won't meet with only enthusiasm with your gene pool. That should be obvious to you - shouldn't it?"

Anna pressed both hands to her face and wiped them away downward. That was already clear to her. But it was pure research and what she wanted to do with it or not was not her topic.

Hilda continued thoughtfully and more quietly, "Research in general is in focus - I have a feeling. It's not just about your department." And after a brief pause, she looked openly at Anna and spoke louder, "But I suppose it won't be about that, nor is the new plague that problematic. Good luck."

"Are you there tonight too?", Anna still wanted to know. Anna was unsettled and couldn't imagine it not being about the plague. Perhaps she had secretly hoped they wanted to know if their gene pool might be spared from this spreading disease.

"No, I was on yesterday and I'm flying back in an hour."

"Wouldn't it be better to convene a major conference on the subject?"

"Yeah, maybe, we should do something on the island, this is going on so sluggishly in secret again, when action should be faster."

Hilda rose, the two other bluecoats following. "I have some packing to do," and smiling, she added, "I'm sure I'll see you back on the island soon." When the blue-coats had turned, Hilda, unnoticed by them, slipped Anna a small note.

Anna sat alone with her coffee, which was bitter, sweet and covered with a fine froth of milk. Beside her she had the little bag with the necessities for an overnight stay or two. "Stay strong" was written on it in quick handwriting and then that cross with the bars on it. It seemed to have been fleetingly used as a stamp.

*Seba*, ran through Anna.

After drinking her coffee in outward calm, she picked up the key at the front desk and went to her room on the first floor. She lay down on the bed and meditated. Thoughts kept intruding, disturbing her. She had not seen her experiments but only received reports of the results: Gene samples, blood work. *Hopeful results*, she could tell for herself, *with only one shortcoming. The rudimentary Y chromosome seemed, so far, to be the only one capable of keeping this auto-repair mechanism going.*

A little excited, she stood at the door of meeting room 209 five minutes before the start of the secret session. She was called in. The room was paneled in wood. Opposite the door was a large semi-circular desk, and seated at it was a female high commissioner of the Senate in a white hooded gown, trimmed with a purple hem of silk. Three women senators at a time were given the office of High Commissioner with veto power for five years. Only they had the power to suspend a resolution of the supreme senate. On the island the high commissioners were only mockingly called 'The Parcen'.

In front of the humble desk was a long table with eight chairs on each side. Six members of the senate in their red hooded robes sat at it.

"Take a seat," the High Commissioner began, "we'll be brief, time is short."

Anna sat down at the front, opposite the High Commissioner. *Time is running out*, Anna thought, *what's going on, is it about the plague?*

"We've evaluated your research report, and in order to properly assess the results, we have a few more questions for you - Alice, you have the floor."

Alice cleared her throat. "You're five employees in all." Anna nodded. "Who else knows the full scope of the last report besides you?"

"Gertrude, my deputy."

"Well, after it became known that genetic material had been stolen, you were responsible for maintaining strict secrecy and tightening security." Alice paused and flipped through her files. "Who else could have gained access?"

"No one," Anna answered impulsively.

"You really don't?"

Anna felt a hot chill run down her spine. Feverishly she tried to remember any striking incidents of the last time.

"Who else has access to the material but you? Does Gertrud have access to the data?"

"Yes, but only with me. She can't access it alone, her access code is one level lower."

"What do the other three know?" Anna felt like she was at a court hearing. "They only know their section of work each."

"What you can do with the results, though, everyone knows - right?"

"Yes, I do, it's speculated before in work meetings."

Alice looked around the room. "Does anyone else have any questions?" A woman next to Alice took the floor. "The research, if I interpret the report correctly, has reached an impasse. There are no prospects of transferring the mechanism of reproduction to the X chromosomes."

"Yes, that's how it looks at the moment." Now Anna realized what the questioning would amount to.

"That's enough," the High Commissioner concluded the questioning, "there has already been one foiled attempt to get the data and we must expect the attempt to be made again."

"But...", Anna tried to speak up again, she was interrupted.

"We need to liquidate the gene pool for security reasons, and we need to do it this year. The dissolution of the research division and the liquidation of the rest of the gene pool associated with it, will be initiated."

Anna, you will make the necessary arrangements upon your return. Not even the slightest trace must remain about gene combinations. The female staff will be divided among other institutes."

The High Commissioner paused and continued more quietly, "We still don't know who might have an interest in such data - unfortunately." And turning to Anna directly, "I'm sorry for you, Anna, but we can't take any chances. We called you here so you would know the danger we face. This is worse than any plague."

Anna couldn't hold back any longer, "We have the last remaining male gene pool and we still can't guarantee it's reproducible from our theoretical findings. We're destroying something we can never get back the same way. Do we really want that?"

Anna composed herself and became more serious, at the same time her voice began to tremble slightly as she formulated the objection directly: "I object and demand that the rest of the gene pool be classified as world-historical cultural heritage. I will make the motion to do so myself.

I don't want to downplay the dangers of activating the pool on a large scale."

Alice took the floor again: "There is no hundred percent security for years. Who's going to guarantee that? You? - No one can. Life always finds a way, even if certain species disappear occasionally."

With her voice growing louder again, the High Commissioner announced, "Evolution has reached a state that makes it unnecessary to preserve the past." And smiling conciliatorily, she added, "After all, we haven't yet felt any interest in reviving the dinosaurs - so why should we breed these hairy half-apes?" She rose and all present in the room followed her as she announced, "What is discussed here is subject to the strictest secrecy: GATHERING! - This hearing is over."

Anna said goodbye. She had the feeling of having lost the ground under her feet. She mustered all her strength not to hit the doorpost on her way out. In the hallway, the dizziness still lingered. She sought out her room, looked in the refrigerator, took out a bottle of cognac, poured herself a swig and downed it. She'd never done it that way before. A coughing fit brought her back.

*What happened, she wondered, the cool, formal and in every way unnecessary visit must surely make sense?*

In the morning hours she flew back. She was alone again with the aircrew.

A small electric bus took her from the airport to her housing estate. Still lost in thoughts of the nonsensical hearing, she entered her bungalow. In the doorway to her study, she flinched. She was expected. From behind, she felt a firm grip on the back of her neck. At the desk were two black frocks. She could not make out any faces.

## 7 Life in a post-apocalyptic women's community



Nanina ran out of the house and there was white everywhere, in the yard and on the path that led away from the yard. Where this path led, Nanina did not know then. It was her earliest memory. She reached into the white stuff and felt her fingers tingle in a way she had never felt before. The white stayed for a little while and then got wet. She ran back into the house. Then later, she could remember this too, the sled she was sitting on, wrapped in blankets, tipped over into a big snowdrift. Now she could also feel the tingling clearly in her face.

The path led to another path that ran along a pond. In winter the water was frozen, in summer frogs croaked, and later Nanina discovered fish in it, and still later she fished for them from time to time.

She lived in a house built mostly of thick wooden beams. There was the big stove, made of stones, which had to heat the whole house in winter. Here Nanina could warm her feet and hands.

Three women lived in it, one of whom was her mother. There were two other children, Rona and Sika, who belonged to the other two women. It didn't really matter which child was assigned to which woman.

Nanina saw her mother Emma less often, as she was more often out in the field or forest than Hela, Rona's mother, who preferred to work in the house. Rona was a year older and Sika a year younger than Nanina.

If Nanina remembered way back, she'd hear Sika yelling about something and Rona getting slapped in the face for doing something she wasn't supposed to again.

Rona later taught Nanina how to fish. First they searched in the small caves under the stones in the brook, which flowed past the house and flowed into the pond. They had to chase these finger-long fish, which looked quite colourful on their bellies, with their hands in the water, reach under the stone with lightning speed and then hold on to them. The caught fish went into a big pot with some stones and water plants. When Rona stirred in circles with a stick in the water, you could see how the fish had to swim and yet always stayed in one place.

After a few days they were mostly dead and dumped into the chicken coop. The chickens ate everything that looked edible, even cockchafers that they had once caught. Rona's mother, Hela, told them that the chickens would then lay especially beautiful eggs.

Nanina did not like chickens. In the summer, when they walked barefoot, it was not uncommon for chicken poop to squeeze out from between their toes. She just didn't like the smell of it.

When Nanina was alone, which was not very often, she would sit by the pond and watch the water beetles and small fish as they floated among the plants. She imagined herself living in such a world, floating among the trees and bushes. Sometimes she had the impression that the fish were trying to tell her something and that she just couldn't understand it.

Alina, Sika's mother, sometimes told them a story about wood elves and gnomes. The wood elves gathered blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, cranberries, mushrooms, leaves and herbs in summer, which they dried.

When winter came slowly, the gnomes, who had built a city under a hill, came and took almost everything from them. And if an elf refused, then she went into a dark dungeon under the gnome city and could no longer see the sun, the moon and the stars, which all elves otherwise liked to do.

These stories were mostly about how a few elves cunningly fought off the gnomes, because the gnomes were ugly and stupid, but strong.

Nanina liked the beautiful elf queen best, who was hated by the ugly gnome queen.

Then later Rona took her fishing. Rona had made a fishing rod out of a hazelnut rod, a thin rope and a needle bent into a hook. Emma, Nanina's mother, had taught her. The two liked each other. Emma liked to take Rona with her when she went into the woods to get wood or when there was work to be done in the fields. Rona had also got quite brown skin from it, as she always wore only a short skirt without a top.

With a specially cut stone that could be tied to the line so that it stayed on and a piece of dry wood dipped several times in linseed oil as a float, they then went fishing, preferably in pairs. Sika only interfered.

You had to watch very carefully whether the fish had bitten or just sipped a little on the earthworm pulled onto the hook. If the right moment was there, the fish could be pulled out of the water with a strong jerk. Usually it came off the hook while still in the air and then lay wriggling in the grass. Rona had gotten a stick with a notch in it from Hela so she could measure each fish she caught. The first fish Rona brought to Hela's kitchen were usually too small. If the carp-like fish was the right

length, Rona, as she had learned from Emma, would hit it on the head with the stick until it stopped wriggling.

Nanina needed longer until she could hold the slippery fish and kill it. She didn't like the taste of these fish either. They somehow always stank of the mud that was all over the pond and that you could feel between your toes like chicken shit.

As they grew up, Nanina and Rona hated it when they had to work in the garden or in the field, which was very often. Mostly Emma was there, but often Alina too. Alina always sang a song while working in the fields, she said that it made you not feel your back so much. She also played with them at least once a week, usually singing songs and everyone dancing to them.

With Emma, Rona first learned reading and arithmetic, then later, when Nanina had made her first progress and could slowly spell words, they were taught in pairs. Emma said that this was important if they didn't want to be cheated later on in the market.

Sika took a little longer and when she completed the learning trio, she was very frustrated at first because she didn't do so well. It took her a long time to get out of this resignation. She was already beginning to solidify a denial attitude about reading when she discovered that she was faster than Nanina at mental arithmetic. Then something like ambition awoke in her and arithmetic became her favorite subject. After another year she was also better than Rona at arithmetic.

If something was left over in the field or in the garden, and if there were still enough supplies, the expendable and preserved was brought to the market. The market was a whole day's journey away on foot. The way there led almost exclusively through the forest. The children were not allowed to go there.

Hela loved to be in the kitchen and at the stove, she usually decided what was cooked and eaten, with her the children learned how to handle food, how it was prepared, seasoned, cooked or preserved.

Every day, from an early age, one child was always with Hela and had kitchen duty. Sometimes one of the children was sick, then Hela nursed him with herbal teas and fruit juices. But no one ever got really seriously ill.

Nanina only liked Alina's stories about the elves and gnomes in winter. Hela and Alina sometimes went away for a few days, to another house, it took them almost half a day to get there in the snow. They never took the children with them. Emma also went away sometimes, but mostly only in the summer.

When there was snow outside, Rona had to go into the forest with Emma and later with Nanina to fetch wood. They took a small wagon pulled by hand or, if there was a lot of snow, a sledge just as big. They looked for dry branches, and when they found few, they had a long pole with a sickle-like hook on it, with which they pulled down dry branches from the trees, which was not easy. This was done by Emma and Rona, both of them pulling with heave-ho until the branch broke off and Nanina could throw it on the wagon or sledge.

No one in the house loved fetching wood, and the big stove ate a huge amount of branches, which also had to be made smaller with a blunt axe beforehand.

At certain intervals a horsewoman appeared on horseback. She asked about things that were broken in the house and needed to be repaired, inquired about illnesses and examined the children to see if they were also healthy.

Nanina loved the summer more than anything. Even though there was always something to do in the garden, in the fields and in the forest, she always found a little time for herself. She loved to daydream by the brook or the pond. When Sika grew up, they often played together by the pond and stream with little boats made of bark. They would race them down the creek. Sometimes they put beetles on them as passengers.

Sika slept together with Nanina since she no longer wet the bed at night. Alina was glad about that, so she could sleep together with Hela now. Rona shared a big bed with Emma.

The house was not very big and the tiny bedrooms were upstairs under the sloping shingle roof, opposite a pantry. In winter it was very cold, though the stove sent some warm air from below through the then open doors. In midsummer, on the other hand, it was sometimes so stiflingly hot that Nanina was still unbearably warm without a nightgown under the now thin blanket.

Nanina soon got used to Sika, and taught her all that Rona had taught her. While Sika, when she was little, liked to throw her arms around herself in the night, hitting Nanina and waking her up, or falling out of bed and then at some point crawling back under the covers to Nanina all cold, now she slept more peacefully and usually snuggled up to Nanina all night.

In the summer, when the berries were ripe, they often had to go with Emma and Alina to the forest, pick berries. Nothing was more horrible than picking blueberries. Gathering those little berries for hours into a small pot and then, when it was full, pouring it all into a bigger one or into a jug. By the time the little pot was full, it was taking a long time. And getting a jug full took an unbearably long time. On top of that, there were mosquitoes, which, Nanina believed, always had it in for her.

"Don't be like that," was usually Emma's reply when Nanina complained in exasperation. When the jug, and it was not a small one, was full, then the children could pick mushrooms in the surrounding area.

Rona usually gathered blueberries in one place with Emma and was also always first to finish her quantum. One day Nanina observed Emma, unseen by Alina, secretly giving Rona berries from her pot. She immediately wanted to complain, but Rona threatened and so she let it go. She thought it was unfair, Sika didn't need to pick quite as much either, as she was still smaller, only she, Nanina, had to get her jar full by herself.

Once that was done, usually at noon, the afternoon belonged to mushroom picking.

After they all ate a piece of flatbread, some dried fruit and cheese and drank malt coffee from a big bottle, Emma, Rona and later Nanina went mushroom picking, while Alina and Sika carried the berries home from the forest.

Mushroom picking was increasingly fun for Nanina. When there weren't many, they romped through the forest together. Rona climbed a small birch tree, and when she was on top, she bobbed until she leaned to the ground with it. Nanina imitated it.

When things got too noisy, Emma would shout, "Be quiet, you're scaring the mushrooms away, they're scared of you." Nanina always had the impression that Emma would make arrangements with some elves, gnomes or forest spirits, who would then inform her where the best mushroom spots were and how to find the shy mushrooms.

A large stick made of hazelnut wood also belonged to the mushroom search, a wolf or a wild boar could have come. With this stick the two then fought against invisible wolves, wild boars and in pairs even against bears. Mostly, however, they only knocked the leaves off the bushes or trees. The mushroom knife was also a good weapon against the predators of the forest. For a long time they could practice throwing the knife against a tree in such a way that it eventually got stuck in the tree, more by accident than anything else.

At the beginning of summer, their arrival party was held on 17 June. Cakes were baked with the first strawberries. There were various fruit juice lemonades for the children and for the women a black hot drink, which tasted very bitter and was only drunk on certain occasions.

There was no work on that day, only the animals got their ration of food and some more. Most of the time the weather was nice, so they could all be outside. The children loved to play hide and seek together, so the age difference didn't matter much.

For the highlight of the day, each child received an arrival gift. This came from the village headquarters, but the children did not know this, and was only allowed to be opened by the women on that day in the presence of the children.

When the children were small, they unwrapped a wooden animal, a wooden flute and sometimes a brown animal made of chocolate. Sweet candies, which were not usually available all year, were always there. When Rona turned 9 and had been living here for 8 years, she unwrapped a beautiful light blue long gown with a hood that day. The fabric reached almost to her ankles. The thick fabric had flowers embroidered on the front of the chest. In addition, she got a real leather belt with a metal buckle.

Rona danced with joy and Emma had to wipe her eyes.

There was also something special in Nanina's gift bag, a wooden ship with a real sail and a rudder.

Only Sika was a little sad, she got a small wooden bunny and some chocolate eggs, but they weren't very big. Nanina tried to comfort her: "Now we already have the first animal to go on the ship."

At the end of the summer, the beautiful sailing ship was broken from all the sailing with and without animals. It had been through storms, capsized, and finally had been pelted with large boulders by giants. Rona, the biggest of the giants, hit it in the middle of the pond and sank the ship in the mud, whereupon it came to a quarrel between Nanina and Rona. Nanina only wanted more waves and began to howl. Rona promised to build her a new ship, which then calmed Nanina down.

There were small festivals in every season. Right after the arrival festival, the Solstice Festival was celebrated.

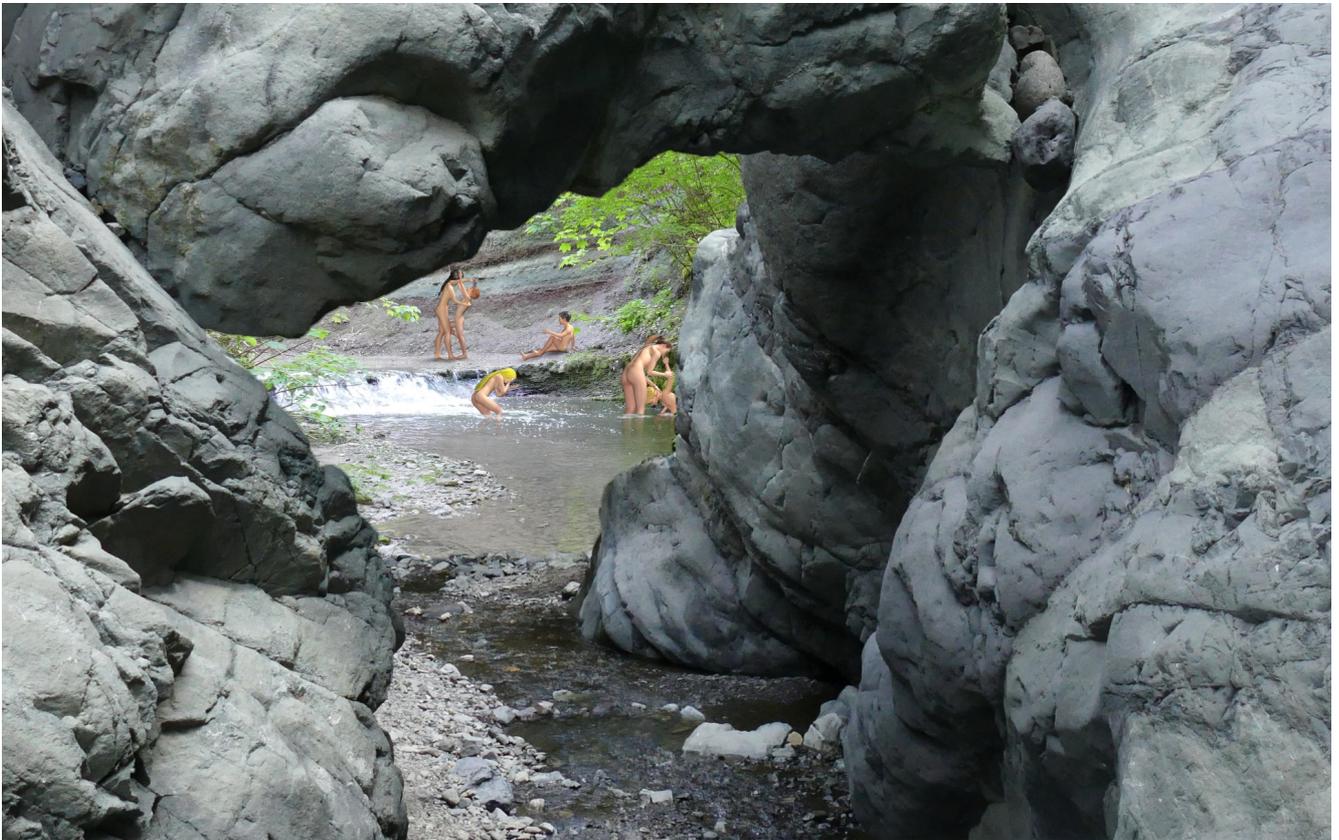
Nanina was already four years old when they left the house for three days for the first time. They went upstream, mostly wading in the stream, through almost inaccessible forest. Again and again they

had to bypass small dams with small waterfalls. This was not always easy, as they had to climb up the embankments and slide back down the slope behind the dam. Each had a bundle to carry in addition, which was not easy. After about two hours of wading and climbing they reached a larger waterfall, which had washed out a large pool below, here one could even swim. From there, a game trail led up a small hill, which was only covered with a few bushes and single, smaller rocks.

From a few rough blankets they had brought with them, two primitive little tents were erected, one for the children and one for the women. Rona and Nanina gathered dry grass for padding and Sika disturbed more than she helped.

At noon we had bread roasted on wooden skewers, dried meat and goat cheese. Hela had baked a sun cake for each of them. Golden yellow it shone, was hard and sweet. For the children there were also dried apple pieces. They drank peppermint tea, which was prepared in a small copper kettle.

At noon the sun was so high that it was really warm.



On the north slope of the hill, not far from the waterfall, was a loamy damp place from which water oozed out in little rivulets. Here everyone took off their clothes and rubbed and smeared themselves with the loamy damp earth. The first thing the women did was to draw a large cross on each other's bodies, from the head to the end of the torso and from shoulder to shoulder. Then it was the children's turn. While the women were already going into the water, the children were still allowed to smear each other and throw clay at each other. Then it was their turn too.

Rona tried to go into the water first, slipping and screaming at the top of her lungs as she fell all the way in and submerged briefly. The water was very cold as Nanina carefully put her feet in.

It was not very easy for the women to go in and then help the children to step into the water. Nanina felt the cold rising from her feet and looked down, quite frightened. Her hernia on the lower abdomen, which was now diving into the water, retreated into the abdominal cavity and was almost no longer visible.

Emma pulled her on, and as the chest dipped into the water, her breath caught, she started screaming, wanting to get back with all her might.

"Come on Nanina, once you're in properly it's very nice!" she tried to encourage Emma. Finally everyone was in, even Sika was carried into the water by Alina in her arms. Everyone was bouncing now, and whoever managed to get their head under the water and come right back up could go out into the sun and continue bouncing warmly. Nanina and Sika needed help, on their own they were not ready to dip their heads into the cold and wet. Nanina was also still afraid of mermaids, they had been taught never to go near deep water or they could be pulled to the bottom by mermaids and would always have to live down there in the cold and wet. Nanina took this very seriously.

Then, as they all bounced around outside on the hill in the sunshine until they were dried by the air and wind, they soon forgot about the water baptism. They put on a short skirt that exposed their upper bodies and legs to the soothing rays of the sun.

In the afternoon everyone had to collect wood. Dry branches and brushwood from the forest were dragged up the hill and then piled into a big pile.

Afterwards the women lay down in the sun and the children played on the hill, ran down to the water and up again. Everyone was already looking forward to the announced big fire in the evening.

As the sun slowly approached the horizon, everyone, including the children, exchanged their short skirts for their best gowns with hoods that reached above the knees. A coloured cord around the waist gave this garment its appealing structure.

Rona was allowed to put on her new blue hooded gown, with a red cloth belt Emma had made especially for her. Nanina wore a light blue and Sika a light green smock, with the slightly darker cord braided from red, blue and white. The women also wore colored gowns, Alina a fiery red, Hela a light blue, and Emma a grass green. They had a few more decorative elements and appliqués on them than the children.

Now it was over with the hide and seek and playing tag. Everyone sat down together and ate small, round goat cheese, round slices of sausage and round flatbread as the sun set. From clay cups they drank lemonade to go with it, made from thickened yellow, green and red fruit juice and fresh water from the stream. This was their very special ritual solstice meal and immediately afterwards the pile of dry branches and brushwood was lit. Alina read her sun story, which always ended with all the different elemental spirits elves, gnomes, mermaids, nymphs, forest spirits, dwarves and humans dancing around a big fire at the end. They sang to it and asked the sun to give them its life-giving rays also in the coming year, so that everything could grow and flourish.

Alina then addressed the children and said, "If you pay close attention and always think of all the creatures you can't see now, maybe they'll come to our fire and dance along when we thank the sun." Nanina got a little creeped out at that, only Sika was obviously bored because she couldn't understand everything yet.

The women began to rub each other with ointment from various small tins: the forehead, temples, back of the knees from one and between the legs with an ointment from another tin.

Now the children also received some of the ointment on their foreheads and temples.

Alina took the guitar and started the song, which all women now sang together with many repetitions in always a slightly different melody and voice pitch:

*Back, back*

*Back, back*

*To earth, water,*

*To fire and to wind*

Then Alina put away her guitar and everyone joined hands and danced around the fire with this chant.

Nanina danced and danced, looked into the flames and thought she was floating around the fire. She could no longer feel her feet. Then everything revolved around her and she no longer knew whether she was still dancing around the fire or the fire around her. They had become more, there were other beautiful elves and little dwarves dancing around the fire, nodding and laughing at her. Nanina laughed and rejoiced as never before in her life.

The fire only glowed and now the circle dissolved. The women jumped over the only smouldering wood and then ran barefoot through, followed by the children.

Afterwards, when it had become really dark, the children were taken to their tent and covered with blankets. Rona smiled as she fell asleep, only Sika fell asleep immediately without transition.

Nanina could still hear the women continuing to dance and sing, then she too danced around the fire again, but it was her dream now.

She no longer heard the women intoning their final chant.

*In the still of the night,*

*The silence of the forest*

*Makes my dreams come true,*

*My dreams are coming true.*

When they had harvested their apples in autumn and had finished drying and juicing them, then there was the cider festival. Hela baked onion cakes and served them with fresh cider.

A week later, another feast was celebrated just for the women. They drank the leftover apple juice, which had already begun to foam and no longer tasted good to the children, and sang songs until late at night. Nanina had the impression that the songs were quite funny at first, but later they became sad, but by then she was usually already falling asleep.



Solstice celebrations in the following years were similar.

When the sun was at its lowest, they celebrated the light-turning festival. For this day they fetched green moss, which in some years they had to search for under the snow, fir and pine cones, blackberry leaves that stayed green all winter, thick bark from pines and spruce twigs. From these, Alina and the children built a small forest with houses and caves made of leaves and bark. Rose hips lay in the caves and were to be the gifts for the forest gnomes.

The turn of the light festival was a celebration where the residents gave each other presents. Hela always gave everyone something baked with honey, almonds and raisins or dried fruit in it. From Emma and Rona, Nanina got a small carved sailing ship. Apparently to replace the arrival day gift that had been sunk in the summer. Emma had carved the hull and built the mast with sails. Rona had put a little house on it to protect the crew from rainy weather and storms.

Emma, who used the small loom the most, had woven and sewn some little thing for everyone, a scarf, a pair of gloves. She was always in competition with Alina, who delighted the others with knitted things. Most of the time, however, they didn't have that much time to make all the presents themselves. A lot of things were traded or bought at the market place just before the turn of the light. For this they received a few copper coins from the village centre for each child and each mother.

In the evening, many candles made of beeswax were placed on a table around a bouquet of fresh spruce twigs and lit. Plates with nuts, almonds, raisins and other dried fruits were ready for the children, but also for the women. On a wooden board lay a large round cake, baked with lots of eggs, oil and raisins, cut into small pieces.

Before the children were allowed to nibble anything from the plates, Alina fetched her guitar and began to sing a chorale with the women:

*Let me close  
be with you  
Let me close  
be up to you  
When I stand in the light*

*Nothing is bad  
And nothing is good  
All it takes is a little courage  
When I stand in the light*

*I can see  
sun and rain  
All that makes my life  
When I stand in the light*

Then it was time to eat from the plates. After each of the children had stuffed themselves with sweets, Hela told a story about the animals, how they had to freeze in winter because evil spirits were always trying to pull the sun into the earth. And how they then succeeded, with the help of the good elemental spirits, the people and with the light they lit everywhere, in taking the sun away from the cruel spirits again and placing it in the sky. Where it then took a long time until it had risen again to its full height.

Nanina soon noticed that the women also celebrated other festivals that had something to do with the moon. They would go into the forest on the full moon and return sometime during the night. In winter usually when the children had not yet fallen asleep, but in summer sometimes not until dawn.

"We dance with the elves," Alina had replied when Nanina asked about it. "They like dancing best in the moonlight. "

*\*Apocrypha 1-7-1*

## 8 Love by the Sea - Gertrud



The sun was at the beginning of the last quarter of its day's orbit. The light haze of a summer afternoon lay over land and sea.

The water was pleasantly refreshing when one was young like Lisa and had an invigorating effect when the self-defined middle of life was already visible like in Gertrud's case.

The sun was just above the cliff behind which the outline of another island could be seen in clear weather. How often they had sailed together and also with others between these islands. Gertrud still loved these sailing trips and wondered if one could not be satiated by beauty and adventure for once.

She came out of the water balancing with difficulty on slippery stones. Her head-length, ash-blond hair clung unflatteringly wet to her skull, as she knew it would. In contrast, the slender, otherwise hairless body moved with an air of masculine body-consciousness towards Lisa, who was lying on a wooden slatted frame, with a bright turquoise bath towel beneath her.

Gertrud still felt an erotic tingling when she saw this perfect body in all its beauty. She liked its scent, which, through the seawater, always awakened this vague longing in her. Paradoxically, it wasn't a longing for faraway places, for a sail on the open sea perhaps, as she had always believed at first in a kind of self-delusion. It was something else. Something tart and brittle was superimposed on the seductively beautiful Lisa. Her soft, womanly forms seemed to become harder, more muscular. An unpredictable abyss of emotion seemed to want to hide beneath.

Gertrud bent and kissed Lisa's slightly salty, sun-tanned belly. Drops of water fell from her hair onto her sun-dried skin.

"You shouldn't scare me like that," Lisa protested, opening her eyes.

Gently and carefully, Gertrud covered Lisa's body with kisses. The sea stopped throwing its waves against the beach, the island sank into nowhere around them, and the lightly fanning wind along the shore fell asleep for a time.

After their rite, often celebrated in one way or another with slight deviations, they later lay snuggled close together. Both dreamed their very own dreams until the sound of the sea became audible again and the wind lightly caressed their bodies.

Lisa felt happy, and yet there was a small drop of another sadness that she couldn't quite put her finger on. A drop of the grey 'forever-so-far essence' mixed in and slowly coloured her dreams.

Gertrude landed softly, brought down by her indefinite longing, on the problems of her Institute. Would she, should she, succeed her boss in the next few years and take charge of the department, and perhaps later, when she had turned fifty, follow her into the Research Council?

The sun was only a hand's breadth above the land, the light breeze from the sea slowly coming to rest. The boundary between this side of day and the other side of night had been reached. The end of the one opened the other on a still indeterminable stage.

"Lisa, my darling, we should think about having a child," Gertrud sensed Lisa's free fall from a dream world still inaccessible to her. Lisa did not answer. Were her dreams about to crash to the ground, they had never talked about the subject before and had always assumed a silent agreement. They were, after all, thanks to Gertrud's social position, privileged, free from the compulsion of having children, they could choose whether or not to.

Gertrud had been thinking more and more about having a child the last few weeks. With her 40 and Lisa's 24 years, a new phase of life, one way or another, was in the air.

"Who do you want her to come after?" the surprisingly calm and relaxed voice of Lisa ended the silence that had already become somewhat threatening.

Surprise showed on Gertrud's face. She had expected everything but this question. Am I that old? Or don't you love me anymore? She could have dealt better with these accusations, she had been racking her brains over them for the last few weeks.

"After you, of course," Lisa replied jokingly, "you're the prettier of the two of us."

Lisa hummed a melody instead of an answer, with a few changes to a minor key. Something came to an end.

This voice still had some of the charm of her young girl's voice. Gertrud had fallen a little in love with her when she had heard Lisa sing a small solo part in an acappella choir for the first time. After that she had asked Lisa's mother and after a settling-in period of four weeks they were both convinced of each other and Lisa moved into Gertrud's bungalow.

Oh, what a wonderful magic of beginning there was in those first weeks by the sea. It was a summer that would not end. Twelve years had passed since then. A beguilingly fresh bud had become the seductively ripe blossom Lisa. Gertrud's thoughts lately involuntarily often circled around that time of her first love adventures and discoveries. As if from an infinitely deep well, these melancholy-soaked images emerged.

They walked up the serpentine path up the slope. Gertrud put her arm around Lisa's hips. The setting sun grazed the flowering hibiscus bushes to the left and right of the path for the last time. The slope sloping south to the sea was an exotic garden with a rich profusion of the most diverse flowering plants, maintained during the day by gardeners from the center.

Lisa put her arm over Gertrud's shoulder. She rarely did. Gertrud was very comfortable with that and she tried to synchronize their steps every time, which didn't work for long with their size difference.

*Who should our child resemble, Gertrude resumed her thoughts, no question!*

She was a specially trained and shaped woman, not a nanny. Until the age of 28 she had always been in some training camp with constant developmental tests and only after that she started her privileged and, as she thought, very responsible work, in an institute of the Center for Anthropocentric Genetics.

These training camps had made her, she felt, tough and relentless. She knew she could focus on problems and not give up until they were solved. The Institute, if Frau wanted to call it that, was a world unto itself, otherworldly to the rest of humanity. It was a world of pure science, equipped with a multitude of workshops at a high level of craftsmanship, not beholden to any future industrial production, and that was a good thing.

Gertrud didn't like her peers from the training camps very much, they had all been trained to be competitive. Being better than the others was later rewarded with a number of privileges, they had been taught that right at the beginning, at least as far as she could remember. Other than platonic friendship and sex, she hadn't found love there, that would have been a hindrance as well. Today, of course, she knew what that had been due to. Various individually well-dosed hormones had made of

their genetically predisposed intelligence what they were: Members of an elite, of which there must not be too many, if society wanted to cope.

Should she struggle with it? Gertrud had often asked herself that. But her work had to be done if society was not to question itself.

The material prosperity she enjoyed compensated her at least somewhat. Besides, she had had no choice, it had been her predetermined fate. After all, she was now working on the fate of others herself, trying to make her own contributions to the optimization and adaptation of the monosexual society to the nature of the earth.

Lisa had taken her arm from her shoulder. Gertrude gave her a kiss and said in a soft, slightly raised voice, "I wish us a child, just as you were." And after a little pause she added, "With a few little changes, perhaps."

Lisa looked up at her with her big brown eyes.

"With a few teeny changes - teeny changes - and only maybe". They both laughed.

As always after bathing in the sea, they sat for a while, wrapped tightly in their large, fluffy bath towels, on a stone bench in a small flower niche. The crescent moon, almost exactly above the south, had gained in luminosity over the many solar lamps and dominated the garden by the sea in all its vastness with its silvery light.

Like a backdrop of eternal beauty, the garden and the sea lay before them, but the curtain behind them had developed a tear. Something, not yet tangible, was trying to force its way through this gap into their life together - a child?

The wind, which was almost always blowing, had become more pleasant and fresher. They reached their residential complex, crossed the entrance hall, which could also be used as a meeting room at times. Behind it were many flat bungalows, always grouped together in small clusters, amid small, lovingly planted ornamental gardens between the many paths paved with ceramic tiles.

Flowering hibiscus bushes, cacti, bananas and flowers of various kinds grew all year round in the well-kept grounds.

Lisa was part of the staff that kept these "islands of the blissful" in their state of eternal lightheartedness.

The bungalows usually had only two bigger rooms, a living area with a small integrated kitchen and a spacious couch with a small table in front of it, a sleeping area with big closets.

The architectural focal point was a generously designed bathroom with a comfortable turquoise blue whirlpool for two. Daylight flooded in pleasantly brightly through a large frosted glass dome. The walls had white tiles. A frieze with pictorial representations of southern landscapes, in which women in light garments danced, ran along two walls. The room was further widened by a large mirror. Marble consoles for perfumes, soaps and oils as well as coloured cloths gave the room an atmosphere that invited one to linger.

This included a terrace with a screen from the neighbors. Life in their free time mostly took place in front of the bungalow under the sun roof.

The staff took care of the laundry, cleaning the apartment complex, they even kept refilling the fridges with drinks.

The kitchen area was only suitable for preparing drinks. Meals were usually taken in a cafeteria located on the way from the residential complex to the institute.

In the slot of the glass entrance door, which was almost as wide as the entire narrow side of the apartment, Gertrude spotted a note, written in rapid script, requesting, "Come to the Pyramid at once-alone-Anna."

"What does Anna want with you?" asked Lisa sullenly, "having a party?" Lisa disappeared into the bathroom.

"I don't think so. Anna's back from the council meeting. - Maybe some news. I'll be off!"

Gertrud grabbed a shawl for her shoulders against the chill of the night that was setting in and immediately took off with quick steps.

## 9 The discovery of forbidden masculinity

Nanina and Sika had discovered playing with the gnomes. Before they went to sleep, Nanina always had to tell stories that Sika had not yet heard or understood from Alina, because she was still too young. And one morning, when they were already awake and the women had had their moon festival the night before and were still asleep, Nanina said to Sika: "Have you seen my gnome yet? I have him here under the covers."

Sika was speechless and wrestled with herself as to what Nanina could possibly mean. She got a little scared, because she had heard a story three days earlier in the evening about a gnome princess who was in love with an elf princess and because she didn't want to know anything about the gnome, she had stolen the elf princess by force.

"Want me to show it to you?" Sika looked at Nanina with wide eyes. Nanina very slowly pulled the covers away from the side of her stomach, revealing a blue pointed cap and two blue eyes underneath. Sika cringed and winced while Nanina giggled loudly.

"Hey, you don't have to be scared, you have a gnome like that." Nanina pulled the covers all the way off and held the gnome up in the air with one hand, wiggling it so it looked like it was shaking its head. Now Sika had to laugh too.

"I'll paint you one, too," said Nanina, and she crept downstairs and got some of Emma's blue vegetable paint on a wooden chip and painted a face on Sika's little gnome, too, and he grew proud and stretched up with vanity. They played some more, making little houses out of the folds of the big quilt, and then let their gnomes peep out and disappear again. This was then followed by gnome catching, with which their giggles grew louder and louder.

Just as Nanina's gnome began to twitch on its own after a quick rub, Hela came over to them, rubbing her eyes. "What are you doing here, can't you be quiet this early in the morning?" she asked, still seeing everything through a veil. Then she shuffled into the kitchen to start breakfast. She had not seen a gnome. The sun was already high in the sky.



That day the two of them had to giggle when they took out their gnome and held it in their hands while they peed, the paint was soon wiped off though.

When the mushroom season started the next year, Rona and Nanina were allowed to go into the forest alone to pick mushrooms when Emma didn't have time. With Rona, Nanina was not afraid of wolves, wild boars, or foxes. Rona was ten and Nanina nine years old.

When there were a particularly large number of mushrooms and they had already found a lot in good time and could actually go home, Rona had an idea: "Nanina, let's go and have a look at the village centre, I know the way."

"Are we allowed to do that? Why, it's forbidden! We're not supposed to go further than the clearing, are we?" asked Nanina, curiosity rising in her. Nanina also knew the path that led beyond the clearing in the forest.

"We'll just run there and back, hiding the mushroom baskets at the clearing. We'll just take our sticks," Rona suggested.

"Can we do this?", Nanina wanted to make sure again.

"Sure, if you can run. If we don't make it, we'll just turn back. If the sun's at its highest and we're still not there, we'll just run back."

Nanina agreed and they ran off, way too fast. Nanina soon got a twinge in her side.

"I can't take it anymore," she gasped and stopped. Rona stopped too. "Squat down and squeeze your arms around your legs and you'll be fine," Rona ordered.

It really helped and Nanina could run again. Rona had set a slower pace so that they could run much longer and only had to take small breaks.

They ran along a sandy path through a sparse pine forest, then the ground became firmer again as they passed through a spruce grove. Clear wagon tracks had appeared in it. A simple wooden bridge made of two logs and billets fastened over them crossed a small stream. They paused, and Rona drank water with her hands. Nanina found some blackberries, but they still tasted very sour. They ran on.

About noon they came to a large open space and some distance away, behind fields of grain, they saw a few houses.

Not far away was a flock of sheep with a shepherdess and a dog.

"The dog must not discover us, go back!" commanded Rona.

They crept back, slowly at first, then faster. Rona didn't want to give up: "Further to the right is a path with bushes, we can sneak up there."

"What happens if they catch us?"

"Who's going to catch us, we're paying attention."

That reassured Nanina.

They found the path, bordered by blackthorn and dog rose bushes, leading up to one of the larger stone houses. The path was wide and paved with gravel. To the left and right were fields of grain.

