

A person is shown from the chest up, holding a lit candle in a dark setting. The person's face is partially obscured by the candle's glow and the text. The background is dark, and the lighting is warm and focused on the candle and the person's hands.

*Avada
Kedavra*

The Digital Prometheus

Lupius Mohnschein, 19 August 2022.

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Prologue

Once upon a time, when wands weren't invented yet and magic was still untamed and wild, something that could be experienced by everyone, everywhere, without limits ... the air bristled, for it was the beginning of something new, something terrifying ... at the same time, muggles and wizards were still living together, right alongside each other, in a prosperity and harmony that would be unseen for quite some time ...

The wooden stick whizzed through the air, up, down and up again. He held it firmly in his hand, it was graceful how he whirled it around seemingly effortlessly and yet in a controlled manner, forming shapes and then: ... the orchestra began to play. The music in front of him swelled, swelled back, he filled the whole room with vibrations and then gently took them away again. It was a real spectacle the way the old man in front went off. The pointed hat on his head just bounced back and forth, as if possessed by a life of its own. The strings. The winds. Then the timpani. Then the strings again. He drove his orchestra to ever higher volumes and faster speeds. The conductor's baton whirled in ever more grotesque forms, his face was consumed, sweat poured down his back. You would have thought he was playing for his life. Faster and faster. Louder and louder and louder. As if he wanted to personally wake the old gods from their millennia-long slumber.

A few metres behind him, a bored Regent Bloxberg forced herself not to appear as bored as she was. Sitting in the front row, she had a perfect view of his sweaty back view, which, she realised, was dead straight and she instantly straightened her back. "Poor posture leads to concentration problems," she had read in an article the other day and for what she was about to do, she needed all the concentration she could get. She tried to straighten her back a little more, but she couldn't. Perfect. She nervously smoothed out her long purple robe and squinted inconspicuously in the direction of the exit. But there was no one there. No Avada rushing towards her, whispering in her ear that she had succeeded. That it was *done*. No, nobody.

She turned her gaze back to the stage and sighed barely audibly. Instead, it was just this old bag with the silly pointed cap (no idea where they had dug it up), labouring in front of her as if it was his last, and maybe it really was. But rattling off this terribly old-fashioned spherical intermezzo was really nothing special, even if he did manage the ethereal discharges of the violinists quite well, she had to give him that much. It felt like standing in the middle of a magical thunderstorm, but that was certainly not thanks to him, but to the violinists. And the piece was somehow still boring. Next time, she made a mental note to herself, she would Avada, her right hand, come up with an excuse so that she wouldn't even have to turn up. She didn't really have to anyway. Who was she to come to any charity celebrations, even if it was in her honour? No, she didn't need to. She could have turned up here in her evening dress and still had every one of her toes kissed off. This instead. She was putting up with such trivialities?

She suppressed a yawn inconspicuously.

She was the most powerful woman in the cauldron. She would revolutionise the world. She was already on the verge of becoming infinite, while everyone around her would be left behind. She could almost watch them die. It would have been pitiful if it hadn't felt so incredibly good. Of course,

it was most visible in the flailing old man. The passing. It disgusted her. She should be doing infinity. Right at that moment. Instead she looked at her fingernails, under one she spotted a bit of dirt, quickly scraped it off with another fingernail and flicked it to the ground. Hopefully no one had seen it ... but it had happened. She was still mortal. Suddenly she could listen to herself die. It was terrible, even the music couldn't drown it out. She was on the verge of doing it. To cheat death. *Just this one more evening.*

In this respect, music was actually quite nice: it didn't have a fade either. Just like they soon would. In five hundred years' time, people would still find this music soporific. But ... maybe in a thousand years ... but in any case at least in a million years, nobody would know it any more. So there was a difference: they would never be forgotten. People would remember her works for as long as she existed. And above all, they would never get bored of them.

Just as the end seemed near, the old man had taken a few more steps back, now waving his arms almost directly in front of her, and now with such intensity that he was almost foaming at the mouth. Yet he was doing the least amount of work. It was the violinists and timpanists, the woodwind and brass players, who were doing the real work here.

Finally, she thought she heard something, something in the nature of the room seemed to have changed. It could only be ... it was always like that with her ... she faked a cough as she looked around inconspicuously to reassure herself and sure enough: stooping low, someone was walking through the rows. A relieved throb ran through her body. It was Avada. Yes, it really was her. She turned her gaze forwards again, not daring to breathe.

She heard her take a seat behind her and whisper in her ear what she had been waiting weeks for: *it's done*. But she did not react immediately, she remained motionless. Avada came a little closer so that the regent could smell her perfume, just as she wanted. Slowly, the day began to unfold to her liking: *It is done, Regent* she heard it once more. She closed her eyes. And then she stood up too, not even bothering to bend down or be inconspicuous in any other way, walking past the gaping masses unimpressed, not returning a glance, casually taking off her black gloves in the room and throwing them aside so that they landed clapping on the floor.

As she glanced back over her shoulder at the door into the corridor, she was pleased to see that everyone had turned round, except the poor old man. Abandoned by his audience, he whipped his orchestra to unprecedented heights without anyone noticing. She smiled. She liked him.

When no one could finally see her, she began to run through the dark corridors of the castle, where skulls smiled encouragingly at her from oriel windows. Anyone else would have looked round, but not her. She was not afraid. Never. But even she had to take safety precautions.

She closed her eyes and mumbled something, almost silently, and then the skulls behind her began to go out, one by one. She left corridors of darkness behind her. No one was allowed to follow her. Avada and she had separated, as they always did. They never left a building together. She had certainly taken similar precautions. The lamp thing was a classic, of course. It was effective and ... she also liked the idea: that the light followed her. That it almost seemed as if she *was* the light, leaving only darkness behind her.

The carriage was already waiting outside. She got in and breathed heavily. She had made it. Now she just had to wait for Avada. She peeked through the screen of the window and saw a black figure approaching the carriage. It was Avada. Panting, she took a seat next to her, spoke the magic word and then the carriage started moving abruptly.

She bent down to Avada and she handed her a handkerchief to wipe her forehead.

"Did you bring it?" she said gently but firmly.

"Yes," Bibi replied and pulled it out of her coat, exhausted. It was a black crystal, pulsating with energy.