The two crept up to the house. It had two stories and a row of windows. In front of it was a place with a pole, two horses were tied.

Cautiously, they crept up to one of the windows.

"There's no one there, I don't see any smoke coming up," Rona stated reassuringly. It was still lunchtime.

Through the window they looked into a large room with a table, wooden chairs and a bookcase on the wall. The two knew books from the women, but they were not allowed to look at them. To learn to read they had a book about two hundred pages thick, in which they learned to read together, under Emma's guidance. On the first pages were large letters. Colorful illustrations showed plants and animals that existed in the garden and in the forest. Further back and already in smaller print were fairy tales and animal stories. At the very end, on a few pages, there was a small picture encyclopedia about saws, hammers and other simple tools, with explanations of what they were used for. But Rona was already finished with that and they had not yet received any further reading material.

"Come on, shall we go in?" asked Rona, not really waiting for an answer. Cautiously, they crept around the house to the front door. Far and wide, there was no one to be seen. Rona carefully pushed down the handle and, to the children's excited delight, the door slid open. They slipped inside and pushed the door shut again from the inside.

They both looked at each other and Rona held her index finger over her mouth as a sign for Nanina to be quiet.

They tried to read the titles of the books. Many words they had never heard before. Then they randomly pulled books off the shelf and looked for pictures, they found one, then they pounced on it.

Nanina found one called 'Hunting Sports'. A book that was written with the intention of bringing hunting a little closer to women. There was a lot of game and a balance in the animal world had not yet been established everywhere. Wild boars, roe deer, stags, but also foxes were very fond of what grew in the fields and cackled in the stables. There were heated discussions about whether poison baits could be a suitable remedy for this almost existential problem.

The handling of hunting crossbows was explained and for the very sporty also the handling of hunting and long bows. Illustrations showed how to make these devices with their razor-sharp bolts and arrows, where to shoot, and what permits were needed to even own these murderous weapons. Obviously there were no friends of Diana in this village, the book had not been in many hands, if any. People here relied on guard dogs and, when there was no other way, poison.

"There's no need to be afraid of wild boars there," Rona observed, remembering how she had run after Emma alone, how then suddenly a sow with her freshlings had moved very close to her through the bushes while she was looking for mushrooms. Rona had immediately stopped, frozen, and when the group had passed by without noticing her, she had very slowly turned and walked out of the woods without looking for Emma any further.

Both were fascinated, they had never seen anything like this before. Speechless and as if hypnotized they looked at the many pictures.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a horse and cart approaching and voices outside the house. They were startled. Rona went to put the book back on the shelf above, but it fell down again. She picked it up and they both hid behind a shelf, for they heard footsteps coming toward the door.

Behind the bookshelf was another door that was only ajar. Carefully they slipped through and came into a small anteroom with brooms and other cleaning tools.

Nanina was scared. Rona still had the book in her hand. There was talking and laughing in the library.

Rona was getting scared too, it was getting late, the sun was already half way to the horizon. She had to think of something now, how to get them out of here. She looked around and saw only a small square window.

*Will we manage to get out of here without being heard?*, Rona asked herself. Music could now be heard in the library, unusual music that had never been heard before.

Carefully they opened the window. Rona climbed out first. Under the window lay a pile of old wooden junk on which Rona came to a shaky halt.

"Give me the book out!" she ordered Nanina in a whisper. She handed it to her and came scrambling out, too. With the book in front of their chests, they crept around the house and to the covered walkway. There they picked up their sticks again, which they had left behind when they crept up.

*Done*, Nanina thought, as they left the path in the forest again and looked for their way back. They had walked further into the forest, afraid of being seen somehow after all. Cautiously, they crept back to the open area of the village center to get their bearings. A dog barked and they ran back into the forest.

Rona tried to orient herself to the sun, as she had learned to do when she was in the mushrooms a little further into the forest with Emma.

By late afternoon, they were finally on their way back. The book became heavier and heavier for Rona, she needed a break more and more often. Nanina gave up even sooner.

The sun was leaning towards the horizon, so Rona finally had an idea, "Nanina, untie your cord, we'll use it to tie the book to our two sticks."

"What do you need that book for?", Nanina wanted to know, she would have preferred to throw it into the forest. Rona didn't answer, she just shrugged her shoulders. In her mind's eye, the image of a female archer emerged from the book. Standing there, tightening the string and aiming at the deer. She had never seen anything like it, unknown feelings rose up in her, she saw herself drawing such a bow and aiming at ... what? She had no image for that.

*Can you just shoot an animal? And what happened then?* These thoughts were accompanied by an excitement, unprecedented until then, and caused others to arise such as: *Can I even bring the book home? If not, what should I do? What about Nanina? Would she tell?*

"I want to tell you a secret," Rona began, after her first rush of the book had passed, "if you tell too no one about the book."

The sun was reaching the horizon and they had progressed much slower than on the way there, they had not yet reached their limit of allowable, the clearing.

"What secret?" wanted Nanina to know, she was beginning to feel anxious. The suspicion that they wouldn't be home in time was slowly becoming a certainty. She had no particular interest in secrets anymore, the instant situation was frightening and drove away all curiosity.

"I found a secret hiding place not very far from home. I'll show you, we can hide the book there too," Rona tried to convince Nanina.

"We're going to be late, I want to go home Rona, I'm thirsty."

Nanina seemed to have only the one thought left, causing Rona to panic as well. But the thought of not giving up the book became stronger and stronger in Rona and finally overpowered.

"It's not far, just a little detour and today the moon is shining," Rona tried to reassure, "I know the way well, I can find it even in the dark. We'll be late anyway, it won't matter."

Nanina tried to calm herself down. *'Don't we have guardian spirits, as Emma always claims. And what can they protect you from, that you don't get lost? That you don't get attacked and eaten by a wild boar?'*

They had reached the clearing. And not far beyond, Rona turned off the path, walked with Nanina across the evening pine forest, along a wild trail, which then, when the sun had already set, came upon an ancient, scarcely discernible path. This they followed for some distance, and reached a strange hill country before it was too dark. Especially many birches grew on the sandy and stony ground.

Somewhere, on one of the small round humps, Rona had recently discovered a small cave. She tried to orient herself by the trees. The moon had indeed risen and made itself noticeable by a bright spot behind the tree trunks.

Somewhere an eagle owl screamed and Nanina got scared again. In every bush she saw some dangerous animal or fiend, and in every larger plant a gnome just waiting to trip her up.

"Here it is," Rona finally announced and they both breathed a sigh of relief.

In front of one of the small flat hills was a sand pit and right on the slope a hole opened up, about three times the size of a fox's den.

"Crap, we never have fire with us," Rona grumbled. She crawled in first.



"Come after," she called. Nanina felt uneasy and again fear crept up her neck. Inside, it was so dark they could barely see. The floor was covered with dry sand. Tree roots stuck out from the walls.

Rona crawled further back, here the cave was bigger. Ashlar shaped and already badly crumbled stones lay in a pile in front of a straight wall. They sat down on it, with their backs against the wall, which was about three meters away from the entrance.

"What do you want to do now?" asked Nanina, thinking only of how they could get home.

"We need to hide the book and then we'll go home right away," Rona tried to reassure. "Come on, we'll build a hiding place in the rocks and then cover rocks on top of it again. Get off that pile!"

Nanina tried to brace herself against the wall, but slid her left foot into a hole and tumbled against the wall, which immediately gave way and fell down with Nanina. She slid on an incline, which then collapsed and landed in a heap with her about ten feet below. Nanina screamed, subsequent stones had fallen on her leg.

Upstairs, Rona stood frozen, seeing nothing. Dust she could taste in her mouth. Nanina's screaming had turned to whimpering downstairs and then it was quiet.

## 10 Murder and escape



The sky was starry and of a black-blue depth not seen very often during the year. Over the eastern horizon rose the summer triangle with the stars Deneb, Atair and Vega. It was spring by the calendar, but here there were only two seasons, a very long summer and a very short spring.

*Anna has never come to get me with a note,* Gertrud reflected, *why didn't she leave a telephone message? Why didn't she call? What happened?*

In the bar of the Pyramid she greeted a couple of female employees from another institute who were apparently celebrating something and was then immediately beckoned by the barmaid.

"You are to come to Anna at once, she is waiting for you in her study."

"Was she here?"

"No, she called."

Was this some kind of joke? Gertrud was unsettled.

"Do you have another one of those little drinks in a hurry? I could use one!" asked Gertrud.

"Campari? Got one here right now."

"All right, give it here." Gertrud hurried to drink the sharp and sweet beverage in one gulp. With quick steps she hurried through the night. The air coming from the sea was now so humid that it began to condense on the stone tiles. Gertrud had to walk more slowly in order not to slip.

Anna had a light burning in her study. Besides the usual rooms of such a bungalow, she still had this luxury of a study and a separate consulting room.

The front door was open.

"Anna?"

Gertrud received no answer. An oppressive feeling came over her. *What happened,* she thought, and headed past the bathroom toward the study. Gertrud went over all the details that could have heralded something out of the ordinary lately. She tried to recall any rumors that might concern her.

"Anna!" she shouted even louder now.

Anna hung forward in her chair with her head on the desk top. She had a red silk scarf around her neck, tending towards bluish.

Gertrud turned Anna's head and felt her pulse.

She was dead.

Goosebumps ran down Gertrud's spine. She untied the cloth and saw the strangulation marks on her neck.

*Who did this*, she thought. She couldn't find an answer. For a moment she was paralyzed. *Who killed Anna, and more importantly, why?* Her brain was working at full speed.

Outside the bungalows she heard laughing voices approaching. Footsteps could be heard now.

Quick as a flash, Gertrud looked around the room, rummaging in the desk. She had no more time for the computer.

The voices were already at the front door. Hastily she took the necklace with the pendant from Anna's neck and disappeared as quietly as she could through the window of the study.

Instinctively, she didn't run in the direction of her bungalow, but took a detour. She needed time to think. Gertrud could find only one reason: Her institute was a thorn in the side of someone or some group. "What's the point anymore, there are other problems than still preserving the past." She had heard it like that, or something similar, from colleagues at other institutes. That had also been the motivation for the reprofiling of her research that Anna had begun. New genetic constellations were tried out on human males, reproduced over and over again, in order to achieve the wild card of evolution, the permanent protection of the chromosome ends. While in the beginning there had been many blockhouses with their village centers used to preserve the male gene pool, in recent years they had only gotten three blockhouses approved for their research. The male gene pool had practically been abolished. These three houses were also enough, as the failure rate of their experiments was very high and only a few embryos met the requirements and promised success. It still took years until they had developed new gene combinations and tested them in partial aspects in the laboratory.

There were very encouraging results from the last series of trials, especially for one specimen. Gertrud knew this because she had evaluated the investigations of the state of development. Anna had become very euphoric about it.

However, and now Gertrud realized it, these genetic manipulations could only be done on the male Y chromosome. *Was that the reason?*

From a distance, she saw policewomen surround her bungalow group and begin searching the area with flashlights.

Boiling hot, it came over her: Someone was trying to frame her for Anna's murder.

Murder was rare, the punishments were drastic. There were excuses for almost all crimes, only not for murder and physical violence. Labor camps in the north, without ever having a chance to return, that was the punishment. For Gertrud it was death in instalments.

When it came to research, it was only logical that she should fall silent as well. Only she knew the big picture besides Anna, and she had been proposed as Anna's official successor.

She had sometimes had the impression that her experiments, if they were to succeed, would not please some, but she was a researcher, and all that mattered was to find out what was feasible and what was not, and whether it should be done, she was happy to leave that to others.

Only Gertrud knew from Anna that her pendant was a disguised memory. Perhaps it contained important information? But where was she supposed to read it out?

She remembered that she had seen female staff from the neighbouring institute in the bar. She could also remember that the head of the institute had been there. Only she, like Anna, had a personal computer at home in the bungalow.

Where was her bungalow? She set off in search of it. She had been there with Anna before, but there had not been a special relationship between them.

She remembered that there had been something like a fountain nearby. A thin film of water flowed over a black lava stone wall into the basin. Gertrud had expected goldfish in it and found only stones and clear water.

She had soon discovered the stone wall with the running water. The larger corner bungalow was close by.

Gertrud was lucky, the window to the bedroom was ajar. The sun protection window in front of it was no obstacle for her, she could open it from the outside with a few deft grips.

She drew the curtains and started the computer in the study. The emerald on the bottom of the pendant came off, along with a third of the socket. The plug to the computer port became free.

She found files on gene sequences - encrypted and useless. She found what she was looking for in the conversation notes. Hastily, she ran through the conversation notes, trying to find signal words. Anna had been speaking very softly, the sounds of airplanes could be heard in the background. Several times she listened to the crucial passage. Then she erased everything by overwriting nonsense information and shut down the computer.

Quietly and quickly she left the bungalow. She still had Anna's words in her ear, "*Gertrud, if you find this, destroy it immediately. Something is going on, I don't know what. Power struggles in the Senate or something else. Our research department has been disbanded. The village will be liquidated, when I don't know, but usually it takes time - try to save the children. You know it - we succeeded in something that happens maybe once in a thousand years. This is just in case we can't talk anymore. Everything is subject to the highest level of secrecy. Hurry up!*"

A wheel was turning in Gertrud's head. *What do I have to do with a, perhaps successful, research object? And that's a maybe, just a ...*, Gertrud considered how likely she thought the results were in terms of stability, *maybe only 50% or less. Did Anna expect me to - how to - save the children? I have to see how to get out of here, what am I going to save children for - bullshit.*

*Anna thinks too idealistically*, was Gertrud's assessment. *What made her think she couldn't talk to me anymore, anyway. Did she have any idea?*

Gertrud crept towards the beach. She had to meet Lisa - but how? Lisa could be watched. What would happen to her? Anger rose in her, an anger that activated her to nothing, on the contrary, she felt paralyzed.

Faintly, something sprouted in her, but was immediately rejected: *So? What if they were only trying to protect her? From whom?* But she could only answer this question irrationally and she didn't give much to that herself. She had to make clear decisions now. Something was coming to an end, that could no longer be overlooked.

Again the murder of Anna rose in her mind, and that she was apparently to be blamed for it.

A bitterly cynical smile played on her lips. The "Islands of the Blissful" were once, it now dawned on her.

"Oh Lisa," she brought out with a moan and her eyes grew moist, "what a disappointment for us."

From a distance she watched their common bathing place and could see no one. Cautiously she moved towards it. The spot was deserted. In the east the waning last quarter of the moon loomed over the sea. She had to come to a decision now. Gertrude sat down on a stone a little farther away, so that she could not be seen at once, and stared at the rising moon. She let her past life slide through her memory, a privileged life, she admitted to herself. Were it not for this incident, anger rose in her again.

She noticed her heart beating harder, she began to think faster. Didn't they want a child, she and Lisa and now it was going to be a stranger or even strangers? Suddenly she felt sorry for Lisa. What would she think and what would she do when she was gone?

Slowly it became clear to her that she couldn't go back to Lisa. Her thoughts now began to move towards the strange children. They were her products, after all. Gertrude was getting a strange feeling. She only knew genes and the technology to specifically alter them. They were the object of ambitious research. She had never imagined what they might look like, or what would become of them once they had accomplished their task. To her, they had been archaic relics of a time a thousand years past, suitable for research and nothing more.

Gertrud tried to remember where her villages were. Anna had wanted her to go there herself a long time ago and have a look. But Gertrud had been able to prevent it with all sorts of pretexts, Lisa had been one such pretext. In her small meeting room hung a map showing the location of the villages, of which only one remained. She tried to remember. There had been the market town and then to the northeast lay the village center with the three log cabins surrounding it.

What if she tried to get there?

Gertrud got up and walked along the beach towards the marina. Midnight had already passed when she arrived. The harbor was neither guarded nor controlled at this hour. Why should it be.

It took her about an hour to load a larger sailboat with gas cans from the other boats. She gathered all the provisions and water canisters she could find. She had discovered a flashlight to make this easier right at the beginning.

Gertrud knew how to sail, it had been one of her main pleasures years ago. Lately Lisa hadn't felt like it anymore and she had let it go.

She set sail and slowly and quietly left the harbor. She kept a course toward the west. If they started looking for her, they would probably look toward the continent. Further out, she set all sail with much difficulty. She did not start the engine. The wind was not ideal; she had to continue southwest. Instead, the distance to the island increased a little more than she had thought.

At dawn she set only a small storm sail and pulled the blue tarpaulin over the whole boat. She made a dark broth from coffee and black tea and tried to dye the storm sail with it. She succeeded only very laboriously with added sugar. The material was water-repellent. She kept to a course that aligned only the stern of the boat with the island. That was all she could do for camouflage.

The boat had an autopilot that could hold its course. Gertrud retired to the cabin, opened a packet of rusks and made another black tea. She wasn't really hungry and only ate something out of reason, then went to sleep. Dreams whipped through her sleep, she couldn't hold them in.

When would they notice a boat was missing and when would they be followed?

## 11 Adventures of the disabled girls

"NANINA, are you hurt," Rona yelled down into the opening as she recovered from her initial shock.

"My leg, my leg," Nanina whined, coughing. Dirt was in her mouth, she held her aching leg and could feel the dampness of blood between her fingers.

Rona felt around the top, lying on her stomach, with her hands along the edge at the opening that had formed. She felt an edge from which it went vertically down. She groped around the cave for her stick, found the book open in a corner, and then the stick. She crawled back to the opening. Down below, Nanina whimpered. Lying on her stomach, she reached down with the stick but couldn't reach the bottom. Panic rose in her. What was she to do? Tears of despair came to her eyes.

"Nanina, are you still alright?" she asked cautiously, but only received a louder whimper in response. "I'll get a long branch, I'll be right back," she tried to reassure Nanina.

Rona felt a heat all over her body as she crawled out to the cave. Feverishly, she searched around the entrance for a small fallen tree, but found none. Then she looked for withered small birch trees. At last she found one, but it would not be pushed over. She tried swinging. Back and forth the dry tree bent and would not crack away. Rona was desperate and sweating all over. When she was about to give up and keep searching, she heard a crackling in the roots. She increased her efforts, pushing and pulling back and forth on the trunk until it cracked again and then finally the trunk tilted. One root was still stubbornly stuck in the ground. Rona had to right the tree and let it fall over to the other side.

Finally the log was free and she could drag it to the cave.

"Nanina, can you still?" cried Rona with trepidation into the hole, and was somewhat relieved to hear faint sounds. *If only I had fire*, she thought steadily, *then I could see more*.

Roots first, Rona lowered the log down. It reached the bottom and the last end remained in the hole.

"Can you walk?" she called down.

"I can't perform," Nanina groaned, "left."

Nanina had gotten over the shock in the meantime and palpated her body. Only her left leg hurt a lot and a spot in her back. She had sat up and was holding her leg. Never in her life had she experienced such pain and such a life threatening situation. As Rona searched for the tree, she tried to remember what had happened, but it had all happened far too quickly. The wall had given way, Nanina had lost her balance, and then she had fallen into the depths after the debris. First she had slid down a bit diagonally and then everything fell down with her for at least another meter.

"Can you crawl to the tree?" asked Rona from above. Nanina tried and noticed that her right wrist also signaled severe pain when she tried to prop herself up.

"I'll try," Nanina moaned, whimpering as best she could as she crawled towards the tree. It was very difficult, she could only grope and there was something sharp and hard sticking out of the rubble she was lying on several times.

"Stay there," Rona called from above through the hole, "I'll throw the rocks down from up here and it'll get higher." She had seen that Nanina could not climb the tree.

Rona pushed and threw down the old stones. Nanina held the sleeve of her smock to her mouth, which was quite dry. She still had sand in her teeth. She was thirsty and getting hungry, too. If Nanina kept her leg still, the pain was somewhat bearable now.

"I can see the hole now, Rona."

"Yes, the moon has come over the forest and is shining in front of the cave," answered Rona, who was now also throwing down to the hole everything she could find outside the cave and carry or drag away. With her stick she kept groping to see if the height would soon be sufficient for her to descend.

Nanina tried to make out something in the darkness. Where had she landed, in a natural cave? She couldn't feel or see any walls, neither on the sides nor above her.

After more than an hour Rona had made it, she could feel the heaped up ground and the fallen branches with her stick. Carefully she lowered herself through the hole in the old tree and felt her way towards Nanina, who had begun to howl softly again. She was very frightened, as she had never been in her life. Briefly, she also thought of her guardian spirit and began to struggle with him, but then Rona was there.

"I'll help you out to the hole," Rona said, "I just want to take a quick look at where we are."

"Please stay here," Nanina begged tearfully, "if there are any more holes here. Please stay." Thirst tormented her more and more.

Rona saw that. By now the dust had settled a bit and they could breathe more freely. Rona tried to bring Nanina in the direction of the hole and to pull up the piled up rubble.

Rona climbed up with the help of the tree trunk and tried to pull Nanina from above. However, she cried out every time she got on her left leg and immediately buckled. She could not use her right hand either.

"We'll have to wait until it's light," Rona stated resignedly, "I'll come back down."

Nanina crouched almost apathetically on the piled rubble beneath the hole. Rona felt her way forward along the wall to the left and noticed that next to the rubble the ground was becoming level. Regular slabs of stone she could feel.

Rona helped Nanina there and she put her back against the wall.

"We'll wait here until it gets lighter and then I'll throw more rocks and branches through the hole," Rona tried soothingly to Nanina, who was beginning to come to terms with her situation. Rona sat down next to her and silently put her arm around Nanina.

Although it was no colder in the room than it had been outside, the cold of the stones soon penetrated the smocks of the two children and they began to freeze.

"Rona, what about when you die?", Nanina started to ask, chills running down her spine.

"We'll go back where we came from," Rona replied, adding, "Emma said."

Nanina tried to remember where she had come from, but didn't get far. She only knew that she had once been smaller.

"I don't remember where I came from, do you know?", Nanina wanted to know further.

"No, I can't remember either," Rona replied, beginning to think of how they could protect themselves from the cold.

"We were once tiny in a womb and there we grew until we could breathe, eat and drink for ourselves."

Nanina considered despite the cold and the pain in her leg and hand. She had never seen a very old person, nor had she ever seen a person die. She knew only one thing: large dead animals were buried in the ground and small ones were simply thrown away, into the forest or the meadow.

"Do we go back into the womb then? What if I had died here, if the hole had been much deeper?"

Rona was thinking of something else entirely. The cold was getting stronger and stronger. It wasn't winter and they probably wouldn't freeze to death but sleeping was out of the question.

"You, I think it's just our soul going back to where it came from, that's all I know either," Rona tried to stifle the questions, "I'll go back up and get us some branches and leaves to lay on."

A foreboding rose in Nanina that solidified into certainty: she would not die!

Rona climbed out once more and ripped branches from the trees, looking for old leaves and threw everything through the hole. After Rona thought it would have to do for now, she climbed back down and set up camp at the bottom of the wall. Pressed close together, they tried to sleep.

Rona was now also hungry and thirsty, but fell asleep from exhaustion. Nanina also fell asleep, but soon woke up from the cold. Legs and hands were so cold that she became a little afraid. She turned to face Rona, who had also put on her legs. Now she could at least place her cold hands on Rona's stomach, then she fell asleep again.

When Nanina was asleep again, Rona woke up from the cold. She was exhausted and shivering. I have to go out again, she thought, but couldn't bring herself to do it for a long time. Then she got up carefully and tried to push some leaves at Nanina and climbed out to the hole again.

The moon was setting and it was dusk in the east. Rona looked for branches to cover themselves with. She broke off twigs with lots of foliage and dragged them to the cave. With her hand she brushed off birch leaves and stuffed them into her mouth, chewing, and gagged them down. She was warm again now. Once downstairs, she heaped the twigs over Nanina and then crawled under the pile with her.

When Rona woke up again she noticed a faint light in the hole diagonally above them. She could see a ceiling above her that was vaulted and spanned a hallway. That was all she could make out.

A strong thirst tormented Rona, her mouth cavity was completely dry. She also felt weak now. Nanina lay sleeping but restless beside her. Crusted blood stuck to her leg.

"Wake up Nanina!" shouted Rona, shaking her, "I'm going to get some water."

"Yes," Nanina answered weakly, without opening her eyes.

Rona struggled back up to the hole, finding it difficult, her muscles aching. Next to the entrance to the cave, she noticed the baskets of mushrooms set out last night. *We can eat those then*, she thought.

Rona tried to remember where she could find water nearby. There was no stream far and wide, nor could she remember a pond.

*Should I run home and get help*, she asked herself. It was too far for her. *I'm going in the opposite direction*, she thought, *I haven't been there yet*.

She crossed the area of regular hills and entered denser forest. Bramble vines had spread among the undergrowth. She kept getting her smock caught and red bleeding streaks formed on her legs and arms from the barb-like thorns. With her hazelnut stick she tried to beat down these thorny vines, but she succeeded only poorly.

She was lucky, in a small hollow the moss was very wet, she felt water on her feet. Her sandals were all wet.

Now she remembered that she had no vessel to draw water from.

With her hands she dug a small hole and waited until water collected in it. Lying on her belly, she drank and immediately felt better.

Should she drag Nanina all the way here? She dismissed the thought.

With her hands and her cane she deepened the hole. A piece of her smock had gotten wet and gave her an idea. She waited until the hole was well filled with water, then took off the linen smock that was the only piece of clothing they all wore in the summer. Rona crumpled it up and pushed it into the water hole. It sucked the water out of the hole after a short time.

Rona waited a while until the whole smock had soaked itself full of water, then she made her way back, holding the wet smock along with the stick in front of her. Now the thorns also drew bloody welts on her hips and upper body.

Nanina groaned as she arrived at her cave.

"Come on, lie on your back and open your mouth!" ordered Rona. Then she wrung out her wet gown piece by piece over Nanina's mouth and Nanina swallowed the water.

*Done*, Rona thought, and climbed up into the sun with the still-wet smock, hanging it on a branch so it could be dried by sun and air.

*Should we eat the mushrooms*, she thought, *or are they no good raw?* She remembered hearing from Hela that you shouldn't eat mushrooms raw. Shouldn't or shouldn't, Rona wondered. She gathered fresh-looking birch leaves and young blackberry leaves put them in one of the mushroom baskets and hopped down with basket. She could see the ground clearly now. Nanina had sat up and was looking at her leg. She felt better.

"I've got some food here," Rona said, "how's your leg?"

"I don't know, doesn't hurt so much anymore," Nanina replied, pained. They tried to eat some of what they had brought. The mushrooms were juicy, but the leaves choked when they swallowed.

Rona looked around, she walked to the end of this corridor and spotted something like a door. She knocked on it and it sounded metallic hollow, an unusual sound for Rona. There was also such a sound at the other end of the corridor.

"Nanina, you must try to come up here."

"I'll try," she replied, pulling herself up by the hazel stick. Carefully she stepped up, it hurt but was getting better. Supported and pulled by Rona, she made it up the rubble hill to the old tree. She could also make out the remains of a stone staircase that she had obviously collapsed with.

Rona climbed out, then lay on her stomach and pulled on Nanina's still intact hand. It took some time, since she could only really use one leg to climb, before she was up and out in the sun. She sat down on a rock. Her legs were shaking. Rona, who had red streaks of blood all over her body, caked to a crust with dirt from the cave, sat down next to her.

"Can you walk?" wanted to know Rona. "I'll try," Nanina replied, looking down her leg. The crusted blood was just a larger graze. The ankle was swollen, but didn't hurt as much when she stepped on it. A cane would be fine.

"You look like a dirty gnome," Nanina said to Rona and they both had to laugh.

"We'd better check each other for ticks. You start with me," Rona replied and stood with her back to the sun in front of Nanina, who first had to move around on the stone.

"There's one, in the back of the knee." Rona broke off a fresh birch twig and from it a small twig. With her thumbnail she split it at one end and gave it to Nanina. She grasped the tick with these wooden tweezers as far forward as she could and slowly twisted the beast upward out of it.

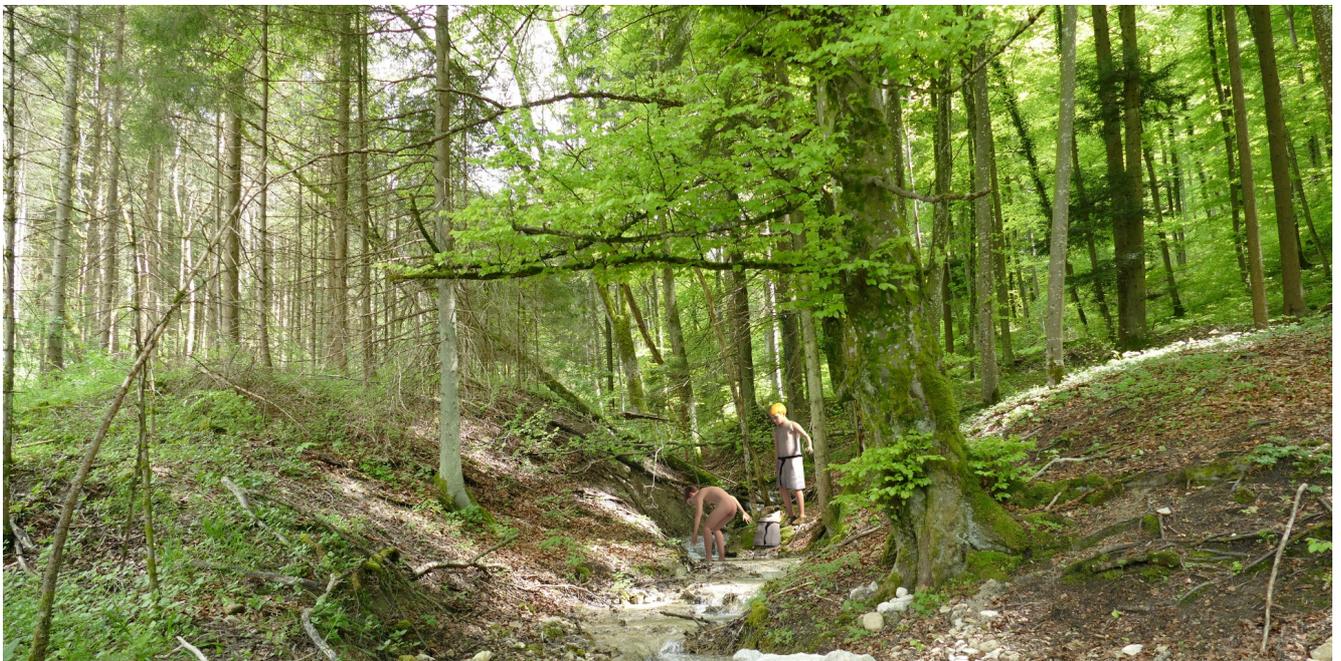
The children had learned this from Emma. When picking blueberries and mushrooms, it was very rare that they didn't get ticks.

Rona examined herself in the front. Especially in the break, in the soft skin folds the ticks liked to try to get at the blood. She found two more, which she removed herself.

Nanina also took off her gown and examined herself and was examined in the back by Rona, she too had three specimens, two in the back of her knees.

*Rona is much browner than I am*, she noted to herself as she looked at their naked bodies in the sunlight, *even in the places where the sun doesn't always reach*.

Rona's thoughts slowly turned back to the book that had brought her to the involuntary night in the cave. There was strange debris in the corners of the underground passage and niches that were in the walls, she remembered seeing. And what was at the ends of the passage, did it go on beyond?



Nanina thought about her home, what Emma, Hela and Alina would say and do. Perhaps they were already wanted? What would they say if they were found? Then she thought of Sika, who had surely slept alone in their shared bed without hearing any scary stories from her before falling asleep.

"I'll go downstairs again and hide our book. Try to leave. We'll go home then," with those words Rona walked into the cave, took the book and jumped down into the hallway. She hid the book in an

alcove in the wall at head height next to a totally dusty glass bottle and an unrecognizable object made of heavily corroded metal.

While Nanina hobbled around in the sun and tried to use her left leg again, Rona closed the hole in the cave from above with wood and brushwood so that no larger animal could get through.

In the meantime, Rona's coat was also somewhat dry. Hunger and thirst returned for both of them and Rona also felt an enormous rumbling in her stomach.

They set off with their mushroom baskets and sticks. Rona took a path that led them a little past her house and headed for the creek. Once there, they took off their smocks and washed thoroughly. Rona had impressed upon Nanina that she was to say nothing to anyone about the cave and the underground passage, and had even threatened her with punishment if she did so. What that punishment would be, Rona had not commented on. Nanina promised and then later kept it.

Around noon they arrived home. Only Sika and Hela were in the house.

"Where have you been, Emma and Alina have been looking for you since dawn. What do you think was going on here last night when you didn't come home." Sika had seen them coming from the garden and had run to meet them.

"We got lost and then Nanina's foot fell in a hole and she sprained her ankle."

Sika stood before them with wide questioning and wondering eyes.

"We had to spend the night, so we built a leaf hut and slept in the forest," Rona answered the even more amazed Sika. Nanina confirmed that and ran to the toilet first. There had probably been a bit too many green leaves.

Hela came towards them from the kitchen. "Where have you been, we were so worried," then she hugged them both.

"We're starving," Rona volunteered, and then had to tell Hela the whole story about the leaf hut and Nanina's sprained foot again.

In the kitchen, Rona and Nanina made themselves over the flatbread and some leftover cold soup. Blackberry tea was still available from breakfast. Hela prepared the lunch. A little later, Alina and Emma returned from the forest, and they too were relieved to hear about their adventures.

Emma had begun cutting grooves in the bark of pine trees in early spring and collecting the slowly oozing resin in small clay pots. She had learned this method during a week of recreation and continuing education at the village center. She had borrowed the special knife and the pots. She would be able to sell the resin well at the market, which was now slowly growing larger. A resin cookery, three days' journey further south, had begun to make varnishes, soaps and waterproof putties and even plasters from it.

Besides, the resin was easy to eat, and when Hela mixed it with thickened fruit juices, boiled it together and congealed it, everyone, but especially the children, had very desirable chewy sweets.

As always Rona helped her and sometimes Nanina and Sika went along too.

Soon Emma had collected enough resin for the market. She wanted to buy a donkey for the tedious field work and for transporting the wood from the forest. Alina and Hela were against it, they thought other things were urgently important in the household. Hela wanted some pots and a baking dish. Alina, who usually did the laundry, urgently needed a new washboard, as the old one was half broken.

The proceeds from their jams, knitting and weaving, the dried mushrooms and resin and the other little things, would not be enough to even come close to fulfilling all the wishes. The end of the year celebration wanted to be decorated and for that some ingredients had to be bought that they couldn't make themselves. Leather for the sandals was also scarce and they would have preferred to buy ready-made ones from the market if the money would last. Especially the sandals for the hard winter were very difficult to make. The children were getting bigger and needed new things, at least Rona did. Their still wearable things went to Nanina and Sika anyway. From the village centre they received 12 copper per woman and child per year. That should and had to be enough for additional expenses.

In the summer, the market was held every two weeks. But not every time the women were there. In the first years, two women always made the three-day journey in a certain rotation.

When it was Emma's and Alina's turn this year, Alina suggested that Rona could go along, she was old enough for it now and she had also shown how independent and careful she could be during the adventure with Nanina.

Rona was thrilled and envied by Nanina and Sika.

## 12 Carefree youth

Hela and Alina had become a solid couple during those years. Not a sheet of paper had space between them.

The architects of this village project had perhaps assumed that there would always be a harmonious triangular relationship, a stable triangle made up of the mothers, with a stable triangle of children embedded in it. The two interwoven together made a stable hexagram or honeycomb. But their special community in log cabin number two was no such perfection.

Every time Emma cried silently to herself at night, she had the impression that Rona greeted her the next morning with the words, "Are we going to the forest today?" and her big, brown children's eyes beamed at her expectantly.

Yes, the forest, there they were alone, and making wood was hard. Even if Rona was exhausted and preferred to play, her presence alone could be the engine that barely let Emma rest and that kept her from running without turning back.

Often she had imagined it in her nocturnal waking states: just walking as far as her feet would carry her.

They no longer lacked wood in the log cabin. Emma took every opportunity to be in the forest. She could bear Alina and Hela's togetherness less and less.

The years ran like sand through an hourglass. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, people and their circumstances changed.

Regardless of the commandment not to let the children come into contact with the rest of the world, the women agreed that 12-year-old Rona, instead of Alina, should accompany Emma to the market.

Emma and Rona started the journey to the market at dawn in their handcart. The journey there took the whole day. When they arrived at the market, they spent the night in a hostel and the next day the market was usually held until noon.

From far and wide the market women came, bought, sold and traded and above all they exchanged a lot of news.

The market grew now every year a little bit further, since northwest new settlement area had been released.

Rona's joy about the many new things that were offered there as goods or barter objects and about the many new faces was also transferred to Emma.

Girls kept showing up at her stall as well, looking less at the products laid out than Rona, who always got a little embarrassed when the strange girls looked at each other and started giggling.

As Emma was negotiating with a trader at another stall for some pots, two slightly older girls approached Rona and asked her where she was from and how long she had to stay at the stall.

"I don't know," Rona just shrugged.

"Why don't you come swimming at the lake this afternoon, we'll be there too." The girls ran away giggling.

Around noon, the traders slowly began to pack up their bought, traded and unsold goods for transport home.

When Emma and Rona were done with that and they had loaded everything onto their handcart, they pulled it to the inn.

Rona asked Emma if she could look around the place a bit. Emma couldn't refuse her, even though she had promised the two women who had stayed at home that she would always have Rona with her.

"But just through the market town for a minute, and then right back again - Rona - you hear!" shouted Emma after her.

But Rona was still not back after about an hour. Emma was growing impatient. She waited in the inn and chatted with a merchant, a middle-aged woman, from the northwest over a glass of sweet spiced wine.

Emma told her pretty much all the circumstances of life, except the special circumstances of the children in her log cabin. But they did not interest the trader and she almost had the impression that the woman knew her. The woman suggested to Emma that she should come and see her. She would have liked to go with Emma to the log cabin for a few days. Emma had great difficulty in dissuading her. She couldn't let that happen under any circumstances. And then the stranger told her that they should see each other again. On a piece of wrapping paper she drew a path as she would have to go from the market to find the little community.

Emma could promise nothing, for she would be tied to the log cabin for at least two more years. But the merchant was imbued with the certainty that they would meet again sooner. At least they were always going to meet again at the market. She would be here in a fortnight, too.

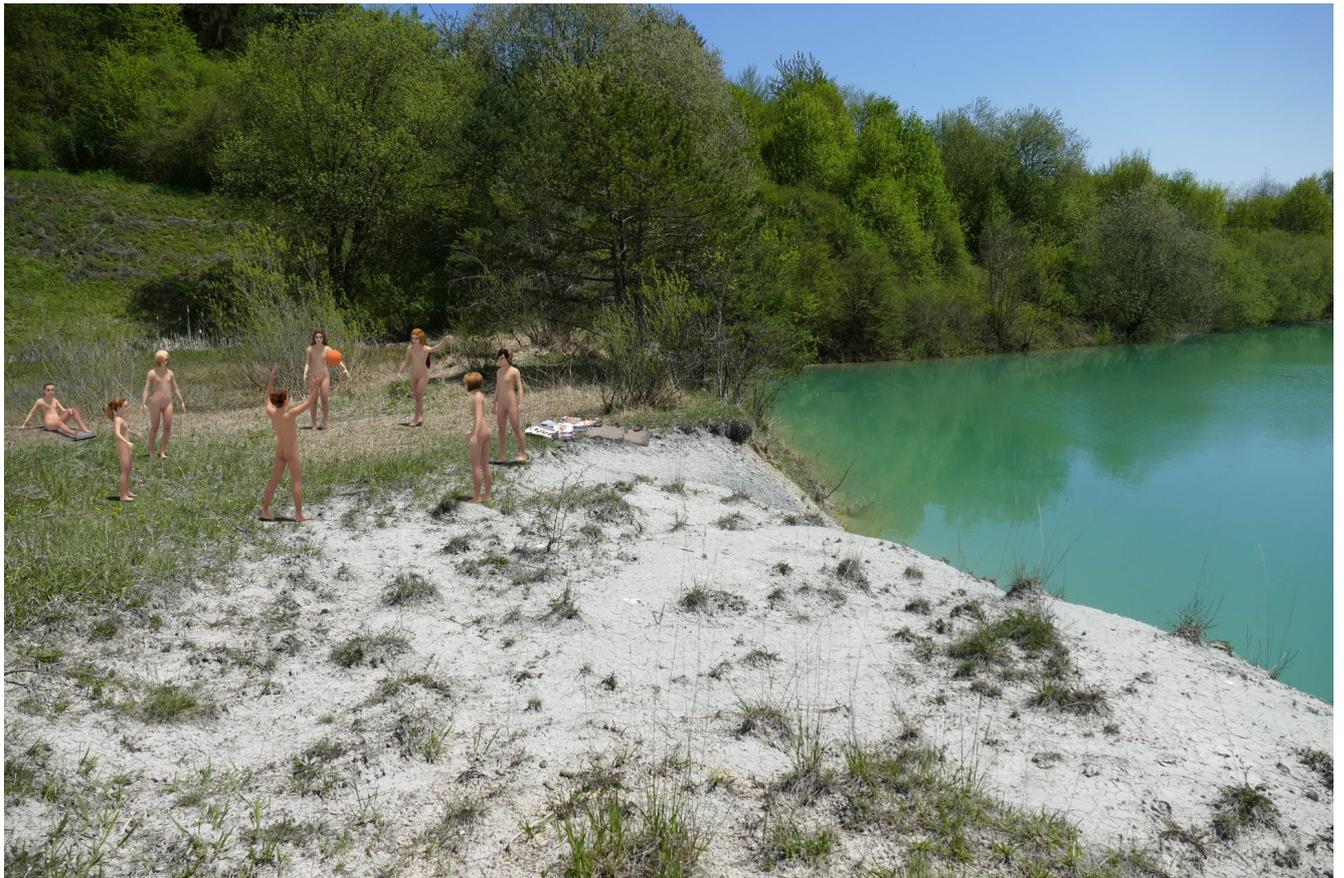
*Why does she insist on coming to see us, Emma mused, as if she suspected that no stranger should be allowed to visit.*

Until then she had not thought about what exactly she wanted to do after this time in the log cabin. For her it had always been clear that she would go back and this back was far in the south, at the sea, there where it was always warm and only in winter a little fresher and there was some rain.

Then Rona came running in, hot in the face and all excited.

Emma wanted to scold and looked at Rona's face, but then she just asked, "Did you have a good time?" Rona answered only, "Yes."

The merchant smiled and stated, "You're a pretty girl though, how old are you?" turning to



Emma, "By all means bring your daughter, we have two girls too."

Then she turned back to Rona, "There you go on a trip. There you can play together. We also have two ponies to ride. I'm sure you'll enjoy that." She gave Rona a sweet jelly candy and said goodbye, "I'm sure we'll see you again soon!"

Emma ordered an omelet for them both for dinner.

"Emma, the girls have been playing with me even though I have this weird hernia."

"He's not bad, Rona."

"We played with a ball, like throwing it up and catching it, and whoever caught the ball had to kiss the one who threw the ball."

Emma smiled, remembering her childhood games. Usually the girl she wanted to kiss had another one to kiss. Only once did she have a smaller friend, but she soon moved away.

"When it was my turn, everyone wanted to kiss me. They were running like crazy for the ball and really fighting."

Emma stumbled.

"They wanted to see me pee with my hernia, too."

"How did they know you had a hernia?" Emma grew serious.

"We went swimming in the lake earlier, and when I got out and wanted to go to the hostel, they wouldn't let me. They hid my smock and I had to play ball if I wanted it back."

What Rona didn't tell Emma, the girls all wanted to touch Rona's hernia too, which he was forced to allow in order to get his smock back. Luckily he had already put the smock back on when his pee hose got big and hard.

Emma became even more thoughtful and looked at Rona. It must have been very exciting for her.

"And when we kissed," Rona continued, "they all wanted to stick their tongues in my mouth."

Emma looked at Rona, the full mouth, the big brown eyes.

*Yes, I could well imagine that,* she thought, feeling a slight excitement, *what would that be like?*

"So, Rona, did you let them kiss you?"

"At first I didn't want to and I gritted my teeth. When they laughed at me, then I opened my mouth - why do the other girls do that, Emma?"

"Because it's fun when you learn it right. Girls learn it and it's most fun with the girl you love."

*Oh Rona,* thought Emma, *you make me sad, you probably won't be able to use it. It is not intended for you. Why really,* she continued the thread of her thoughts, *what is in store for you? A life without love?* She didn't know exactly, but she guessed it from the tale of Wella, the fishwife.

## 13 Prohibited games

When Rona returned from the market excited, she blurted out loud, "I had half the day off!" Nanina and Sika listened very curiously. "There were lots of other children there. We played with a ball, then tag and hide and seek." Sika and Nanina got wide-eyed.

"Then we went swimming," Rona continued "and afterwards we played love and kissing."

"Loving and kissing?" asked Sika in amazement, catch and hide, even tickling out, they played themselves, that was nothing new.

"What game is this?" now Nanina wanted to know too.

"It's very simple," Rona explained. One child stands in the middle of a circle, the others all around. The child in the middle throws the ball high and far away, shouting, "Whoever loves me, catches it." The one who caught the ball then goes to the child in the middle and kisses him on the mouth or then somewhere else. The others count 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - FINISH WITH THE KISS. Then another comes into the middle and it starts all over again."

"Were those real girls or did some have a hernia too?", Nanina still wanted to know.

"Real girls," Rona confirmed, adding, "they let me go along with everything, even though I..." She didn't finish the sentence, still amazed that they hadn't laughed at her.

"I'll go again next time, Emma promised me." Rona seemed to have the market and all its exciting goings-on in her mind's eye when she said this.

The next time it was once again Emma's turn to visit the market. Hela didn't feel like it either, she wanted to go with Alina again first.

When the time approached, Rona was very sad and almost cried, she had bruised her left foot two days before while fetching wood. It was now thick and blue and she could only hobble around the house with a stick.

Emma agreed to try it with Nanina. Nanina was excited with curiosity and with pride, because she was already allowed to do what otherwise only Rona would have been allowed to do.

The night before, Rona gave her a few more tips: "If they kiss you, don't be scared, they'll stick their tongue in your mouth and - if you don't let them in - they'll tickle you out."

Rona looked at Nanina for a moment and then suddenly said, "Watch it like this."

Rona held Nanina's head in a flash and approached her mouth. And before Nanina could react to what was happening, Rona had stuck her tongue in Nanina's mouth and was trying to play with her tongue.

Nanina tried to break away, but let it happen with little resistance. Then Rona let go and laughed.

"And this is supposed to be fun?" asked Nanina incredulously.

"At first I felt like you," Rona gave a precocious air, "later I joined in when they tickled me out and I almost couldn't breathe."

*Tickling is still possible*, Nanina thought, when she remembered Rona's demonstration of kissing, the three of them had already done that and Sika especially loved it, but the tongue thing gave her the creeps.

She had been walking with Emma for an hour when the sun rose over the trees and the forest birds finished their morning concert.

Nanina was full of exciting expectations. Emma walked silently beside her the whole time until she said, "It's all right, Nanina, you walk and pull as well as Rona."

Nanina was proud of herself again that she could already represent Rona. Then she thought again of the kiss last night and resolved, if it should come to it, to leave her teeth open a little right at the beginning.

After another hour, Emma took a break. They ate some flatbread with goat cheese and drank cold tea from a jug.

"Emma," asked Nanina, "the children there are all normal and not like us, aren't they?"

"Yes, of course," Emma replied boredly, "why do you ask?"

"Rona said they played with her and didn't laugh at her."

"Yeah, why would they laugh?"

"Because of the hernia."

Emma hadn't thought about the fact that the kids might be embarrassed that they were so different. Sure, it was all very sensitive and probably only had the one advantage that they could pee standing up. Emma smiled.

"Nanina, now don't you worry about that. Rona wasn't laughed at either, on the contrary, all the girls there wanted to kiss her because she was a bit different and they had never seen such a girl before. If you meet the girls again, they already know about you and you're not so new and unknown to them anymore. I think they'll leave you alone."

And she added for reassurance, "Just stay with me whenever you're scared of the others. But they certainly won't do anything to hurt you." Emma wondered if Nanina was afraid or happy or both when she would meet strange children.

After another two hours they reached the clearing with the crossroads. Nanina could clearly see the turnoff to the old desolation. There the book about hunting lay well hidden in a niche in the wall of the collapsed cave. Nanina did not know that it had once been the cellar of a house that had belonged to an entirely different civilization. She remembered the pictures she had seen and asked: "Emma, what is a hunting bow, can you catch animals with it?"

Emma looked at Nanina in amazement, she had to make sure what was meant first.

"Do you mean a trap that catches animals and then springs up when the animal is in the snare?"

"No, I mean a bow that you shoot a pointed stick with and then hit an animal."

Emma stopped with the handcart, "Where did you get that?"

Nanina remembered Rona's threat not to reveal anything about her hiding place and evasively replied, "From Rona, she got it from the market."

Were there bows for sale at the market? Emma couldn't remember seeing any. In her training she had once been given a sport bow and was supposed to shoot at a straw target. Archery was the hobby of one of her instructors. For Emma, it had been fascinating to see the arrow leave the bow and get stuck in the target. In her case, however, the arrow flew past the target. She had not received any training.

"You need a bow made of wood, a string, arrows, and then you have to hit." The handcart started moving again. The road was sandy and there were always small stones lying there, which then jerked on the drawbar of the cart and made the journey arduous.

"You have to meet the beast?" asked Nanina, which she already knew, she just wanted to know more.

"If you hit it right, yes, otherwise ...," Emma paused, "you have to shoot again."

Emma wondered what had kept her from pursuing hunting here in the wilderness. Was it because there were no dangerous animals? Was it that she didn't trust herself to hit and an injured fleeing animal would have disturbed her peace of mind? But then, what didn't disturb her peace of mind?

Nanina was satisfied with Emma's answer. She kept imagining an arrow shot by her flying through the forest, hitting a deer, which then fell down dead. She avoided looking into the eyes of the imagined animal.

Thus caught in their daydreams, time passed and it was noon. On a piece of particularly soft forest floor, in the shade of a beech tree, they stopped for lunch.

Emma was asleep immediately after eating her flatbread with jerky and the cold blackberry tea.

Nanina was content to rest during the meal. She explored the surroundings, found three beautiful large porcini mushrooms, a fox's den, a bird's nest in a larger shrub with five bird's eggs, and made herself a crop from a hazel bush. This stick was now her bow. Now she still needed a string and arrows.

Emma was happy about the fresh mushrooms and said that they could eat them tonight together with the fried bird eggs in the hostel.

When they had been walking for quite a while again, Nanina asked what she could take for a sinew. Since it was time for a break again, Emma stopped and looked at Nanina. She always had a strange feeling when she looked at Nanina, she could maybe call it awe. Somehow she was different from the other two children. To her she was something like a supernatural being, an angel, not an earthbound elemental spirit, a being floating above the earth, in whom childlike naivete seemed combined with an unknown, ancient wisdom. She had had this feeling even when Nanina was very little in her arms. When she gave her a kiss, she often didn't know if it was a grace of Nanina's that she was allowed to have and kiss this very child. But that was just such an irrational feeling and only occasionally intruded on the reality of the rest of her existence.

Emma then searched and found a strong string, made more durable with beeswax, with which the tarp over the handcart was lashed all around.

Emma cut off a piece of it. The rest was still enough for the tarp. She made two notches at the ends of Nanina's hazelnut stick, stretched the stick to form a bow between her legs and tied the string tight.

Nanina beamed overjoyed.

"The wood is still too fresh, it needs to be drier. - You need arrows too, Nanina."

Emma rejoiced with Nanina. Together they searched for dry, thin and straight hazelnut whips. Emma carved a point on it and, after the first slip from the string, carved another notch in the back.

Nanina couldn't wait, she was jumping for joy.

Emma struggled to remember, "Watch it Nanina, you have to hold the bow at a bit of an angle or you'll drop the arrow and then with two fingers here pull back the string with arrow and then ..."

Emma let go of the arrow, it missed the tree and flew further into the forest. Nanina ran after it almost as fast as the arrow and found it again. It was stuck in the ground at an angle.

Nanina came back excited. Under Emma's guidance, Nanina tried archery a few times and actually got better and better at it.

"We have to go now, we're already late."

"Please do it again," Nanina begged.

"But that's the last time!" replied Emma with a grin.

Maybe she should teach the kids archery, maybe build a better, real bow. Emma thought of herself and how she would shoot with a real bow. She had to laugh inwardly at that. A bow for the children was enough. The children's joy would be her joy too. She did wonder a little about Nanina, how she could be so enthusiastic about a bow. A bow was a weapon and was actually outlawed and only allowed for hunting in special cases.

Perhaps, she went on to think, after her operation the children would be able to go to the new settlements and there a bow would be quite useful for hunting. Wolves and bears had been seen there, she had heard at the market.

Nanina bounced next to Emma for most of the next while as they headed back out. What would Rona say when she came back with a bow? Nanina had only archery thoughts for the rest of the way, and over and over Emma had to tell how she had once shot at a straw target with a real bow. Nanina made up her mind to tie a target of straw as soon as she got home. For a while she didn't know what to look forward to more, the market or archery at home.

Towards evening, the sun had already set, they reached the inn. They parked their wagon in the courtyard and went into the inn. Many wagons were parked. Some larger ones pulled by donkeys or even ponies were also there. The sounds of the draught animals came from the stables.

The hostel was now so full inside that they had to sit on a bench outside. Emma paid a copper for herself and half a copper for Nanina, that paid for the two nights.

"Well, here again? Would you like some more food?" the serving woman asked, smiling at Emma. They knew each other.

"Thank you, we still have some flatbreads," Emma replied, "can you roast the porcini mushrooms and the bird eggs in the kitchen?"

"I'll talk to the kitchen." Then the waitress came back and said, "All right, hand that stuff over. It'll make a quarter copper."

It took quite a while, but then the two sat over their delicious meal. The kitchen woman had added some salad and two boiled carrots. Emma ordered another lemonade for a quarter of a cup.

Nanina and Emma were somehow happy, despite the long walk through the forest and the blisters on Nanina's heel. Emma was happy to be alone with Nanina again after a long time.

They slept well on the hard wooden cots and the rough blankets.

In the mornings they washed at the well in the courtyard, one taking turns to operate the pump handle. Donkeys stood beside them, drinking from the trough.

They pulled up to the market in their cart, which was starting to get busy. Emma paid half a copper for a stall, which she had to share with another market woman. The neighbour came from the market town and offered leather belts, sandals to lace up and also sturdier footwear.

Nanina retrieved her wares from the handcart and Emma sorted the displays, struggling to come to an agreement with the leather woman. Each wanted more space than half the table offered.

Knitted socks, gloves, scarves woven on a small hand frame and dyed with different plants and fruits, dried apple slices in a cloth bag, dried medicinal plants, wild herbs and mushrooms, thickened cranberries, blackberries, raspberries and blueberries. Hazelnuts collected by the children from last year stood in a basket next to carved animals made by Sika. Rona had made combs from dry beech wood under Hela's guidance. A small carved sailing ship with a real sail made from a scrap of cloth had been offered by Nanina.

A large space was also taken up by the collected resin, which was the first commodity to be sighted and negotiated by a female buyer.

The second customer to appear at the stall was an old woman, already hunched over and wrinkled in the face, who came limping up, leaning on a cane. Her gaze flitted unsteadily over the displays. As she was about to leave, her eyes fell on Nanina.

"Who are you, I haven't seen you around here before?"

"I'm Nanina."

"So, Nanina." The woman looked longer into Nanina's face. Then her gaze transfigured and she spoke softly, as if to herself, "No, you're not - like - you're a pearl - a pearl among pebbles." A grin stretched across her face. Then she asked aloud, looking sternly at Nanina, "What were you doing here?" As she did so, she wiped the displays with a wave of her hand.

Nanina pointed to the small sailboat.

"How much?"

"A quarter," Emma answered for the puzzled Nanina.

"Hmm," the old woman smiled and rummaged around in a cloth bag and then had a half in her bony fingers. This she laid on the rough wood and said, "Right!" She limped away.

Nanina stood speechless for a while. Emma nudged her, "Go on, take the ship after her."

Nanina ran after him, "You forgot the ship!"

The old woman stopped, looked at Nanina again, and then said softly, "I saw you - keep your ship and good luck - you'll be able to use it."

Nanina stood paralyzed for a moment. She understood nothing and did not know what to do. Emma picked her up.

"As goes the beginning, so goes the end," said Emma, about noon, when the trade was so slowly ending, "we have sold a great deal." Emma had done all the errands with the other traders, buying cheaply as much as she could from the list that had been drawn up by the three women together.

Emma even suspected that Nanina had sold more than she had. That's why she wasn't in a hurry lately when she went to another merchant to buy something herself.

"Here you have a copper, go buy some!" Nanina ran off happily, past the stalls of cloth and wool, past the only stall with the expensive nails and the almost prohibitively expensive craft tools for building, past pottery that was already almost all repackaged. At a bookstall she stopped, hoping to see something about hunting with bows and arrows. All she saw were novels and books on home, garden, and cooking. These writings were also very expensive.

She found the stall with toys and trinkets just at the right time. The market woman, tall, slim, and middle-aged, in a light blue linen smock with a purple belt and a leather necklace with silver little top hats strung on it, had been delayed and was only now beginning to pack up.

Nanina had never seen a purple like it.

Today the children had stayed away and the shop had therefore only been primarily run with jewellery. Dolls and doll things, stuffed animals and a few board games still lay there. A wooden board made of eight by eight black and white squares fascinated Nanina. She stood spellbound in front of it. In two rows, black and white game pieces faced each other. In the back row, two elephants stood in each corner, then two tigers and two rhinos. In the middle stood a bear and a lion. The front row was made up of eight wolves. All the animals were very carefully carved out of wood and obviously coloured.

"What game is this?" wanted Nanina to know.

"A chess set," she got in reply.

"How much is this?" Nanina was red with excitement.

"A silver," only now the woman looked up and eyed Nanina, "how much do you have?" The question seemed superfluous; so far she had found no one interested.

"A copper"

"So, one copper, that's a little too little," the woman laughed, then seeing Nanina's disappointed face, added, "maybe I have something else for you." She rummaged in a basket already prepared for loading and took out a small board with the same eight by eight black and white squares. There were also sixteen each of black and white round little wooden discs.

Nanina suddenly felt very clearly something like words in her head that she had not heard. Words that could mean: *You I want to kiss*. She had never felt so clearly words that were not spoken and that she had not heard. For a brief moment Nanina thought she had only to listen in a certain way to feel words that she herself did not think, but which related to her. In the past, when Rona or Sika would attack her in anger or argue with her, she had noticed it even before they said anything or got physical. Most of the time, and she was getting better at it, she was then able to calm them down.

"It's a game of checkers, is kind of like chess - costs a little more than a copper, but we can trade - what else do you have to offer besides your copper?"

Nanina thought and rummaged in her smock pockets, but found nothing useful, then she wondered if there was anything left at Emma's, but she couldn't negotiate that, it wasn't hers. Disappointed again, she looked at the woman.

"Well, never mind, I'll give you a special price for wrapping up. Where did you come from? From that log cabin in the woods?" The woman smirked, as if she knew the secret with her home. She looked Nanina over again thoroughly, then laughed as she said, "Give me your copper and a kiss, and we'll be settled."

Nanina looked at her puzzled, put down her copper and leaned over the table to the tall slender woman. She took her by the head, and before Nanina could even go in for a kiss, she had a fleeting kiss on each cheek and a hearty one on her mouth. She took the board and the round disks in a little box in her hands and ran to Emma. The woman called after her, laughing loudly. "You forgot something else - the instructions for the game. I'll see you again, yes"

Nanina ran back.

"Here's the instructions, I don't want to be overpaid and have fun with it - where did you come from?"

Nanina just pointed in the direction of her market stall and quickly ran away.

Emma was already almost done packing up and asked curiously, "What did you buy?"

Nanina showed her treasure. "Oh, a game of checkers!" Emma knew it from her mother and her mother's friend, they had played it sometimes. But actually, it wasn't well regarded and was just barely tolerated among older women. All other fighting games from the previous age, while not generally banned, were not made and sold, they were practically outlawed. There were also a lot of new games and not many women wanted to play those old ones anyway.

*Since when is that available for purchase*, Emma asked herself and leafed through the instructions. In addition to the checkers game, the chess game was also explained. A sign made of a cross of bars caught her eye. When Emma saw the pictures of the king and queen, she winced and folded the instructions shut.

Red and embarrassed in the face and quarreling with the saleswoman, she said to Nanina, "This is something ... something special, this is precious ... you can't get it like this. I'll save it for you, and to play with, I'll copy the instructions for you."

Nanina didn't understand, but because it looked like a small book, she assumed it must be very valuable and they might break it.

"The woman may not have known it was very valuable." With these words Emma put it in a basket and on top of it an unsold scarf.

At the inn they both ate a big bowl of lentil stew with two small sausages in it. They could afford that to finish the good business. In the courtyard they drank more water from the well and then Emma gave Nanina until evening off.

Nanina ran to the market once more, but almost all the stalls had been dismantled or at least cleared away. Merchants were no longer there, only the village staff to dismantle.

Rona had said something about a small lake where there was a jetty from which one could jump into the deep water.

Nanina found the lake with the jetty. Only one small boat was moored. She felt the warm jetty as she took off her sandals and walked barefoot the small distance to the end. She put her hand in the water and found that it wasn't cold, rather maybe even warm.

She looked around and could see no one. Then she took off the smock and put it with the sandals. With a running start, a jump and tightened legs she landed in the water.

The lake was actually much deeper than her always muddy pond. She found no bottom with her feet and had to swim off immediately.

Nanina swam and swam. A girl, half a head taller than her, her long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, leapt from the dock into the water with an elegant dive. With practiced strokes, she swam toward Nanina.

"Hey, I've seen you around the market, are you new in town?"

"No, I'm just at the market," Nanina replied.

"And where did you come from?" the girl wanted to know further.

Nanina was inexperienced at swimming and choked. She swam to a post of the jetty and held on to be able to cough out the water better.

The girl didn't wait for Nanina's answer and just kept talking. "There are always new kids coming along to the market here, since there are some living in the north now. I know that from school. Three new ones joined us this year too, they live here in town now."

Nanina did not know what to say. The girl swam around in the water in front of her, sometimes on her back and half diving.

"The others are all at Forest School, I couldn't go."

"In the forest school, what do they do there?" asked Nanina.

"What else, picking berries, making jam, gathering and drying tea leaves, making fires and building leaf huts. I had a wood chip in my foot and had to stay there because it was thick and festering. But it's gone now. It's boring here alone."

With only a brief pause, she continued, "I had to help my mother this morning-you're here with your mother, too, yes-or I would have come to you already. There wasn't much going on today. A month ago there were many more. It'll be nice again in the fall, there's the big market, it goes on for three days, and there's a market festival."

Nanina had recovered and was now beginning to feel cold.

"I'm Silki and what's your name?"

"Nanina"

Silki could tell by the look on Nanina's face that she was freezing now.

"Come on, let's go outside, I brought a blanket, we can lie down in the sun - come on!"

With quick strokes the girl swam to a sandy spot on the shore that was not occupied by the reed belt. Nanina swam slowly after. Silki fetched the folded blanket from the jetty and spread it out behind a shrub on the bank, so that the sun could shine particularly strongly on the slight slope.

"It's nicest here when ..." Silki's mouth remained open. Nanina had come out of the water. Nanina knew why immediately. There wasn't much of the break left because of the cold water, but there was still enough.

"Are you from there too, from - there was one there last market day, from a village, she had one of those too, and she couldn't even kiss. Is that sick or an accident?" Nanina shrugged.

"I think her name was Rona, I remembered, I hadn't seen anything like that. Come here on the blanket."

Nanina wanted to lie down on her belly but Silki looked so interested that she couldn't help herself and turned onto her back.

"And with this thing here," Silki giggled, "with this - what do you call it - you can pee, right? Rona showed us."

Nanina was a little sad at first that she had such a hernia, but being marveled at like that was something too.

"Does this hurt when I touch here?" Nanina couldn't answer as quickly as Silki had her gnome in her fingers.

"That's soft."

"It's a defect in the womb, later it will all be stuffed back into the stomach," Nanina tried to explain.

"And what's this in the little bag?"

The sun coaxed out again what the cold of the water had driven into the hollow of his belly.

"Looks like you have two little bird eggs in there. Are those the ovaries? We had that in school, that's where the eggs are formed that become babies."

The warm sun and Silki's curious but cautiously gentle touches and hand-holding had made Nanina's gnome straighten and harden, which Silki noticed immediately.

"Now it's our gnome and he's fun," Nanina stunned Silki and she actually found herself at a loss for words for a few moments.

"Why gnome?", Silki then wanted to know.

"If you draw a face on the front here, this looks like a cap."

"Wait a minute," Silki jumped up and ran up the embankment. Up there, on the edge by a stone circle, a fire was often burned. Silki searched and found three small pieces of charcoal and ran back.

"You're sweet, Nanina, I want to kiss you. But first I'll paint a face on you. I'm good at painting - Erna, our art teacher, said."

Silki tried hard and the face succeeded. The gnome enjoyed it and Silki giggled when the little one started to wiggle and twitch. Then Silki gave Nanina a long kiss and she let it happen to her.

*\*Apocrypha 1-13-1*

"How old are you?" wanted to know Silki.

"I'll be 12 soon."

"And I'm 12."

Both laughed and let the warm sun shine on their bellies. They lay on their backs next to each other. Nanina was dreaming of something beautiful. Silki took her hand and placed it on her mound of Venus, then she pressed Nanina's slender fingers into her cleft and slowly guided Nanina's hand back and forth, then left her alone.

Nanina felt the warm wetness and Silki's multiple reactions. After that Silki held Nanina's hand tightly and put it between their bodies. Both of them were dreaming their dreams in the warm sun of high summer, in the childhood that was eternal for a moment.

Then at some point they went into the water once more, swam in a race, Silki winning by lengths, played in the sand, and went swimming again. Nanina told of her log cabin and the new bow

for hunting, and Silki told of the interesting incidents of her market spot and the love affairs among the girls.

The sun reached the horizon. Silki kissed Nanina one more time and emphasized how sweet she was. They both felt their sun-warmed bodies one last time, then they put on their gowns and slowly walked back to the market. Nanina promised Silki to come to the big autumn market.



Emma was just saying goodbye in the inn to the woman from whom Nanina had gotten the checkers for her copper and the kiss. Smiling at Nanina with a wink, she left the inn.

"Hey, what's going on, you're beaming like a honey moon," Emma greeted her at the inn, "what happened?"

"I went swimming with Silki, it was very nice in the lake."

"Who's Silki?", Emma wanted to know with a smile.

"A girl who couldn't go to Forest School and had to stay here."

"I see."

Nanina did not know what could, would, should she tell.

"Can I come back for the Fall Market?"

Emma looked into Nanina's bright, pleading children's eyes. *No, they don't deserve disappointment*, she thought, *maybe we'll find a way*, and she said, "Maybe, you've been a big help."

Nanina jumped for joy and hugged Emma, who became quite melancholy about it.

After dinner, Nanina fell asleep contentedly with a smile and the exciting memories of that day very quickly turning into dreams.

The next morning, as Emma and Nanina drove their handcart out to the market town with the newly acquired things and a small amount of unsold merchandise, a girl came running. It was Silki. She hung around Nanina's neck a leather strap with a small sea-snail, smooth on the inside and shimmering slightly pink, and said, "I'll give you this, Nanina-see you at the autumn market." Silki, waving a hand, disappeared as quickly as she had come.

Nanina's heart was up to her neck.

Emma smiled within herself and it became quite apparent to her that something was going to change or something new was going to happen or had to happen. The market was growing year by year and they, the women of log cabin number two, had disobeyed the commandment not to bring their children together with other, normal children.

The quality of time began to change almost imperceptibly.

Could they keep this a secret from the village center and further up the hierarchy? None of the three women had thought of it until now. Emma was the first. She had also invited the woman who was from the same village as the woman she had met last time. And, bring the children too, she had still very firmly suggested to her.

Nanina spent the breaks and the midday rest with archery. When the green wood splintered, Nanina immediately wanted a new bow. Emma was able to slow her down with the promise to look for better wood, dry it and then carve it into a real bow. But she didn't know exactly how to do that and what a real bow had to look like.

They had almost reached their log cabin again when Emma suddenly stopped and looked at Nanina, "It might be better, Nanina, if we say that I bought the game for you and you say that you bought yourself this necklace with the pendant from the copper you gave."

Nanina agreed and complied when they arrived home.

When Nanina and Rona were alone for the next few days, they both tried to make a new bow. The results were poor. The wood feathered too little or broke and the arrows were usually too heavy.

"We really need the book, it says exactly how to do this," Rona tried to explain her failures. But there was no opportunity to go to her hiding place. The field and garden work needed every hand. The rye had to be harvested and the runner beans had also ripened. Besides this, the children, under Emma's direction, dug up burdock and horseradish roots near the log cabin, which, dried, could then be added to the rye and bean soups in winter. One child always had to tend the three goats and two sheep. When they had grazed the grass around their peg, the peg had to be pulled out and driven into the ground again with a stone in another place. At first Rona learned this from Emma and later Nanina and Sika could do it too.

## 14 Race to the Continent



The sun was already around noon when Gertrud left the cabin. She felt as if she had been shattered. The island was no longer visible. She took in the storm sail and set main and jib. She had to try to tack against the prevailing westerly wind. In the cabin she looked at the chart and then at noon tried to determine the position with the sextant. She hated doing this, but she had no choice. She noted with concern that she would have to steer further south to avoid getting too close to the archipelago again. Could she rely on her position fix? It had been years again since she had done that.

She was lucky with this stolen yacht, it was designed for at least ten people and longer stay at sea, there were all the sea charts of the Atlantic to America. She even found a motor-driven water treatment plant that could produce the necessary fresh water from seawater. If her thoughts did not constantly revolve around the near future, she might enjoy sailing the Atlantic to America.

*America, what a name a thousand years ago*, thought Gertrud. During her education, people did not like to speak that name, for it had been the last great empire of this planet, with the claim to impose the domestication of the rest of humanity by force.

All of North America had been part of the forbidden zone for a thousand years. The radioactive contamination had been very strong.

After two days she cruised again hard to the wind in the direction of the west. After a renewed determination of position she turned to the north. Towards evening, an island appeared on the horizon in a northeasterly direction. Gertrud knew she must have made a mistake in determining longitude. Probably the on-board clock was no longer accurate enough. Instantly she turned back to a westerly course. In the twilight, she noticed another motor yacht following her without position lights.

First fear and then anger rose in Gertrud. She changed her course and fell away from the wind, she had to pick up more speed and hoped to be able to cover her track in the falling darkness.

*Were the engine noises getting fainter?*, Gertrud asked herself and wanted to believe it. What would she do if the yacht caught up with her? Of course, there were no weapons of any kind aboard. Perhaps she would find a fishing rod. Gertrud's mouth twisted into a cynical grin. Then she remembered the signal pistol. Could it be used to defend herself? She had no idea, and had never used one of those things before. Gertrud considered starting the engine, then immediately dismissed it. Her

boat was not a fast motor yacht, and besides, the sound of the engine could be made out at a great distance.

Suddenly she heard the strange motor yacht much more clearly. She must have noticed the new course and was now following it quickly. The wind carried the engine sounds clearly ahead of her.

What chance did she have left? For a brief moment it seemed to her that her life so far was passing before her inner eye in wild images. *Was that all there was?* she asked herself. *Should I fight? With a grappling hook? Ridiculously? With a signal pistol?*

The yacht approached alongside at high speed. Gertrud was at the helm, she would change course one last time perhaps when the alien yacht was at her height or when they tried to moor and board. Gertrud tensed all her senses and muscles. Now she could make out two women to starboard, holding something elongated. It looked like a dark sack. A person dressed in black was steering the boat in the raised steering cabin. All of them had their hoods drawn up. She couldn't make out any faces.

*They're not policewomen,"* Gertrud said. The yacht was now alongside. Gertrud had expected police and forgot her last maneuver.

The black bag flew onto her deck and at the same moment the motor yacht gave full throttle and turned away. Gertrud was stunned. Tears ran down her face, she could no longer hold herself. She hadn't felt that way about herself for a long time.

The sack contained equipment, a compass, warm clothes, maps and gold and silver money. What she looked at with astonishment and also fear was a commissioner's permit, who had issued it and was it genuine? Who knew of her escape and who had an interest in Anna's mission?

Gertrud resumed her old course, unable to comprehend anything. She sat at the wheel and watched the work of the autopilot, staring again and again in bewilderment at the stars blinking back and forth, blurred by tears.

For the next few days she sailed a northerly course, making more than 100 nautical miles a day in winds of 5 to 6. The boat gave her no time to think. Seawater seeping into the bilge had her looking for the leak. After three days she found a broken seal in the toilet, which she made a makeshift repair. She had to adjust the electric bilge pump more often and hoped the batteries would last a while longer. On the fifth day, the autopilot began to creak terribly and gave up the ghost. Gertrud was in despair. Were the batteries down? She started the engine and was lucky, after a while the autopilot worked again. From now on, she regularly ran the engine for two hours to recharge the batteries.

The wind force increased after ten days, she had arrived in the middle of the westerly wind belt with wind forces around 8-10. The water in the bilge rose again. She had to run the engine more and more often to supply the batteries with power.

The seasickness, long scarcely felt, grew more and more alarming. If she kept nothing more in her stomach, she would soon fail from her weakness. She was no longer able to take the midday position fix with the sextant, weather permitting.

*Is that death?* Gertrud thought. The storm had increased in strength. The night was terrible. She thought she was going to faint. The engine held out. It was with difficulty that she managed to withstand the rolling waves and the spray whipping across the deck. Should she release the snap hook that held her to the wheel? She would be washed over the deck and that would be that. As her fear vanished, she knew her body was ready to die. She let go of the wheel she was kneeling behind. The autopilot tried to hold course. She waited for the engine or autopilot to fail at any moment. Then she would come across the waves and capsize. Her last thought should be Lisa's, trying to remember her good times on the island. She saw a beach, blue sky, flowering bushes and Lisa in a light summer dress coming towards her, then she slowly lost consciousness, still noticing how she rolled on the ground and was held by the safety line.

When she regained consciousness, she was still on the ground, she couldn't hear the engine anymore, the autopilot was still creaking. It was brighter in the cabin. She tried to get back on her feet. The wind had died down. Blue gaps could be seen between the clouds that were still chasing quickly by in the sky. Gertrud could not stand on her feet. She immediately felt sick again and retched. On her knees she dragged herself down to the cabin. She had only one thought left: drink. Opening the water

canister, she first realized how weak she was, but a spark of life had appeared somewhere. Spilling a large portion, she managed to drink after all. She tore open a packet of emergency provisions and chewed some of the high-energy, sweet bar, then fought first the nausea and then the faintness. She drank water again and recovered. Her senses slowly returning, she rested her head high and watched the lurching boat apathetically, but with germinating hope.

The swell and wind became more bearable again, allowing her to slowly recover. She looked outside. The storm sail had held. She thanked her boat. She was able to refill the engine's tank and it started up again. She had stolen a very good boat after all. Gertrud was able to contort her mouth into a faint smile again even at that thought.

After 12 days she noticed land off to starboard. The wind and swell had died down. She knew the Gulf was ahead of her now and she would make it. The distant land gave her confidence again. The fuel would run out in the next few days. She tried to scoop the water out of the forecabin by hand and with a bucket. She was able to set the mainsail again and made good progress, only using the engine to recharge the batteries.

Slowly she was able to use thoughts of the further journey again. In three days she had reached the mouth of the river and started the engine again to reach upstream the western centre of the continent. A thousand years ago it had been a great city, known for its heavy red wines. Then later a heap of ruins and completely uninhabited for two centuries, until slowly a settlement arose and grew steadily.

Then she came to the decision to anchor right at the mouth of the river, and then reach the town on foot. The fuel could run out at any moment. To starboard, a nautical mile from the mouth, she saw a small bay. This must have been a fishing or marina in the past. She could still clearly make out the outer breakwater. In the middle of the old harbor she dropped anchor. There was no jetty or other mooring to be seen. Then she rested for the moment. She immediately fell into a dead-like sleep. When she awoke, she did not know how long she had slept. She hadn't noticed another boat when she entered, not even a fishing boat. She needed rest, her clothes needed washing. She could only now take a closer look at the small injuries on her hands from working on the sailboat. From the dinghy, she lashed the yacht's stern to a tree on the shore. She ate something and tried to clean her dirty and smelly laundry. Fortunately she had enough to change into. In the evening she took a hammock and a sleeping bag and went to the shore with the dinghy. Between two trees she found a suitable place to sleep. Gertrud felt so weak that she thought the earth was still swaying beneath her. At the thought that Lisa could see her like this, she had to smile inside herself.

*Who were the strangers who had thrown her equipment on the deck?* Despite this tormenting thought, she again fell asleep instantly from exhaustion. Restless dreams about the sailboat took her into the night and brought her back into the day. The sun shone high in the sky. It had to be close to noon by now. Not far from her hammock spot, a small sandy path she hadn't noticed yesterday passed by. As she was packing up, a little girl with shoulder-length black hair of maybe 11 passed by. She was leading two goats on a rope, eating here and there at the leaves of the bushes.

"Hey, come here a minute," called Gertrude. The girl came slowly and wonderingly to her. What could she be thinking? Gertrud had not considered how she might look. She quickly ran her hands over her face and brushed her hair back. As she did so, she noticed a crusty scar on her forehead that she had picked up from the masthead.

"Is there a village near here, with an inn?" The girl still marveled at her and shook her head.

"What is your name?" wanted Gertrude to know now, perhaps opening her mouth.

"You are not from here," came now at least in reply. "Guess what!", Gertrud was at the end of her conversation. What more do I want from her? she asked herself.

"Will you have breakfast with me?" invited Gertrud, smiling at her, her hunger having returned after the privations of the sea voyage and the seasickness. The girl shook her head in the negative and brushed her long black hair out of her face.

"All right, but let's have a cup of tea together." The little girl didn't dare say no again and stopped. "Come along, we'll go on the boat; I have a stove there." The girl came along to the shore and

saw the stately boat anchored. She was disconcerted, but nevertheless tied the goats to a tree and followed Gertrud into the swaying dinghy. Gertrud was glad to meet a human being again, even if it was only a child. "What's your name?" she wanted to know. "Sofi," the girl answered as an aside, and continued to marvel at the interior of the saloon. Gertrud didn't bother to sort out the mess that had been made during her ride. She put on some water and wondered if Sofi would even drink her black tea. She'd just have to put a lot of sugar in it.

While the water was getting hot, she cleared two cushion seats and opened a tin of butter cookies, and as she did, her eyes fell on the radio. Should she switch to receive now? She wasn't sure if even if it was on receive, it would still send signals that could be locked on.

"Where are you from?" wanted Sofi to know now, after she had eaten the first sweet cookie with the especially sweet tea. Laughing, Gertrud replied, "I come straight from the moon. Didn't you see it sink into the sea to the west. At that moment I set off in my boat." She compared the fine, water-repellent fabric of her trouser suit with the coarse fabric of the girl's smock. Something seemed true about it. With her mouth half open she stared at the girl. What did it know of the moon? Fairy tales? Gertrud was sure that Sofi would not be believed if questioned.

"Did you like it?" Sofi nodded, "well you can take me to your mother now can't you?" The girl agreed. Gertrud had to travel on as undetected as possible. She had a notion that if she were to enter the harbor of the nearby town with the big boat, there was no way it could go unnoticed. Gertrud put on a smock again and found that she had only the best of fabrics. She considered for a moment, she couldn't be too conspicuous. She didn't have much choice, she decided on the green one with the hood and still felt like she was from the moon compared to the girl.

Gertrud noticed how excited Sofi was as she ran after her and the goats as some sort of moon fairy. As they approached the settlement, more little girls had joined them. The flat houses, thatched with wooden shingles or straw and small fenced gardens, were scattered around a square with a draw well. Benches, roughly hewn from tree trunks, surrounded the well.

Gertrud, accompanied by the children, strode to one of the houses. A few women who were working in the gardens and in a nearby field looked up and let their work rest.

Three women greeted Gertrud with great reluctance and invited her into the house. The children also pushed their way in, but were sent out again. It was evidently the living room-kitchen. An open fire burned on a stove. Over it hung a smoky kettle. Gertrud sat down on a wooden bench, in front of which stood a rough, unplaned wooden table.

Suddenly Gertrud realized she hadn't even thought about how to introduce herself.

"My name is Gertrud, I'm passing through," she paused, watching the women. An almost silent pause arose.

"Welcome to our home," she was greeted for the second time by what appeared to be the oldest of those present. Another disappeared behind a curtain and fetched three cups, and prepared a lemonade, which she mixed from fruit syrup and water.

"I'm on my way to the city of Bordo, and I'd like to know if you can travel from here with a ...", Gertrud thought frantically about what to travel on with here. She had never been in such a position, she had been too much of a scientist and had lived only among her own kind. "Is it possible to travel on in a wagon?" She drank of the lemonade offered, it tasted very refreshing.

"Where did you come from and where do you keep your luggage?" "I still have it on my boat." The women looked at each other in amazement and disbelief.

"By boat you came - and from where, you also speak somewhat differently from us here, you speak written language." Gertrud had already noticed that Sofi had to strain and think when she answered her. She remembered the Kommissarpermissio. Should she use those? What other choice did she have. She awkwardly retrieved the document shrink-wrapped in clear plastic, which she wore on Anna's gold necklace next to the flash drive disguised as jewelry.