Her servant took it immediately, suddenly almost shaking. The future. Their future. Suddenly, it would all be possible now.

"You haven't used it yet, have you?", Bibi interrupted, sensing her nervousness and excitement.

"No, Bibi ..."

"I know ... it's just", She was crying now, they were both crying. Everything they had worked so long for. In the shadow of the others. In everyone's shadow.

She pulled out the device, holding it between them. Bibi's eyes grew wide. It was long and completely black, shimmering in the light of the ceiling lantern. She reached for it, but her servant drew it away from her, smiling. Playfully, she weighed it in her hand. It was heavy, but the handle distributed the weight well.

Avada's eyes widened.

"Can I touch it?", said Bibi.

"Of course." She handed her the black metal thing, "but be careful."

It was cool, almost like ice, Bibi thought.

"I would have thought it to be ... heavier. It's like a thing for child's toy", she said and as she had not even finished the last word, Avada had already taken it away from her again.

"A toy? You mean ... like this?" She threw it in the air and caught it with the broad front, stabbed it in the air in front of her. Then she laughed.

"It feels good."

"Yes," said Bibi, laughing briefly too, she was suddenly afraid. Avada could get cocky sometimes. Especially in moments of absolute happiness. There was something about her. The two of them. Death and happiness, just a few blinks of an eye away from each other.

"Come on, let's get a grip on yourself," said Bibi urgently, "give it back to me."

She reached for it, but Avada pulled it away from her.

"Are you kidding me? This is going to change the world? This," she leant forward, "is the key."

"Yes, yes, I know." She had one of her moods. It was excitement. She let it take her too far. Once again, Bibi shifted. Avada, unlike her, hadn't gotten used to controlling her impulses yet. If she ever would. It had been a mistake... She should never have shared her curse with her. And yet: the unexpected side effects that the partial merging of their two Ether bodies had brought with it ... they

always surprised her anew. Even now, she could see everything that was going on in Avada's head. But what she saw frightened her.

"Come on, *please*. Let's put it away again, Avada. You ..."

"What?"

"You're not well."

"Me? I feel great!"

"Okay. But give it to me anyway."

"Why?" Her face became distorted with anger for a moment. Then her eyes widened. "Or ... you know what else might be just as good?"

"No, what?" the regent clenched between her teeth, she wanted to reach forward, try to take it from her, instead she clawed her fingernails into her arms. She couldn't try it again. It was too dangerous.

"A world of peace ... completely without humans. Just the two of us!"

"What? Are you completely stupid ..."

She grabbed it and pulled it out of her hand. Avada laughed. "Just kidding..." she said and reached for it again, but Bibi held against it. "Avada!" Then suddenly, everything jolted, the carriage made a leap, Bibi felt something snap under her fingers and she cursed. Cursed her lover, in her own language, like she had done so many times before. Wished her dead because she was the reason she was no longer with her family, could not be with them, when it was actually her that was the reason for her separation; she and only she and her shortcomings. A curse escaped her mouth. Had they really broken it? Then a loud bang, followed by green fire right in front of her, the heat was unbearable. It was as if it was all over her face too. Startled, she felt it, but it was all still there ... then a pungent smell hit her nose and she realised her friend had fallen to the ground in front of her. She lifted her up and turned her round. Her face was without any mark of harm, but all life had left her.

But she held her anyway, held her until she had become completely cold and stiff, and didn't let go even then.

The whole journey.

"Mrs Bloxberg. We're here," she heard the driver at the door, heard his gentle knock.

"Hello? Mrs Bloxberg?"

She switched off the voice. It only distracted her. She pressed her closer to her again, listened inside herself, tried to follow the feeling she usually followed when she wanted to be close to her. *Avada? Are you there?* But there was nothing. Just a huge hole that swallowed everything inside her.

Part I - How To Hex My Boyfriend's Phone

Fry two orange slices, 8 minutes on each side,

Cut out the flesh and hang the orange slices around your ears, one around each ear and don't sneeze! Do not sneeze under any circumstances!

Prepare a pot of black tea, better to steep it too long than too short,

Just when it is about to turn bitter, stir it once with a thin twig, then again in the other direction, it doesn't matter which direction first, the main thing is first one way and then the other,

Find a quiet spot, preferably in the countryside, a pond surrounded by birch trees, a clearing in the forest or a quiet riverbank,

The best places are usually very close by, you'll see,

When you have found it, make yourself comfortable in the way that seems most natural to you,

Drink the tea without haste and try to memorise your surroundings as best you can, taking them in with all your senses,

Stand in the centre of it all and start to move, do whatever comes into your head, don't think about it, let your movements flow like a stream that flows quietly without thinking about where it is going.

And then: start witching.

(Excerpt from "Great Almanac of Witchcraft, Chapter 1: Warm-up rituals for mobile phone hexes")

Chapter 1

We flew along, me and my horse Frederick, past the fir trees of the Finsterforst, over the great trade route and then finally into the open countryside, a sea of green pastures before us. We simply ploughed through it as if it were nothing. The wind tore at my hair and in a moment of exuberance I untied it with a quick grip, letting the wind whirl it around. It tore at them impetuously, whirling them into my face as I pressed myself close to Frederick's neck, feeling his heartbeat, feeling his soft fur against my cheeks. I opened my eyes again. Below me, I could see the powerful hooves of my gelding tearing large chunks out of the earth. And all this power was in my hands. It was the best feeling.

I straightened up again and steered Frederick in a different direction.

Lately I've had the urge more and more often to just ride away, to let him take control, to see where he would take me. Hopefully as far away from here as possible ... but it was nothing but a daydream. I would be leaving soon anyway. To some boring university. I would start a degree there that would benefit my family and then return here to serve the house.

But even if I were to take my life into my own hands. If I really decided to run away. If I had the opportunity to leave my family behind and go where I've always wanted to go. I wouldn't know where that would be. If I was completely honest about what I wanted to do after school, I just wanted to ride horses and hunt monsters. Preferably all day long.

What a strange time. School was over and now something happened that I hadn't expected at all: I had to decide what I wanted to be. It had all happened so quickly. But I could still get away from it all. Just like that. Run off with someone, anyone I was interested in but didn't actually know. Like in all those books about princesses and their handsome princes from my father's library ... And then I had a second dream. That Ti, the prince of the neighbouring kingdom, would be this man. And I had the feeling that he would actually go everywhere with me.