She handed it to the older woman, who began to read it awkwardly. Then the three women conversed in their dialect, of which Gertrud understood only fragments. Gertrud became uneasy. Was she to be put out on the wanted list already? That was impossible, she reassured herself. Who would

know about her permission from the official side? If there was no danger, then she no longer had to answer any questions and could only give instructions.

The older woman spoke up again. "Shall we get your luggage, we can take you to the nearest post office, and from there a horse post will go to town."

"Thank you, I have one more request, is there a fishing harbor or cove around here where my boat can be serviced and stored until I return?"

"I know a couple of fisherwomen upriver," came forward one of the three who had not yet said anything. Gertrud suddenly had her confidence back. The permission gave her added authority. *At least here*, thought Gertrud, *the piece of paper helps me*.

When she stepped out of the hut, some children and also adults had gathered outside, whispering to each other and now suddenly falling silent. Was it just her conspicuously high quality clothing or was it also her significantly altered figure from the normal women here due to the training camp and hormone supplements? A large handcart was organized to be brought to the boat, led by Sofi.

Gertrud ran ahead, she still had to pack the essentials. On the way to her boat, she tried to remember what powers were connected with such a commissioner's permission. She thought she remembered unrestricted help. But how far this help would really go, she could not remember. Surely only to make the journey without difficulty.

When the little table wagon arrived, she packed a knapsack and two bags, hoping she hadn't forgotten anything. She wrote another order entrusting the boat to the custody and secrecy of the fisherwomen. *Something in writing is always good*, Gertrud thought, *it doesn't miss its mark*. It also said that there always had to be a week's supply of emergency provisions on the boat. As a farewell gift, she gave little Sofi a tin of sweet, waterproof butter biscuits.

As she was on her way to the city with the horse post, she only now really realized that she had only been on the run so far and had not yet had time to think thoroughly about the goal and the task Anna had accepted. So she would save the children, but probably really only Nanina and then? Should she perhaps hide in the wilderness with the children afterwards? And then what?

Gertrud had to try. This specimen, which went by the name Nanina in her books, had most likely achieved Anna's goal and could provide a new beginning for civilization on a higher level. Was this to be an ancient dream of mankind come true?

At that moment she thought herself mad, and everything seemed to her as unreal as in a very bad play. Then, in addition, she remembered the fast motor yacht, and Gertrud became strangely uneasy and uncertain. Who had they been? She had not the slightest idea, and had given absolutely no thought hitherto to such a thing as fate. She would have to check the papers from the black sack again for overlooked clues at the first quiet opportunity.

On the first day on the covered wagon of the horse post, the only travelling companions were a middle-aged woman and her daughter. They spent the night on the wagon on a straw mattress and covered with the available blankets. On the second day, five more women joined them with goods in carrying baskets for the market. Late in the afternoon, the horse post passed through the first huts in town. They resembled the dwellings of the village by the river. Only the roads were wider and better surfaced. The few passengers on the covered wagon got off here and there at the harness driver's call. Gertrud had decided to stay on the wagon until she reached the central post office. There she retrieved her luggage from the rear mail wagon and asked a woman, who looked as if she were a resident of this town, for an inn. She pointed to a larger, two-story wooden house with many small windows facing the street.

Gertrud thanked him and walked with her luggage in that direction and past the house and a good bit further. She wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. There were now narrow alleys with small shops and crafts, in the majority she saw women at looms and spinning wheels, next to them also a pottery. Two women worked at potter's wheels, two girls kneaded and cut lumps of clay. She went inside and asked for a place to stay for the night.

The two women looked up briefly. Gertrud felt as if she had been examined from head to toe.

"There's an inn at the post office, and the next one is at the harbor."

The slightly older woman paused, then added, in view of Gertrud's travel equipment, "There's even a hotel at the train station."

"I don't make big demands and I also need someone who can guide me around the city and who knows his way around. First I have to get rid of the luggage - I can't stay here, the bags are too heavy for me."

The older woman stopped her potter's wheel and stood up. Washing her hands and drying them on her apron, she took the two bags and carried them into one of the back rooms. Gertrude followed her. "If you want to sleep here with the girls? They can sleep in a bed for a night." "Agreed, that's enough for me, I want to go on tomorrow. Is one silver enough?" The woman looked at Gertrude in amazement. "For lodging, food, and guide," Gertrud added. She had no idea at all what anything cost, where would she get it from, she had hardly needed any money so far. She had already been astonished at the low fare of the post.

The older girl, Edit, she was maybe 13, became her guide the next day. With her she set off after breakfast, an oatmeal with milk.

Edit took them to the train station. On the way they found another bakery, there they ate a sweet poppy seed bun and drank a coffee made of malt, much to Edit's delight. Next to the train station was a police station. Gertrud saw how every woman who wanted to enter the station was checked.

"Is everyone who wants to go to the station checked by policewomen here?"

Edit shook her dark brown bangs, "I haven't seen that either."

"Can you do me a favor?" Edit nodded. "Why don't you go down to the station and check out the connections on the timetable. I'm interested in a connection to Frankental, it's to the northeast of here. I have something else to do. I'll meet you back here. Or better yet, you can come over there to the café-bar." Gertrud pointed to the tables and chairs she had just spotted being brought out to the street.

Edit ran off. Gertrud walked slowly towards the sidewalk coffee shop, watching her out of the corner of her eye. The policewomen took no notice of her.

Gertrud sat down at a table so that she could watch the entrance to the railway station. In one of her smock pockets she still had the small brass telescope. But she did not dare to take it out and watch the entrance. At that time there were very few women in the street who wanted to go to the station.

She ordered a cup of coffee. When it was brought and Gertrud had taken a sip, she smiled at the woman and asked, "Do you have any real coffee - I mean coffee that makes you perky?" The woman smiled back, "But it's expensive!"

"How much?"

"A quarter of silver"

"That's really expensive," Gertrude confirmed, "bring me one with half milk."

"Gladly, it will only take a moment, I have to brew it first." After a short pause, she asked, halfway through her walk: "Do you want to travel by train - it was just a question, none of my business."

Gertrud was the only guest that morning, she was still calling out to the barmaid. "Brew one for you too!"

Gertrud watched as all women over a certain age were checked by the policewomen.

The barmaid came again and brought, in addition to the coffee, a glass of water and a cognac for both of them.

"What's going on over there? Since when is the station controlled?"

The barmaid joined her at the table with the two coffees and shrugged. "They've been checking almost everyone here for four days. They're looking for someone they expect to see here at the station, because they only check those who want to get in."

Gertrud had to be careful. Or had she already generated suspicion? She had tried to dress as inconspicuously as possible, but her high-toned speech betrayed that she was a stranger in the city.

Gertrude asked, "Is there a reason?"

"I'm not aware of any, there was nothing in yesterday's news sheet and today's hasn't arrived yet."

"Can I see yesterday's news?"

The barmaid fetched the paper from the counter. Gertrud leafed through it without really reading. Over the edge she could see Edit coming back and being stopped by the policewomen at the gate.

Gertrud reacted quickly. She waved the barmaid over, gave her half a silver and said, "I forgot to do something. When the girl comes, tell her that I have been before, but must go away for a moment, and that I will be back soon. Be sure she waits for me here!" Gertrude fetched another quarter of silver and laid it on the table. "This is for the girl Edit."

Gertrud stood up and disappeared around the house. She turned around once briefly and saw Edit pointing towards the café. As fast as she could, and when she thought no one saw her, she ran towards her quarters. She had trouble finding her way. She paused in front of the small pottery shop to steady herself. Then she went in said Edit was following and that she would have to hurry to catch the train yet. She declined the offer to carry her luggage.

Out in the street, Gertrud decided to walk in the direction of the post office. On her way there, she saw a small market through a side street. The luggage became too heavy for her, she needed a break and stood at the edge of the market. There were mainly vegetables on offer, as well as fabrics, clothing, a stall with pottery and two tables with junk.

Gertrud placed her bags and backpack under an unused market table. She desperately needed a plan for what she was going to do next. She felt like she was just always on a haphazard run. What if none of this was for her? But then the black bag of travel paraphernalia became pointless.

But what could she really do? Kidnap the children from their blockhouses? If they were to be liquidated, it could have been done long ago. After all, the highest reproductive authorities in the council also had the fast news traffic via radio.

Gertrud continued to think and tried to imagine that the liquidation would be carried out on the spot with the usual delay. Then they would have to be transported away and that would also be done very slowly with the usual means of transport there.

*Where was the next reproduction station for this settlement area?* Gertrud asked herself in her thoughts, she could only think of Frankental. She just had to try. Maybe she could get somewhere there. She had to put all her eggs in one basket now, slowly she began to suspect that only a task with a higher goal could lead her out of this hopeless situation. She decided for herself that Anna's mission held an importance that she could not fully comprehend at the moment. She would go now to the reproduction station in Bordo. Each of these large stations had a courier service.

She inquired where she could get horses and made her way there. She had loaded her luggage on a handcart. A woman took her to a horse breeder for half a copper.

The stables of the trader and her grooms were already a little outside the town. Paddocks, partially bordered by bushes, stretched out behind the house and very far back, almost on the horizon, only the next houses could be seen.

They quickly agreed on a deal. Gertrud rented a horse. The trader would accompany them and bring the horse back when they got there.

Gertrud still asked to change and freshen up. Should she put on her best frock or her long anorak for the wilderness? She decided on the light blue frock with the white lapels and the black wide hems on the arms. To this she added the gold chain with Anna's gem-embellished pendant.

The horse breeder's eyes widened when she saw Gertrud like this, and when she brought out the inspector's report, she was speechless. Gertrud had to rely on the element of surprise.

*Strange, she thought, I almost feel like a commissioner too.* She hung the Kommissarpermissio back next to Anna's trailer and mounted the horse. The horse breeder could immediately see that this was not the first time Gertrud had sat on a horse.

Skilfully they both rode off. On the way, Gertrud explained her mission, which was being carried out in secrecy, and that she was bound to absolute silence and to help.

They approached the reproduction complex, a large area with scattered sturdily built two-story stone houses. Under a mound of earth lay the cooling chambers and parthenogenesis facilities. In most cases there was also a fertilization facility for the rarer fusion of two eggs. In several buildings were incubators with artificial birthing substrates. In addition, there were outpatient stations for implanting embryos for women who wanted to carry their child to term themselves.

The center supplied the whole area in the southwest of the continent. In Frankental, a center was established for the new settlement area in the midwest of the continent.

They reached the outer security belt of the courier service. Gertrud showed the permissio and was let through by the gatekeepers. One of the hangars was open. A crew was busy unloading frozen containers.

Gertrud rode in the hangar up to the plane. And asked for the pilot. She came out of a ready room.

"The plane is to be made ready for takeoff at once!" Gertrud was still sitting on her horse, which now began to prance. She held out your commissar permissio to the pilot and added, "The exact mission order will be given in the air for safety reasons. Do you still need to refuel?"

The pilot nodded, speechless. Just as she was about to say something, Gertrud called out to the unloading crew, "Hurry up, we're taking off right now!"

The captain had regained her speech. "But I have to get permission to fly first."

"All you do now is fuel the plane and take off directly from here. That's a top priority order." The captain stood motionless. Gertrud's brain was working at full speed: *what would happen if she refused?*

"Where's the tanker?" cried Gertrud, still lowering her voice a little. The captain had evidently got round to obeying orders now after all. She was familiar with the commissariat, but had never thought she would ever have to deal with it. She began to prepare for takeoff. The plane was fueled and pulled in front of the hangar.

"But we don't have a co-pilot," the captain tried to object in a last ditch effort but Gertrud replied, "I am - turn off the radio and take off."

The two propellers started up. "To the runway!" commanded Gertrud. Then they took off. Gertrud couldn't notice anything at the control tower, they must be completely surprised.

They pierced through some low-lying veil clouds. And the pilot looked questioningly at Gertrud. "The course is Frankental but for now the course is southeast towards Marsee. Flying altitude 2000 meters above ground."

After half an hour Gertrud changed course to the north-east.

She went into the small galley and brewed two coffees. She handed one to the pilot and then sat back down in the co-pilot's seat. Looking at the map, she tried to orient herself to rivers and lakes.

"We stay about 100 km east of Frankental."

"I've never been there before." The pilot looked a little helplessly to her left. Gertrud played safety. "I've got the charts, we'll fly on sight then. Where are the parachutes?" The pilot gestured to a built-in locker in the back. She tied her luggage together and attached a parachute to it. A second she laid out for herself. Then she tracked the course on the chart again and gave instructions for course corrections. At one point she thought she had lost her bearings. She remained calm and searched with great concentration. In an upper left corner she noticed a strange sign. It was a black cross.

Where did these cards come from? This strange sign was unknown to her. She kept searching and then she saw a lake that matched the map and became calmer inside again.

When they had reached a point about 100 km east of Frankental, she gave the new course. It continued in an east-north-easterly direction. Straining, she looked for the great river in a northwesterly direction. At last she had found it. She gave the last change of course and tried to fasten the parachute.

"Is everything all right?" she still asked, "I don't know this guy that well." The pilot gave a few more hints as to which belts were to be fastened and how. Then she received instructions from Gertrud to fly to Frankental and land there to await further instructions.

Gertrud had never jumped with a parachute before and only knew something like this from very early pictures of her training. Gertrud looked nervously at her watch. The pilot set the autopilot and helped her. She hooked the ripcords, opened the door. A powerful suction took her breath away. She threw the luggage out and jumped after it. A tremendous jolt almost made her lose her senses. Then she was floating over woods into the depths. Pulling on the straps, she tried to get an overview. To her left floated the luggage. Gertrud had a faster rate of descent, she had to keep an eye on her luggage, at

least the direction, to find it again. At first, the hovering seemed interminable, especially since a belt unfortunately caught her left thigh. The last few meters went very fast, too fast, she tried desperately to pull on the straps to avoid landing on a tree. Her steering attempts did nothing, she hurtled between two spruces into the forest.

The parachute got caught on a low branch. She freed herself from the straps and tried to pull the parachute off the branch, which she managed after some effort. She tied up the parachute silk as best she could and set off with the bundle to find the rest of the equipment. She had clearly misjudged the distance after all. Things looked different down here. She spent the rest of the day doing this, going back to the starting point again and again, and from there, with minor changes, in the direction she had guessed. Finally she found the bundle hanging in a tree about 5 meters above the ground. After dark she gave up trying to get the bundle down and made camp for the night out of the parachute. Clouds had rolled in, but the rain was a long time coming. Only in the distance could she see a weather glow, and she hoped a thunderstorm would spare her.

The night barely let her sleep, either something was pinching her back or she was getting cold.

The morning was fresh and with harnesses to help her climb, she finally managed to get the gear to the ground. She ate something from the supplies she had brought with her. Had she perhaps brought too little? She couldn't find any more peace, she had to reach the market town. She dug out the compass and determined the direction. Pulling on the straps, she dragged the equipment behind her. After a few meters she had to realize that her ideas about this forest were completely insane. She would only be able to move herself with great effort. She could forget about the equipment. She unpacked everything and sorted first, trying to fill the backpack with the essentials. She remembered her youth and the camps in the forest camp. That was where they had done the survival training. Later, she didn't have much faith in it, as everything had gone very smoothly and had obviously been prepared appropriately by their instructors. Gertrud tried to remember. The first thing to be secured was water to drink, only then came a dry night's lodging and then food. She packed vessels to boil water and food. Fire she would have to make when the matches would be wet or spent. The usual burning glass was a must. Maps could not be missing. The knife was small, but very sharp. With the clothes to change there were already the first problems. The anorak and the trousers for the winter took a lot of space because of their warm lining. The rain clothes also had to go in. A waterproof rain tarp could not be missing either. And what would she sleep in? The sleeping bag had no more space, she attached it to the outside of the backpack.

She wrapped the rest of the equipment in the parachute and looked around for a place to put it. Would she need any more of it? Would she need to resort to it again? She looked for a scattered large tree and then tied the bundle into the branches, leaving a blue ribbon hanging down so she could find it again more easily.

Then she set off. She knew there was no railroad as far north as here. She had to find a way or she was lost. The undergrowth was almost impenetrable in sections. The compass direction was utterly pointless; she would have climbed up and down the hills.

*And why all this? Even if I find the kids, what do I do with them? Do I have to rob them first? Free them?* Gertrud rested panting on a green mossy tree stump.

*I have to find a way to this market town,* she thought, and tried it across from her actual direction. After half an hour she felt she had taken the right direction.

The road she found was simply made for horse-drawn wagons, but it ran very straight through the countryside. In parts it was very wide and ran through aisles in small hills, avoiding as far as possible any ups and downs. Then suddenly it came to a larger valley, led there in small narrow serpentine on the valley floor, and then led up again on the opposite slope in equally narrow serpentine. At the top it continued its straight course.

*It must have been one of those highways,* Gertrud remembered. But then this straight road came to an end and a fork now led far more winding and with more ups and downs through the woods. Gertrud wished for a horse. The backpack pressed heavily on her back. *Mustn't there be a rest stop for the horses soon?* These monotonous thoughts circled like a mill wheel in her head. While she was dragging herself along so wearily, she suddenly heard a horse whinny from a distance. Instinctively

she ran into the undergrowth, threw herself down and watched the path. It was a while before three horse-drawn carts came from the opposite direction. Two were pulling wagons covered with tarpaulins. Two women sat on the trestle of each. Gertrud could not make out what they were carrying.

*Could children be taken away like that?* Gertrud asked herself. The third and last carriage was open, small wooden barrels were fastened with ropes. A woman sat alone on the coach box.

Yes, why was she hiding? She could have asked if she was on the right track. But then she looked down at herself. A light, water-repellent anorak with the many pockets and then the pants with the sporty shoes. The backpack alone was enough to draw attention to herself completely. No, she had to change, she couldn't keep running like this. She pulled out her grey hooded coat, stowed the anorak and pants, and threw a blanket over the backpack. She didn't want to part with the shoes. Then she continued on her way.

You had to look closer, now she was less noticeable. *It must be a lucky day today*, she thought, when she could see the first thatched mud houses in small clearings in the late afternoon. The thatched huts made a gloomier impression than the more lightly built and usually already shingle-roofed houses in the southwest of the continent. Small gardens enclosed by simple willow fences grew a variety of vegetables. She could also make out large sunflowers, tied off with cloth to protect them from birds. She saw some goats eating at shrubs in the nearby forest. Sheep were tied to stakes.

Gertrud knew there would be at least one inn. She asked a woman for directions to the inn. The woman was busy with a stake for the tethered sheep. She wanted to put it in a little further so the animal could eat new grass. Gertrude kept the milk sheep on a leash until the woman had the peg securely in the ground. Gertrude wasn't very talkative and when asked where, she deflected and pretended not to understand the question. Which was pretty much the truth. There were other and strong discrepancies between spoken and written language here as well.

She ran in the direction of the inn. The woman looked after her curiously for a while.

Just as she went in the door of the inn, she could see five mounted policewomen riding hurriedly through the market town. The waitress looked strained through the window and said to a couple of women sitting in a corner: "They're new again - I'd like to know what they're all doing here. Just a few days ago a wagon train with covered wagons and policewomen left this way." Three of the five women had also walked to the window and were watching the riders. "They're riding northeast, I just want to know what they're doing there," one said, and another interjected, "There's nothing there, the new settlement area is to the northwest."

Gertrud's senses had immediately become wide awake. She sat down quickly and hid her athletic walking shoes under the table.

"Sometimes women from this area come to the market. There are a few scattered houses there, a day's journey away. One of them wanted to have seen a helicopter coming from that direction. But no one knows for sure," the waitress remarked.

"There's an experimental station there for genetic experiments and the children are disabled. I know from one of the caregivers, she told me over a glass of apricot liqueur here at the market."

Gertrud had winced at the word *gene experiments* and hoped no one had seen it.

The women in the corner continued to chatter quietly, pretending not to care about the new girl. But Gertrud noticed how the women kept eyeing her out of the corner of their eyes.

"Can I have some tea or coffee?" asked Gertrude as the waitress came to her table. "Whatever you like," replied the waitress shortly. "Then I'll have a coffee!"

Gertrud was given a black broth in a thick earthenware cup, along with some milk in a small jug and beet syrup in a small bowl. She tasted and found that it was only roasted and brewed grain. She poured in some milk and added a spoonful of syrup. Now she could drink the broth.

The policewomen worried her, but also gave her hope. Maybe she wasn't too late. She had to try. Slowly she understood herself as an outcast and clung all the more to her mission in order not to resign.

*I must go on at once*, it flashed through her mind. What were her chances of freeing at least this Nanina, she thought, and had to admit to herself that only a coincidence could help her. Would she

perhaps be able to use her commissariat on the policewomen? Would they allow themselves to be taken by surprise? She had to take her chances.

"I'd like to pay, please!" Gertrud called the waitress over. "That'll be half a silver." Gertrud searched in her pocket for half a silver. She had a few coins ready to go. She found only one whole one and took it out. The waitress looked at her in amazement, "Don't you have anything smaller?" Gertrude shook her head and then quickly added, "That's all I have!" This created even more astonishment in the waitress, who now disappeared to the back of the kitchen area. She heard excited talking. Then she came back, bringing with her a quantity of copper coins, which she counted out to Gertrud.

Gertrude whispered to the waitress who leaned down to her, "Where can I buy a riding horse around here?"

"Out the door and to the left, there's a blacksmith shop, pretty much at the end of the street. They've got horses, too. I wonder if they have any for sale now?" The waitress shrugged.

Gertrud put the coins in, stood up, pulled the cover cloth over her backpack and disappeared outside. She knew she was being watched now and moved away emphatically slowly in the direction indicated by the waitress.

## 15 The treasure cave

In late summer Rona suddenly lost interest in bow making with Nanina. She was now very much together with Emma. Sika was happy about that, now she could play and be together with Nanina much more often. Sika went along with everything Nanina said, she was also immediately ready to continue with bow making instead of Rona. Sika also tried to bring Nanina's hand to her gnome and play with it more and more often now. Nanina, however, had been thinking of Silki a lot lately and had felt little desire to play the old game with Sika. She waited for the Autumn Market and was disappointed in Rona for only wanting to be with Emma now. In the end, she was pleased to see that Sika had remained so affectionate and was becoming even more so.

When Hela thought that after the rain the mushrooms had grown again, Nanina begged to go mushroom picking alone with Sika. Rona had to and wanted to fetch wood with Emma in the forest again and again. Alina just didn't need them in the garden or in the field, so they were allowed to go. Nanina and Sika were given permission to pick mushrooms and blackberry leaves all day.

They both rushed off with two baskets for the mushrooms and a cloth bag for the leaves.

Nanina had a plan, sprung in no small part from Rona's sudden disinterest in her and bow making. When their log cabin was out of sight, she let Sika in on the secret of the book and they both ran. Mushrooms and bramble leaves they saw none. Nanina was pleased that Sika could run as fast as she could. A brown slow worm crawling ahead of them on the path was the only distraction, making them both stop and catch their breath leaning on her stick. To play with it, to direct the little snake in another direction with a stick or to take it in hand, they had no desire to do that today. They ran on.

Nanina found the desolation, the cave and the old cellar, without having to search long first. Together they pulled away the branches that were supposed to keep the animals out before the hole down, then they both climbed down, found the alcove in the wall, but not the book.

Stunned and saddened, Nanina, assisted eagerly by Sika, searched through the piles of rubble in the dim light of the basement.

Old glass bottles, mostly shattered, lay in a pile in one of the corners. They rummaged through the rubble and found a few coils of green copper wire and wires, rusty and sometimes still shiny pieces of sheet metal. Nanina thought that some of it might be sold at the market some day. Such metal wires, she thought she remembered, she had seen there.

Then they began - Nanina out of despair over the loss of the book - to throw old pieces of brick against the wall. Soon they both found fun in it, as the old bricks immediately became a cloud of dust when they thundered against the wall.

Then suddenly a piece of wall fell in and a hidden alcove became visible. Out fell a lot of golden yellow and black shiny round metal discs.

"Hey, what's this," Sika wanted to know. She took the heavy round metal pieces in her hand.

"That's old money, I know from Emma, you can buy a lot of things with it at the market."

Sika beamed, "That's our secret now! Nanina, we won't tell anyone, not even Rona - will we?"

"Yeah, not Rona either" Nanina agreed, she was still mad at Rona for caring less about her. She looked at Sika's beaming face and gave her a long kiss on the mouth. Sika suddenly hugged Nanina tightly and wouldn't let her go until they were both laughing with joy.

*\*Apocrypha 1-15-1*

In the niche in the wall they found some other things, but for which, except for a lens to be used as a burning glass, they did not see in the dim light what they could be used for. They put all the things into one of the baskets and carried it out of the cave into the light. A heavy metal object wrapped in disintegrating scraps of cloth turned out to be a sheath for various knives, a small saw, a file a pair of scissors, and still other things whose uses were unclear to the two. The handle of this universal tool crumbled under their hands.

Nanina had an idea what the round metal hooks could be used for. She brushed them bare on her smock and it snagged. With difficulty she got it out again. "You can fish with them," she explained to

the questioning looking Sika. They saw no use for the tips of the crossbow bolts, which had originally once had very sharp blades. Also, despite the wax protection, the once very sharp blades had corroded in many places over time.

The round coins with portraits of a woman with a crown and a maple leaf shone in the sun. "What's that?" asked Sika in wonder, "A monkey with hair on its neck?" They both had to laugh. "That looks dangerous, like a troll and in the back is an animal that doesn't exist here, kind of like a deer," Nanina pointed. The black coins also showed the portrait of this woman with a crown and some also showed an older woman without a crown and on the other side was always a large maple leaf. Nanina scratched and rubbed at it with sand, and then inspiration came to her. "Those are silver coins! Do you know what you can buy for them in the market? I haven't seen one that big there yet!"

Nanina's face was really red with excitement. "And these, shining as yellow as the sun?" Sika let one of the coins reflect in the sun. "I don't know, but copper isn't it." Then Nanina remembered, and she wondered if it was the metal that was sometimes used for the golden crowns of the fairy queens?

"Sika, do you know what this is? It's elf gold, given to them by the sun when they become queen." Sika looked at the round sun-like discs in awe. "But Nanina, then why is there such a troll on some of them?" "But not on the bright ones, here look." Nanina held the two side by side. The coin with the crown was brighter and more yellow than the one with the troll.

"Elf gold and troll gold, we have elf gold and troll gold," Sika shouted out loud, jumping around in circles and tossing the coins high into the air.

Suddenly, Sika stopped and looked at Nanina worriedly. "But if the gold really belongs to elves and trolls, then they might get mad at us for breaking into their cave and finding the gold." Nanina thought about it, what Sika had said wasn't that completely out of the question. A bit of fear came over them both and they didn't really feel like going back down.

"No elves or trolls live there anymore," Nanina tried to reassure her, "maybe some used to live here. But then they're probably long gone."

"But if any lived here, this must have been their palace." Sika didn't let up.

"And what kind of palace would it have been then, an elven palace or a troll palace? It's just a filthy cave."

"A troll palace of course, they're in caves and underground after all." Sika was quite sure. "And the elven gold has been stolen," Nanina added. She was glad now that they had solved the mystery.

"If this was a troll palace, then there must be more rooms - should we keep looking?" Sika wasn't satisfied yet, she looked questioningly at Nanina who was wrestling with doubts about the elves and trolls. Where did Sika get the courage? Then she suddenly remembered the metallic sound Rona had detected at each end of the passage when Nanina had fallen down and hurt herself. She had heard the sound too, though at the time the wound on her leg had taken up all her senses.

"If you're not afraid, then let's go," Nanina looked at Sika promptly. Sika obviously didn't expect Nanina to respond affirmatively to her question. "Sika, if there really were trolls here, they would have shown themselves by now."

They both descended the hole again and found this strange metallic sounding wall at the end of the passage. They tried to push against it - but in vain. They ran to the other end of the passage and tried there too, but again without success.

"We need a big rock to throw at it." They both climbed out and looked for rocks in the area. They threw several down towards the hole. There was a tremendous thunder when the stones were thrown against the metal door. Success would not come until one of the doors did give way with a loud bang at a bottom corner, springing open a crack. The two were startled and stood rooted to the spot. The dust settled and nothing happened. Then they both plucked up courage and went to examine the gap that had appeared. Where the iron lock of the door must have once been, there was a rusty hole in the aluminum door.

Both of them braced themselves. They could hear stone rubble being pushed aside on the other side. Then there was another crash and the rest of the door fell into the room. The children flinched, not knowing whether to flee or just wait it out. Sika looked questioningly at Nanina, who jerked away

and climbed through the dust cloud into the room over the rubble. It was even darker than in the antechamber.

"We need light!" noted Nanina, turning back, "we need a pine chip." Sika had still remained outside.

"Can't we take the burning glass and start a fire?" suggested Sika. They both climbed back to the surface. They laid stones together to make a small round fireplace. With the burning glass they had found, the stem of which fell off in a moment, they tried to start a fire with dry leaves and thin branches. It succeeded after Nanina had wiped the glass lens with spit and polished it bright on her smock. The sun shone sufficiently long for its purpose, in spite of the fair summer clouds.

In their log cabin they also had such a lens for emergencies. Only there had been problems in winter when Hela accidentally let the fire go out and no candle was burning. To make matters worse, they had to wait three full days for a ray of sunlight. They all remembered those terribly cold days very well.

When the small fire was burning, they searched the surrounding area for resinous wood, but found nothing suitable to serve as a torch.

Then, with a slight startle, Nanina realized that the sun was already leaning towards the tops of the trees. "We have to get home, Sika!" Sika too now looked up at the sky, startled. "We're going back here though, right Nanina?" she made sure. Nanina nodded. They quickly kicked out the fire and gathered everything into a basket, climbing through the hole into the old troll palace and looking for a new hiding place. In one corner they found some loose floor tiles. There they scraped out the earth until their fingernails broke off, and put the found things inside and the floor tiles on top. Then they sprinkled some loose sand on top and kicked it wide. Now no one could recognize the hiding place.

Now they had to hurry, quickly tearing off blackberry leaves and looking for mushrooms on the way home. But the right mushroom sight did not want to appear. In front of the inner eye were still the pictures from the cellar with the lost property.



## 16 Emma's love and escape preparations

This year, summer didn't seem to be coming to an end. No one in the log cabin, including the children, wanted the warm days to end and the rainy days to begin.

Emma and Rona were looking for new areas for wood. They still needed many dry branches for the winter, which they could easily carry away. In the process, they discovered an old trail that was just a game trail, but was still good for their handcart.

They continued to follow it and suddenly it led close to a steeply sloping stone wall. It was a large waterhole they had never seen before. On the steep rock face of the other side they could see that it had once been a granite quarry.

Large old oaks stood at the edge, in between bushes, which only at the last moment allowed to recognize the deep water.

The path led them to a shallow sandy bank. From there, they descended onto a stone slab that sloped gently and slowly into the water.

They left the handcart at the top and walked down the embankment, sliding ever so slightly.

Rona took off her sandals and pulled up her smock. She waded into the water on the slowly sloping stone slab.

"It's deep up ahead here, I can't see the bottom. The water is warm," Rona noted.

Emma held her hand in. It was actually surprisingly warm.

"Can I swim?" asked Rona.

"Yeah, I'll go too."

They both took off their smocks and carefully walked across the stone slab until they were knee-deep in water at the steep drop.

Rona dropped in and swam off, snorting. Emma followed and at first her breath caught in her throat. The water was only warm on the stone slab and on the surface, underneath it was cold, very cold for her sensation.

Emma swam a few laps, which she usually couldn't do so well in her muddy pond. Rona tried to dive and then said that it was incredibly black and cold down below.

Emma soon went out again, dried herself with her smock, and then lay down on the warm flagstones in a suitable flat spot.

After a while, Rona also came out of the water freezing with goose bumps, jumped in once more, swam and tried to dive. Emma watched the elegant movements of Rona in the water. The still delicate muscles of the arms and legs, the full brown hair and the ever questioning wide brown eyes. A mouth with full lips that seemed to invite a kiss.

Shivering a bit and with blue lips, she finally came out, coming before the sun and being surrounded by it and given an aura. Emma had the feeling for a moment that it was the Rona from the dream she had a long time ago.

"Come to me Rona." There was a slight, imperceptible tremor in Emma's voice as she rose to her knees. Emma kissed Rona, who stood in front of her, full of water droplets on her tanned, cool skin. She kissed Rona on the forehead, on the full, soft lips. Her hands clasped her, pulling her cool wet body to hers, warmed by the sun. She let go of Rona a little again and continued kissing her breast. Emma kissed away every drop of water.

"Rona, do you know how perfectly pretty you are?" Emma startled herself at the nonsensical words. She took Rona's smock and dried her back.

The brown, slightly taut skin, Emma hadn't kissed anything like it before. *Why*, she wondered, hadn't *I noticed this beauty before?*

She brushed her hands from her shoulder to her hips and held them tight. She looked into Rona's wide eyes and could only detect curiosity and wonder.

"Rona, you don't know how beautiful you are." Once more she kissed her lips fleetingly, her breast and her taut belly, still taut from the cold water.

Emma felt a comforting shiver run over Rona's stomach.

Her kissing mouth approached the slightly aroused one - Emma couldn't think of any appropriate words - she simply took it into her mouth, playing with it like a French kiss, noticing the rapid increase in size.

A strong excitement flooded Emma's whole body. Her left hand gently slid to the small, still cold bag and enclosed it completely with her warm hand.



Emma knew she was all wet. Rona let it all happen to her and didn't ask why. Then she lay softly on Emma's body, trembling with arousal, her head soft between her tightly stretched breasts.

Emma grabbed her ass and gently pushed into her. Rona's whole body twitched with pleasure and she felt an unprecedented warmth and wetness with her hardness pushing to explode.

Then came the wild relaxation and Rona sank into the deep expanses of an infinite sea. A relaxation of unimagined depth ran through both their bodies.

Emma was happy, she held Rona tightly and never wanted to let her go.

*This is what eternity should be like,* she thought.

So far, though, every eternity had come to an end. For Emma, it was a little stone that was now getting attention in her back.

Gently, she gave Rona another squeeze and then straightened up. Rona looked at her as if entranced. Emma smiled first at Rona and then into the sun.

Rona jumped into the water again, with an almost successful dive of her head and a whoop, swam a few laps and came out dripping. A body at the peak of a first, so never to return beauty. Every one of her young movements exuded harmony and dynamism.

*Are there better times in life?* Emma asked herself and she did not answer this question to her inner self. She was overwhelmed with happiness that she could share in Rona's carefree and tender love.

Emma dried Rona from head to toe with her smock. She did not hold back from desiring the almost still childlike body refreshed by the water again.

Summer passed imperceptibly into autumn, as if it did not want to end and only temporarily bring some refreshment. Only the days became noticeably shorter and the nights cooler. The autumn rains were still a long time coming.

Emma and Rona both lived happily ever after, like a fairy tale written just for the two of them.

Then, in the last week of October, the weather changed within two days. Cold rain set in and meadows and forests dripped with wetness for days.

Rona had let Emma in on the secret of the book and, without telling Nanina, had taken it into the log cabin. There, before sleeping, Emma and Rona took turns reading each chapter on building a hunting bow, making the arrows, and using them properly. There even followed two chapters on hunting and gutting and processing the game they had killed.

Rona had made Emma promise to help her build such a hunting bow. Emma almost couldn't refuse Rona a request.

Emma went to the village center for a week.

Rona got really sad like never before in her life when Emma stayed away for a whole week.

The days there, meant as an exchange of experiences and a rest from the physically and mentally exhausting everyday life in the log cabin, brought Emma back to the cruel reality. Not only did she sorely miss Rona every day, but above all it was the foreseeable end of this cycle in the log cabin that would begin when Rona was picked up.

It was undetermined when the evacuation began, whether at the onset or only at the end of the children's 12th year. Rona turned 13 the next summer.

In her training she had learned that people with such a break were part of the everyday appearance of mankind over a thousand years ago and usually dominated it. The origin lay in the long evolutionary path of the human species from the animal kingdom.

In order to still be more efficient, humans had first begun to gradually eliminate this polarity of male and female in farm animals. Cattle, for example, were now used only in the female variety. Born male specimens were at first immediately processed as calves for meat and sausage, and later they were sorted out even before birth.

In the beginning, individual specimens of the male variety still had to be left alive, as they were needed for the offspring. These were specimens that could not stand each other and fought each other in their animal state. Only the winner could then contribute to reproduction.

With humans, unfortunately, it had been no different. The male version of humans constantly waged wars against each other and permeated human society like a parasitic, parasitic fungus with a web of violence.

If individual specimens were also not so violent, they were often also no longer useful for reproduction. There was a negative correlation between violence and impotence, which was recognized only very late.

The very few specimens that were still allowed after the apocalypse, in order to be able to reactivate the polar gene pool if necessary, were only left in this state until the onset of sexual maturity. The transformation into a neutral specimen took place before the metamorphosis.

They had been shown some specimens before and after metamorphosis in pictures and films during their training. How their girlish or angelic appearance changed to the sight of a beastly hairy, muscle-bound fighting machine. She could recall images of these half-animals going at each other with fists or fighting over a ball in a group egoism. It was called sport in those days, but it was always training for one of the next wars.

All those who had to watch it at the time became very disgusted by it and could then understand why male-dominated people were inexorably driving themselves into the apocalypse.

Emma couldn't allow the thought of Rona becoming such a hairy creep.

In the thousand years that had passed since the apocalypse, humans had only full head of hair. Everything else that could remind of animal sexual maturity was genetically sorted out. Even the breasts remained firm and small until old age.

Emma had also seen pictures that were still from the bi-sexual era. From the dominant version of humans, women were made into wide-hipped birthing machines with breasts like cow udders.

That was unrepeatable past.

Deep inside Emma, something tore. No!, she told herself, Rona is different. Maybe-no, definitely-these males have changed, too, and they're not so animalistic anymore. Inside her grew this strong hope.

When Emma returned to the log cabin, she loved Rona even more dearly. Her feelings were both tender and bitter. She dreamed herself away on an uninhabited little island in the middle of the Atlantic. Just her and Rona, bathing in a turquoise lagoon, shells and sweet fruit, and a time that stood still and saved them both from Rona's terrible metamorphosis.

At other moments, when they were lying together or she was playing with her, another, previously unknown feeling rose up. She didn't know how to describe it. It was an altogether demonic feeling that frightened her. It scared Emma so badly that Rona asked what was wrong with her. Emma felt like she had to devour Rona forever.

"Oh nothing, Rona, I'm just sad that you're going to have to leave me one day."

"No, I'm not leaving you!" Rona turned pale, it hit her like a shock. Suddenly she started to cry and sobbed, "I don't want to leave, I don't want to leave you."

Emma couldn't hold back her tears, she hugged Rona tightly and wouldn't let her go.

Then Rona had caught herself again. "Emma," she said with finality, pausing for a long moment, "we're getting out of here."

Wasn't that what Emma had been thinking? It seemed that way to her now.

"Oh yes, Rona," she sighed, "I'd like to do that too. But how ..."

"We'll take saw, hatchet, a hand grindstone, pots, and take off in the night, and we'll be far away by the time the others wake up." Rona's face had gone all red. Emma kissed her on the hot cheeks.

"It's not easy, but maybe we should do it. And what about Nanina and Sika?" After a pause, she added, "Rona, you have to promise me, though, that you won't say a word to anyone, not even Nanina. Only if no one finds out can it succeed."

"I promise you. We'll get Nanina and Sika later, before they're picked up." Rona said solemnly and continued, "What happens to me when they pick me up?"

Emma took Rona's gnome, whom she would have liked to knit a cap, in her hand. "They'll operate on that one, and your little bag, too," and when she noticed him getting small and soft, she added, "It won't hurt, though."

"I'm leaving first."

"We're leaving, Rona," Emma added.

With ardor Rona was at her bow making for the next while. In their wood supply they found enough dry and tough wood and according to the instructions they drew the rough forms. There was enough for three normal bows, only the fourth, which Sika was to get, had to be worked a little smaller.

The shapes were carved out with a knife and a hand grindstone. This all had to be done secretly, so that no one in the house would know. But it was not long before they had to reveal their woodworking, which did not take place silently, as a Solstice gift. What it would be, they did not reveal. Only in Nanina the initial suspicion became certainty.

Emma tried to build up a small stock of durable food in a hiding place in the house. With the beginning of summer, they had both decided, they would make the escape. Rona would be not quite 12 years old by then.

The winter was long and over her preparation for the escape, Emma somewhat neglected her duties, which Alina and Hela slowly noticed. What also did not escape their attention were the intimate relations between Rona and Emma.

Hela thought it was absurd to bother with a girl who wasn't one yet, and in this case wouldn't become one.

Alina's imagination went on, and when she saw Rona's delicate fingers at dinner, she could well imagine them groping clumsily and unexpectedly inside her.

They both decided not to go into it, it wouldn't last forever and maybe they felt a little sorry for Emma.

Moreover, anything done out of love and not accompanied by violence of any kind was not only permitted but expressly desired, even if it was unusual.

On the winter solstice, Rona, Nanina and Sika got their bows. Emma had even made a forearm guard of thick cloth with wooden ribs and a finger leather for each. For herself, she also had such equipment in hiding.