And even if that wasn't the case, when I looked out over the endless land as I had just done, it really seemed possible that I could make it on my own. Just me and Frederick. The princess of today is herself. I leant forwards and rode a little faster, breathing in the cold air deeply. Nothing confined you here. And why should it be anywhere else? The world was literally open to me. Why shouldn't I ride off straight away and discover it?

And besides, even if *he* didn't come with me, I could always write to him. If I had reception ...

Then I remembered why I had actually come here.

I started rummaging around in my shoulder bags, finally found what I was looking for and held it high above me with my arm stretched towards the sky: my mobile phone.

Only occasionally did I give my horse instructions now, he knew exactly that I let him run free as long as he didn't overdo it, because I was busy with something else: in my right hand the shining something that separated me from the backwoodsmen of my family and connected me to the world, fresh from the witchcraft it reflected the sunlight in its silvery glow as if I carried the mere light in my hand, and yet: *no reception*.

I waited a while until we had reached another part of the pasture, tried again without success. Then I saw a rocky outcrop on a hill.

I tucked my mobile phone into the inside of my dress and gave Frederick the spurs, then very carefully, I walked with him to the edge of the hill, the slope going steeply down beside me, slowly stood up in my crampons and held the mobile phone as far up as I could. If not here, then where? But it was no use: I had no reception. I had. None. Reception.

What a load of crap. These shitty southern countries.

I trotted round in circles for a while longer without success, climbed a hill, tried the stone statues that supposedly contained so much magic, but no luck there either. I groaned in exasperation, got off Frederick, took out my sword and slashed furiously at a nearby bramble bush.

I then cleaned it carefully in the grass. Dark blue juice dripped from the blade.

It was typical once again. Typical Southland. The shitty patch of earth where I grew up. Nothing worked here. People did everything by hand here. My father said: *Yes, yes. The good old labour. People still do work by hand here.* I couldn't listen to his jokes any more. Nobody here wanted to know anything about magic. Him least of all. And it would stay that way for the next 1000 years, I was sure of it. While the rest of the world took off, I rode my horse and searched for reception. Was this what the future looked like?

I scowled and put my sword back and mounted my horse again. "Sometimes you'd think we were still living in the Middle Ages," I thought and praised myself for my own cool sarcasm, which I had been cultivating for so long now. And somehow it was true: magic hadn't really arrived here yet. It was exasperating. But witchcraft wasn't needed here. No, far too modern. Dangerous. *Evil.*

I thought all this while I felt the wind in my face again and it swept away my displeasure.

"*Oh, how I love riding!*" I thought, "I should actually ride away just to be able to do that all day.

I soon came to a mountain, looking into the distance (no reception here either, of course), but at least with a nice view. And back there, above the mountains, behind the miserable towns and shabby villages, was Ti, my prince, king of sarcasm, and perhaps soon also a famous stand-up comedian, as he dreamed of being, but only self-deprecatingly, of course. Hach. He was so cool.

He lived there. In the Notnagel house. They were just as Neanderthal as my family, of course. All of them, except him. He was the only Southerner I would describe as progressive. Apart from me, of course. Even beyond that, we had all sorts of things in common. He read books, he was heir to the throne in the last, but also the very last row - just like me.

We were both on the bench when it came to the succession to the throne, useless in principle, just breathing air, wasting money to study useless things at some distant university, all that was the same with us! Two poor souls, ignored by the world, that's what we were! Always with an ironic saying on our lips and yet only in search of a little happiness, a meaning in life! Oh dear, oh dear. And what's more, and perhaps that was the best thing: he secretly practised witchcraft. In the Southlands! As a man! When that was already frowned upon by women.

I didn't know what he was doing it for, but it was certainly very exciting. He had told me the other day during the break when the mistress had left us alone. We were both getting private lessons together, a diplomatic gesture from the two houses that was probably meant to work towards future bonds, but which me and Ti had already overridden with ice-cold calculation. *If* our parents were thinking of setting us up, they had bet on the wrong young adults. We'd take all the knowledge we could get here like ravenous wolves. Oh, we would learn, and how. We would take what we could get and then demand more. And we wouldn't even think about gently stroking each other's hands under the table. No, we would be ambitious and attentive, even if it drove our parents crazy!

That's why, and because of both our impossible chances of taking the throne, we both decided to study painting. As the second stage of our small but aesthetically staged rebellion with the help of social media. Neither of us could even make a brushstroke. It was madness, madness I say! Or at least that's how we had hoped it would be! But in fact neither of our families had given a damn. My sister, the future monarch, had just shrugged her shoulders and even wished me good luck afterwards. Of course! And why not? As long as we left the heirs in the good seats alone!

I looked at my mobile phone. Suddenly I actually had reception. For a fraction of a second, a few small bars appeared at the top of the display. My heart skipped a beat. But then came the bitter realisation: no new messages. Not even one. Fuck. *Fuck fuck fuck*. What a fucking world. What a shitty, shitty world.

I would have loved to have written to him. I had told him about it. Had he not written to me out of politeness? Surely he hadn't seriously believed that I would talk to the *guests at* my sister's coronation?

But the thought gave me a little comfort for the moment. I put it away and set off back on my horse without rushing. They probably hadn't even realised I was gone ... as usual ...

Chapter 2

When I arrived in front of our castle, I thought I couldn't believe my eyes: they were all there. They *were waiting?* For *me*? In fact, my mum came up to me excitedly. Had my sister refused the crown? In House Durmstrang, my house, the crown was given to the next heir to the throne on her twenty-first birthday. What if she refused? Would I succeed her prematurely? Would my moment come after all? And if it did, would I accept the crown? Of course I would! I would not neglect my duty like her! Never. I had to smile involuntarily, but my mum didn't even look me in the eye, pulling me gruffly by the hand behind her.

"Man, Bianka, where *have* you been? We've been waiting for you the whole time - for the *family photo!*"

I should have known. Smile once and then I could disappear again because of them. That's how much I was worth to my family.

I thought I could at least get it over with quickly, but I had bet without my family's backwardness: they had actually taken one of those huge cameras out of the cellar for the family photo. I probably would have taken a better photo with my mobile phone ...

However, there was one good thing about it: the thing could only take one photo per hour.

After that, we scattered like opposing magnets and my job for the day was done, so to speak. I lingered around the cake buffet for a while out of good will, without any of the people around me even noticing me. One even pressed an empty wine glass into my hand as if I were some runaway servant! My sister, on the other hand: surrounded, courted, fought over. Everyone wanted to get to know her. Three boys immediately offered her a hand to help her across the muddy grass. None of the boys even gave me a glance. If I had fallen down, they would probably have just walked over me.

I'd better go and feed my horse, I thought, and turned my back on the annoying lickspittles.

I slowly groomed the coat of my bay gelding. I didn't have to do anything to please Frederick. Just be there. He accepted me for who I was. But a horse as a friend was also rather difficult.

Oh, if only Ti had answered ... Why didn't he come? He knows how hard this stuff is for me. You just can't rely on boys.

I wandered around restlessly, watching my relatives stuff themselves with tonnes of cake. I watched the party crowd and mentally ticked off the houses that had come. All of the neighbouring kingdoms were there. Except for one. Maybe Ti hadn't just not turned up after all. None of his family was there, and no wonder: his house and mine were at odds. Our private lessons were the last band, and only because no one was interested in us.

I was about to check my mobile phone again when my mother suddenly came up to me. I didn't know what hit me.

"So, how's it going?"

"Good..." I said suspiciously. None of them had said a word to me for weeks and now this? Well, I'd also made myself pretty scarce ... maybe I should give her a chance.

"Yes, really great," I added and immediately regretted it.

"It's not too bad for you, is it?"

"Oh, no. Of course not. I'm happy for her."

"You know, this is as much a celebration for you as it is for her."

I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Mum. I know that I'm on the bench in the family tree. But that's not a bad thing. I'm totally okay with it. Really."

She sighed.

"Bianka, you're clever. Smarter than your sister. You know that and it wasn't always easy for her. But she'll be a better queen than you. You'll study somewhere, you'll have a great life and you won't have to worry about anything. Maybe one day you'll give something back to the kingdom, but your sister will do the real work. And that's great, the tradition of the house wants it that way. And yet there will be things, duties, that are expected of you in return."

I frowned at him. I didn't like the way the conversation was going at all.

"Yes," I said hesitantly, "and of course I will do that too ... when the day comes ..."

"Yes," she interrupted me curtly, "there's one thing you can do for us now."

"Okay. And what?"

So she hadn't just spoken to me like that after all ... at the same time, I couldn't wait to see what they wanted from me ...

"You're with Prinzen von Haus Notnagel, aren't you?"

"What, no ..."

"You were seen disappearing into the haylofts of the south wing."

"Yeah, well no, we're ... friends."

Man, she really had her spies everywhere ...

"That's just as good. We want you to hack into his mobile phone."

"Excuse me?" I said, and then very quietly, "*Witchcraft?*" I looked round. What would the others think? But no one was paying any attention to us.

Witchcraft was frowned upon in the south, there were virtually no witches here, just a few who roamed the woods like vagrants, stirring up abortifacients and contraceptives for the people, for which they were loathed by the lords and ladies of the land, and although they were no longer persecuted, they were prevented from doing their work in the best possible way.

"We don't have to whisper. Everyone knows. So does your father. In fact, it was his idea that you could do it."

"Mum. I *can't* do witchcraft."

She made a discarding motion.

"Of course you can. You're clever. You can do all this mobile phone stuff much better than we can," she smiled at me, "you always don't trust yourself enough."

She laughed, patted me on the shoulder and looked around searchingly. All of a sudden, everyone in the neighbourhood was looking at us, smiling benevolently, some even nodding encouragingly at me. But it seemed artificial. It was very creepy and I quickly turned away.

"No, that's something *completely* different. I can install apps for you, but *witchcrafting someone's mobile phone* ... that's for real witches. I-I wouldn't even know where to start ..."

'Bianka,' she interrupted me gently, '*please*. It's an emergency. The fate of our house depends on it. We need you. So ... can we count on you?'

I swallowed. The gods had answered my prayers. My house was interested in me. But what do the scholars say? *Be careful what you wish for* ...

"Yes, but ... I've never done it before. Do you know how complicated it is?"

"Can't you just watch something on the Ethernet?"

"Mum..."

I saw fear flit across her face for a moment, but then her features hardened. She straightened her back and turned her gaze to something behind me, probably so she wouldn't have to look me in the eye.

"I and your father won't stand for any backtalk on this," she said, all warmth gone from her voice, "I've always been a tolerant, open-minded mum. When those mobile phones started coming out everywhere I said she'd be fine with it. I trusted you. Now it's like that again. You're going to do it. We need the information. We think House Notnagel is planning a war against us. And rumours say they want to use witchcraft against us. We need certainty. We want your prince to have something to do with it."

I snorted, now almost amused at how *worried* she was. "Ti would never do that. And he's not *my* prince. It makes no sense at all. His house has no grounds for it and besides ... there are no weapons of witches. It goes against their code ... should I go on?"

"Witches and codex? Don't tell me fairy tales. And about your friend: we have internal sources that say the opposite. You're up to something."

I exhaled slowly. I was about to burst. *The war, the war, that's all they ever care about. They didn't see the people behind it at all. They were all just pawns in their game.*

"No, that can't be. I just spoke to Titus yesterday and he assured me that next week ..."

"No time for long discussions, Bianka. It's an emergency. We don't even have hours. So are you going to do it or not? Can your house count on your support?"

"I ... yeah, sure. Of course, Mum. The house can count on me."

"Fine."

We can only see the truth with our eyes closed. A great coat of arms, really, a great house that has taken up the cause of not having a clear view. Really great, Mum. And now I have to take the rap for it all. No wonder if our house goes under, I'll kill us all ...

"Is what?"

"No, no. I will do my best. Long live House Durmstrang."

"Long live House Durmstrang."

I curtseyed mockingly and left, shaking my head.

In my room, I opened my laptop and entered *how to hex my boyfriend's phone* in the search field.