After the gift-giving in the evening, the children scrambled out very early the following morning for archery. However, the one arrow that everyone had received was soon lost in the high snow, never to be seen again. Thereupon a wild arrow carving began.

When spring finally came, Emma and Rona made the cellar in the deserted house their hideout. When it came to fetching wood, their path always led them to the hiding place.

There they practiced making fire with a burning glass and collected very dry fuel that burned like tinder. They learned how to cook leafy vegetables from wild plants, how to prepare insects, ant eggs, worms and larvae of the forest. They practiced archery and improved their arrows. It was still a great effort to make arrowheads, as they were needed for hunting. For this they needed metal plates, which they had to grind and attach to the tip of the arrow. In the junk of the hiding place they found usable old metal sheets, which were made of stainless steel.

Emma discovered a whole new side to herself that she hadn't noticed before, she felt an air of freedom when she focused on a target with her bow and arrow.

Then it was time, Emma had shot a hare. Together they pulled the fur over its ears, gutted it, roasted the meat over the fire and enjoyed it.

Rona was happy and for her it was certain that she would kill the next animal.

When they came home that day with only a little wood, but very satisfied, they did not rush with ravenous hunger, as usual, to the supper prepared by Hela.

The first big spring market approached and it was Emma who prevailed that she moved there with Nanina. Rona was sad and somewhat displeased she expressed her disappointment. But Emma consoled her with the fact that she had promised Nanina and that Rona still had to make very important preparations.

After this market, they had both decided, they would leave for their journey.

The night before Emma and Nanina's visit to the market, Rona ran to their hiding place in the basement of the desolation and picked up some of the junk they had found there. Rona had noticed during her visit to the market that similar stuff was also offered at the market, obviously coming from the new settlements in the north.

Emma had thought of that, because they might also need extra money for their escape, and it would also take them north a bit first, then turn east, further into unpopulated territory.

Rona brought green-flecked coils and wires, but they shone red-gold like the copper coins for trade when you brushed them with sand.

But the real reason Emma took Nanina, and not Rona, was because of the girls of the same age in the market town. She would not give Rona away, no one in the world.

And there was something else that worried Emma a lot, something she knew from earlier, from her biology classes. Her monthly bleeding had stopped and she knew what that could mean. They would be starting a new life as a threesome for the foreseeable future. She would have to seek out the familiar trader because of this, maybe she could help her in the beginning. She didn't know, but she would have to try. In her daydreams she already saw the little baby.

Nanina again attracted attention selling and trading at her stall and helped vigorously to increase sales. Emma was able to keep a few copper coins and a silver piece for herself, for her upcoming journey.

Nanina came sadly to the hostel in the evening; she had not found her friend. Perhaps she had moved away or had been at school all day. Only smaller girls who did not yet go to school had she met. Emma had not seen her acquaintances at the market either.

When they reached their log cabin the next evening, it was strangely quiet. No one noticed them as their handcart stopped just outside the door.

A terrible foreboding rose up in Emma. She hurried into the house. Hela and Alina were sitting at the kitchen table with tears in their eyes.

"What happened, where is Rona, where is Sika?" she cried in a loud voice.

"The village is disbanded, the first thing they did was pick up the children," Alina said quietly, blowing her nose into a handkerchief.

"Dissolved," Emma moaned, feeling a stone form in her stomach and her legs begin to tremble. Then, instantly, a boundless rage rose up inside her.

"They'll get Nanina too, they'll be back again," Hela added, "they hadn't counted on a kid being in the market."

It only took Emma a brief moment to think, then she asked, "Where did they take the children?"

"To the center," Hela replied.

Nanina stood transfixed in the doorway, she had overheard everything and now saw Emma hurriedly running up the stairs and coming back with her bow and arrows.

"Nanina, come with me, quickly!"

## 17 A deserted area



*What a remote area, thought Gertrud, in order not to miss the way here, one needs magical abilities or the help of elemental spirits.*

A smile stretched across her face despite the hardships so far. She had no confidence in her magical abilities and no experience with elemental spirits, that was something for the natives. She had a compass, a map, and the location of the village in her head. That would have to do. The sandy path, or rather trail, obstructed by occasional stones the size of fists to skulls scattered about, led her on her brown mare through sparse pine and deciduous forests, interrupted now and then by small groups of spruce trees.

In the market town, she had inquired of one of the two horsewomen about the fastest horse. A soot-smearred face had appraised her. In the back of the house, which consisted of only one room, a fire smoldered, perhaps a slow-burning blacksmith's fire. On one wall hung a pair of old horseshoes on a wooden spike. Around the anvil lay a variety of tongs. *Surely one could forge long knives with these,* Gertrud thought.

"What have you got for it?" Gertrude thought it would cost at least a gold piece. From an inside pocket of her long, gray hooded cloak, she retrieved a well-worn gold coin and tossed it to the horse woman, who caught it out of the air with one hand. Incredulous, she looked at the coin and spun it back and forth.

*You big mother!* Gertrud thought, *do they even know gold here?*

"Where did you come from, and what do you want here-you are not from here!" The eyes between the smudges of soot on her face had now narrowed to slits; they looked first at Gertrude and then at the coin, and seemed to remember convulsively when they had seen such a treasure before.

"I still need provisions for five days." Gertrud compensated for her uncertainty. No one here could guess what she was up to. She wasn't in the mood for gossip, and the horse woman was surely just out for business.

"For Lilo I have something - oats - not for you." The horse woman put the coin into her worn leather apron.

"Where are you going?"

What was she to answer without stirring up further suspicion that was surely already burning with a bright flame.

What did the horse woman think of her? Had she ever seen anyone like me before, a woman who had spent half her life in dust-free laboratories and was taller and slimmer than the women around here? She had to think of something now, the policewomen weren't far away and could surely be notified immediately. If they weren't already. From what she could remember of the map, it was probably a day's journey to the village centre.

"None of my business," the horse woman relieved her. Apparently she had gotten out of the habit of having her curiosity satisfied as well.

"What a deserted place!" said Gertrude audibly to herself now, but her horse did not even wiggle his ears.

The sun had been down for at least an hour. It wouldn't get that far today. There was a crackling in the distance and sometimes close by. She wasn't afraid. Wolves were peaceful this time of year now, and she was unaware of any bears. Hanging from her cowl was the forearm-length knife she had received as change from the horse woman. However, it was only after Gertrud had asked her directly.

Obviously the gold coin here was worth more than she had thought, because she didn't need a second one. With a small silver coin, she had exchanged a bountiful supply of dried bread, some dried fruit, and a narrow clay jug of sunflower oil at a bakery in this market town. That would have to do; she didn't want to attract the attention of any more women.

Already after the first meal, however, a steadily growing appetite for cheese or jerky set in. From her original equipment, she had only taken well-packed chocolate. Water was not an issue in these parts. There were enough small rivulets where she could fill her water bottle.

Paths rarely branched off and it wasn't always easy to keep an eye on the main trail. Somehow she couldn't help feeling that she was on a journey that led straight to nowhere - a journey of no return. She was growing impatient with herself, and with the fact that her thoughts were already beginning to spill out again about the futility of this mission.

Whoever had planned this seclusion for the village so long ago knew what he was doing and must have possessed a very good imagination.

The closer she got to her goal, the more her brain began to work. She had never seen such a settlement in reality, and the plans she knew were only general concepts, thought up at her desk. But the concept was working, had been for many, many years.

When it became too dark and she had to fear that she could lose the way, she got off the horse. After she thought, despite the darkness, to have found a reasonably level and soft forest floor a little off the path, she tied the feed bag with some oats around Lilo. She spread out a blanket, put on the warm anorak and put the ankle cuffs on her mare, then she tried to fall asleep. The thoughts circled and she had to fear not to find any sleep. Compulsively she tried to think of something nice in life. Lisa and the islands came to mind, and that was enough to block out the reality of this wasteland. The efforts of the last hours turned into total exhaustion and let her slip into unconsciousness.

She began the first morning of her walk through the forest shivering slightly with a quick breakfast of bread, dried plums, and water. The night had been relatively quiet, if not very comfortable. After giving her mare oats and removing her shackles, she climbed into the saddle, still somewhat stiff. She had feared the worst and was pleasantly surprised that the riding went so well.

How long had it been since she had ridden? It must have been at least ten years ago? While she was still thinking about it like that, she saw a mushroom standing not far from the side of the trail. Brown hat and relatively large. She was almost past it when her meager provisions popped into her

brain. She dismounted and was pleased to find that it was a porcini mushroom, and she was even more euphoric by the smell and the fact that it was without those hated wormholes. She found more mushrooms of this type and perfection that she began to look forward to lunch.

After she had finished her mushroom collection, she urged Lilo to hurry. The mare galloped along the path and Gertrud had to duck low to the horse's neck. A pleasant horse scent tried to bring back memories of her childhood. It went straight on for longer and the path was clearly visible. Then came a bend and two paths diverged. She got out the compass and decided on the left of the two. That one matched her direction best. The right one had to lead to the center of the village, but she didn't want to go there for now; she needed to get to the children's log cabins. The path became sandier and much more overgrown now, leading between rolling hills, but sometimes right over one of those little wooded humps.

Around noon, after a glance at the compass, she had to realize that the path had turned quite a bit from the compass direction, unnoticed by her. It also seemed to have somehow come to an end. The path was lost between the trees and small, quite regular hills.

*This is probably an ancient desert, thought Gertrud, of which there are certainly still many here.* But very few of them were still recognizable as such at first glance. Among the pines, there were also plenty of birch trees on the flat, small, sandy hills.

*Shit, thought Gertrud, this had to happen. This will cost me at least half a day's time.*

Hunger and the prospect of porcini mushrooms fried in oil made her stop when she noticed something like a fireplace. Indeed, here someone had made a somewhat bumbling attempt to keep fires going. Cautiously, she looked around from her horse before dismounting. Elongated red stones, obviously badly weathered bricks, had been laid together to form a square. Inside were ashes, cold but not yet caked together by any rain, but quite loose.

I can test the equipment there, Gertrud thought, and a sarcastic, mocking smile played around her mouth. She still felt rather haphazard about what she was going to do. She only suspected one thing, she probably wouldn't have much time left.

Dry branches were already lying on a small pile, she fetched some more stones and improved the fireplace, then she lit a fire with the matches and placed the pot of light metal over the flames. Soon the mushrooms were stewing in the oil and spreading a very pleasant fragrance. Together with the flatbread, this meal seemed like a delicacy to her.

The pleasure didn't last long, because soon after eating she was chewing on her index finger. She had to play out variations if she found a log cabin or the village center. Should she play the stranger?

*None of the cops would believe me. What if they've got an APB out on me? They can't send pictures, can they?* Gertrud was getting more and more nervous, she had to make a decision.

Then she decided to become a commissar. She took off her robe. *Is there any water around here?* She asked herself and had to laugh silently, I have to freshen up a bit when I meet them. She decided to wear the sporty clothes of an anorak and trousers and hung Anna's piece of jewellery around her again, from which the map of the commissioner's office dangled.

*I needed another mirror, she thought, my hair is going to look terrible.*

She packed everything up, extinguished the fire with sand and fastened the luggage behind the horse's riding seat. Then she climbed into the saddle and straightened up. She would deliver the new instructions to the policewomen as commissary and take command of the removal. Then she had only to wait for a favourable opportunity. And then ... But she had no time to think about that then. She had to ride off.

For a moment she wondered if she could dare to ride across the forest. Following an intuition, she decided to ride back the way she had come to the fork. She had no confidence that she could get through the undergrowth.

Gertrud didn't know at that moment that she had been watched for a while.

## 18 Emma's death

Emma struck out in the direction of the village center. When they were out of sight of the blockhouse, she ordered Nanina, "Run, hide in your basement until I come back for you!"

Nanina ran off, she knew the direction for sure and would find it even in the dark.

Emma walked quickly towards the village center. After midnight, she arrived. She felt her heart whip the blood through her veins, trying to burst them.

Cautiously, she approached the communal house where her trainings and recreations had taken place. Lights still burned in all the rooms in the basement. She slipped under a window. Soft crying of a child she could hear from the upper floor. *Was that Rona?* She asked herself for a moment. She had to have strong nerves now. Emma crept around the house to the front door.

A dog barked. At its bark, the front door opened. Quickly she placed the bow and quiver of arrows around the corner of the house and stepped to the front door.

"What's going on, who's there?" a tired policewoman asked, her uniform jacket unbuttoned and her half-length black hair tied back in a ponytail with a ribbon.

"I'm Emma, and I want to know why you took the children away." She was red with anger in the face and could only force herself to be calm.

"What house are you from?" The policewoman buttoned her jacket and looked at Emma in surprise.

"From house two." Emma immediately got even more annoyed for answering just like that. She couldn't let herself get wrapped up.

"Out of two? There's one kid missing, did you bring him?"

Emma felt her muscles, trained from forest work, grow hard. "I want to know why you picked up the children."

The policewoman buttoned a few more buttons and replied gruffly, "The village is disbanded effective immediately and the children will be evacuated first and immediately."

"Evacuated? What for? What is this!", Emma was stunned, "I want an explanation."

"An explanation? This is none of your business, go home!" The policewoman slammed the front door. Movement arose inside. Emma grabbed her bow and arrows and hid behind a bush not far from the house. She had to think about what was outrageous to her first.

Shortly afterwards, two armed policewomen left the house and went to the stables. There were several horses tied up outside. They saddled two horses, took an electric lamp and rode in the direction of their blockhouse. They were evidently going to fetch Nanina.

Emma gathered all her courage and knocked on the door. The policewoman from earlier opened again. With her bow cocked and a sharp, deadly arrow cocked, Emma stood before her.

Loud and clear, in a commanding voice, she commanded the startled policewoman, "Go ahead and take me to the children!"

Emma didn't know where she suddenly got this strength and deathly courage from, but at that moment she was ready for anything.

They climbed a flight of stairs. In the first room there were seven children of different ages, Sika was also there. They slept on mats on the floor.

"Where's Rona?" The policewoman looked at her unintelligently, then realized after a moment. She went to a smaller, locked room. On a cot lay Rona. Her feet and hands were bound to the bed. In the background she could see stars through the window.

"You release her now or I'll shoot!" commanded Emma in a harsh voice.

Rona woke up and squinted into the lamp. "Emma," she brought out anxiously inquiringly, and then she cried, "Emma, behind you!"

She turned around in a flash. A shot fell, striking Emma in the left breast. She staggered for a moment, then released the arrow, which now, driven by the string, sped across the short distance and

severed the jugular and throat of the policewoman, who had come through the door with a pistol at the ready.

Emma sank to the floor and it went black before her eyes.



## 19 Nanina trapped

Nanina ran until her sides stung. Branches whipped her in the face. She struggled to stay on track and sometimes she thought she was running the wrong way. She caught her breath and tried to remember the last hour. What had happened? Rona and Sika had been picked up, Hela and Alina were sitting at the kitchen table crying, Emma was running to the village center, and Nanina was told to hide.

Something terrible must have happened. There had always been situations in which one of the women or a child cried. Usually one knew then also soon why. But why had Sika and Rona been taken away? Nanina didn't understand anything. They wanted to pick her up too and she was supposed to hide, on Emma's orders.

Nanina couldn't find her hiding place right away. It was dark in the forest, the moon was not shining and black clouds kept passing by in the sky. Only rarely were a few stars to be seen.

When she finally found the entrance, she got scared and stayed sitting in front of it, not daring to enter the absolute darkness. Leaning back against a mossy tree stump, she looked up at the sky for the stars that appeared from time to time. With her arms, she drew her legs up and rested her head on her knees. Then tears ran down her face and formed a wet stain on her knees. She guessed that she would not see Sika and Rona again, but also Hela and Alina. The exciting pictures of the last hours passed her inner eye again and again.

When would Emma come? Nanina waited and listened every time a crackling sound came to her from somewhere in the forest. Then horrible images of wild pigs and other monsters mingled and she finally fell asleep, exhausted.

She woke up after midnight. It had begun to rain and she was very cold. She crawled to the entrance of the cave into the dry and sat there for a while, listening out into the night. Shivering with cold, she waited for Emma.

Then Nanina got up and tried to move around to get warm. At last it began to dawn on the eastern horizon. The rain had stopped. Nanina was getting hungry and thirsty. Why had Emma still not come? How much longer did she have to wait?

Nanina wondered if she could walk to a watering hole to drink. It would take her at least half an hour there and back, even if she ran for stretches. And if Emma came in that time and she wasn't there.

Nanina picked a few wet birch and blackberry leaves, the few would have to do for now. Eating more of this stuff, she knew, wouldn't do her any good.

It was getting lighter. Nanina pulled away the branches lying in front of the entrance for camouflage and protection from animals and crawled into the cave. She was amazed when she noticed something like a ladder leading down. Two slender parallel tree trunks and rungs between them, tied tightly with rope, led down easily and comfortably. She was even more amazed when she found jerky and earthenware jars of oil and flour in the one room. There was also a longbow in one corner with a quiver full of arrows. A rabbit skin hung over a stick leaning at an angle against the wall. She found another knife and a ceramic bowl. In an alcove lay other odds and ends for fishing and mending clothes. The book on hunting with bow and crossbow was there.

Now Nanina was suddenly frightened. Did someone unknown live here without Rona or Emma knowing about it? She wanted to go out again, but then curiosity won out and she examined the things more thoroughly.

Then the suspicion came to her, and it was confirmed more and more as she examined the things more closely, that Rona and Emma might have made this camp. But why? She could find no answer.

She went back out into the anteroom and picked up an empty jar. She looked at the stone slabs where her and Sika's treasure lay. They did not appear to have been broken open. In front of the cave Nanina made a patch of sand level and wrote with a small stick, "Am fetching water - Nanina." Then she put another stick in each corner. Now Emma would know that she would soon be back.

As she walked to the watering hole, she pondered and tried to calculate how long it might have taken Emma to get to the village center and how long it might take her to get here. That reassured her. Emma couldn't be there yet, after all, if she was still asleep somewhere.

The water hole was deeper and still extended by a drain, so that there was always relatively fresh water in the hole. Nanina got down on her knees and bent over the hole and drank a lot. She had only just noticed how parched her body was. Then she filled the pitcher and started back. She strongly hoped to meet Emma there, already waiting for her. She was all the more disappointed when everything was still as she had left it. In the sand were still the words she had written.

Nanina hoped that Emma would come about noon. She descended into the hiding-place and fetched up some food. She found dry rusks and cheese soaked in oil. On the other side of the hill she noticed a fireplace. Who had built a fire here? Emma and Rona? Again Nanina wondered, and again she began to doubt that it had been them. Why should they have made a fire here, too.

The day was windy and only now and then did the sun make an appearance. Nanina continued to examine the hiding place and noticed that one door was not yet open, which sounded metallic hollow when stones were thrown against it. For a while, she tried throwing rocks at the door. It was brighter down here now around noon and she could see better.

And what if someone else was supposed to live here after all and was just not there now? The thought drove Nanina up to the surface and she hid for the time being. Maybe the person would come back around noon. No one came. Nanina flipped through and read the book about the hunt. It became afternoon and then, as evening approached, Nanina grew restless again. Emma couldn't stay away that long. Should she perhaps go out to meet her? Nanina had discovered matches and was building a small fire. She looked for plenty of dry wood. That night she was going to wait by the fire for Emma. If it took that long, she would surely bring Rona and Sika with her. Nanina began to look forward.

Towards evening, the wind died down and the cloud cover opened up. In the west the narrow crescent moon disappeared behind the tops of the trees. Nanina sat by the fire and poked at the embers with a stick, slowly putting on new branches, and when the dry ones ran out, she searched in the dark for others and found a few, but at first they gave off a lot of smoke.

She had brought herself a blanket from downstairs and was sitting in front of the fire. Nanina was afraid, every sound seemed threatening to her now, and yet she still tried to listen for footsteps that might suggest the arrival of Emma. About midnight she fell asleep, with restless and frightening dreams, curled up in the blanket, beside the fire.

Early in the morning she woke up shivering with cold. The fire had gone out. There was little water left in the jug. She took out some dried apple slices and a piece of jerky from the hiding place and ate. Suddenly she began to sob again. What had happened to the others and why didn't Emma come? Then she went to fetch water. No one had been there in the meantime, no one had written another, new message in the sand.

Nanina spent the morning trying to find dry wood in the area. She untied her belt and looked for dry branches to tie into a bundle and carry to her fireplace. She wanted to have more wood ready for the night this time. Everything had already been gathered in the surrounding area, Nanina had to get further and further away into the forest. And then suddenly she heard a sound from the direction of the hiding place. But it was a different sound than the one she was eagerly awaiting. It sounded like a horse.

Nanina left the wood and tied her belt back on. Was she wanted here? Was it Emma with a horse? She stood there indecisively, but would have liked to run off at once.

*No, it couldn't be*, she reasoned. Cautiously, Nanina crept in the direction of her hiding place. She could see a strange woman carrying stones to the fireplace. Right next to her was a horse with baggage. It was a tall slender woman in a grey hooded robe. She placed a shiny metal pot on the fire pit and cut something into the pot.

Nanina held her breath and crept silently closer, then stopped under a shrub. Would the stranger discover her cave? Who was she and what did she want here?

She ate stewed mushrooms from the pot, porcini mushrooms. Nanina could even smell it at her distance. She broke some flatbread to go with it.

Ants tried to crawl into her gown. Nanina held still and watched as the woman now changed her clothes and exchanged the smock for other unusual garments. Now she packed the pot in her pack, put out the fire, and sat up. She rode back down the trail to the fork in the road. Evidently she was in a hurry. Nanina ran to the fireplace. From the hoofprints in the soft ground, she could see that the stranger was riding back the same way she had come.

Suddenly Nanina realized that maybe she was headed to her log cabin and had just gotten lost here. Without much thought, Nanina ran off to her house. She had to warn Emma if she was there, whoever this woman was. There was something eerily strange about her and it had to be related to recent bad events. She didn't know where it came from but she sensed something and had the impression that this strange woman might have something to do with her. Was she wanted by her? In any case, she couldn't see any intentions that were threatening to her.

Nanina knew the shortcut. The path across the fork was more than three times as long. Branches whipped in her face again as she ran through the undergrowth.

Then she had made it. In front of her was her home. She looked around for anything unusual, circled the house and couldn't spot anything. There were the posts with the line for the laundry, the wooden bench on the south side with the rough wooden table in front of it. There were still bundles of herbs hanging to dry under the overhanging roof.

What she didn't see were two horses tethered in the woods further toward the center of the village.

Nanina called out "Emma" and opened the door and ran into the middle of the kitchen.



"You're safe Nanina, we've been waiting for you," said the friendly sounding voice of a policewoman from the background. Nanina stood frozen. Behind her the door closed.

## 20 Liberation and escape

Gertrud hurried. She had great difficulty not to lose the path back. Then she was back at the fork in the road and wondered why she hadn't taken this obviously frequently used path the first time. She blamed it on her maps, which were simply too inaccurate here. She could clearly make out wagon tracks as it went through a small damp hollow.

Diagonally behind her, she suddenly heard the sound of a helicopter. She stopped and tried to determine the direction. Then every now and then she could see it between the trees. It was one of the larger ones used only by the central police squadrons. It could be used to get several policewomen to their location very quickly, though that was very rare now. Gertrud knew that this had to be a high priority operation.

She was now making faster progress on this path than she thought. A larger clearing lay ahead of her, she galloped briskly across it and was now in a thinner forest with many pines, then came another hollow with denser spruce stands.

She had almost left him when, further into the forest, she could make out two horses against a bright background for a brief moment. Instantly she stopped, looked around for a moment, and then rode up to the horses. There was no one with them.

Why were they standing here alone in the forest? The horses belonged to policewomen, as she could easily see. Probably the blockhouse was not far and she was already expected.

*Bad cover*, she thought. Holsters for weapons she could spot on every horse. They had to have light machine guns on them. She would decide operationally what to say and do.

Gertrud untied the horses. They followed her willingly through the dense undergrowth. After half an hour they reached a stream. Gertrud took the path up the stream and then left it when she could see a pond further ahead. Gertrud could remember that there was a small body of water marked at the log cabin. She tied all three horses in the woods not far from the creek and hung a sack on each with some oats in it, then went back to the creek and tried to get to the pond as quietly as possible. From there she crept, constantly seeking cover, to the log house. She approached from behind and crouched under a window.

In front of her now the door opened. She heard a voice call out, "Hurry up, we're late." Gertrud peered cautiously around the corner of the house and could see one of the policewomen walking hurriedly toward the horses that had been left behind. She didn't have her gun with her; the horses weren't that far, after all.

*You shouldn't do that*, Gertrud thought. Did she perhaps still have a pistol? How could Gertrud find out now? She was close to sneaking after the policewoman and making her fight. But then she decided otherwise. She had to know what was going on inside.

Carefully she searched for a stone and then threw it to the other side of the house. Inside, something moved as the stone came down in front of the house and made a noise. The door opened in front. With her submachine gun ready to fire, the policewoman who had stayed behind cautiously opened the door.

Gertrud looked through the window and could see a girl sitting in it, hands and feet lightly bound with her back to her, in a chair.

Incredulous, the policewoman looked around from the door, but could not see anything. But she did not dare to go further out.

*Coward*, Gertrud thought, and a satisfied smile played around her mouth. She crept forward to the door, put her long knife at the ready, and threw another stone, but this time from the front across the roof to the back. She could hear a chair being moved and the policewoman standing up. Where would she go? Would she go to the back window or come back to the door with her gun at the ready? Anxious moments arose for Gertrude. Now she had to dare. The door had not yet opened. With a jerk she pulled the door open, and with a yell and holding the long knife before her, she rushed into the room.

The policewoman was actually standing at the window, her submachine gun dangling over her shoulder. Gertrud knew that she could be very fast, she had been able to experience that in her training camps over and over again.

Before the policewoman had recovered from her shock and subsequent freeze and could reach for her weapon, she already had the knife on her chest.



Gertrud didn't know herself again as she ordered, "No resistance or you're dead. She had pressed the knife a little deeper to feel if there was any protection under the uniform. She noted perfectly normal uniform clothing. Still scared out of her wits, the policewoman let the submachine gun slide off her shoulder at Gertrud's command. As a precaution, Gertrud looked for another pistol, but found none. The second gun lay on the table. With her left hand Gertrud put the submachine gun on her shoulder, took the safety off and kept it in the holster as she also put the other one on her shoulder. Then she ordered the policewoman to sit down on a chair at the table. Now she tried to cut the girl's handcuffs with the knife.

"Who are you?"

"Nanina," rang out in a trembling voice. Gertrud's heart beat faster; she was almost ready to believe in miracles now. After Nanina had freed her hands again, Gertrud gave her the knife.

"Cut your legs free!" Nanina stood up and looked at Gertrude with fear and wonder. This was the strange tall woman she had seen earlier today. At her command she now had to tie the policewoman to the chair with her and empty all her pockets. She still found ammunition and a small radio.

*Elite and so scared*, she thought and almost had to laugh, then she helped tie them up and tightened the ropes.

"Come on, we don't have time." Gertrud pushed Nanina out the door.

Nanina ran along, not wondering if it was a good thing. The policewomen had told her that, after all, she was only being tied up for her own safety. From this woman she perceived something that aroused more confidence in her.

Gertrud knew that no one could see her now. She took the direct path to the horses.

"Do you know where we can get here if we keep riding up the creek?" Nanina had to think at first, so much was she still shocked. Then she answered, "There's a little waterfall further up, and that's as far as I've been."

They reached the horses and Gertrud asked, "Can you ride?" Nanina shook her head. Gertrud helped Nanina onto the horse and tied the other two together, not wanting to leave anything behind. The creek was thankfully a small distance reasonably walkable, even for the horses. They didn't have much time, the area would be searched soon, Gertrud guessed.

"What about Emma and with Rona and Sika, where are they?"

"Oh, yes, you don't know who I am," Gertrud led the first horse by the reins, "I am here to save you, you are to be liquidated." Did this girl even know what liquidate meant, Gertrud wondered, continuing, "I come from where you ..." *Oh great mother*, she thought, *how can I explain this to her*. "... Where you children came into being and you are special, you must not ... be turned back - Nanina, don't ask so much now, I must concentrate. Tell me what you know about where the other children are and I'll try to save them too."

"They've taken her to the village center and Emma is also ..."

"Who's Emma?"

"Emma's my mom, she's there too."

"Alright Nanina, first I need to get you to safety and then I'll take care of the others. - How well do you know this area? And why are you still here anyway?"

Nanina told Gertrud the last few days and how she had waited in vain for Emma until she saw Gertrud and ran to her log cabin.

"Who knows your hiding place?"

"Just Emma, Rona and Sika."

"Good, then I'll take you back there now and I'll go to the village center." Gertrud had to take this opportunity too, she owed it to Anna. She felt for a moment like the heroine in a fairy tale.

*I'm just not in a fairy tale, I'm in a nasty reality*, she finally thought, and it sobered her. Gertrud had to be careful.

Nanina sat bent over on Lilo, avoiding the branches. She knew this forest and gave directions. Gertrud urged the horses to hurry.

It was already dark when they reached the hiding place. Emma wasn't there, Nanina immediately realized with disappointment.

Gertrud was in doubt. Should she try riding to the village center in the night? Would she be able to find the way?

"Nanina, you stay here, I'll try to get to the village center. You must tell me again exactly the way." Gertrud looked into infinitely dark and sad eyes, in which tears were swimming.

*What am I going to do?* Gertrud agonized. Was there any point at all in attempting to enter the village centre with two submachine guns and 5 spare magazines against a superior number of policewomen who were just waiting for her?

*No*, she told herself, *but I need to know what's going on*.

"Nanina, is there a watering hole around here somewhere? We need to take care of the horses."

"There's one not far from here in a swamp."

"Good, come on, let's get the horses over there, I'm sure they need something to eat too."

Gertrud tied Lilo down and they took the other two to the swamp with some of the luggage. There they filled the containers they had brought with them, Nanina's jug, the aluminium pot and Gertrud's canteen, gave the horses a small ration of oats and ran back again.

Gertrud searched in the remaining luggage for a lamp. She knew there had to be an oil lamp. Then they destroyed the fireplace and tried to cover all traces as best they could and then climbed down into the hiding place. Gertrude was pleasantly surprised to find some supplies here. She retrieved another blanket and a cloth bag from her pack.

"Nanina, pack up everything we can take with us, including the bow and arrows! As soon as I get back, we have to go. And please don't make a fire! If I don't come back ..." Gertrud faltered, she looked into Nanina's eyes again and simply took her in her arms, "then you must go alone, you take the

horses and the baggage and go north as fast as you can. And don't tell or show anyone, you hear, anyone about your, you know, between the legs." Nanina just howled out loud. "Try to find a settlement to take you in over the winter. And another thing, bend a twig now and then and hang it over a bigger branch. Like this!" She snapped a twig in half and hung it over the nearest drooping branch of a tree.

Gertrude looked at Nanina a little sadly.

"That way, if I'm running late, I can come behind. And maybe some other kids will come along." At that she had to smile at Nanina again.

For herself, Gertrud thought hard about how it should continue, she had no plan yet. But suddenly she had an idea. She fetched one of her maps and showed Nanina the strange cross in the corner by the dim light of the oil-spark. "Try to find this sign. That must be your goal, you hear! Don't give up before then."

What should she take with her on her nightly ride to the village center? They ate some more of the supplies and drank water with it. Then Gertrud hugged Nanina and said, "If I'm not back by sunrise tomorrow, you take the luggage to the two horses and load them. Then you go off. And don't wait for me. Before you do, give the horses some of the oats in a sack that you'll put on them. When you stop for a rest, tie these shackles on the horses here - see, like this - you can do that at night, too, and they won't run away."

Gertrud took one of the submachine guns, stowed all the magazines in her anorak and trousers, pocketed the knife as well, and went to Lilo. Nanina had tried to describe the way to her.

Gertrud was lucky, the moon was in the first quarter and occasionally came through between the gaps in the clouds, she could find her way.

Nanina began to put all the supplies on a blanket. How was she going to pack it all? Then she lifted the stone slab from Sikas and her treasure, dug everything out and put it in an extra cloth bag. She also took the bow and quiver of arrows, then climbed up and looked for rope in the luggage Gertrude had left behind, but only found some twine made of almost transparent material. It seemed to be very strong.

She had to descend several times until she had everything on the surface and could begin packing. It was the middle of the night when, despite the darkness, she thought she had everything stowed away. She lay down among the bundles of luggage and covered herself with Gertrude's gray smock. She did not want to go back down to her hiding place; she was afraid of sleeping through the sunrise. *What had happened to Emma*, Nanina wondered, but received only an inner emptiness for an answer, then she fell into a death-like sleep. The cold of the night and the unevenness of the forest floor caused her to awaken again in the early dawn.

Should she get the horses? And what and how much do they have to eat? Nanina had some idea of what her two goats and the sheep ate all day, but horses?

Well before sunrise Nanina set out and with much difficulty got the horses out of the swamp. She hung the sack with some oats around them. After she had drunk and eaten something herself, she poured the rest of the water into the pot and let the horses drink from it.

Then she led the animals around some more to eat and began loading. When she had finished, she waited and noticed, becoming more and more nervous, that the eastern horizon was already beginning to glow in various shades of green, blue and red. And then the first still faint rays of sunlight flashed between the trees.

Nanina climbed a nearby tree and tried to look further in the direction from which she expected Gertrud. She could not notice anything. She was startled to see that the sun was already further above the horizon, something she hadn't noticed from below. She looked towards the centre of the village one last time. Tears came to her eyes as she climbed down from the tree.

Gertrud had still shown her the tree that was to be her line of march. She set herself in motion. The horses followed her willingly after initial difficulties.

Nanina didn't know where she was going, she didn't have time to think about it either, the horses and the dense undergrowth demanded all her strength. Over the forest, deep and grey clouds were now moving from west to east. The sun was hiding more and more and the rain would start soon.

*Are those the cold autumn rains already?"* wondered Nanina.

On a small hill she took a rest. After a short rest, she climbed a tree and looked back. Almost on the horizon, she saw smoke rising from a large fire. Nanina suspected, without being able to make it conscious, that her house, her home, was burning there.

## 21 Gertrud's struggle for a different future

From a distance, Gertrud saw light through the trees and knew that must be where the village center was. She tied her horse to a tree and memorized the place well, then crept towards the lights.

It had to be past midnight already and yet there was some movement ahead of her. Horses were saddled and some policewomen rode off in different directions.

At the edge of the large clearing she found a suitable tree to climb to observe the surroundings. The spruce was so dense that she thought she had a good chance of not being discovered. However, the branches were so close around the trunk that she could not climb three meters up the tree without scratching her hands and face.

With her binoculars she saw very well the hustle and bustle in front of the individual buildings of the village center. There were many armed policewomen to be seen. There seemed to be a nervous atmosphere. Loud words echoed up to her. Further back, she could spot a transport helicopter.

Quickly Gertrud realized that she was completely without chances. She would have to overcome too many, better trained fighters. Her training and combat experience amounted to only two times six weeks during her specialized studies on the continent. And that had only been very superficial.

One house was particularly heavily guarded, that's where the children had to be. Why hadn't they been taken away? Were they still waiting for Nanina? If Nanina wasn't there, there must be 8 children still waiting to be taken away.

A sudden fright ran through her entire body: would she have to shoot and kill? Did she have too much of that testosterone still in her body? Was there such a thing as pure lust for hunting, no matter what it was, animals or people? She knew it from distant history that all those testosterone carriers had murdered for religious and other ideals, but even in front of women and children the bloodlust had found no end.

She realized now that she was in a most improper place. If she was going to make any difference at all, the only way to do it was to infiltrate the children's home unnoticed. With luck, she might be able to save a few if she could escape with them unseen. Gertrud had to admit to herself that the odds of that might only be one in a thousand.

She climbed down from the tree and tried to sneak closer to the guarded house. Her blue hood pulled more tightly over her face, almost blending in with the night blue surrounding her. At a safe distance, she circled the house, but could find no way to enter unseen.

Could she dare to storm the house by force and then what? Perhaps she could manage to get into the house. She would then be barricaded in with the children as if in a trap. No, that didn't help anyone.

She had to do something, though. It was beginning to dawn in the east. Suddenly she heard the sounds of a helicopter flying, coming closer faster. She didn't know this type of helicopter; there was something inexplicably dangerous about it. The house became more lively. Commands could be heard.

The helicopter landed at the other end of the clearing and out came more policewomen and three of them were dog handlers, but this time dressed throughout in black uniforms, as Gertrud guessed in the dim light. Her mouth turned salty. *They want me*, were her immediate thoughts, *they're guards*.

The children now came out of the house, escorted by policewomen with machine guns at the ready. How many were there? Gertrud could only count six. Had she not been able to notice the others in the commotion. There had to be eight!

The dog handlers were talking to a superior of the guards. She pointed in the direction of the forest, almost in the direction where Gertrud was hiding.

Suddenly two policewomen of the children's escort screamed and fell forward. The others didn't know what had happened and stood frozen for a moment, then started shooting in the direction of the forest.

Gertrud had not heard any shots as the policewomen fell to the grass. But she could see some of the guards running towards the helicopter with the children, then suddenly stopping and firing in the direction of the helicopter. Green-clad women had appeared from there now, carrying long knives. Gertrude could also see bows and quivers of arrows. She was too far away to intervene in any way.

The green-clad were outnumbered. Despite the heavy casualties from the shooting, they managed to pick up the weapons of the fallen policewomen. The terrified screaming children ran to the helicopter, followed by three greens. From there they were now also shooting with a machine gun.



The Greens no longer had a chance. Obviously they did not know how to handle the collected rapid fire weapons.

Some tried to escape in the direction of the forest. Gertrud could not see if they succeeded.

While Gertrud's brain was working at full speed, the children were loaded into the helicopter, which also took off immediately. Two of the six children had been carried inside. There were six children and not eight, she could see that clearly now. Had those two been injured in the shooting? For Gertrud it was now certain that two were missing.

The helicopter took off with the children and some of the policewomen. The other helicopter also took off. When both were in the air and already some distance away, something strange happened for Gertrud, she could see a flash followed by a bang. Smoke was pouring out of the helicopter carrying the children. Soon after, the rotor blades grazed the topmost treetops and after that Gertrud saw only a fireball and a mushroom cloud rising above the trees.

Now Gertrud knew what she had to do. She crept back as fast as she could, found her horse at once, and rode off in the direction in which the dog squad had disappeared into the forest.

It took her some time, as she kept stopping and listening for sounds that might be coming from the dogs or from other horses. Then she thought she heard the cracking of branches and a dog's whimper. The sun was just rising over the eastern horizon, coloring a bank of clouds a brilliant pinkish-red.

Gertrud got off Lilo, tied her to a tree, unlocked the submachine gun and fired a volley in the direction from which she had heard the noises. The mare reared up and Gertrud had to calm her down. She sat up and listened. The gun now hung in front of her chest, ready to fire. Would she be able to distract the dog squad?

Gertrud had reached the path that led from the log cabin to the market. Lilo flared her nostrils. Her snort was sure to be heard for miles. Then she heard the approach of dogs. Her plan had worked.

She took cover in a bush. Then a dog came with her handler and both had to cross the path. Gertrud fired a well-aimed shot at the dog, missed, and quickly sent a burst from the submachine gun

after it. The dog yelped and Gertrud blasted away with Lilo down the main path towards the centre of the village. The shots sent after her missed.

*Did the dog squad travel alone? Didn't they have riders with them? Who were they trying to catch?* Gertrud slowly became certain that they were after the two children who had apparently escaped or perhaps even been kidnapped. *And will they follow me now, so the children can get a head start? Nanina is probably already a good hour's walk away from her hiding place in the desert.*

She had to get back to the handlers before reinforcements could arrive. Gertrud rode back and reached the path again. The three policewomen had only been waiting for her. Nervously they shot at Gertrud from a distance, so that she could pull Lilo around and escape through the less dense forest here.

Gertrud emptied her magazine in the direction of the dogs, hoping that the three handlers would get even more nervous, then she switched magazines and rode quickly in a semicircle around what she guessed was the location of the dog squad.

The three could not calm the remaining two dogs, so that Gertrud could well determine the direction. Feverishly Gertrud searched for favorable escape routes through the forest. Then she decided to attack again and galloped in the direction of the dog squadron, but was fired upon from the side before she could do so. Two had apparently tried to sneak up on Gertrud unnoticed.

Gertrud reached the dogs with the handler remaining there and fired at the dogs while they were still galloping.

She was almost out of reach again when Lilo was hit and fell. Gertrud was ready for it and came up well on the soft forest floor. It had not been her first fall from a horse. She crawled over to the still twitching Lilo and retrieved the magazines of the submachine guns from the saddlebags. She could no longer hear any dogs.

Quickly she crawled on through the undergrowth and then ran on bent over. She didn't want to go up against the three of them. Her goal was accomplished, the dogs were no longer operational, in all likelihood she had met them. It was all she could do.

Now she was painfully aware that she no longer had a horse and would soon be hunted.

She ran an arc through the forest, trying to get back to the old path. She could not hear any pursuers.