Chapter 3

I pressed search and it took and took. I tilted the laptop, held it up in the direction of the Wi-Fi and groaned in exasperation. Even that was useless in these parts of the country. The devices were ancient and my father had strictly forbidden me from downloading updates to the witchcraft on them. So I would need books ... but books about witchcraft? Here? In the south? Well, that could be fun ... no, I couldn't do without Ethernet.

I went up one room to the attic and climbed out of the window onto the roof, where I often went to download stuff. Of course, you could forget about the Wi-Fi here, but ... Yes! I actually had reception! Probably the only place in all the kingdoms of the southlands with reliable reception! I connected my mobile phone to my laptop and was finally able to access the Ethernet.

How to hex my boyfriend's phone

There were of course a million results, but find something that works and doesn't involve starting a war with all the neighbouring kingdoms.

I finally just went to one side. It looked terribly illegal, I could feel sweat running down my back.

I scrolled further down.

Aha, here: how to hack a mobile phone to get information. Perfect. Too perfect?

I read the first sentence and a shiver ran down my spine: *the first thing you need is a bucket of fresh pig's blood.*

It really did say that. I read it again and my eyes flitted over the next instructions with increasing panic.

No, not like that.

No. That couldn't be the only way.

I closed the tab, stood up, held on to the staff of the ferns of our house that fluttered above me in the wind and looked out over the landscape, but clouds separated me from the kingdom of my prince.

Then I sat down again, opened the browser and searched again.

Chapter 4

Half an hour later, I typed in *How to hex your boyfriend's phone* for what felt like the thousandth time. *I wondered* what kind of people are even looking for something like this? And above all: who was posting articles about this online? I felt very wicked and started surfing in incognito mode to be on the safe side, even though I knew it wouldn't help.

There were an incredible number of results and I didn't even know where to start.

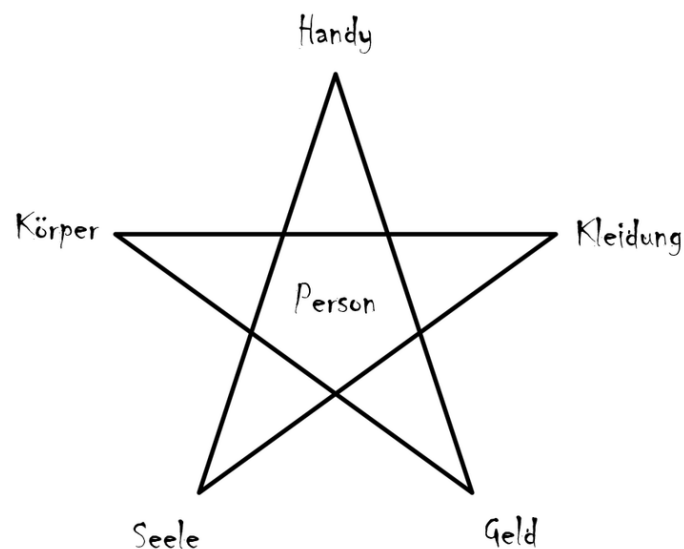
There were long sayings that you were supposed to read out loud and do something else at the same time. My God. They wanted you to smear your feet with margarine in the meantime ... well, if I asked Farmer Hans, he always had butter with him ... or did it *have to* be margarine specifically?

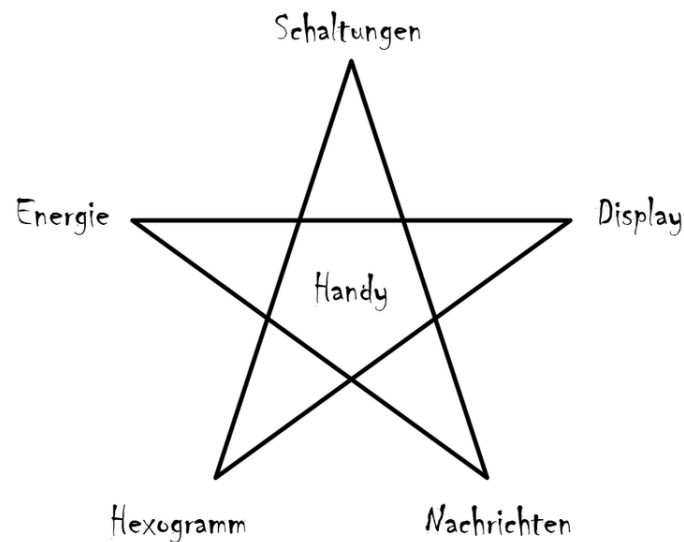
I went to the next article.

There was a text here that was written a bit strangely. It said "*Elder*" in brackets underneath. I looked it up on Wikipedia. *Elder* was apparently one of the most widespread *witch dances* ever. *Elder*. Strange name. But apparently used by the smallest coven around the corner to global players like the Bloxberg coven ...

And the text that had to be spoken even looked relatively understandable apart from the wooden phrasing. And the dance moves were downright minimalist. And *that* would work?

There were also a few scary looking drawings that I couldn't read no matter how many times I looked at them.





They seemed to list the objects involved. Was this really witchcraft or voodoo? Hard to say. How were you supposed to find *anything* here if you had no idea what it all meant? This could just as well be murder rituals, as little as I understood. What was I doing here? I had no idea. I didn't want to hurt him under any circumstances ...

But I didn't have much time left. And the text under the symbols actually looked relatively simple and it didn't say anything about killing. Perhaps this *Elder*-dance was a real stroke of luck ...

I could try it out first. Just dance a little first and then see. I could always try the margarine later.

So I climbed down from the roof, scrambled quickly back to my room, made a quick note of the text, exchanged a few words so that it would work for my prince and whizzed off to my father's wing.

On the way, I checked the page again to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

I read the first sentence before the dance, which I had previously overlooked, and stopped.

Crap. Something essential was still missing.

I needed something from him.

It was clearly written there. I needed something that normally belonged to his body and I had to hold it in my hand during the dance. How could I have missed that? And where on earth was I supposed to get something from him so quickly? I looked at the page again. They recommended taking a hair of the sacrifice. "Of the sacrifice." The word sent a shiver down my spine and a dull feeling spread through the pit of my stomach, but I pushed the thought aside.