When she was on her way, she immediately took cover behind a larger pile of stones. From a distance, she heard the clatter of horses and the metallic banging of equipment. A cynical smile stretched across Gertrud's mouth. They couldn't have announced themselves any better than that.

The horsewomen seemed to be in a hurry. Gertrud had to dare, she looked for a secure hold on a tree trunk and waited until they were close enough. Contrary to her expectations, she was quite calm and then she pulled the trigger.

The first rider fell from her horse. Gertrud fired the whole magazine at the other horses, which then fell along with the riders. She jumped onto the path and was just able to catch the first horse. She didn't have much time and she didn't know if the other riders were hit.

Gertrud swung herself into the saddle and rode back. She had only one goal left: Nanina. The other children had to make it on their own; she could do no more than kill the dogs. She didn't reckon there was any chance of finding the children, as she had no way of knowing which direction they would take. In her mind she wished them luck and helping spirits. Helping spirits made her smile a little despite the last few exciting hours.

She rode to the fork in the trail and then kept left toward the deserted area, which she reached late in the afternoon without sparing her horse.

Satisfied, Gertrud found that Nanina had set out. After a short pause, she began to pursue Nanina. The hiding place in the desert would not be safe for much longer.

## 22 Rona and Sika escape

Sika had heard Rona screaming in her dream. A loud bang from the next room woke her up. Immediately the images of the last hours came to her mind: the appearance of the policewomen in the blockhouse, Hela's and Alina's speechlessness and inability to act, Rona's and Sika's removal, Rona's attempt to escape and her being tied up with ropes.

The other children had also woken up and were sitting on their blankets anxiously listening. They heard screaming and stomping up and down the stairs, then it quieted down.

Sika heard only a very faint howl from one of the neighboring rooms upstairs. She knew it was Rona. After her escape attempt yesterday, she had been tied up and taken to another room.

The next day they were only allowed to leave the room one by one and with a constant escort in the direction of the toilet. They were given food and drink in their room. Then, in the evening, the first helicopter arrived and Sika suspected that it would take them away. She was excitedly curious and yet scared at the same time. *Flying in a helicopter, what will that be like*, she wondered. But, what about Rona? She really needed to get to her. Something else had to have happened that she didn't know about. As midnight approached, she got up quietly. In the near impenetrable darkness, Sika felt her way to the door and opened it carefully. Another child called after her, "Stay here, I'm scared."

Sika was already in the hallway. Only from below the stairs could she hear noises and loud cursing. She noticed Rona behind a door, sobbing to herself. The room was unlocked. Sika crept inside. Rona was bound hand and foot to the bed.

"Rona," Sika whispered, "it's me, Sika." Rona was quiet on the spot. "Come here quickly, untie me!" Sika stood there indecisively, seeing almost nothing.

"How?"

"I always keep a small knife here in my smock, they didn't find it - get it out and cut the ropes." Sika felt for the knife, took it out of the leather sheath and used it to cut the ropes free.

"We have to get out of here - they shot Emma." Sika couldn't really comprehend anything, she trusted Rona blindly. They both crept to the window. From below the stairs they heard footsteps coming.

"Jump," Rona gasped, jumping first.

"Ow," Sika had tried to support herself with her hand and sprained it. "Can you walk?", Rona wanted to know. "Yeah, it's just my hand."

"Come on, we have to run!" commanded Rona, grabbing Sika's healthy hand and they both took off running. They had almost reached the edge of the forest when they still noticed the lights coming on upstairs. Loud shouting from the house drove them to hurry even more and panting they disappeared into the forest.

Rona knew instinctively that they could not walk to her log cabin. She remembered the woman she had met at the market with Emma. They had to go there, she had been kind and invited Emma and her.

When Sika moaned, "I can't go on, I've got side stitches," Rona stopped and tried to get her bearings. She felt blood on her face, a branch had left a bleeding welt on her forehead, near her eye.

Rona tried to remember. On the map it must have been up on the right from the market. They weren't allowed to go to the market, they would surely be looked for there right away. Anger rose in Rona, anger at the policewomen who had shot Emma.

Shouldn't they go to their hiding place first? Rona was undecided what they should do now. Where was Nanina, what had happened to her? She had been at the market with Emma, and Emma was dead. And again anger rose in Rona, making her freeze for a moment.

Rona decided to go to the hideout, her hideout, but it had to get lighter first.

They ran through the forest with only one goal: to be far away from this house, from this village center.

Slowly it became lighter and over the east the first harbingers of dawn shone. The sparse pine forest allowed them to make good progress. They could easily avoid the few dense bushes and

undergrowth. It was getting brighter fast. Above the eastern horizon a deep cloud bank shone in bright purple.

Rona recognized the path she had taken with Emma to the market. They were not allowed back here, Rona knew instinctively.

They crossed the sandy path and continued walking through the forest.

Suddenly the two heard loud banging in shorter and longer intervals. They stopped and tried to listen in that direction. Dogs barking now resounded through the forest. They both immediately ran, not paying attention to the branches that hit them in the face and the prickly vines on the ground that left bloody welts on their legs.

They reached a small stream that neither of them knew. With both hands they scooped up water and hurried to make progress in the shallow water towards the spring. The stream led east, Rona realized, and that must be where their hiding place was somewhere. In the distance, they could still hear gunshots.

The strenuous walk through the creek bed soon made them forget the horrors of the night. Sika moaned more and more often that she was hungry and could go no further. Rona had to keep urging her on, "Just a little further, Sika, then we'll take a break. We can't let them catch up with us."

Rona couldn't take any more either and looked around for a place to rest. Dark clouds were now moving behind them from the west, overtaking them. It looked like rain.

To the left and right of the creek was a small slope and the creek was impassable for them with fallen trees. They had to leave the creek and climb up the slope. At the top was a large oak tree with lots of dry leaves at the bottom of the trunk. Here they rested. Sika lay down exhausted and closed her eyes. Her legs ached and her hand sprained from jumping out the window. The bloody scratches on her skin burned like fire.

Rona leaned back against the oak trunk, she was tired but couldn't fall asleep like Sika. The images of the night returned.

Smoke rose over the forest to the south. It was their log cabin that went up in flames. The two could not see it, they were too exhausted from their escape.

Rona woke Sika and gave her some birch leaves she had gathered. "Chew this, it'll help with the hunger - we need to keep moving if we want to get to the hideout before nightfall."

"Why do you want to go there?" wanted to know Sika, "maybe they are already waiting for us there."

Rona became uncertain. "Maybe Nanina is there waiting for us."

The birch leaves were old and they both choked them down with difficulty. They followed the stream further, so at least they always had water to drink. At a few spruces they found some old tree resin, which didn't taste any better and which they could only suck softly because of the hardness.

The stream landscapes changed constantly. Slow-flowing sections with dense bushes on the banks and swampy shallows that first had to be scanned with a stick alternated with faster-flowing sections where they made better progress.

Late in the afternoon the stream, which had now become very small, turned south and in the evening they reached a marshy area from which the stream was fed.

Rona was glad, she was sure this was the area she had fetched water for Nanina from not so long ago. She tried to orient herself as the darkness grew, they had to reach their hiding place tonight.

Light rain had started and was slowly but steadily soaking the light summer frocks of the two children.

It was getting dark faster now in late summer and Rona got lost a few times until, late at night, they reached the deserted place with their hideout.

Sika was amazed as she felt her way down the ladder. Rona explained to her that Emma and she had built the ladder.

Rona became frightened as she groped to find that there was almost nothing left in the hiding place. Cuddled close together from exhaustion, they then fell asleep in a corner of the cellar.

Where was Nanina? This question occupied both of them even into deep sleep. Despite the cold, they did not wake up from exhaustion.

Even before the bright dawn glowed in the eastern sky, two oil lamps appeared at the upper entrance of the cave and shone into the sleepy blinking eyes of the children.



## 23 Gertrud and Nanina are pursued

Nanina had little time to think. She was fully occupied with the two horses. They had to have food and water. She was constantly on the lookout for passable breakthroughs through the undergrowth. Then the landscape became clearer and less hilly, so she made faster progress.

Late in the afternoon she reached a lazily flowing river. It led from east to west. If she wanted to keep her direction, she had to cross it. With her stick she felt along the bank. It was soft mud in which the stick sank.

Nanina tried along the river, towards the east, to find a place to cross. After each turn, she hoped anew to find a shallow spot, a shallow ford. Again and again she scanned the bank. Once she slipped and slowly sank into the mire of bank mud. What appeared to her to be shallow was only mire. There was no shrub nearby for her to cling to. She tried to get out and kept sinking. Seeking help, she looked around. The horses were standing too far away. She was already sunk up to her belly button in the mud and panicked.

Nanina looked at the one horse and in desperation she commanded, "Come on, get over here and help me. Pull me out of here." She didn't know if she had shouted, just thought it, or imagined it intensely.

The first horse came to the shore. And with great effort Nanina managed to grab the halter and thought: *Now pull me out slowly!* she imagined the horse slowly going backwards, which it actually did. And with much difficulty she got out again and was more careful now. She wondered for a brief moment how the horse did what she thought it did, or was it what the horse did and then she thought?

Ignoring the muddy smock, she continued on her way. Until evening she found no suitable place to cross. She tried to remember what the strange, tall slender Gertrude had said about the fire. She shouldn't make a fire, she reminded herself. But did that still apply now? She knew that one should not drink from such a slow-moving body of water without first boiling the small animals in it.

She decided to make fire without smoke. The sun was already losing its power. Quickly she looked for some dry birch twigs a little further away from the river. The forest floor of the birch grove was covered with thick bracken. With the last effort of the sun, she managed to first light dry fern fronds with the burning glass and then placed the birch twigs on top. She took pains to make little smoke and keep the fire small. They had often done that in the forest with Emma.

Using the metal pot, Nanina fetched water from the nearby river, gathered common plantain and yarrow, and boiled the herbs along with some shredded wheat and jerky to make a thin soup.

The sound of engines could be heard in the distance. Nanina ran to the edge of the small birch grove and looked in the direction from which this unfamiliar noise was coming. Large spinning rotors seemed to be flapping like wings above an aggressive looking insect. Nanina had never seen anything like it in her life. She had only heard her mothers talk about there being such a thing as giant metal birds that people could fly along with. Although this metal bird looked aggressive and dangerous, she still felt the desire to be able to fly with it one day. She had often imagined herself soaring over the landscape like a hawk. What would it look like from above? She had never looked down into the valley from a high mountain.

The sound of the helicopter moved away and Nanina placed the bent branch at the edge of the birch grove, then tended to the horses. A wave of sympathy and love flowed from her to the two animals and somehow came back as well. Nanina felt as if she were not alone. With the horses, they were somehow three after all.

She would spend the night here. Perhaps the tall slender woman would come after all, though Nanina could hardly remember what Gertrud had said, what she had heard and what she had felt of her were too contradictory. Gertrud had little hope that they would meet again, radiate.

A light drizzle set in again. The birch trees did not offer sufficient protection from the wetness in the long run. Nanina looked for a coniferous tree at the edge of the forest, which with its dense branches could divert the water for a while. The horses got their shackles and grazed nearby. Nanina leaned with her back against the dry trunk of the tall and dense spruce, so for the time being she was

protected from the wetness coming from above. The fire had not brought her here. She couldn't get any branches for a night's camp from the surrounding area, it was all dripping wet by now. She placed the pack around her as a windbreak and, wrapped in the blankets, tried to sleep. With thoughts of the last few days and the tall strange woman, Nanina fell asleep exhausted.

The cold penetrated relentlessly from the forest floor into the wet smock, and shivering with cold Nanina woke up already around midnight.

*Why didn't I take the fire with me*, she thought. In her luggage she found a heavily folded metallic shiny foil, with which she additionally covered herself and immediately noticed that the heat was retained better.

When she woke up in the morning, the drizzle seemed to have turned into a not very heavy, but continuous downpour. Stiff with cold, she got up and looked around. The horses were in sight under another solitary spruce. *Should have put their blankets on them*, she thought, not knowing whether wet blankets were good or bad for horses.

But suddenly she stumbled, weren't there three horses standing there and couldn't light smoke be seen behind them? Nanina stood there as if paralyzed, rubbing her eyes. *Gertrud, the great stranger, flashed* through her mind, yet she was cautious enough from her experiences of the last few days not to run off at once. With some difficulty she climbed the lowest branches of her tree, only to realize through the dense branches that in front of the fire sat Gertrud in her blue robe, obviously also occupied with the wet and cold.

Nanina felt that she could trust her unconditionally, and ran over. Gertrud got up from the fire when she heard Nanina coming.

"You didn't make it very easy for me to find you," Gertrude greeted her with a light laugh, "especially your path by the river, you should have marked it better. I had to look for you all night that way." She embraced Nanina, and on a spontaneous impulse she caught the twelve-year-old under the arms and lifted her up. *How light she still is*, it flashed through her mind.

Nanina had actually forgotten that, she had been too busy with the quagmire on the riverbank.

"Then at dawn I could see the horses, and soon I saw you, too, fast asleep under the tree. I let you sleep. But now I am very tired, and before we must go on," Gertrude interrupted herself, fumbling at her wet frock, "I must sleep a few minutes."

Nanina stood there with her mouth half open. She had never seen such a woman before. Instinctively she felt that even Emma, from whom she had learned much about the forest and who could also cut wood and had taught the children archery, was of a very different type. *How did she make fire*, Nanina wondered further, *when everything was wet and the sun wasn't shining?* And what was this strange black thing of metal that she had hanging by a strap over her shoulder and now laid beside her.

"Pack the horses and bring me that golden shining tarp first, and when you're done, wake me-you hear, Nanina-wake me relentlessly!" Nanina still looked at her speechlessly. Somewhat more mildly Gertrude repeated, "Just wake me, and then you tell me how you've been. I'm terribly tired now, dead tired, and in desperate need of rest."

Gertrud waited until Nanina had brought the tarp running, said still, "Thank you, keep the fire going, and make some tea-as much as you can hold with three fingers," wrapped herself in the tarp under the tree, and immediately fell asleep, exhausted.

*What kind of tea*, Nanina thought, but didn't want to ask any more. She took the horses to the luggage, searched in the provisions and found a tin can with the inscription BLACK TEA - ASSAM-BLEND. Black dried plant parts were in it. Nanina remembered that the women had drunk this as 'tea' on special occasions.

Nanina ran to the river to fetch water. However, the water seemed dirty to her due to the recent rains. Indecisive, she stood for a while and then decided to look for a puddle of rainwater. In the small depression by a nearby cairn, the water seemed clearer to her. With this she put on the tea, and when it boiled she threw in the three fingerfuls and woke Gertrud.

Stretching and running her hands over her face several times, Gertrud slowly regained consciousness. "Oh, it smells like tea," Gertrud let out with a yawn. The horses stood packed and ready to march off at the nearest tree.

"What else do we have to eat?" continued Gertrude, wanting to know as she slowly squatted down. "Dried meat, dried fruit, and cereal meal." What else was in the baggage Nanina had no way of knowing.

"Are you very hungry?" Nanina shook her head. "Good, then we'll eat some dried fruit and drink the tea. We'll eat at length later. We need to get further away first, so I'll be a bit calmer."

They drank the tea from a cup. Nanina twisted her mouth and would not. "What is it?" wanted to know Gertrud. "It tastes bitter," Nanina answered with a puckered mouth.

"Yes, the tea has not been drained and is still floating in the pot and besides" Gertrud remembered that for her as a child black tea was also only enjoyable with sugar and cream or lemon. In her luggage she found sugar still packed in small portions. She drank the cup empty, then another, and afterwards prepared Nanina a well-sweetened cupful.

"That's more like it, you can drink that," Nanina beamed at Gertrude.

"Let's go! We can eat the fruit while we walk."

Gertrud took the somewhat frightened Nanina in front of her on horseback and then they rode off slowly, dragging the other two horses with the luggage behind them.

Every now and then Gertrud took out the compass so as not to lose direction in this rainy weather. The rain tarp was big enough to keep the rain off their bodies for a long time for both of them.

Nanina told of her adventure in the swamp of the river bank and Gertrud told of her visit to the village center, leaving out the dramatic parts. When she reported that two children had probably escaped, Nanina knew immediately that it could only have been Rona and Sika. Rona had that energy.

"And what about Emma? Why didn't she come with you?" Gertrud just shrugged. "I haven't seen her." Nanina didn't want to believe, or couldn't believe, that Emma was gone.

Towards noon the rain became less. Wind had sprung up and Gertrud had hopes that it would drive away the rain clouds. They still had not found a suitable place to cross the river. Gertrud was beginning to get nervous. Their progress was slow. There were deer crossings but they only led to the river and away again. Along the bank the terrain was very rough.

From somewhere they hear engine noise. Gertrud searched the sky and then after a while she could make out a high flying propeller plane.

*What are they doing here,* Gertrud thought, she couldn't imagine that this plane could have anything to do with them. Was this child sitting on the horse in front of her so dangerous that it had to be hunted down with the use of all available technology? Gertrud concluded for herself that there had to be something else that she could only develop an inkling of. Still the attack on the removal of the children and the subsequent crash of the helicopter remained a mystery to her.

"Aren't you even hungry?" Gertrud wanted to know from Nanina. She just nodded her head. "All right, let's find a place to rest for lunch." The rain had stopped, the wind had picked up.

Suddenly they heard rapidly approaching aircraft noise. It was an attack helicopter. Instinctively, Gertrud jumped off her horse, pulled Nanina down, and yelled, "Run, run!"

Nanina didn't know what was happening. Gertrud pulled and pushed her away from the horses. She ran as fast as she could with Nanina. A small depression, filled with rainwater, was on the escape route. Gertrud grabbed Nanina by the scruff of the neck and pulled her into the water with her. At the same moment, there was a tremendous crash and a fireball blew the leaves off the branches of the surrounding trees and bushes. Dirt, stones, burning wood and torn horse parts flew through the air.

Gertrud didn't need to hold Nanina still, she was in shock and no longer moved in the pond. The helicopter stood still, then made a small turn and fired another missile at the place where their horses had been. Then it flew away.

Gertrud was relieved to see that there was no place for a helicopter to land in the vicinity. With bitterness she registered that they were hunted like dangerous beasts.

"Come on, get up, they won't be right back." Nanina was trembling all over, unable to utter a word.

Even from a distance Gertrud saw all the devastation and ordered Nanina to wait by the pond. She wanted to spare her the torn horse's legs. There had been no direct direct hit. Two rockets had failed to detonate. Gertrud could still find some of the equipment in the area. She laid everything usable on two charred blankets and tied them together at the top. Even the gold coins were still in her pouch. *Should probably leave them, they're heavy and can't be eaten*, she thought, but then decided to take them with her after she pulled out a coin and looked at it in the light of day. Then she dragged these bundles to Nanina at the pond. Pleased, Gertrud discovered that she had had a submachine gun and the remaining ammunition on her body during the escape.

Nanina had recovered somewhat, but was still unable to speak. Together they dragged the remaining equipment away from the river into denser bushes.

Suddenly Gertrud felt sick, she dragged herself behind a bush and threw up. It had been too much for her, too.

Apathetically, both lay motionless for quite a while next to the remains of the equipment. Gertrud was tormented by one question: Would they come back or would they have peace now?

All hunger was blown away and a deep exhaustion spread over their bodies like paralysis. *If they come again, that's the end*, thought Gertrud and slowly closed her eyes, at the same



moment she saw Nanina move and look at Gertrud with fear in her face.

*No, no, Nanina we won't give up*, she continued to think, and instantly Nanina calmed down again, which now caused Gertrud to wake up.

*Why did she react to my thoughts*, Gertrud wondered, but had no time to think about it. More agonizing was the question of what she should do next. The wet clothes were continuously drawing heat away from their bodies and they both began to freeze without the warming rays of the sun.

*First we have to cross the river, but how*, Gertrud thought, *we won't get far now*.

Gertrud remembered that there had been rumors on the island of scattered survivors in the vastness of the Eurasian mainland. Savage and primitive life forms, compared to their standards of the new civilization, were said to have survived there in remote mountain valleys, eluding all grasp until now. They had been only rumors, but Gertrude had believed them, or had wanted to believe them, and she had clung to that straw like a drowning woman. But that goal now, without the horses, seemed to have receded into unattainable distance.

Another rumor, which had also been making the rounds in the bars of the island, was the disappearance of women. Speculation about what might have happened to them ranged from wild, as yet unknown animals, to dangerous, deadly-looking areas and landscapes.

At the frontiers of civilization such tales and legends always arise, that was certain for Gertrud. She had taken little part in such speculation. And she also knew, though she was unaware of the details, that the Guardian Council cared and protected civilization effectively. Despite all rumors, their civilization had remained very stable for centuries. Why would that change? Even if there were problems with her at the moment and with the execution of the last masculine remnants.

Gertrud began to doubt. Was this little person sitting next to her, wet and shivering with cold, supposed to endanger civilization? *Ridiculous!* Gertrud thought, and yet she had a vague sense of a responsibility imposed on her by fate that she might not be able to live up to.

Should she go back, hand herself and Nanina over? Again, she was too proud for that and would not be able to bear the humiliation, apart from her own life, which she now saw threatened. Humility had always been a foreign word to her, she had that in common with Anna. *So let's keep playing the game*, Gertrud said to herself and gave herself an inner jolt, *with doing the brooding fades away*.

"Come, we must go on!" Gertrud rose. From a remaining bag of dried fruit she gave Nanina a handful of dried plums. Oddly enough, an oil bottle had also survived the missile attack. They choked down a gulp to go with the dried fruit. The rainwater from the pond was their drink.

Together they stowed the remaining luggage in the charred blankets, made a bundle of it for each, and with a stick carried it over their backs.

Back at the river, they tried to find a shallow spot, but had no luck. The river flowed slowly and already the bank was boggy and deep.

With unease, Gertrud realized that the river was now coming from the southeast, but they were heading north into unpopulated territory. *Should we have walked downstream?*, Gertrud pondered.

"There's something in the bushes," Nanina called to her, running behind her. Nanina had run close to the water, put down the bundle, and stood with her bow over her back in front of a few logs that were visible in the shrubbery.

Gertrud walked over, scowling. What could be so special about it? But how amazed she was when they discovered a raft. Gertrud immediately looked for tracks on the shore meadow, but could find none. *Strange*, she thought, and all her senses were on high alert. The raft was usable. On the shore now they both looked for tracks. They actually found some some distance from where the raft was hidden. *Well camouflaged!*, Gertrud noted to herself, *but why must the raft be hidden in this deserted area?*

Up to that point Nanina had been running after Gertrud as if in a dream. Again and again the images of the last hours forced themselves before her inner eye, in between word images appeared which came from Gertrud and which she had not yet experienced in this way. Many things were indistinct, incomprehensible, and produced feelings of fear, and more rarely, of joy and exhilaration. She heard nothing but it was as if she could see words and sometimes these words turned into images and concepts that she understood.

The horrific experiences of the last few hours had caused something in her to develop that was eerie and frightening.

Gertrud looked at the raft, and Nanina knew now why she had followed this strange tall and slender woman at once. She had known instantly on her appearance at the log cabin that she would be protected, indeed somehow saved, by her. The policewomen had told her so only in words, and Nanina had felt the opposite of their words within her.

Gertrud decided to watch the raft from a distance until dark. Then they would dare to cross the river with it.

## 24 rebels?

"Get up! You've got to get out of here."

Rona and Sika rubbed their dazzled eyes. "Why?" Rona wanted to know.

"Because if you don't, the policewomen or the Greens will catch you again," one of the two dark figures groaned. "We know you from the market," one of them tried to explain.

That worked, both were immediately wide awake and despite the stiff frozen limbs quickly on their feet. *Who are they,*" it flashed through Rona's mind. She looked very suspicious and couldn't remember so quickly. Sika held on to Rona fearfully.

Quickly they all climbed the ladder and crawled out of the children's hiding place. Outside they could see four horses, two older women were already sitting in the saddles in charcoal gray cowls with hoods. The children were lifted up to them and placed in front of them on the horses and off they went on their ride. The other two also mounted very hastily and followed on the spot.

They had not been riding through the undergrowth long when they could hear the banging of shots close behind them, which spurred the riders on to even greater haste. Again and again they had to dodge and look for a more passable way for the horses.

But the gunfire slowly quieted and one of the riders called out to the others with satisfaction. "That's the Greens and the Guardians."

Sika couldn't take it anymore. "I have to go!" she groaned. The rider only pressed out sharply, "Not now!" and held Sika even tighter with her elbows between the horse's reins, and after a pause for thought, "Well, go for the smock if you can't." This spurred Sika to hold on for a while after all.

They rode at first through dense undergrowth, then in a creek bed, and finally they had reached a path on which they made faster progress. After about an hour the situation relaxed and words again flew back and forth between the riders. Then they had reached a shelter in a forest covered with dense and tall trees. Under a roof of branches and foliage the horses disappeared, the women and children sat down under a smaller leafy roof.

One of the women commanded Rona and Sika, "Get into the bushes and then we'll have something to eat!" Satisfaction, almost glee, spread among the women riders.

Rona immediately noticed that these women were different from the others she had seen in the market so far. She just didn't know exactly in what yet. The frocks were the usual ones, the color was somewhat unusually dark, and what was also unusual was that they almost all wore the same frocks and wore a brightly glowing ring with two small dark red stones and a bar cross in the center.

There was flatbread, sour milk and patties made of undefinable plant and meat components. In addition there was still weakly sweetened cold tea. A huge hunger had set in Rona and Sika, which was noted by the women with a smile.

Rona looked more closely at the equipment. The horses had saddlebags and long knives dangled in their leather sheaths beside them. The women themselves had shorter knives in small pouches at their belts. On one saddlebag, Rona could still spot a club-like object made of metal with a hole in the handle.

The women began to change and put on more colorful frocks and two put on simple smocks like the women had worn at the market. As the women changed, Rona noticed that they did not have the usual womanly breasts. Before she could ask, Sika spoke up. "Who are you and why did you bring us?"

The woman who had been commanding earlier now turned to the two children, "I'm Mara and I'll make this quick, we have to get going. So we grew up just like you in log houses like this, and we were just like you." And after a pause she added even more quietly, "And you are the last. There are no more houses like that, and you were going to be converted prematurely. That's why we wanted to save you. Even if you don't understand that now. You don't have to. You just have to trust us for now. You're not really sick or disabled."

It immediately flashed through Rona's mind: they had a fracture like ours and now they're transformed. She immediately gained confidence, while Sika looked at her questioningly.

The women were discussing which of them should take the horses away. Then two had come forward. The two immediately went to the horses, hung green-brown spotted blankets over them and put on such cloaks themselves. Then they disappeared with the horses into the forest.

Rona and Sika each got a wicker basket with a few bags in it. The women who stayed behind tied another belt around their chests so that it looked like the other women. Then they also took a woven basket with carrying straps on their backs. Each of them, including the children, was given a walking stick made of ash and then they set off.

"We're going to get to a village later today," said Mara, who was evidently giving out the orders, as Rona had since discovered, "and you say nothing about what happened-you hear, nothing!" Then she gave further instructions as to where they supposed they had come from, and who they were, and where they were going. "But the best thing you can do is to say nothing at all when asked! Is that clear?"

The two looked at each other and nodded. Slowly it began to get exciting for them. Where would they end up? There was one thing they independently resolved in their innermost being: They were always going to stay together. Only Rona still had to think about the horrible event of Emma's death and Sika wondered what had happened to Nanina. Where was she? Sika had a feeling she didn't know where it came from, only that it calmed her and stopped torturing her mind.

Interested, the two women inquired about their life in the log cabin with their mothers. Rona told about the terrible death of Emma and that they had hoped to find Nanina in her hiding place. Rona also told them that she had wanted to escape with Emma and that they had already prepared everything for the escape. At this Mona became very quiet and thoughtful.

Sika was still anxious and wanted to know where they were going and what would happen to them. "We'll take you to safety, where no policewomen can reach you and where even the guards in the air won't find you," she reassured her leader, and the other added, "That's far to the north ... "

"That's enough!" interrupted the other, "we're far from safe."

They reached the first houses of the village as the two women scanned the sky somewhat nervously for the sound of propellers. "Will they have made it with the horses?" Their leader reassured them, "Sure, it's not that far."

Next to one of the houses, two women and three girls were busy hoeing potatoes out of the ground. The two older girls, like the women, were hoeing the potatoes from the rows of earth, while the smaller girl was only picking up potatoes. The small field, which was more like a garden, was heavily fenced with wooden stakes and willow rods woven between them. From the centre of the village they could hear the patter of horses.

"Go away!" the children were quickly pulled towards the field and they all ran off towards the potato choppers. Just before they fell back into step.



"Hey, what's your hurry?" asked the older of the two women leaning on her hoe.

"The kids wanted to know who came first, so we wanted to show them!" The women laughed. "Greetings to the Great Mother." The two women returned the greeting, "Greetings to the Great Mother." Turning to Rona and Sika, the spokeswoman said in a stern tone, "You said earlier that you could no longer walk. Now rest and lie down there behind the fence." Rona and Sika obeyed on the spot. The three girls of the women stood there with their mouths open. And one of the potato-choppers, turning to them, said, "But they are good and follow at least," and turning to her girls, "take an example from them."

The clatter of horses had moved away a little and now began to grow louder again. It was difficult to gauge whether it was approaching the village exit by a direct route.

"What is the matter with you, who has so many horses here?" asked Lona, the other companion of the children.

"They are others again. This morning there was already a police horse squad in the village. They're looking for runaway children from a village further away, they said."

Mara became restless, the clatter of horses seemed to be approaching. Nothing could be seen yet. She took the hoe from the one woman's hand, looked at Lona, and then said, "Now you take a break and we'll go on for you, and then we'll have a snack together."

The women looked at each other puzzled, the girls immediately threw off their heels and sat down, some distance but not too far from Rona and Sika, by the willow fence.

Mara and Lona chopped the potatoes at a pace that amazed the women.

The five mounted and armed policewomen approached. The three girls stood up curiously and peered over the fence. Rona and Sika instinctively stayed put, so Mara didn't have to say anything. Then the policewomen suddenly turned away again and rode towards the village exit.

Mara pretended to be calm. "How are the wild boars here?" she inquired. "It's a real nuisance," the younger of the two women began to complain, "they've broken through the fence here twice already, too." And the older one added, "They're getting bolder and bolder, and are now letting themselves be seen in the village during the day."

"What are you doing about it?"

"We dig pitfall traps and try to catch them with decoy food."

Mara laughed, "there's bound to be more game roasts!"

"If only," added the older woman regretfully, "the wild boars are getting smarter and smarter, too, and they notice. And once they've smelled it, even potatoes won't help as bait."

"You'll need slayers then," Lona suggested.

"We've had two young girls trained for it, but they still miss twice before they half hit once," the older girl replied with a laugh.

"At least you have a permit for it," Mara said appreciatively.

"But only for one crossbow. So the two must take turns."

"Then build a second crossbow or a really good bow yourself," Lona advised, "or even better, buy one." The village women looked at each other in amazement. What was not allowed was not an issue for them.

"Good," Lona added, "so reapply every year. In the new settlements in the northwest where we're from, there are no more restrictions there to begin with," she paused, "or no one really abides by them." Now only Mara and Lona laughed.

After Mara thought they had chopped enough potatoes, she sent the children to collect wood and together with Lona built a small fireplace out of stones.

One of the women said that they could also walk to the hut to have lunch there. But Mara said that they had enough with them, only no potatoes and they tasted best freshly baked in the embers.

One of the girls was sent to the hut. Just as the potatoes were cooking in the embers, she returned with a large pot of malted barley coffee with some goat's milk in it and several ceramic mugs.

In addition, Lona packed some goat's cheese and a sausage from her provisions and cut some for everyone. Everything was placed on a cloth around which the women and children gathered.

Sika was constantly busy staring at the strange girls. Somehow they were different from what she had imagined from Rona's description. They whispered, giggling often while looking at each other. Just looking at each other was enough to make them giggle again. This became too much even for the younger village woman and admonishingly she remarked to them, "Haven't you seen any other girls! What must they think of you!" And turning to Mara and Lona, she apologized, "They're just still a bit childish, and haven't gotten out of the village yet." Which in turn was commented on with a clearly shown indignation, a "Phew" from the older, maybe 13 year old girl.

Rona had yet to spare a glance, too preoccupied with her inner images that revolved only around Emma and her horrible death.

Lona, who was sitting next to her, noticed her sadness and spontaneously took her close with her right arm and pressed her head to her side and softly, inaudible to the others, she whispered in her ear, "I can understand you, you loved each other, Rona. The time to mourn Emma will come, Rona." And after a moment's pause, she added firmly, "Now we must go on, we're a long way from our destination."

After this long lunch break Lona exchanged a piece of sausage for some potatoes and they said goodbye to the village women with the invitation to visit them when they would be in their area. There followed a longer description of where they lived and how they had to go. Finally, they inquired about the village hostel, which was also something of a barter shop for the small settlement. The women from the neighbouring village communities liked to visit each other a lot, as they always had something to exchange, especially a lot of news. And in addition there were these inns with their overnight accommodations and the small barter shops.

One of the two landladies greets them from a distance, saying, "Such children as you have with you are wanted by the police. Are they?"

## 25 No plan and many questions

"Come Nanina, we'll try it now! Can you swim? Nanina nodded.

They both approached the shore and pushed the raft into the water with much strength and effort. Gertrud noticed how the sweat ran from her forehead through her eyebrows and into her eyes, where it began to burn.

"Hold it fast!" cried Gertrude, as the raft threatened to float away alone. Nanina waded into the water, trying with her small and light body to hold the logs, which were tied together and heavily soaked full by the water. Gertrud threw her pack on it and jumped in after it with a pole.

"Come on, quickly, climb on," she now ordered Nanina. She slipped off and could no longer get onto the raft, which had already begun to turn slightly on the shore. Gertrud dropped the pole and lay down on her belly on the edge so that she could hold out a hand to Nanina.

At last it was done and both were, though wet, but at least on the raft. They reached the opposite shore with less effort. Getting off was more difficult again, especially unloading the remaining luggage, which had now also become heavier due to the water.



Gertrud decided to go on in spite of the darkness. The sky was covered with dark heavy clouds that quickly moved on. *At least it wasn't raining*, Gertrud thought, she took out the compass and found that there was even a path leading through the undergrowth in her direction. She wasted no thought on what that path might be. They had to get away. The policewomen, or was it just the guards, wouldn't leave it at that. They would surely send a patrol to see if they were indeed destroyed. She knew that for a fact. She had always believed the rumors about the Guardians. The rumors had been such that none of her acquaintances on the island had ever wanted anything to do with them. Yes, it had even been hard for them to believe that they had to exist.

They moved along this path all night, interrupted only by small breaks where they ate something and could recover a little from carrying the luggage. It was not always easy to follow the path, although it was very straight. But after midnight gaps in the clouds formed more often and the rising moon always provided enough light at the right moment to allow them to stay on the trail. The landscape became flatter and flatter, and the trail stretched dead straight north. At dawn it suddenly ended at a large old oak tree. Individual tracks ran away from here in different directions.

Gertrud could not yet make any clear decisions, she was too caught up in the past. She just wanted to get away, to gain distance. The two of them walked, or rather trudged, through endless pine

forests, always northwards. Gertrud was amazed that Nanina could endure so much. Their conversation was limited to the bare necessities of their escape.

The weather had changed. The cloudy and rainy days were over. The sun was shining again during the day, but the nights were already very cold. They had to prepare a camp for each night from leaf branches and as dry as possible grass, so that the warmth remained for a long time. Most of the time they had no strength left to build a small hut of leaves over themselves. Gertrud covered Nanina with several branches and then tried to crawl under them herself.

The nights were mostly short and interrupted by constant cold attacks. Gertrud had not found the tarp protecting her from the cold after the attack. Too quickly they had left this ghastly place.

After five days they were so exhausted that they immediately fell into a deep sleep at every little break.

They had now reached an area that was very swampy and wet. Over a small, slowly flowing body of water lay a large tree. They balanced over it with their sticks and baggage. Gertrud had taken to building small fires again. They were always going to watch for engine noises, and Gertrud inculcated Nanina to put out the fire without smoke at once, as soon as she should hear anything.

Gertrud looked at Nanina and decided they needed to take a bigger rest. Nanina looked exhausted and had been walking behind her for the last two days only apathetic, speechless and jaded.

At the edge of a dense beech forest, with almost last efforts, they built a leaf hut from a slanting larger long and straight branch, which they placed in a branch fork of a small tree. Out of many sticks and branches they built a roof, which Gertrud hoped would retain some of the heat. Nanina gathered lots of dry leaves and small branches for the mattress in the hut. They even tied something like a door together from intertwined twigs to seal the opening of their hut.

The first night in this comfortable leaf hut brought for the first time a really restful sleep. The only disturbing thing were the mosquitoes, which apparently came in swarms from the nearby water and found the many leaks in her hut. But Gertrud was so exhausted that she did not notice the bites on her face until the other morning.

Nanina had fewer, and they didn't even really itch, as Gertrud was pleased and somewhat surprised to discover.

"I have the sweeter blood of the two of us," Gertrude stated, laughing. As if that had anything to do with sweetness.

After a leisurely breakfast, Gertrud took stock of their luggage and was shocked to discover that their remaining food supplies would last another two days at most. They had already included everything that was edible along the way in their daily food intake during their trek through the forest.

"Where are we going?" wanted to know Nanina, in a calmer moment. "If I knew that myself," escaped Gertrud impulsively. "Nanina, we'll talk it over by the fire tonight. First we must see about something to eat. You can search in the vicinity. I saw wild yams by that water earlier. Take the knife and make yourself a digging stick - can you do that, and do you know what I mean?" Nanina nodded, "Yes."

"I'll try to shoot some game," and turning to Nanina, "don't go too far from our cabin, though." "Sure," Nanina set to work at once.

Gertrud took the submachine gun, which Nanina watched with interest, and set off for the water. *If I shoot only one duck, at least one shot will be gone and the meat will last a day, maybe two*, Gertrud thought on the way to the water, *I should already hit a deer or better still a wild boar.*

Then she realized that they had only built their hut between two arms of water. They were on a long island and Gertrud could not imagine that there would be big game here. Slowly she crept along the shore against the wind direction through the undergrowth. It felt like she was in a training camp of her youth, except they never hunted there. That came later, when she went through basic training for the police service. All those who were chosen for university training had to endure that training.

Gertrud's heart beat faster. Deer were actually grazing on the opposite bank. She became nervous. She had to hit them with the first shot. What distance did she have to set?

*Just take it easy*, she told herself, but knew the deer could be up and gone at any moment. In her mind, she quickly ran the distance to the herd, then estimated the distance and fired at the closest deer, a buck with still unbranched antlers.

The buck jumped away and into the next bush. Nothing more was to be seen of the herd.

*Have I hit it now?*, Gertrud asked herself, *is it worth crossing the water and searching?* She stripped off her clothes and left everything on the dry shore. The water is cold, she realized, and swam to the other side with a knife between her teeth.

There was a trail of blood she could follow. And after about ten meters she saw the dead buck. Delighted, she dragged it back to shore.

How was she going to get him across the water? She imagined a mirror and saw herself in it, naked, a bloody roebuck at her feet. *Now all I needed was a predator's teeth and a strong stomach*, she noted with amusement, *can I swim him across the water or will he sink?* Gertrud was at a loss. *Nanina should be here*, she thought, *she could throw a stone across the water with a string. Then we could pull the deer across.* Should she call Nanina? She couldn't have gone far. Gertrud imagined the path Nanina would have to take. The island wasn't very big.

With the knife she cut a long young ash trunk, left a branch on the thinner end briefly as a barb, and then stuck the branch through the deer's feet between bone and sinew. That might hold as she swam, dragging the animal behind her.

A cold shiver ran down Gertrud's spine when she saw Nanina coming from the opposite shore with a string in her hand.

Gertrud did not let her surprise show, "I'm glad you've come, I can make good use of you." Nanina, astonished at the game she had shot, searched for a stone at Gertrud's direction, but found none suitable that would hold the string securely. A thick, shortened branch had to go. Even after several attempts, Nanina was unable to throw the branch across the water. Gertrud had to go back in and get the string. She tied the buck to the ash pole and Nanina pulled while Gertrud swam, trying to keep the animal afloat. Then she noticed that she could just barely wade through the mud. She should have tested the depth of the water with a pole beforehand. *Another experience richer*, she realized for herself.

By noon they had already skinned the animal and divided it into portions, which were now slowly roasting on wooden sticks over the embers of the fire.

Nanina could hold back no longer and asked Gertrud holes in the belly how she had killed the deer and how the machine gun worked.

The meat tasted good to both of them, despite the lack of salt. A few wild sweet potatoes, cooked in the embers, completed the meal. This way they could spare the remains of their provisions.

"Say Nanina, you're dragging your bow. Can you shoot with it, too?" Gertrude was looking at it more closely now, not having much confidence in its performance. "Yes, Emma taught us how. Shall I show you?"

*This Emma must have been some sort of Diana of the Forest*, Gertrude thought, a little amused. "Yes show me. Maybe it goes for birds."

"I only have two arrowheads left, though, and I'd have to make arrows first." Nanina looked at Gertrud questioningly, meaning: Should I?

Gertrud answered, undecided as to whether Nanina had really asked. "Yes, start, then you can shoot birds. You can't always hit a deer. You always need a bit of luck for that." *And today I had some!* Gertrud added in her thoughts.

In the afternoon Nanina had two arrows ready and began with the shooting exercises. To Gertrud's astonishment, she hit not so badly. Gertrud had to make an effort to get the same score. In terms of strength, shooting a duck might be enough, Gertrud noted, taking a closer look at Nanina. The arms were long and still somewhat thin, the legs too, and overall Nanina seemed very slender. She certainly hadn't been all that slim at that age, or had she? Somehow Nanina's figure wasn't girlish, not even comparable to her custom-made one. Gertrud had to smile. Despite her training and hormone doses in childhood, she hadn't become a different creature after all, she was still very slim at her current age. *Girlishly slim!* she stated determinedly, not wanting to leave any doubt.

"Tell me why we have to escape and where we are going?" They were sitting at supper by the fire in front of their hut and had made themselves really comfortable.

"Nanina," Gertrude, taking a deep breath, "you were raised far away from the rest of the humans because you are a type of human that already doesn't exist. In order for humans to continue living, they had to separate themselves from a part. That was the part of humans that was important in the past, so we can stop being animals and use our minds."

"What do you mean by brains?" Nanina looked at Gertrud questioningly.

"Oh, you know, I'll explain that to you later." Gertrud laughed at Nanina, who was serious and thinking hard. She felt the need to take Nanina in her arms and hold her close, and wondered at such a feeling in her. She knew immediately that it was the "kiddie scheme" of evolution that made adults turn to offspring in need of help in order to preserve their kind. Never in her life so far had she bothered with children. Yes, when she had met some, they had always seemed creepy to her and she had never known what to talk to them about.

"You children who have grown up there in your log cabin represent the last of your kind and you are at the same time the first of a new kind, you must be preserved like that at all costs. Perhaps, and I am even sure of this, you will be a new epoch ..." Gertrude stopped. What was she talking about that was incomprehensible. "You are special, and you will bring entirely new possibilities for the development of all people."

"Tell me, why are we being followed, and then why do they want to kill us?" interrupted Nanina.

"Because some people are afraid of something new. There are always such people, and always have been, Nanina."

"And where are we going?" wanted Nanina to know further. Gertrud was silent. Again and again she had been thinking about it for the last two days, and now an idea came to her. She looked gravely at Nanina and spoke slowly and solemnly, as best she could, "Nanina, you are a gift from heaven," she paused, "and so are the other children. With you a new age will begin." And in her mind she added: *a better one*. There was much hope in that, Gertrude was aware of that.

"We'll move further north, and then we'll try to start a village far away, where planes can't reach us anymore, with you, and then we'll look for your two ..." Gertrud considered, then said simply, "Siblings." Now she remembered the names of what the other two children were called.

## 26 Dark shadows of the past

For two days they rested, caught fish with the trimmed rod, and gathered what edible roots they could find. On the third day, Gertrud said to Nanina, "Today we'll move on, but first we should find out what's going on with the water."

They put out the fire, tore down their leafy hut, and scattered everything so that no traces remained. Then they hid the luggage under foliage, hung a broken branch in a branch fork so that it was visible to them from a distance, and set off with only their stick in hand. The island ended in a sandbank. Gertrud had already crossed this arm of water.

The sun was already shining warmly over the forest and Gertrud had the idea to cross this water once more to see if they could continue beyond it, otherwise they would not be able to keep the north direction and would have to turn to the west or east.

Besides, thought Gertrud, it would be good for Nanina if she could have a bath again after all the dirt they had to go through. She thought wistfully of her bath on the Isle of the Blessed and the wonderful hours she had spent there with Lisa.

They both undressed, tied their smocks, Nanina her sandals and Gertrud her trekking shoes, into a bundle on the walking stick at the top and waded into the water. Nanina hesitated and only went further in when it was already up to Gertrud's chest and she told Nanina to be brave after all. The arm of water was wider here and a little shallower. Nanina was up to her neck and even had to walk on her toes for a while, but she was beaming when they finally made it. The water was fresh, but the feeling of standing in the warm sunshine again, so refreshed, made everything doubly good.

They dressed and walked on through sparse groves of trees and meadows until, after half an hour, they were again at a body of water. This was wider and probably also deeper.

Nanina thought she saw a stake in one of the meadows at the edge, such as they used to tie the goats and sheep to. They walked along the bank a little longer, and Gertrud had almost resigned herself to the fact that they would turn back again, and that she would choose a more westerly direction for their further escape, when they discovered a barge in the reeds on the bank. It was a real barge, and could even seat several people or animals. In fact, sheep droppings could still be seen in it on the rough-hewn planks.

*Should there be a village nearby?* Gertrud became uncertain, she believed that they would have arrived in a still unsettled area long ago.

Suddenly Nanina felt something threatening behind her. She pulled Gertrud by the sleeve and looked at her fearfully. "Let's go, please - quickly."

"Why Nanina, when there might be a village here, and one far away from ..." She could get no further.

"Go on, grab them!"

With a roar, four figures in green robes, with long knives at their sides and bows with quivers of arrows on their backs, ran at Gertrud, who was standing there as if paralyzed, and grabbed her by the arms, turned her around and pushed her to the ground. One of these figures seized Nanina by the scruff of the neck.

"What birds have we caught here?" With a thunderous voice, the stocky and muscular leader slowly approached them.

"If you are a Watcher, then your last hour has come." Gertrude could still see him, in the face covered all over with dark blond hair, tighten his mouth into a grin, take a step back, and look at her with a tilted head.

"What kind of fine shoes are those?" he asked with raised eyebrows and derision in the raised pitch of his voice. "Take them off her!" Some one snatched the shoes from Gertrude's feet and tossed them to the leader. He held them up in the air with two fingers, then roared in a low thundering voice, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" One, holding Gertrude, yanked her head up by the hair. Gertrud cried out and tried to say something, and was immediately silenced by the wide-legged Rottenführer standing in front of her with, "Shut your mouth, I know who you are."

He let the shoes rotate through the air by their laces.

"These shoes are so fine that not even our mother would dare dance in them," he sneered again in a sweeter tone. Then he looked at the others, who began to laugh, and then continued, "And you will give us your last dance in them." Everyone shook with laughter.

"Are these, perhaps, the new spy-INNES -t oo fine to wear coarse sandals? They need their fine shoes even in the wilderness!" Then he turned back to Gertrude and bent down slightly to her: "We even have a shoe shop in our cave, opened especially for you." Everyone laughed even louder. In disdain, he spat at Gertrud's feet. "Now you're already coming in person and not just throwing your fireballs at us from the air. We'll kill all of you for that yet, and you'll be special for our charcoal burners."

"And who else do we have here!" He turned to Nanina. "Is this a cover too? Come over here!"

Nanina was pushed forward by the man holding her. She could only perceive a forearm, black-haired almost to the fingers. She had the feeling that Gertrud wanted to tell her not to say anything.



With another sweet sounding tone in his voice, the leader turned Nanina's head with three fingers towards his fellows.

"Why don't you show my comrades how pretty you are underneath? Maybe someone will fall in love with you and I can marry you off in the name of the mother while I'm at it." Again they all laughed. Nanina's smock was lifted and the laughter died away.

"What is it, my fellows?" The leader bowed his head and was also speechless for a moment.

"What's this, then? A new cover?"

Two of the men tried to laugh artificially. With two fingers of his left hand he pulled Nanina's penis up by the foreskin and flicked strongly at the testicles with the index finger of his right hand.

Nanina felt a sharp pain, doubled over, slumped at the knees, and her eyes went black.

"Seems genuine - all respect." He grinned at his cronies, who fell into restrained laughter again. "Our mother will have a use for it yet."

He stepped to Gertrud now, slipped one of his sandals under her chin, and with a jerk lifted her head.

"Now what are we going to do with this bird?"

"Shagging!" shouted two of the men from the horde at once.

One of them tore Gertrud's smock over her head.

"Can you even fuck that bird?" he turned to one of his comrades who had shouted "fuck."

"That bird doesn't have any feathers at all!" The leader pointed to Gertrud's hairless abdomen. Peals of laughter followed.

"I always can!" came back jeeringly in response.

"Well then, whoever wants to, the bird is free! And then we'll take them both to the mother."

## 27 The vision of a new kingdom

Mara was a little taken aback for a moment by the landlady's greeting, but instantly regained her speech. The policewomen's *description of the children couldn't be that accurate*, it went through her mind. "No, no, we met the policewomen outside the village earlier, they've been asking us about it too."

The more skeptical of the two innkeepers still looked at her in disbelief, then grumbled something to herself as she walked away.

Mara called after her, "Oh, before I forget, I'm supposed to deliver a small gift to you." The landlady stopped and looked at the four arrivals with even more disbelief. Mara turned and, not visible to the landlady, winked at Lona, "Now get it out already!" Lona searched through the luggage while Mara continued to explain, "This was given to us by a woman who, when do I know, has been with you and underpaid."

The innkeeper was about to protest, but Mara immediately continued speaking. "Look at it first before you try to remember."

In the meantime Lona had opened a small box. Two small silver brooches in the shape of flowers, one with a small red stone, the other with a blue one in the middle, were shining in it, and on top of everything the sun was just falling on it.

As if mesmerized, they both stood gawking at the jewel. Mara looked at Lona triumphantly.

"All right, I can care less," grumbled the suspicious landlady.

They entered the inn, bought the children a warm tea sweetened with honey and bought provisions for the onward journey. Then they all ate scrambled eggs with fresh bread. The two women drank malt beer with them, which the other landlady bought for them.

In the meantime, word had spread through the village that two interesting but strange women with children were passing through the inn, so that the guest room slowly filled up as night fell.

More or less brazenly, everyone listened to what was said at the table with Mara and Lona. They told in flowery colours about new settlements in the north. Then Mara interrupted herself, and addressed the children, who had hitherto remained quite quiet: "Surely you are tired; Lona will put you to bed now."

"Upstairs on the left, the first room," the younger landlady called after them.

The three climbed the stairs, found a room with a large bed. On a table stood a pitcher of water and a bowl of crudely decorated pottery. Soap lay on a small plate next to it and even brushes for the teeth and a small bowl with a chalk paste was provided. Even a towel had been thought of. It hung over the bedpost.

The atmosphere relaxed as they washed and brushed their teeth. Lona watched them with obvious pleasure. Then the children jumped into bed and Lona sat down on the edge of the bed with them.

"I won't tell you a fairy tale today, I can't think of a suitable one, do you have one?" Rona and Sika shook their heads.

"I'll kiss you goodnight, if I may." The children nodded again. Lona leaned down to each and kissed the still soft lips for a moment, then rose.

"Dream of something nice, tomorrow the sun will shine - one way or the other." Lona went down the stairs slowly, as if in a dream.

In bed, Sika snuggled tightly against Rona and fell asleep immediately. Rona lay awake for a while longer, trying to listen to the voices that sounded from downstairs in the inn, until everything wove itself into a single dream.

When Lona came down the stairs, Mara was already promoting the new settlements.

"We're looking for young women with little girls who are daring enough to want a city with all the comforts." The fact that it had yet to be built was somewhat lost on Lona, as she immediately noted.

Mara almost outdid herself when she spoke of bathhouses with always warm water, of horse-drawn carriages and ox teams that would lighten the heavy work in the fields so that there would be plenty of free time left over for the most social events one could think of. There would even always be fresh fish, which would be quite cheap.

Questions came sparsely, everything was too unfamiliar for the women of the village.

"And what is special about our community...", Mara paused and looked all around at the faces almost bursting with curiosity. She was enjoying the undivided attention to the fullest. "With us, no woman need worry about age. You might almost say that old age is at its best. Each one works only as much as she still wants to and can, and if it's only looking after the little children. And all that regardless of whether or not she has raised children of her own."

Lona looked at Mara and it made her a little uneasy, she seemed a little too triumphant. *If this works out*, she thought, and there are no Guardian spies in the place. But that was what they had assumed.

Mara had by now reached the introduction of her order. "We are Templar women, and we always stand unconditionally for each other. However, membership in our order is not a requirement to belong to our community." She then let her silver ring with the bar cross and the two garnets on either side make the rounds of the inn. A few more questions came from the other tables in the room and by midnight everyone was gone.

Everything went well.

The next morning there were two women with three girls at the hostel. They already knew one woman and the girl with her from the potato dinner the day before. It was the second oldest of the three they had already seen.

Lona was still bargaining for two handcarts for the luggage. It wasn't really bargaining, more like bribing with two silver coins. Then she bought the whole barter shop empty and filled up her travel provisions with it. The landlady got a small advance with the request to support nuns if they should come by and had nothing to barter or needed the help.

After lunch at the hostel, when the trolleys were packed and the goodbyes began with the many promises to visit each other again, another girl, a little older than Rona, came running. It was the older of the two bigger girls of their involuntary potato rest, who didn't want to stay without her friend. Or maybe it was just curiosity about the strange girls Rona and Sika that had won out in her. Crying, the slightly older woman was left alone with the little girl.

Then, finally, the train of four women and six girls slowly began to move. The rain of late summer slowly gave way to a golden autumn with bright sunshine and pleasant temperatures during the day and cold with plenty of dew at night.

Lona had earnestly impressed upon the two princes, Rona and Sika, as they were secretly called by her, that they must not, after all, reveal their peculiarity to anyone in their group. "Otherwise the women will get scared and run away from us with their girls," she tried to reason, "and if you have to pee, then, for the sake of the Great Mother, go behind a bush and crouch down so that nothing can be seen." Which Sika forgot once before in the episode, but was reminded by Rona, with a nudge in her back, in time.

Mara and Lona always found a suitable leaf hut or a hidden empty little log cabin for the trek to use for the night. Sentinel reconnaissance planes were seldom seen and flew farther east, so Mara became more and more cheerful and her cheerfulness soon infected the others. Only Rona and Sika were having a hard time, only very slowly finding their way back to a childlike lightheartedness. The last few days had weighed too heavily on them, and to make matters worse, they always had to dodge the other girls while washing and frolicking. Lona took great pains to defuse critical moments and always came to the rescue of the two at the right moment. *How long will this go on*, she asked herself more and more often.

It went well, although the other girls became more and more curious about the two eccentrics. Lona was already asked if they were sick. The women also wondered and wanted to know more and more urgently where the two came from and whether Mara and Lona were their mothers.

The oldest of the girls, thirteen-year-old Cora, always tried to stay close to Rona on the hikes and went to great lengths to start conversations with her. Sika didn't like that very much and both of them clashed from time to time for that reason. But it didn't come to a bigger fight, their journey was much too adventurous for that. In the evenings at the fire Lona always told exciting animal stories about bears, wild horses, foxes, wolves, otters and big animals with only one horn on their forehead, of which there were two varieties. One kind was kind and friendly to man, while the other was wild and much stronger. It was of the second kind that men had to be afraid.

On the way and during breaks in the hike, the children always gathered together with two women what edible wild herbs, flowers and seeds they could find. There were only problems with the cooking pot the first two days. It was simply too small for everyone and they had to cook three times. In the third overnight hut, a small log cabin, they then found a small cauldron that they took with them and which could fill everyone up at once.

Then, after about two weeks, they had reached the great river. Apart from Mara and Lona, no one in their travelling party had ever seen anything like it. They walked a bit more to the northwest, and in a dead branch that had once been an old small harbor, there was a sailing ship. It was well camouflaged. With gray-brown paint all the superstructures were painted. The sails were of a greenish-brown colour, and over large parts was stretched canvas, also of a greyish-brown colour.

Four women, two of whom Rona and Sika had already seen, were waiting for them on the shore. The two acquaintances whispered with the other two and pointed at Rona and Sika.

"You are quite punctual," they were greeted joyfully, "the snack is already ready in the cabin."

Mara turned to the children: "You stay out on the shore for a moment. The adults will eat first. We can't all fit at once at the small table on the boat."

The narrow table in the cabin was covered all over with small sandwiches. There was a lot of fish, sour and smoked, but also cheese and ham. Glasses of cold tea were already ready and one of the women was also preparing hot tea in the galley.

The two new women could not get out of their amazement. First the ship, they had never experienced anything like it and then the many and partly unknown food. Now they were also officially greeted and welcomed by Mara. Lona wanted to know if everything had gone well with the horses and was told that they were well accommodated again and waiting for the next action.

When everyone was nearly sated, Mara tapped her tea glass and everyone quieted down, all but the two new women also knew what was coming. She turned to the new ones.

"There is something you must learn before we go on, and if you wish to turn back and travel back to your village, which I hope you do not, you may do so now. We'll equip you plenty for that, and you'll also get the two handcarts with us, and you can use our huts as we do. But if you decide to come with us, there will be no going back permanently."

The two didn't want to go back and shook their heads, albeit somewhat hesitantly. Which didn't mean they doubted their decision. It was just a hesitation in the face of the new and unfamiliar.

Mara continued, "You are about to learn a secret that will change your lives. We are now traveling to a kingdom, without a king and queen, but a caretaker has already started building it."

King and queen, this word was new to the women and they almost thought it was another joke, of which Mara had already made a few the last time on their journey. They only knew the word princess from the usual children's fairy tales. It also made them feel a little eerie, since they were now so suddenly the unfamiliar focus of the round.

Lona was curious how Mara would manage to reveal the secret about Sika and Rona. To the other women of her community she could only make promises that male children would come. And now the time had come. Would that make all her plans come true? It wasn't that certain, after all, they weren't from normal reproduction as they had been themselves, but already afflicted with genetically experimental interventions. Besides, there had always been talk of three boys and now only two were coming.

Mara continued, "We have among us..." she paused, thinking of the third who might have fallen into the hands of the Greens, "two boys." The new women looked at Mara incomprehensibly, she immediately added, "two male children." But that didn't make it any clearer for the two women. A

little more contemplatively, she continued, "They are Rona and Sika, but they don't know it yet, and I ask you all not to think of them as anything special."

*Now she's talking crap,* Lona thought.

"They are just kids, like others, just a little bit different, and kids they should still be until bigger tasks come their way. Rona and Sika still think they're handicapped or sick, and we need to be careful with them, slowly introducing them to the fact that they're normal male children, with all that entails, and that they don't have to hide because of it." She paused and looked around the room with raised eyebrows. "And that they have nothing to do with, and are not responsible for, what the male principle had meant in the primitive days of mankind."

Mara had said the last sentence more for her religious. She saw from the faces of the two newcomers that mill wheels must be turning in their heads.

"And one more thing, the word boy is not an official word and I ask you all to forget it again, at least in your spoken word."



Mara took a deep breath: "And now it's the children's turn. Only the two cooks stay here. The rest of us will load the luggage."

Full of curiosity, all the children crowded into the cabin chattering happily. For them there were not so many fish specialties, but more cheese and hot goat milk sweetened with honey.

The women loaded the luggage and then a merry ship's people made a journey downstream on a great river, to a land as yet unknown, to a kingdom without a king or queen, to a kingdom that existed only as an idea in the minds of a few.

## 28 Hopelessness and unimagined powers

Nanina came to again in the swaying barge. She lay next to the naked and bloodied Gertrud, who was trembling all over and whose hands were tied behind her back. Around her neck she had a rope, such as one would tie around goats and sheep. The men had apparently just thrown Gertrud into it and were putting it down.

It went along a quiet and slowly flowing branch of water. Nanina tried to memorize the direction, despite the barely endurable pain in her testicles. She also had such a rope around her neck. Hands and feet, however, were free. She was not noticed at all by the roar of the men.

A fork came and they turned into a smaller channel. A dense canopy of leaves arched over them and branches often brushed the barge. They docked at a hill densely covered with trees.

"Come on, get up, you bitch!" commanded one of the men, pulling Gertrud up by the rope so that it choked her. "Come on, you too!" This was directed at Nanina, who quickly jumped up, thus avoiding the strangulation of the rope. However, she was immediately yanked back. "Trying to run away, I suppose - can't!" Her bearded rope-holder laughed derisively.

It went down a narrow passage into the interior of the hill. To the left and right Nanina could discover chambers, sometimes partitioned off from the passage with curtains, but mostly open. She could see something like a large bed once inside. Wooden crates stood in each chamber Nanina could peek into.

But what particularly astonished Nanina was that she could hear children's cries, which she could not interpret at first, until she saw an infant in one of the chambers, held to her bare chest by a woman with long black hair.

They reached a larger hall, sparsely lit by oil lamps and talc candles. A few men and women lay on skins around a brazier with a flue above it, with smaller children playing with various crudely carved wooden animals in between. A larger wooden table, with thick logs as seats all around, stood further back in the room.

"Get the mother, we've got loot - go!" rumbled the leader. A woman rose and disappeared at the far end of the room behind a primitive plank door. All the inmates of this hall, women, men and children were now standing in a circle around the pack with their prisoners.

A plump, tall woman with wide hips and a massive-looking face came wobbling sleepily from the back door after a while and sat down on a slightly raised bench at one side of the room with the exclamation, "Make more light." Glossy black and stringy hair fell thinly to her shoulders.

The leader threw Gertrud's crumpled smock and her mother's trekking shoes in front of the bench and pushed Gertrud and Nanina down on their knees.

"Ah, a bitch of a guard who was scouting us. Where did you pick her up?"

"By the sheep pasture, it had just found our barge."

"What were you doing there, and why in that disguise, go on, speak, you bitch!"

Gertrude remained silently trembling on her knees.

The mother only waved her head. The man holding her rope cracked the loose end over Gertrud's head and shoulders like a whip.

Gertrud remained silent. Nanina could feel her suffering and thought of her that she, Nanina, would have to flee.

Now the leader of the scouting fleet reported that they had observed their enemies, the southern clan, trying to rob a transport, apparently to get weapons.

The mother became thoughtful, "So?"

"Most are dead, a few managed to escape."

"So, weapons?"

"No none."

"Really? - Good," the mother grumbled. From the background a man called out, "Wouldn't those two make good hostages?"

"Hostages? None of those snakes will go for that, and besides, hostages for what? If they see anything of us, they'll throw their fireballs, they ain't got nobody of us, and what the hell, soon we'll be farther east, they won't get there with their vultures, and then ... then they won't see our charcoal works from the air."

Another attempt to make Gertrud talk by hitting her failed. So the mother turned to Nanina. "And who is she, one of her children?"

"You'll be amazed, Mother!" The guard yanked Nanina up by the rope so that her throat constricted and a rattle escaped her throat and she could only look up at the ceiling. Then he pulled up her gown.

"What's that, a male? Was he with that bitch?"

The leader nodded.

"That's a mystery, they haven't had a male in years. He can't be from the wolf clan either."

The mother rubbed her chin. "Let him loosen up and take off his smock," then she got up stolidly, took a sparkle of oil, and wiggled over to Nanina, who now stood trembling without a smock, not daring to move for fear of being yanked by the rope again.

After a thorough muster of Nanina's lanky body, she looked around the room and then back at Nanina. With an attempted friendly tone, she asked, "But surely you'll tell us who you are and where you're from."

Nanina's throat made a gurgling sound, tears now streaming down her face. She remained silent. One of the men explained that he had been unconscious and might now be in shock from a rough handling of his balls. The round burst into laughter.

Then the mother announced her instructions: "The bitch needs a break to think, lock her up with the others for now and tomorrow you'll think of something to make her talk before the last dance. And this one," she pointed at Nanina, "you put him with the boys his own age, maybe we can make a man out of him yet. We'll look at that in the sunshine tomorrow, if not," she made a motion with the flat of her hand past her throat, "we won't screw up our genes." With that she wobbled back to the back door and disappeared behind it.

Gertrud was locked into another corridor branching off from the hall and there into a stinking narrow hutch with three other women. A grate made of strong wooden planks and rusted iron bars was tied tightly with ropes so that the prisoners could not reach it and open it.

With the words. "Here you have a guard, but let her live, we will need her tomorrow," Gertrud was pushed into the cell and fell onto a pile of straw in one of the corners. In the other corner was a stinking wooden bucket of feces. Her smock was still thrown after her.

The first thing Gertrud noticed from the others was their spitting, slapping her face and tearing at her hair. With difficulty she opened her mouth after her guards had moved away, and moaning she brought forth, "I am not a guard, this is a mistake."

Nanina got back her smock, the rope about her neck was tied, and she was led out of the hall into the open air. About half an hour away from this hill with the hall, among the trees, were small tent huts made of tree poles, with skins and blankets roughly tied together. Nanina noticed at once a straw doll. Older bare-chested boys with only a short skirt-like cloth around their waists, reaching to their knees, were throwing pointed wooden sticks at it from a greater distance. There were a number of other training grounds, the significance of which eluded Nanina.

She was taken to one of the men who supervised the boys' combat training. He also had such a short skirt around his hips. His entire torso, arms and legs were almost completely covered in black hair that sparkled in the sun. A short beard, also black, framed his face. Nanina hadn't seen anything like it before, and she didn't know if it was also something like a human or something in between a human and a bear. Bears she knew and they were dangerous and vicious animals. Nanina had also seen a picture of them at her mother's. They did exist far to the east of her log cabin in the woods. Her guard and the trainer whispered a little, and then he took Nanina to one of the fur huts, flipped back the mat at the entrance, and announced to the boys gathered inside, who were chewing on bread patties and

jerky while drinking water from a pitcher, "Here's a new one, he's all yours. Show him what you can do and give him a beating, he needs it. Romo, you do it! You got it?"

The boy addressed, about two years older than the average of the pack nodded, "You got it!" The boy leader let the mat fall shut again and disappeared.

Romo approached Nanina and asked, "Name?"

"Nanina."

Quick as a flash, Romo placed a well-aimed punch under Nanina's chin. She staggered back against one of the fur walls and then slid to her knees. Everyone laughed.

"Are you kidding me? That's a girl's name!" Romo grabbed Nanina by her smock and pulled her up with his left hand. "What the fuck is this, only girls wear that." Romo looked around the room.

"They must all be kidding us" then he turned to Nanina "Take that thing off and put this on! Kim, give our Nino something to wear and let's see what he can do."

Nanina awkwardly took off her smock and pulled her short skirt over her hips. "Look how frightened he is," cried one of the boys, and they all laughed again.

Nanina's chin was numb, her lower jaw was on fire, and there was also pain in her neck and between her legs. Her upper lip was split open and a thin trickle of blood dripped from her chin onto the floor. Nanina felt miserable and didn't know if she would rather die on the spot.

Then the pack went to a sand pit that was a long jump and high jump training area, but was also used for wrestling and boxing matches.

Romo shouted loudly several times, "There's a fight!" Several boys of different ages joined in, in joyful anticipation of what was to come.

"Beno, you're the last of us and finish him off now!" ordered Romo, "you can win here for once, otherwise it's off to the girls, picking berries and mushrooms." Some of the boys grinned. Beno stepped into the sand pit with fighter's mine and took up a boxing stance with his head pulled back on his shoulders and his fists bent at his chest. Nanina was pushed into the pit. Romo shouted after her, "Whoever has their head in the sand three times is the loser and gets peed on. You kick in the balls, you lose too - got it?"

Nanina tried to assume the same position as Beno. It evidently looked very pitiful in the eyes of the other boys, for they all laughed again, and one exclaimed, "Like a rabbit doing mano a mano!"

Romo shouted, "Ready - fight!" Beno, who was almost the same size, charged and delivered a punch to Nanina's face with his right fist. Instinctively, Nanina had brought her forearms up and was able to block the blow somewhat. Beno immediately delivered a follow-up left to her ribs. Nanina's breath caught in her throat and she went down. Beno immediately jumped over her and pressed her head into the sand.

"Out!" cried Romo, "a point for Beno!" The beamed and gained new will to fight. Nanina had sand in her dry mouth. With trembling legs she stood up. She was close to weeping, and would have preferred to run away or lie down. A thought of Gertrud brought her up again. In a flash she went over Beno's attack in her brain. Had she not sensed before how and where he would strike? Had that been earlier?

Romo shouted, "Ready!" and after a little pause, "Fight!" Beno charged in again, looking to repeat the punch from the first time. Nanina was able to dodge in time and Beno only hit Nanina in the shoulder. Visibly surprised, Beno turned around in a flash and with his head down, tried to run into Nanina's stomach. Nanina couldn't dodge enough. Beno nearly staggered past, but was still able to grab Nanina by the waist with his right and punch her in the pit of the stomach with his left. Nanina folded like a pocket knife and fell again into the sand and had to swallow sand, forced by Beno.

Again Roma shouted "Out!" and "Two-nil to Beno!"

At the thought of Gertrud and the humiliations she had already suffered, a great sadness rose up in her and turned into an overpowering rage at the sight of Beno, ready to fight and already in a winning mood. It was a rage Nanina had never felt like this before in her life. She felt close to an end. For her it was death unknown until then, and from this nearness of death she suddenly grew new powers and abilities. Now she stood better, she forgot all pain as if in a daze.

Beno rushed up, Nanina now knew more precisely what he was up to and dodged with lightning speed without much effort. Beno shot past her, stumbled and fell to his own surprise in the sand. There was dead silence for a moment among the spectators. Then some of the boys shouted, "Beno, give it to him, finish him off, smash him in the face!"

Beno stood up and tried to run against Nanina again - again unsuccessfully. Then he changed tactics and approached in a boxing stance, but he couldn't land another hit. Nanina immediately dodged when she sensed how, when, and where he would strike. Then she caught his rushing right fist and pushed it back with both hands with all her might. Beno stumbled backwards into the sand, got up and charged at Nanina again, full of rage and aggression. She bent over in a flash when Beno couldn't help it and this time he flew over Nanina, who was crouched on the ground, into the sand. Now he stood up trembling and stunned. His breathing was heavy. No laughter was heard from the round.



Romo announced, "The fight is over!" It took him some effort to announce the result, "A draw!" Instinctively, he didn't challenge another boy to another duel against Nanina and instead announced, "We'll continue tomorrow."

As they walked back to the tent hut, Nanina was overcome by a crippling weakness and fatigue. She had the impression that her legs would collapse at any moment.

"Drink and eat," Romo commanded, scooping a pitcher of water from a vat and placing it in front of Nanina on the table made of rough wooden planks. Nanina sat down on the equally rough wooden log that acted as a bench, drank half the pitcher, and used it to wash down the sand and dirt in her mouth. She had neither hunger nor appetite. But then she ate some of the flatbread and hard jerky, as if absently. Beno sat at the other end with his face flushed and drank as well.

The other boys were ordered by Romo to a shooting exercise with the bow. Nanina and Beno were allowed to stay in the hut.

Suddenly Nanina began to lose her balance. There were skins and blankets in one corner, and she staggered along and lay down. The cabin room began to spin around her and she fought stomach cramps, then fell into unconsciousness.

Gertrud didn't fight back as hairy female legs kicked her in the side, she already didn't care, desperately trying to get her brain to think.

"Hey, then what are you, bitch, if you're not a guard - a fine villager, perhaps?" One of the women had leaned over her, jerking Gertrud's head back around to spit in her face again. Gertrud could only close her eyes, letting everything else happen to her. Worse than the spit, Gertrud felt the stench emanating from her.

Gertrud was able to mobilize some strength again and crawled up against the wall to lean her back against it. She answered with a counter question, "Who are you?"

The three looked at each other as if duped. "What's it to you, bitch."

Gertrud didn't let up: "Why are you locked up here like goats in a barn?" That was too much for one of them, she walked up to Gertrud and kicked her in the thigh and then in the hip. Gertrud was able to deflect the kick to her hip. She didn't let up, "Why are you locked in here?"

"So we don't run, bitch!"

Gertrud's brain began to work again and life came back even in this hopeless situation for her. *There are no hopeless situations*, she had heard over and over again during her training, *can't be done, doesn't exist*. They were trimmed during training to look for creative solutions to make the impossible possible. One way or another, they always had to find a solution. It all seemed cynical to her now. But didn't she also have to try everything? Did she have any hope left? She wasn't a Watcher, even if it seemed that way at first glance.

"And where are you going to run off to?" Gertrud did not let up. Two answered at the same time. One said, "None of your fucking business, bitch," and the other, "To our clan."

"To your clan?" asked Gertrude back.

"Did you think we were such naked sluts as you and the village girls? She lifted her smock and let Gertrud see her black fur between her legs at her abdomen. The other two laughed.

"And where you are now, these are your enemies, is that right?" Gertrude remembered certain lessons on the history of mankind. Raids were perpetrated by men, and the spoils had always included women. *Could the knowledge of history be useful to her now?*, Gertrud pondered convulsively.

"Enemies? We're locked in here until we gestate and stay here voluntarily."

"Until you're pregnant? That is, until you have children in your womb?"

"Yeah, bitch, we're going to get fucked every day and you're going to hang upside down like a slaughter pig." The women laughed.

"Who's gonna fuck you?"

The women laughed again. "The young bucks, that they learn."

Gertrud refused to be distracted. "And if you don't have children? What will they do with you then?"

The laughter died away. "We'll get some!" one replied over loudly, and another spat in Gertrud's direction and shouted, "Bitch!"

"What if you don't get any more? You've already had some."

The women were quiet. Gertrud could see their anger at her, but also the insecurity and doubt she had sown in them. She left the women alone with the fact that they were then no longer needed here, and then they could not go back either, they would no longer be accepted there.

It had cost Gertrud the greatest effort to have this conversation at all. Exhausted, she lay leaning against the wall and tried to continue thinking. But she could get no further. There it was again, that hopelessness, spreading like a cold, paralyzing shadow over her thinking. Gertrud fell into a sleep-like state of exhaustion and wandered about in confused dream images. The blue sea appeared for a moment, a cliff with white houses, then suddenly dark clouds and thunder.

Gertrud woke up. A woman accompanied by two armed men brought flat bread and water for the three women. One gave Gertrud some of her bread, "Go on, eat some so you can get it all and not kick it away again." Then she got some more water from the jug.

A little later an armed man came with three adolescent young men. He opened the bars and waved at one of the women. "Your turn." The woman came to the grate and the lads put a rope around

her neck, tied her hands behind her back and pulled her out of the dungeon by the rope. The grate was tied securely again and they all departed. Gertrud heard one of the boys say, "She sure stinks," to which she heard the man reply, "Then throw her in the water first."

Gertrud wished she had her gun here, or at least a knife, then she might have a chance if they brought the woman back. But where was she to escape to, and what about Nanina, could she leave her behind? No! She was the reason they were here, after all. Gertrude was ready to believe in something supernatural, a goddess or one of the old gods. But they had all perished, perished with manhood. She had no faith in the new-religious beliefs of women, most of whom believed in nature spirits and Mother Earth. What was fate, nothing more than an endless series of coincidences. Had she perhaps hitherto seen life as a kind of play, in which every man acted with a mask, and after dying on the stage went to the dressing-room in the back?

The woman was now brought back by three armed men. Gertrud did not think she had a chance. Her thoughts, with their hopelessness, were with Nanina. Maybe she had a chance, she wished it to her very strongly.

Nanina came to as the boys returned noisy and sweaty. Loudly, performances in martial arts were discussed, especially the previous archery was evaluated mentally. The boys paid Nanina no further attention, yet she could feel the fight between Beno and her still haunting their minds.

There was a louder noise outside, a group of larger girls carrying a steaming kettle of milk cereal porridge on two carrying poles through the camp. Wooden bowls were distributed in each of the three tents, and each boy received a large wooden spoonful of it in the bowl. With this there was a crust of bread, which looked very green inside, and was evidently baked with plenty of nettles or other herbs, and a piece of cheese. Nanina knew this wild herb bread from her home.

Romo called out to the girls, "Hey, kitchen bitches, we need one more bowl." Nanina was tremendously hungry now and she could feel her strength slowly returning. In her mind's eye, she could see Gertrude thinking about Nanina's escape.

After the meal, the bowls were picked up again by the girls. Romo ordered the boys to the water to wash. "And brush your teeth, or I'll knock them out one by one!" He himself stayed behind and held Nanina, who also wanted to go to the wash. "You go with me then, when the others are back." Silently he sat at the table and looked at Nanina. Her laceration was dried and not particularly large.

The others came back slowly in groups of two or three. Romo randomly checked each of them to see if they had been washed.

"Come on, Nino, let's go wash up!"

On the way to the sandy washing place, on the bank of one of the water arms common here, he drew Nanina into conversation. "I liked your fight, but why didn't you fight back? Surely that would have been an easy way to finish Beno off." Nanina said nothing. Romo punched Nanina in the back, making her cough for a moment. "Hey, Nino, come on talk, I'm not going to hurt you. How did you do that. How did you dodge so fast?" Nanina became uncertain. What was she supposed to answer, she didn't really know herself. "I just can."

"What can you do, block and dodge? Come on, show me!" Romo grabbed Nanina by the shoulders and faced her. "I want to see how fast you can react. I'll hit you in a minute, but not too hard, and you have to parry."

They stood silently facing each other. Then Nanina saw Romo's left hand twitch briefly and then his right advanced toward her left shoulder before it actually did and she took both hands, catching the fist with it and pushing the arm away, turning quickly to the side. Romo's fist went just past Nanina into the void.

"Great," Romo commented, "and now you. Hit me!"

Nanina got into position. She imagined her right fist hitting Romo's right shoulder and him catching that blow. A tiny moment later, she slammed her left towards Romo's chin. As if in a suddenly slowed down time, Nanina could notice that Romo was actually doing what she had imagined. Just before Nanina's left hand, clenched into a fist, reached his chin, she slowed the blow and stopped with skin touching.

Romo was speechless for a moment. "You'll have to teach me that. This is top notch! We'll start training first thing tomorrow. We'll always go to the wash together from now on. The others don't need to know."

Arriving at a sandy spot, Romo undressed. His body, already very muscular and athletic for his age, showed a healthy tan, illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun in an exceptionally clear sky. With a leap of his head Romo jumped into the cold water. "Come on, get in!" he shouted to Nanina.

What Nanina saw on Romo made her wonder and somehow also glad, despite the pain she had suffered. *Are there more children with this hernia and are they all called by a different, a "boy's name"? So aren't we in the log cabin the only ones to be segregated from the rest of the humans? So they're not girls. And are they still going to be real girls?* Nanina couldn't explain all this.

Reluctantly following his command, she stripped and jumped into the water. Romo dived briefly, swam a distance and then ran out again. On the shore he plucked leaves from a bush and massaged his gums with them. Nanina tried to imitate everything he did, which she now managed to do to some extent.

"Nino, you're sleeping in my bed tonight, not with the pack." He watched Nanina get dressed again, saying as he did so, "You need a friend here to protect you, or you'll soon be finished off and you'll wish to die in battle rather than continue living with the Rotte."

They went back to the hut tent. Romo assigned the guard for the night, threatened to make a check, and if the guard slept, he announced draconian punishments. Then he moved on with Nanina to a denser section of the forest. There stood a small log cabin with three beds. Two older boys were already inside, grinning as the two emerged.

"Hey, Romo, another bed buddy."

"Shut your mouth." Romo punched, but not really seriously. The other just grinned and held the blankets up to his face.

"Don't let them get to you, Nino, they're dumb sons of bitches."

"Isn't that the new boy who fought this afternoon?" the other boy observed, turning to Nanina, "I saw you. If you practice some more, you'll even ride Romo." Again they both grumbled, and Romo gave the other a few whacks on the blanket as well.

"Well, have a nice night you two, but let us sleep in peace." The two amusedly extinguished their talk lights on the stool next to the bed.

Romo's bed was across the far wall. In the dark, he pushed Nanina backward. "Put your skirt here on the stool and then come." He pulled Nanina into bed and whispered to her from under the covers, "They're both crazy, you don't have to be afraid, I won't hurt you. I just don't want to leave you with the pack. They can be very mean. Violence is the only way to deal with them, or you'll be lost."

Nanina felt that he meant it, and yet she felt his affection and did not know how to interpret it. Then, exhausted, she fell at once into a deep sleep.

She woke up after midnight. Had Gertrud called her? She tried to remember the dream. Was it a dream at all? Then she saw a corridor and a hutch where Gertrud lay on a pile of straw, unable to cry because she lacked the bodily fluids to do so. Was she still in that dream? No, she could see the night sky through the small open window of the log cabin. What she felt had turned into images.

Next to her lay Romo, she felt his warm skin against hers. He seemed to be fast asleep. She got up very slowly and took one of the loin skirts from the stool, imagining that Romo was sleeping very deeply. Then she crept past the other two boys, whom she had the impression were also very deeply asleep. Outside the hut she had to get her bearings. *Didn't Romo organize a guard*, Nanina tried to avoid the boys' training camp. *Why are they even putting up a guard?*, she asked herself, but couldn't answer.

A moon, still quite full, stood above the western horizon in the clear night sky. Nanina had goose bumps and she shivered with cold as she pulled on the boys' short skirt.

She immediately found the path through the forest to the clan's hill and was careful enough to scout for guards. Near the well-camouflaged entrance through which she had left the den at noon, heading for the training camp, sat two armed men. Bare, long knives stuck in the ground beside them, as well as what looked like spears.