You might think that it had become impossible to perform the dance quickly. I would never get anything from my honourable prince that quickly. But the thing was, I already had something. He had given me something that showed a part of his body in all its detail because I had never replied to his pictures. He had had his *portrait taken* especially for me. I wasn't one to make too much of a fuss about it - I had actually wanted to burn it straight away, but without giving it much thought I'd ended up letting it disappear into a drawer where I hadn't taken it out or put anything else in, and where it must still be at that moment.

It was only a photo, but as I soon found out, pictures were enough to make the witches' dance work. You just had to concentrate more. I rushed back to my room. To the desk. It wasn't even a handle away, but I hesitated briefly.

Then I pulled out the drawer. There it actually was. I picked it up and looked at it again. It certainly wasn't a beautiful specimen. At best you could call it unique, but that would be the height of nice words. How had I felt when he had sent it to me? When I had very slowly, full of expectation, broken the seal and opened the letter with his name on it in handwritten letters?

I stood up, folded the paper and tucked it inside my dress. I couldn't even think about not doing it. My family's future depended on it. It was ironic. He had given me a gift and sealed his fate and mine, but probably in a different way than he had intended.

I wiped a tear away.

Admittedly, Ti was a bit of an asshole too, but he was pretty much my best friend. I couldn't hurt him, even if I wanted to want to. I couldn't.

I walked quickly up the stairs of my tower towards my father's wing of the building. I was even a little proud. I would save my house. And Ti would still be friends with me. He would get over it, maybe he wouldn't even know about it, maybe we would laugh together again at class next week. Whether that would also take place in wartime ... I wouldn't be surprised. "Definitely," I said to myself. I felt the paper of the picture cold against my skin as I made my way through the draughty passageways, lowering my gaze guiltily to the guards. In the end, I touched it to make sure it was still there or just a trick of my senses. It was still there. I exhaled with relief.

I would do it. I would do it and then everything would be exactly as it was.

Chapter 5

I knocked on his door. Nothing.

Of course, the crowning glory.

I walked across the yard, running now.

He was already coming towards me from a distance.

"Father, I've got it."

"Very good. Come on, or where shall we do it?"

"Why not here?"

"Um. No. It's witchcraft."

"All right ... what do you suggest?"

"Best in the hall of mirrors. In the witches' cage."

"Dad..."

"It's just a precaution, nothing more, I promise."

"I'm not a witch ... Mum said ..."

"I know, but there's no harm in being careful. We won't lock it either. Okay?"

"Mmh-mh, okay ..."

"Do you need anything else?"

I thought about it. "I'd need another sheet," he looked at me questioningly and I sighed, "for the information, Dad. It has to be *written down* somewhere."

"Oh, right, of course. I'll have one delivered straight away. Go on ahead."

I put up with it, it was only for this one time. I watched as they dragged the huge cage into the room. It was strangely distorted by the mirrors on the walls, I climbed in, I could see myself on the walls everywhere, like the witch I was now. But it wasn't for long and of course it wasn't bad at all. The cage was so old that it probably didn't help against anything anyway ... any three-year-old could see that. What hicks we southerners were. Still, I couldn't get my legs to stop shaking.

I tried to calm myself down. I had used the text from the net. Nothing could really happen. I would hex his mobile phone and that would be it. Nothing would happen and then everything would be fine again. I started to stretch. Sure, real witches don't do that, but you never know. I wanted to delay it even longer, but at the same time I wanted to finally get it over with.

But what if it went wrong? In my head, the page from which I got the slogan suddenly no longer looked serious at all, it had tentacle arms, text moved when you clicked on it. But that didn't have to mean anything, did it? Why hadn't I done more research ...

They closed the door with a loud bang, but didn't lock it as we had agreed. I wouldn't have cared either.

I held the photo between the fingers of my left hand, in the other the sheet that one of my father's servants had handed me between the bars.

The whole family had come to see it. They all looked at me. There was no turning back. I had to do it now. It was even a little comforting. It was out of my control now.

I took a deep breath, then walked through the confined space of the cage, trying as best I could to imitate the steps described, which was more difficult than I thought in the narrow thing, and said in a voice quivering with excitement, my eyes on the picture: "For all objects of the universe: if you are this prince here," I concentrated more on the picture, on the strange shape, the front area where the skin seemed to be stretched far too tightly, I imagined pressing it firmly with my fingers, "give me your arm. If there's a mobile phone: tell me all the last messages you wrote. Banish them to this sheet."

And then I stamped on the floor and waited, opening my eyes.

Had it worked? A spark of pride blossomed in my chest.

Then the floor began to vibrate.

One thought: that's not how it was in the tutorial. I had done everything *exactly* like that!

In the corner of my eye, I saw a lamp fly across the room, crash into one of the mirrors and break it into shards. And when the shards fell to the floor, something appeared behind them: a hole. A purple, almost black hole.

"Stop," I shouted and stamped my foot on the floor, but it didn't stop, it just got worse. Things were now flying towards the hole from everywhere. I kept stomping, but only more and more objects flew through the air and the hole got bigger, starting to break more and more mirrors around it. Was I making it worse? I stood rooted to the spot, not daring to take another step. But it didn't stop.

I noticed from the sidelines how panic had broken out around me, how people were shouting at me, rattling the cage, but all I could pay attention to was the hole, which was getting bigger and bigger and could be seen on all the mirrors that were left.

Now it tore away half a wall, swallowing it inside, and I suddenly saw a few of my relatives being pulled in. I looked to the side and saw my father holding on to a pillar to resist the forces pulling at him as I was thrown against the wall of the cage and blackness filled my field of vision.

When I woke up later to a noise, I was still in the cage. I didn't even know where I was at first.

It was dark, only the full moon shone down on me. I was alone, everything was destroyed. The whole castle, nothing was left standing. Just me in my witch's cage. I rattled the bars, kicked them, called for help until I remembered that the door wasn't locked.

I opened the door, took a step over the rubble, but no longer felt like I could walk properly. My body and mind were separated. I felt completely empty. I felt nothing. My legs kept walking, but not because I wanted to.

I staggered to the stable, of which only the remains were still standing, but in the distance I saw Frederick, my faithful horse, who had gone to sleep in the pasture. I called him, but he didn't come, as if even he knew what I had done. But when I approached him, he let me sit on him. I gratefully felt his warmth beneath me and felt life return to my body.