Nanina wondered why they weren't sitting around a fire and instead had just wrapped themselves in blankets. She hadn't spotted a fireplace in the boys' camp either. The charcoal fire inside the den was the only fire she had seen. She tried to get as close as she could to the guards from behind. Slipping past them into the burrow seemed too dangerous to her. She focused on the guards, trying to figure out if they might be asleep. No, they were conversing at greater intervals with two and three word sentences.

She was at a loss and wondered what she could do. She remembered how Gertrud had distracted the policewomen in her log cabin with stones. *Could this work here?* , she was undecided and continued to creep towards the entrance.

One of the guards suddenly became agitated and nudged the other. He seemed to have heard something. *'Haven't I been quiet enough?'* Nanina was startled. *Look over there, something's coming,* she thought fearfully, imagining a wild boar moving through the undergrowth. The guards were indeed looking in that direction and Nanina didn't know if there was really anything there. She took this small chance and slipped inside to the entrance. The passage was dark, with only a single oil lamp burning on the wall further back. She walked on cautiously and slowly, this was apparently not the hallway she had seen. Again there were cubicles to the left and right with curtains that were mostly closed. Nanina pushed further inside. Somewhere a small child was screaming and a second one fell in. Words could be heard. She stood now at the entrance to the great hall. She wished she were invisible.

Didn't she look like one of those boys from the camp? But what would he want here at this time.

The fire at one side of the hall was still burning and there were also a few figures lying around on blankets and furs. Two oil lamps still burned in the wide hall. Nanina could only dimly spy three more corridors and the wooden door from which her mother had come. She was at a loss to decide which corridor to look in first for Gertrude. She tried to think of her again and then she got the feeling which corridor it might be. It bore a strong resemblance to what she had seen in her dream. The crates and chambers that led off from this tunnel were primarily for storage. The crate with Gertrude and the three women was unguarded. Nanina knew at once that the three women were fast asleep. Gertrude was half asleep and awake at once, as if she had guessed that Nanina was coming. Whispering softly and listening for the women again and again, she explained to Nanina where the grate was tied outside. The hallway was even more sparsely lit. Nanina had to feel the ropes more than see anything of them.

But at last they succeeded, and stood outside in the passage. Gertrud embraced Nanina and sobbed softly without tears, "That I may see you once more." And then she felt strength come to her again, coming from a deep, bottomless hatred.

Unnoticed, they were able to sneak through the great hall and reached the entrance through which they had been dragged in with a rope around their necks. They stopped. Outside were the guards again.

Gertrude looked at Nanina and Nanina understood her thoughts.

The guards thought they heard noises and focused in that direction. Nanina pulled Gertrud by the arm and quietly they slipped past behind her back into the darkness of the forest. When they were sure they could not be heard, they ran.

The moon set like a great pale goat's cheese in the west. On the eastern horizon the dawn rose above the treetops.

On that day, everything was prepared for the removal of the whole camp by order of the mother. Romo was hung naked by his hands in front of all the other boys and whipped. When the scouting parties without Gertrud and Nanina returned in the evening, the packing up of the luggage accelerated and the first barges began to cross the many small arms of water. First were the women and children. The route led to the east, where small scouting parties had already scouted the terrain for new settlements and begun building new shelters.

## 29 The arrival of the new princes

For the first three days, Rona and Sika had only sailed the river at night. In the morning at dusk they moored in a side arm or in a small bay. After gathering wild herbs and other edibles, the children could play on the bank or within sight. Lona told Rona and Sika that now they didn't have to hide so much when they had to get behind a bush. "You can go ahead and stand against a tree. The women all know you're two boys now, and let the girls get a little curious and find out for themselves what strange girls you are," and at this she laughed merrily but also a little as if wistfully absent.

On the third day they also sailed during the day. Although the sailboat was crowded, Rona and Sika slowly forgot everything that had happened in the past and mostly sat at the railing and let their legs dangle overboard. Every now and then the girls would join them, and once they caught on to what was special about Rona and Sika, there were hardly any times when the two were alone. After all the girls had seen what was special about Rona and Sika and even touched them once, they calmed down again.

There was always something to see on the shore. Mostly just different woods or meadows. But they were especially interested in the animals they could see on the beach and on the shore meadows. There were also animals never seen before that were bigger than their goats and sheep. Wild cows they were called by Lona. They saw no people on the shore during the whole journey.

When they were still at anchor during the day, two women always went hunting with the bow and also brought back something, a hare, waterfowl and once even a wild goat. This was a pleasant surprise and complemented the fish that were fished and caught from the boat. Rona and Sika would have loved to go along but they always found an excuse why they should stay with the boat.

After another three days the river had widened a lot and was just flowing sluggishly. They moored in a small, sheltered harbour. There were three more sailboats of their size and five smaller ones moored. Crates of fish were being unloaded from a fishing boat, and a larger sailing vessel was being loaded with various larger crates and barrels. In a small wharf not far from the harbor, a fishing boat could be seen laid up on keel. This small harbor had been built far away from the settlement areas of the women in the south. In this area, the converted former seed reproducers had been busy scavenging for metals and other recyclable materials in the rubble mountains of the old industrial sites. These were then transported along the coast by sailing ships to the south, to the workshops.

After this kind of human reproduction had become obsolete and the converted seed reproducers, who had to be isolated and sent to remote areas, became fewer and fewer, women now searched for the needed metals in other parts of their settlement area. There were piles of rubble from old industrial areas even directly to the south. It was just difficult to find women who wanted to do this hard and unsatisfying work.

Thus the north was left to itself, and it was planned that less and less would come from there, since the castrati would die out in time. But they had already started to produce jewellery and other utensils, which were desired by women, in small handicraft workshops from the found materials. There was even a small glassworks that could make a variety of bottles, jars and bowls. Several small potteries also produced tableware by hand.

This production also attracted younger women with their girls, who were happy to help out and thus escape the strenuous farm work with its eternal battle against weeds and pests.

This production in the small workshops and manufactories had brought a modest prosperity, and since gold and silver began to prevail as universal objects of exchange, there was even a certain wealth which enabled them to trade everywhere for the food they did not produce themselves.

Some distance from this little harbour with its workshops, many bungalows had been erected among dense deciduous trees. Rona and Sika were taken with the girls and the two women to a larger log house, the lower story of which was built of stones. Here, too, they were welcomed with a sumptuous snack and greeted by a woman named Wella, who introduced herself as the women's

master for this port. The two new women with their girls were assigned one of these small bungalows and were to look around everywhere for the next while and then decide what they wanted to do here.

Sika was allowed to look around the port and workshops dressed as a woman.

Lona retreated with Rona to a room where they were alone, she had asked Mara for that. After Rona had told her about Emma once more, Lona also began to tell that one of the mothers had fallen in love with her and that the other two had made life in the hut a misery for her because of it. This was six months before she was taken away for surgery. Lona told that she had also been very happy and after the transformation she was very sad and would have liked to kill herself. Later, when she was already far away here in the north, helping to build tunnels in the rubble heaps, the second child who had been operated on also came to her from her log cabin and reported that his beloved had hanged herself from a branch in the forest when she had been taken away.

Rona and Lona were silent for a while. In Rona's mind's eye, the last images of Emma trying to free her appeared again. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Rona, you are young, you need to learn to see the beauty in life again, you need to see how a rose glows in the sunshine and how it smells. Don't let it get you down, and fight so that this doesn't have to happen again."

Rona did not answer and there was a pause again. Then Lona began to tell how happy everyone here was now that they, Rona and Sika, were saved. Then Lona told how there were many women here who would like to have a child that they could carry in their womb. But she also told them that it would be better if they didn't know who the father was. Rona looked at her questioningly.

"Oh, you don't know what a father is. I didn't know that either for a long time. You still don't know a lot of things either. You and Sika, you will still receive training. We have begun to rehash old knowledge."

Lona paused, and her transfigured gaze betrayed that memory images were appearing before her inner eye.

"I too know how blissful it is to be intimately united with a woman. I don't want to miss this memory and it was this memory that brought me back to life in difficult times."

Rona was still silent, everything was too unfamiliar and new for her. Lona thought about how she could bring forward her wish, the wish of the last Templars.

"We've been thinking for a long time about how we can make our dream come true, that there will be happy little boys like us and you again - and yes, you can still be."

Lona caught herself getting pathetic now, talking about a new beginning for humanity, a new beginning on a higher plane, without the relics of the past that clung to the male part.

Lona talked about what happens when children grow up in a human body and what it takes to do so, and that nature enables males to produce a great many offspring.

"I don't understand half of it," Rona interrupted, "but what can I do?"

"Oh, of course, I'm talking a snow here and you want to know what part you're supposed to play in it." Lona took a deep breath. "We need some of the fluid your body makes to do that from time to time, and then we distribute it to the women who want to have a child. That is, of course, regardless of whether you find another woman or girl to live with."

Rona listened wide-eyed and open-mouthed as Lona reported that they had taught a few women and girls, also his age, how to get Rona, and later Sika, to donate their seed in a pleasurable way as a result of a massage.

"You are our future." With that, Lona concluded the important part of her conversation.

For Rona and Sika they had arranged a room to sleep in the big log house. They would stay here for a few days and then continue their journey north by ship. The Templars thought that the two were not safe here for a long time, so they wanted to bring them to a secret and secure place until the new kingdom was stable.

Sika talked enthusiastically about the workshops she had seen and all the things that were made there. She was most impressed by a smithy where crossbows were made for hunting. Sika was even allowed to shoot at a target with it.

The next day they were both able to go off and see everything together, with Sika now taking the lead. But that only went well until noon, then word had spread about who the two were and every woman wanted to see them, so that they could only be brought back with difficulty by two Templar women who accompanied them unobtrusively at a greater distance.

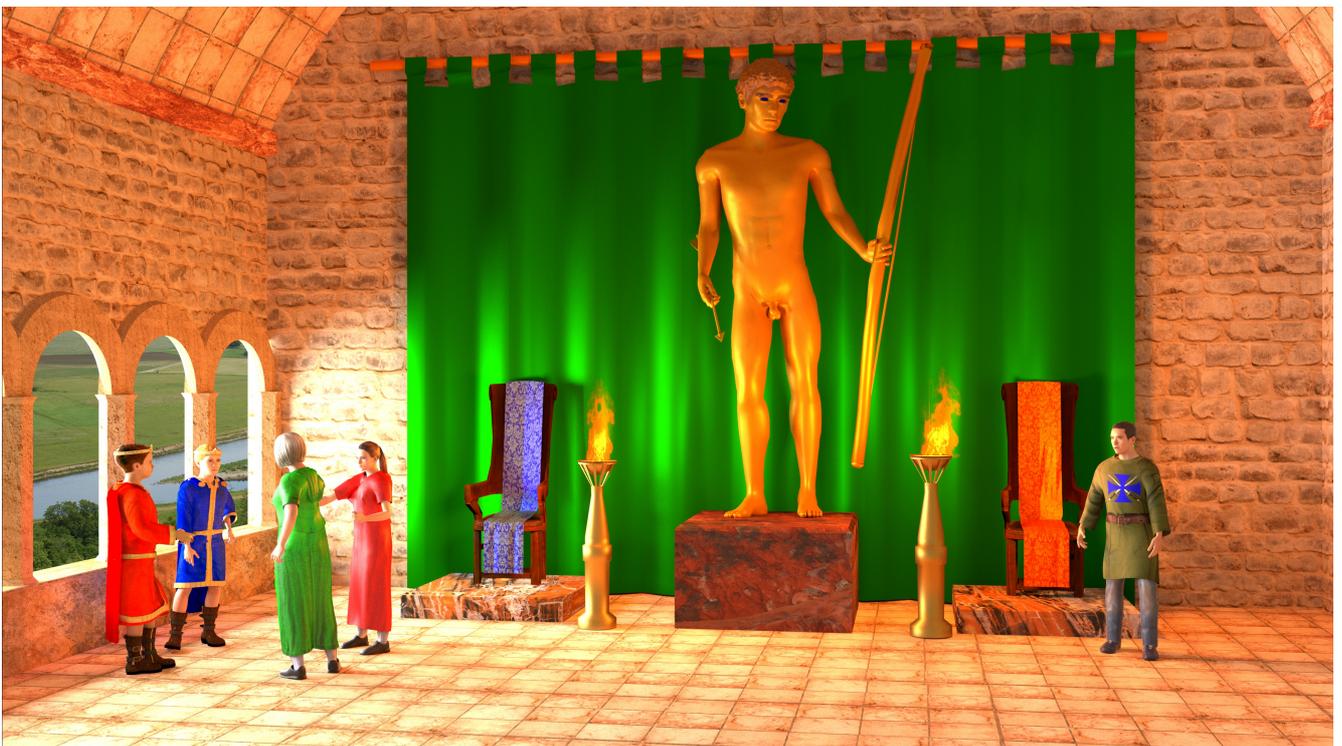
Then came the day Rona returned from his first massage. She had not yet told Sika about the important role they would both play. Now she couldn't keep it to herself anymore and told about the task they would have in the future. Sika listened with interest as Rona was rubbed with fragrant oils after a warm bath and lastly his penis was stroked until he gave up his seed, which was immediately collected. Rona did not tell how she first had to overcome her fear and only the memory of Emma and her tenderness had removed all problems.

"And when you're as old as I am, you'll be kissed and pampered and milked, too. Now your gnome is still too small."

Sika protested, "He's getting big, too."

"Yes, Sika, but not that big and nothing comes out yet when you rub it, you need to get a little bigger."

On the next few dates, Rona closed her eyes and always imagined Emma was there, being gentle with her. She kept that up even later. That way Emma had come back and could no longer be lost and that could console her over the actual loss.



## 30 Flight and no end

Nanina and Gertrud ran until they were exhausted. They swam through the arms of water and ran themselves warm again. Bushes whipped their faces and thorns scratched their legs. Still in the dark, they reached their campsite. Now Gertrud felt safe, she had her submachine gun back. An abysmal thought of revenge against her rapists rose up in her.

They packed everything up very quickly, destroyed the hiding place and covered their tracks as best they could. Then they began their march to the northwest, crossed another of those muddy arms of water, and then wandered more to the west again. Gertrud had given up trying to reach the south by an eastern detour.

After three days, food became scarce. Wild herbs and gathering edible maggots and worms took too much time and couldn't fully meet their protein needs. Their progress was slower and slower. Building the leaf hut in the evening was taking longer and longer as the nights were getting sensitively cold and a lot of leaves had to be brought in to get some rest during the night sleep. The weather had changed again, it had become rainy and autumnally cool.

Nanina had tried several times to talk to Gertrud about the recent terrible events and had always found that something rose up in Gertrud that was unknown to her and seemed to block out any memory with her. Nanina could see Gertrud's face harden and take on petrified features. Nanina found no answers to the many questions that had arisen in her lately.

The certainty settled in Gertrud that they would not manage to survive the winter alone in the wilderness. She was not convinced that they would reach their boat before winter set in. *If anything, though, we must try*, Gertrude kept thinking. She decided to take a southwesterly direction. At some point they had to get into settlement territory and there they would have to spend the winter undetected.

After five days they reached a larger settlement. There they could buy supplies and bargain for a donkey. Gertrud was glad that they had dragged the gold with them. A single coin had been enough, and a few small pieces of silver remained of it. When asked where, the women of the settlement were content with simple answers. And on the where to, they all helped in the inn to find the best way. It didn't occur to any of them that the two were wanted. Maybe they didn't care at all what policewomen were looking for.

The donkey now carried most of her luggage. At first he sometimes gave them trouble, but then he and Nanina became friends and the donkey trusted her completely. On the paths they could now walk, they met other travelers, mostly with children, so they didn't stand out. Sometimes they even traveled in a small group, which was especially fun for Nanina. Gertrude had impressed upon her that she must not reveal anything of her special identity. Nanina paid attention to that. The other women liked to look at her, and a maternal pride grew in Gertrud. Wasn't she somehow also something of a mother to Nanina? After all, she and Anna had been instrumental in the genetic experiments at the time.

Smaller rivers could be crossed at a ford. With the larger rivers, the way always led them to a settlement where there was a ferry. Usually it was just a sturdily built raft, but later there were also larger barges. Increasingly they encountered more and more transports of goods now. If Nanina hadn't been so attached to her donkey, they could have continued their journey by mail or baggage wagon.

When they spent the night in a hostel in the last low mountain range, winter had caught up with them. Early everything was white and a cold, damp wind from the Atlantic drove heavy snowflakes against the mountain slopes. Ahead of them now lay only a great low plain, and then they had to reach the mouth of the river where Gertrud had left the sailboat.

Only the hope of being there soon made Gertrud pack up her luggage to set off in spite of the snowstorm. They were drinking some hot tea before they were about to leave when Nanina pulled Gertrud by the sleeve and whispered to her, "Something bad is happening here, up in the dormitories - we have to go up!"

Gertrude winced, "What, Nanina, speak!"

"I don't know, someone's calling for help."

Gertrud quickly went through her memories to find out who else could be up there. Some of the women traders had already left very early with their wagons. Two women and a child were still in the inn; they too were about to leave, but in a different direction from her. Then she remembered seeing two more smaller girls. Had they already left?

Gertrud went up the stairs with Nanina. Under the large gable roof, various cubicles with simple board walls were divided off as sleeping cabins. From one of these cabins they heard the soft moaning of a woman, gasping for breath, pale and with drops of sweat on her face, she lay on one of these simple bedsteads. On the other bed sat two girls, six and eight years old, eyes wide with fear, staring at their mother. The smaller girl clutched her older sister.

"Nanina, stop at the entrance!" commanded Gertrude sharply. She approached the woman cautiously. Gertrud suspected it was one of the dreaded viral diseases that simply hadn't been contained. Genetic selection hadn't helped much either. It appeared again and again and whoever was afflicted by it suffered a circulatory collapse that led to death in a short time. The initial symptoms were hardly noticeable and were often mistaken for others. There was more speculation than definite knowledge about how this virus was spread.

The last thing Gertrud could hear from the woman was the monotonous repetition of two words over and over again, "My children!"

Gertrud told her reassuringly several times, "I worry about her, you can rest assured!" The woman opened her eyes once more and looked at Gertrud. Then she closed her eyes and gasped for a while longer until her breath stopped with one last deep exhale. Gertrud looked through the woman's few belongings and also found something about her identity and that of the girls. She took that and then told the girls to take off their clothes and leave everything.

"Nanina, don't touch anything here! Go downstairs to the inn and wait for me there!" Then she went downstairs with the crying girls and informed one of the innkeepers. She asked for warm water and soap. With the girls she went into the washroom and soaped them up from top to bottom, then rinsed them off. She repeated this a second time. By now panic had broken out in the parlor. Everyone hurried to leave as quickly as possible.

Two landladies tied cloths over their faces and put on gloves, then they packed everything that had been in the dead woman's room into a bundle and dragged it far behind the house to a waste pit. Last of all they got the woman, wrapped in a white cloth, and laid her on top. Then they piled wood on top and burned it all. In the bedchamber there were only the wooden bedsteads, which, according to the general rule, were not to be used for two weeks.

"Mommy, Mommy," the smaller girl cried, unable to be calmed. Gertrud tried, as best she could, to check the girls for redness on their mucous membranes at the open door of the washroom. She could find nothing.

In the village Gertrud tried to find clothes for the frightened girls wrapped in blankets. Nanina stayed with them at the inn. Gertrud returned and brought another donkey with her. She bargained with the two innkeepers for provisions and paid very generously, in return for which they promised not to report the woman's death. But that was also in her interest.

After lunch at the inn, the little caravan set out on the road that now led them down into the lowlands. Gertrud thought silently of how she had now suddenly become a mother of three. She inwardly accepted this additional assignment. She also thought of the side effect that they would now attract much less attention from the policewomen, and that was reassuring and allowed space for other thoughts to arise again.

Nanina tried to take care of the girls, to play with them during breaks and to be to them what she had been to Sika, an older sibling. She had confidence that Rona and Sika would be fine now.

At the next inn, Gertrud decided, much to Nanina's chagrin, to sell the donkeys and cover the next stages in the mail cart. The roads had become muddy. Clouds of wet snow drifted towards them from the Atlantic. They had no protection against the wet or the cold wind. The sandals and rags tied around their feet could not be changed as often as had become necessary.

In the middle of winter they reached the town of Bordo and put up at a hostel a little way out. Gertrud had survived a police check well thanks to the papers she had from the girls' mother. Children weren't counted anyway. Now she felt safer in this town than the first time.

Gertrud still wanted to spend the winter in the hostel. She visited several inns and hostels and tried to get information of all kinds. But it was only the known problems of the supply of food and what necessary things of daily use could be obtained where and how. There were no new diseases except the known ones. The reproductive number of children was still at the same level and attempts to increase it did not lead to any radical success. The technical effort required for this was enormous and already demanded the greatest efforts. What Gertrud took up with increasing interest was the fact that at present the desire of some young women to have children could not be fulfilled. Was this a temporary bottleneck or was it slowly becoming permanent? Gertrud found no answer.

If Gertrud had so far mainly thought about how she could save the genetic experiment Nanina and herself and had only vague ideas about the further future, the decision to found a new human race matured more and more in her. She knew this would be a declaration of war against all that had gone before, and as thoughts of her recent humiliating, horrific events began to well up within her, it began to choke her. It inexorably solidified her resolve. She had time now to mentally prepare everything. She met with women who would like to have a child and promised to open a new settlement where their wish could become a reality. The women were happy to trust Gertrud's promises. Her appearance still marked her out as something special among the women.

Gertrud had been able to observe Nanina for some time and had been surprised at first that Nanina was able to absorb thought content from other living beings and also influence it herself. As earlier experiments had shown a thousand years ago, this had been present in many living beings in varying degrees. Mostly only the range was very limited. With electrodes directly on the head, however, it was also technically possible at that time to decode thought content in almost all higher creatures. She had discussed this with Anna, but there had been no success. Gertrud only knew that the last genetic constructions had to be realized at very specific times.

Anna had spoken very little about it. Apparently she had feared that Gertrud would find it ridiculous to consider the constellations of the sun, moon and planets. Anna thought that evolution over billions of years had not been able to escape this influence and that the gravitational field had imposed its rhythms.

Actually, Gertrud hadn't cared at the time. Time was a measurable quantity and was not afflicted with any attributes such as harmonious or disharmonious. The character of time was at best man-made.

With such thoughts she would now only meet with incomprehension. She had to offer the women who were willing to give birth and settle something else. She had no laboratory and no hormones. Could she even use Nanina for that? After all, she didn't even know if Nanina would be able to produce a reproductive seed. She only knew when it could begin and that was summer at the earliest.

Gertrud searched all the shops for supplies for her plan. She needed to set up production, from raw materials and machine tools to reproduction equipment. She needed glass and ways to make alcohol. She needed to get her hands on more silver to make simple devices. She wouldn't be able to do it without artificial insemination, at least at first. She knew her labs on the island and the effort that went into it, and she needed to simplify that. She didn't have any machine tools.

There were two workshops in the city that could make jewelry from silver and gold. Only, silver and gold were very rare and were only delivered in small quantities from the rubble mountains of the north to the south. Gertrude knew that there had been larger amounts of gold and silver in the south as well, and not just what was found by chance. It was just that no one was willing to look for it. The problems were of a different nature and the women could also make jewellery from natural materials.

Gertrud managed to win over one of the younger women in one of the jewelry workshops for the new settlement project. She gave her two large round gold coins and the order to get as many tools as possible and some silver so that she could start a new workshop there immediately.

The winter passed and Gertrud had turned her hostel into a headquarters for her settlement project. It would certainly have soon come to the attention of the city authorities if Gertrud had not

maintained strict secrecy and included only selected women in the project. But even that would not have been enough. For a long time she had thought back and forth, and then it was certain: she was the high priestess of a new religion, a religion of the Great Mother, who had sent her Son to bring hope and a new love to the people.

It had taken her six weeks to write a religious pamphlet that was supposed to be something like a constitution of a new society. She could still remember her training, there had also been a small section on the role of religions in the patriarchy. Only she could no longer remember many details.

Then it was time. In a hill with a natural cave, a day's journey outside the city, the first twelve priestesses would be ordained by Gertrude.

Everything stood or fell with Nanina. *Will she be able to understand it all and take on this role?* Gertrud was not sure. She knew it was difficult to fool Nanina, although she herself was getting better at not letting thoughts leak out.

It had been on a dull, rainy autumn day when Gertrude saw the plan of the new religion more clearly out of the mists of thought.

"Nanina, we have something very important to discuss," Gertrud began from the fireplace. There were no other guests present just then, and the two girls were upstairs playing with rag dolls Gertrud had brought them from the market. Nanina knew at once that it must be something extraordinary. She also sensed immediately that she would be the center of attention.

"I have told you before how you three children came to be." Gertrude had to find a language that Nanina could understand. "You have no birth mother, your mother is the Great Mother of Earth and I was one of the priestesses who helped you to be born. But you, Nanina, have something else special, you have a father." Nanina looked at Gertrude in disbelief. Gertrude simply continued, "Heaven had a hand in your creation. You were created from the union of heaven and earth. Earth, Sun, Moon and the planets created you. Your father is Heaven and your mother is the great Mother Earth."

"Then why don't Rona and Sika have a father? Why just me?"

Gertrud was silent but then she continued after pondering for a while, "Rona and Sika are also special. But why only you have a father and a mother, only heaven and earth know, that is also hidden from us and a veil lies over this secret."

"Why are we being followed, does that have anything to do with it?"

"No, Nanina, they do not know what they are doing. Only a very few of the priestesses, of which I was one, know anything about it. The others are not privy to the secret about you, and they are afraid ..."

*Should I say in front of you,* Gertrud was unsure, "they are just afraid of something new. And what people don't know, that scares them."

Gertrud let Nanina in on her plans. She wanted to open up the large island off the west of the continent as a new settlement area. She knew that the attempt had been made once before, but had been abandoned again, as there were simply too few offspring and an island brought even more difficulties with supplies than the continent already had. She had chosen a smaller island, close to the south coast of the big island. There she wanted to build the first temples of reproduction, protected by the surrounding water.

The women who were to be ordained as the first twelve priestesses of the Son of Earth and Heaven were carefully chosen by Gertrud. Again and again she had tried to find out in personal conversations which of the women could be suitable. They were not allowed to have any fixed relationships with other women and they were not allowed to resemble each other. She made sure that the genetic pool allowed for a wider range of offspring. The women were also not allowed to be too feminine, they had to be willing to take risks and face hardships. She selected women with narrower hips and long legs.

What Gertrud found very difficult to gauge was the reaction to masculinity they would be confronted with. She was taking a big risk herself. There was still the possibility that Nanina would become something other than she imagined. *And what relationship do I actually have with Nanina,* she asked herself more and more often, *what do I feel when I'm confronted with her?* Her love was still for Lisa. But in Nanina she was beginning to feel something that took on a different dimension and was

not directed at sexual stimulation. Nanina would at least become something like herself and at that moment she wished that a deep friendship would fill her forever. To the girls named Corina and Balda she felt more and more motherly feelings and that somehow also made her proud that she still had two beings in need of protection around her, since she herself could never have children.

At the market Gertrud bought fine, coloured fabrics. She wanted to found a religion that would also emphasize the pleasant and beautiful sides of life and was not based on pity. She had long white robes with colored appliqués sewn for the priestesses. The future priestesses chosen by her would be assigned to the months and then also alternate monthly in leading the community and each month was given a white robe with colored additions. She herself would wear only a white gown with red borders on the hems. With it she wore the sign of the High Priestess, Anna's pendant with emerald. From her, acquired goldsmith, she had a silver ring made for each of the priestesses with the stone of the month's color. Which was also sometimes, in the absence of a real stone, a colorful, cut glass shard.

Together with Nanina she tried to design the consecration ritual. It was to be a great high time, she knew the term darkly from history. The priestesses would become Nanina's brides. Nanina was given an ankle length white robe with velvet blue borders on the sleeves.

The goldsmith made a silver browband with a gold jewel in the front. Corina and Balda had also been given an important role, they would wear the flowers and were also given a white dress with coloured heels.

Slowly Gertrud ran out of gold and she already had to fear that it would not be enough. But the future priestesses went all out and sold and traded with tremendous vigor to replenish the community coffers. This satisfied Gertrud, as she saw it as a sign that her plan would succeed.

Gertrud discussed the ceremony of the consecration with Nanina. Together, with Gertrud of course contributing most of the ideas, the order of the individual acts was discussed and also rehearsed.

Nanina was only known to the women as one of Gertrud's three girls. A ceremony was planned for this, which at first seemed a little scary to Nanina, but then also made her feel proud. Gertrud was able to convey to her that the revelation of Nanina's secret had to become a ceremony.

*Her life will be radically changed then*, thought Gertrud, and the thoughts arose in her that made her doubt again for a moment. But then she was sure again, it was not only her selfishness and vanity, there was something else outside of her and of greater interest. She rose to the thought of giving men a new religion, which again included heaven. She found it harder and harder to believe that the Son of Mother Earth and Father Sky, as Nanina was to be called by epithet in the future, was only a fiction. She was already firmly convinced that she had been chosen to give humanity a new love.

Then came the day of the consecration ceremony. It was a bright day with scattered fair weather clouds against a blue sky. In the evening they would see the first full moon of spring rising in the western sky. Gertrude had designated the moonrise as the beginning of the ceremony.

Nanina was wearing a plain linen smock and was no different from the two girls in that. They were the only children when the ceremony began. Together they all stood in front of the cave and waited for the moon in the eastern sky. The sun was setting in the western sky.

And then it was time, the moon announced itself with a bright glow over the forest. When the first bright fringe was visible, the women began to sing a chorale. After the full disk was seen, the women, directed by Gertrude, danced a change dance in a circle. Nanina remembered the Solstice celebration; there she had joined in the dancing. Here the children stood aside and watched.

Then the women went into the cave lit by candles. Nanina's heart was up to her neck. Would she also forget nothing with excitement?

In the background, a raised seat with a high back was set up and draped with fabrics. Corina and Balda were given their festive robes by Gertrud. Corina was given a bowl of silver rings and little Balda carried a basket of spring flowers in all the colours that could be found. To the left and right of the walls were two benches, in front of each of which stood six women in their priestly robes.

Nanina stood at the entrance in front of the cave and waited for the sign. Inside, Gertrud gave a speech, or was it already a sermon? Then came the thanks to Mother Earth and Father Sky. As the women all raised their arms upward, Nanina walked slowly through the line of women toward Gertrude. The snatches of thoughts the women picked up puzzled her. They had been promised that

now the Son of Heaven and Earth would appear and now she was coming, the daughter of Gertrude. The thoughts seemed to Nanina like a wave of disbelief and skepticism. Gertrud smiled at her and that restored her courage.

With pathetically holy words she announced the metamorphosis. Then she laid the son's ceremonial robe over the chair and pulled Nanina's plain gown over her head. At a sign from Gertrud the aspiring priestesses went down on their knees. Nanina stood in the perfection of her naked boy's body before the speechless astonished women and moved her outstretched arms towards their heads, then lifted them forward and upwards. Now Gertrud came with the festive robe and slowly slid it down over Nanina. Then she placed the silver circlet with the golden star on her forehead.

Nanina began with the Priestess of January. She walked up to her, accompanied on the left by Corina and on the right by Balda. Behind her stood Gertrud, always intervening a little correcting Balda to place her correctly. Nanina was so excited that Gertrud had to help her a little in choosing the first ring. Nanina took the ring and placed it on the first woman's index finger of her right hand, which was trembling slightly. From the basket of flowers she chose a flower similar to the colored appliqué on the priestess's robe. Nanina took the request for a kiss from her on the mouth. Gertrude had told her that if she sensed any wishes or questions from the priestesses, she should by all means act on them, if it was even possible. If they were impossible requests to grant, Nanina should just smile back. She had even practiced that with Gertrud because it seemed to be important to her.

"You shall have your kiss," Nanina spoke more surely now, and bending to the priestess, caught her by the head with both hands and gave her a fleeting kiss on the mouth. Then, still watching the woman go into a kind of rapture, she turned to the next.

"Yes, I will be the father of your children," Nanina confirmed to the second woman, though it was unclear from Gertrud at first what that meant. At Gertrud's mental prompting, she now gave each woman a kiss.

Nanina confirmed the third priestess' mental question, "We'll travel to the island together and live there in a community."

"No, I'm not a girl," she confirmed to one incredulous doubter. "Yes, Gertrude is the High Priestess, appointed by Mother Earth and Father Sky as their chief representative among men," Nanina answered another question that Gertrude had anticipated and rehearsed and Nanina now answered in her mind. A few of the priestesses got only a smile from Nanina in reply, and then went into a tearful rapture.

Then the feast began. Gertrud, with the help of Nanina and two hired women, had prepared a feast of white poultry meat, white bread, and red wine. She had even found a white tablecloth and three boards which, laid over stones that had now been brought in, made a table for the feast. Each of the newly ordained priestesses was poured red wine from a jug into a cup by Nanina. Then a toast was shared and the atmosphere slowly loosened. Nanina sat to Gertrude's right on the raised seat, with the priestesses of January to June on the left and those of December to July on the right. The girls also sat on the benches to the left and right of the women.

Nanina was suddenly hungry and began to eat slowly and somewhat unsettled. What came now after the consecration ceremony was no longer rehearsed and she had to cope alone with the furtive or even enraptured looks and thoughts of the many women.

With the second cup of red wine, the mood became so euphoric that Gertrud instructed Nanina to go with the two girls to the small estate nearby and sleep there. Five women had a small farm there, whose produce they sold in town. At their place Gertrud had prepared the feast and the night's lodging in the hay barn. Gertrud herself and the children slept in the women's communal room.

The next few days passed in feverish preparations for the journey. The newly ordained priestesses went about their tasks with great enthusiasm. Gertrud knew how to divide the work well. She was proud of her ceremonial success, but had to act quickly. The priestesses were so full of the wonderful things they had experienced at the ceremony that Gertrude feared their mouths would overflow.

Boiling hot, she realized that she had no punitive elements in her religion. Would that go well, wouldn't discipline suffer. Was it punishment enough to be deprived of the benevolence of heaven and earth for not living in harmony with them?

Then rumors began to circulate in the town. In a cave not far from the city there had been an apparition. Gertrud hastened her departure. She had already sent a few women and a priestess ahead to prepare the sailboat for the first trip. From there came word that all was well. Gertrud didn't want to wait any longer, she was getting afraid of the policewomen again. When would they be followed again? It could only be a matter of time. She had to get ahead of it.



### 31 The return of evolution

Six weeks after their arrival at the Templar trading post, Rona and Sika sailed further north. They were to be housed more safely. No one wanted to take any more chances.

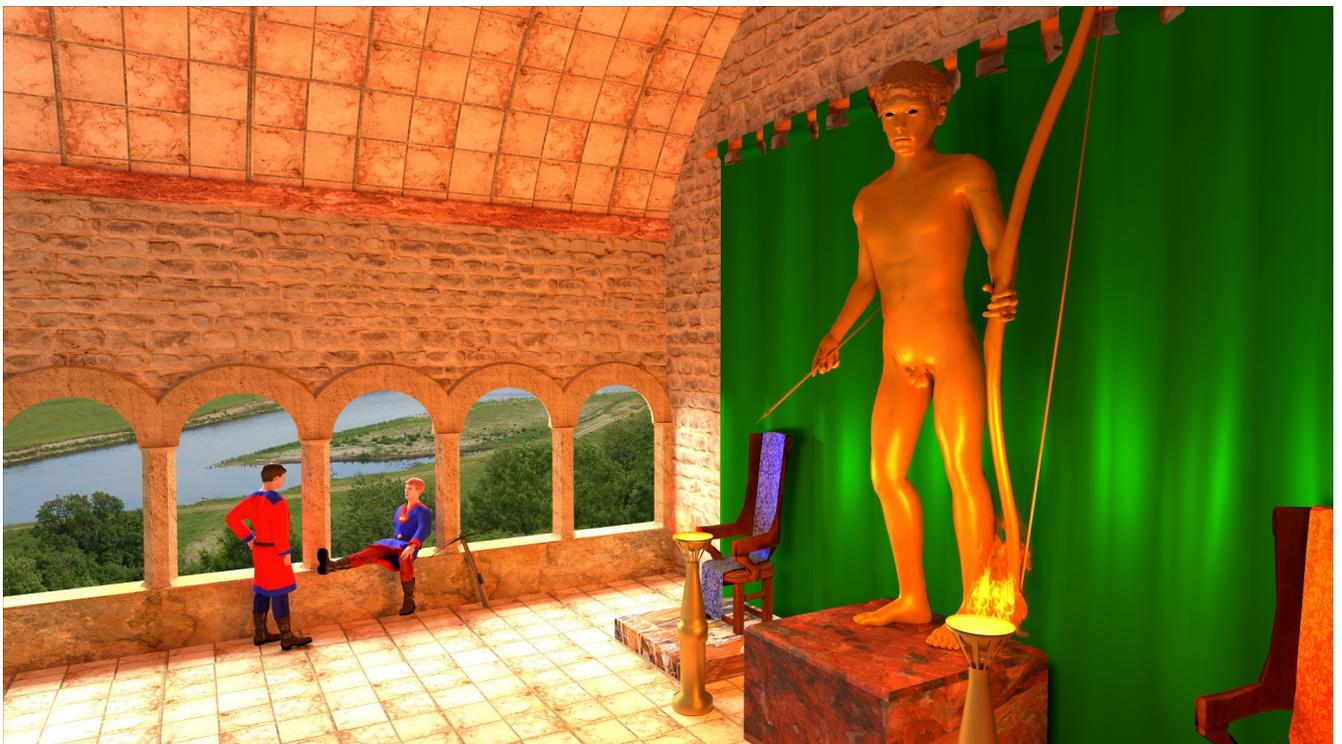
The autumn storms had already started and sailing was not easy. Twice they had to seek shelter in a bay and wait a few days until the sea calmed down a bit. Safety was the overriding principle. Both had become seasick and felt they could neither live nor die. Then at last they left the open sea and sailed through fjords and larger inland lakes until they reached the new town of Alburg. It wasn't a city yet, it was a construction site for now.

For Rona and Sika, a time of training, games and hunting adventures began. They were accommodated and looked after exclusively by the already older Templar women. But there was no lack of new blood for the order. Young women came forward and wanted to join the aims and code of the order. The buildings with their libraries of ancient knowledge were constantly growing.

The city of Alburg, capital of a new territory, grew slowly. The population was constantly changing. While at the beginning there were no babies and toddlers, suddenly there were very many and children's houses had to be built, then later schools and new workshops.

Seba had been the head of the order for many years. What she had not learned from Anna at that time was the fact that more girls were born than boys, and that the boys all showed only ever slight deviations from Rona and Sika, and also had a very long extended youth.

The happy days of the Order of the Templar began. Then Rona and Sika had grown up and a new time for the Order was coming to them from the future.



## 32 The Golden Age

Gertrude and her three children, along with three priestesses and two other women were the first settlers to go to the island. They found an uninhabited land, inhabited only by wild goats, sheep, pigs, and beasts of prey, apparently from once-poaching dogs.

The first shelters were built with the fresh wood from the still abundant forests, spared by the goats, in the sheltered bay of their landing. One of the women had become particularly adept at sailing. She was instructed still further by Gertrude, and made captain. Then she was given a list of the necessary tools that were still missing, and sailed back with a priestess to fetch the next ones.

In autumn, the first village stood on the bay that had been developed into a small harbor. A group of settlers were busy in the interior of the island to build the religious temple center and the first city. Initially, this first temple of love served the reproductive ceremony. Gertrud's fears that it would cause Nanina difficulties and that she would not be able to cope with the new, emotionally difficult situation were unfounded. Nanina was up to the role and she didn't forget about playing and going hunting. Small game was plentiful on the island.

The autumn of the next year was filled with the crying of the first children. Almost as many girls as boys were born. Happy children's play reigned on parts of the island for the next few years. Gertrud made sure in all her planning that the entire island was built in the style of a sanctuary that was in harmony with nature. Then later they would settle the big island as well. Nanina was slowly growing taller. Was she getting older too? Gertrud often asked herself that over the next few years, and her certainty that Nanina was not growing older in the way she knew grew stronger.

Those were the happy years for Gertrud. If the administration of the new kingdom gave her time, she wrote down what old knowledge she could still bring up from her memory. Nanina was always inquisitive and she could teach her everything.



The new children grew up. There were fewer difficulties than Gertrud and the other women knew from their childhood. First houses of the children and then also a temple of knowledge had to be established. Gertrud's transcripts served as background knowledge for the first child caretakers. There was no more hidden knowledge. All children were treated equally and were also very similar

externally and in their motivations and behaviour and it made practically no difference any more whether the child was born a girl or a boy. Gertrud observed everything with great interest and made many notes.

For Gertrud, Nanina and their community, a future began that could be one of the happier ages in human history. How long would this time last?

*Continuation of this novel "2045++ - The Youth of the PANDEAE" on [www.nanina-roman.de](http://www.nanina-roman.de)*