At least one ... but no, no, don't think in that direction now ...

I looked up. The night was still long, there was no light or sound. The sky seemed to be filled with clouds of light.

I gave him the spurs and rode, rode, until the sun's rays warmed my face again, until I could take no more and fell asleep into a restless, dreamless sleep.

(Song suggestion to round off the first part: Suzi Wu - Teenage Witch)

Part II - How To Start Your Own Coven

*We don't witch frogs,
we don't eat rats,
we don't tell the future,
we don't tend the garden,*

*We are witches,
we are the ones who eat asparagus,
never change jobs
and tip
ginger shots into our bagged soups,*

(Excerpt from "Great Almanac of Witchcraft, Chapter 2: Opening words for the founding of a coven")

Chapter 1

I woke up the next morning in the mud of a pond. Frederick was drinking next to me and whinnying happily. I must have fallen off him. I looked round. Where was I? ... inside my clothes I found my mobile phone, which was fortunately waterproof. Still in the mud, I checked it. No battery. Crap. Of course I didn't have a charging cable with me.

I looked round. I saw a village in the near distance. I struggled out of the mud, made a makeshift adjustment to my dress, mounted Frederick and trotted slowly towards it.

It was small, poor and the houses were so close together that you'd think they were protecting each other from impending disaster. *Fuck*. Where had I ended up *here*?

The people I met looked at me with hostility. Did I look that bad? I quickly looked down at myself. I was a little dirty, but everything else was still in place and I didn't have any wounds. You shouldn't make such a fuss.

I wouldn't get a charging cable here, that much was certain ... so I headed straight for the bar, I needed something to drink.

I tied Frederick to a nearby tree. With one hand on the sword hilt, I stepped inside.

The light was bad, I could already smell in the bar that I wouldn't be given a drink, even though I was the only customer. Hostility made the air so thick you could have cut it.

I tried it anyway: "A glass of whiskey."

The barman grunted.

"What is it?"

He did not react.

"Hello? I'm talking to you."

He wrinkled his nose. I didn't believe it. Did he know who he was talking to? I would have him tarred and feathered, then quartered and whipped ...

"You stink to high heaven," he spat at me and added: "The Durmstrang house ... someone is said to have razed it to the ground. They say it was a witch ..."

That couldn't be true ... no, I wouldn't say razed to the ground and anyway ... stories couldn't possibly travel that fast with the bad Ethernet here ... what was he trying to say? He didn't seriously mean that I ...

I must have given him an evil look, because his face suddenly became fearful and he touched an iron cup that was standing next to him. A typical gesture to ward off magic. He wasn't serious ...

"Listen, man ... I'm from the House of Durmstrang. I survived ..."

He frowned, something moved in his face.

"I've seen the pictures. They're everywhere. How could you have survived *that*?"

He held something out to me, held it as far away from him as he could. It was a mobile phone. I walked closer and involuntarily sobbed, there was my home, in ruins. I hadn't remembered it being that bad ... were they really ... all dead? No, they were just gone, in the other dimension ... just a spell away ...

"I..." *I was in the witch's cage*, I wanted to say, but I lost my balance for a moment and stumbled back a step. "Erm, well..."

"Please ..." he said hastily, "just leave my village in peace. Ride on, and then everything will be fine. I didn't see you, okay?"

His face was pleading. He was really scared. "Please?" he asked again. It was so pathetic. I turned round and felt that I could no longer hold back the tears. With a few steps I was out in the light, blinking through the tears and finding my way to Frederick, pulling myself up by him and riding away, riding until the tears had stopped.

During the next break, when I had to go into the bushes, I realised that I really did stink. I washed myself and my clothes in the stream, did my hair again and looked at myself in the water. Then I went to Frederick and inspected the little equipment I had with me. It was almost nothing, but luckily I always had my sturdy clothes handy in Frederick's saddlebag, just in case I needed to get away from them again and even putting on my riding clothes would have meant too many moments in their sphere of influence. I put them on and looked at myself in the water.

People knew me from social media. But not like this. They knew me in lace and ruffles, leg-length dresses and braided pigtails, surrounded by my dazzling relatives. They wouldn't recognise me. Perfect.

All of a sudden a strong wind came up and blew the dampness of the lake into my face and for the first time since yesterday I was filled with something like joy, a sense of optimism, even if I felt guilty about it at the same time.

But there was nothing I could do about it: I was someone completely different. The woman in the water that I had always hidden from the world had now become me. She had surfaced. I would be

able to start again as her. I was free. What would my family think if I brought her back? Because that's what I would do! I would become the greatest witch in the kingdoms of Walpurgis and bring her back. Then everything would be good again and at the same time everything would be completely different. Nothing would be the same as before.

I cheerfully mounted Frederick and galloped off.

Chapter 2

As hunger set in during the day, my foolhardy plan to save my family took a back seat.

I spent the rest of the day wandering around the western Southlands in search of food and the possibility of forgiveness. Both with rather modest success. But I finally found a charging cable!

I rode past a farmer who was using it as a rope for his hat, which he had tied around his head. I swapped his "worthless rubber rope." for three of my hemp ropes. He could hardly believe his luck. He gleefully threw my ropes through the air and taunted and mocked me when he thought he was a safe distance away. At least someone within a radius of 100 kilometres now liked me. Slowly but surely, the tide was turning in my favour!

Overjoyed by this surprise find, I had thought I would be able to leave the Southlands within the week, but as I didn't want to use the main roads and avoided larger towns, my journey was arduous and I soon realised that it would be a long time before I left the Southlands.

But if I really wanted to learn witchcraft, there was no other option. I had to reach the Northlands. That was where the largest and most famous covens in the world were, where I would be able to become a witch. And I couldn't actually see the Southlands any more anyway. But they didn't want to let *me* go yet. They clung to me and wouldn't let me go. The reception in the villages was still lousy. The map didn't even load properly. I had to keep asking locals for directions, the last thing I wanted to do in my given situation. Damn you, nasty southerners!

I increasingly got the impression that they weren't letting me go because they liked me so much, but to punish me. Yes, that was what they wanted. I had been spat at twice. Once I was even ambushed and had to fight my way free with my sword. I was defencelessly at the mercy of the Southlanders in all their merciless backwardness. A young witch, at the arse end of the world. The gods are not merciful down here.

I didn't eat for about two days, only drinking frequently. I didn't meet any more people on the forest paths I travelled. It was only better this way and I thought I had left the feeling of hunger behind me for good. But then I came across a clearing where I found a whole range of wonderful, edible berries and even shot a deer nearby. I almost ate it raw, I was so hungry. I decided to stay here for the night.

The campfire had burnt down by now and in the light of the screen I looked boredly at my mobile phone for more useful tutorials and life hacks for forest life and witchcraft. Sure, I hadn't been entirely successful with my first attempt, but it was simple in principle... and if I really could, I could

get them back in no time. It had been so easy, it couldn't be that hard to undo it. If only I knew what I had done wrong ...

I saw a number of *Elder dances* to do really interesting things. And it was really amazingly simple. Elder was very different from what people thought of as witch dances. It was ... strangely civilised. It was completely devoid of the moaning and screaming that Grandma had always told me about and that you always saw in my father's old films.

With trembling feet I stood and danced with the simple, undramatic hand gestures and footsteps, as it was always with *Elder* (that much I already knew) and said: "for all the trees of this forest: for all your leaves: water-sphere: if you have water, let the water run off".

I stepped up, waited, but nothing happened.

I looked at my mobile phone again. "*You have to have all the things you name nearby, or have part of them in your hand,*" it said.

But I had had everything nearby, the trees, the forest, I was standing on the forest floor after all ...

Water sphere! I had no water! I trudged to the stream near me and took a little water in the hollow of my hand. Would that be enough? I did it again, Elder-teasing around while the stream ran past me.

And then, when I put my foot on the ground, it swept the leaves off all the trees with a big whoosh. I opened my eyes wide and laughed.

The leaves were floating through the air, all around me. I couldn't see anything because of all the leaves. Then they fell and I could suddenly see very far and I felt dizzy.

I fell to the floor in shock. I stood up with trembling legs.

Was it that simple? No wonder entire communities in the Northlands were constantly blowing up ...

I picked up a handful of leaves from the ground, they were real. I hoped it hadn't really happened for the whole forest, but as far as I could see it was leafless for quite a distance. I hadn't even thought about the fact that it could work...

I walked around a bit stupidly, trying to reattach the leaves to the branches, first with my hands, then with a witch's dance, but I didn't know how to get them back on. I quickly stopped. I ruined everything, first my family, then a whole forest. It became more and more and more and it was so much harder to make it whole again ...

Then I heard a growl behind me ...

I drove round. There stood a wolf, but it was no ordinary wolf. It was a warg, huge, half boar, half wolf, dripping black saliva from its lips. Slowly it came towards me, left paw, right paw, ready to pounce.

I went back and reflexively looked at my smartphone, staring at it without doing anything. *What was I doing here?* I looked back at the wolf in horror.

At that moment he jumped off, his mouth a hole full of teeth and everything inside me screamed. But he didn't fly towards me, he flew to the side. Blood spurted, his ribs protruded from his body, he whimpered.

I stared at it and dropped my mobile phone. My gaze flitted around and I saw a figure.

Further back in the leafless forest stood a woman with short, tied-up hair and functional but colourful clothes.

A witch flashed through my mind.

A real witch.

Chapter 3

"Hello?" I said, my voice sounding raspy, I hadn't used it for a while.

The other replied nothing.

Then she came towards me and I intuitively went back. But she wouldn't come to me. With a well-directed thrust, she plunged a dagger into the warg's body, causing it to groan and its body to finally go limp.

"Do you know what you've done to this forest?" she hissed at me. I didn't dare move.

"Yes ... sorry, it was an oversight ..."

"An accident? Do you know how many animals have lost their homes now?"

"Yes, really, I'm really sorry about that. I'm usually really close to nature, I only hunt monsters ..."

She shook her head. "Monsters are part of nature. You would have let him suffer here like that..."

Well, at first he would have eaten me, I thought, but didn't say anything.

She pulled something out of her rucksack. It was a larger knife and she began to gut the warg. I felt my stomach growl.

"Hey ... do you want to set up camp together for the night?" I began and had to clear my throat, "I could make a fire and ... we could put the warg on it. After all, we killed it together."

"I," she said, "I killed him."

I stuck out my chin and said nothing.

She looked at me and finally shrugged her shoulders.

"Do I have any other choice? You obviously don't have a single survival skill. You're a walking danger to yourself and every ecosystem you're in."

The danger thing was only fair. I had been reckless, but the survival skills thing was completely out of line. How did *she* know how *I* could behave in the wild?

I took it as a challenge, went over to her, rolled up my sleeves and helped her gut the warg, even though I felt very sick at one point, I almost managed to hold out until the end. I had often gutted hares and roasted them with Ti ... but this was a different kettle of fish. It was two tonnes of meat. Stinking warg meat. At some point, my nameless mate sent me away.

"Thank you, that's enough. Go now, I'll take care of the rest," and when she saw my hurt face, she added: "Thank you. Maybe you're not quite as useless as I thought."

When she joined me at the campfire a little later, the atmosphere was much more relaxed. The beginning had been bumpy, but who said that couldn't change? How much easier certain things become when you take out a two-tonne warg together ...

"So, what are you doing here?" I asked almost casually.

She shrugged her shoulders and it was a while before she replied. It seemed to be the same with her in general. In the meantime, I bit into the large warg thigh in my hand. It was juicy and tasted fantastic. What kind of spices had she put on it?

"I come from the East," she finally said.

And silence. Aha, should that tell me something now?

"So, is it nice there?" I said with my mouth full.

"It is war. My family was killed. By a monster created by Wisper in the Ether, coalesced from the darkness of the human soul."

"Oh, sorry, really. I..." I almost choked on the meat.

"It's okay ... it's just all still very ... fresh ..."

"Okay..." I felt very stupid, I studied her face from the side, but it showed no emotion. I thought about telling her that I had recently lost my family too, but I didn't think it would be appropriate, as I would soon conjure them up again anyway ...

"So ... what do you want to do now?"

She looked at me and a smile appeared on her lips.

"Well, what do you think? To the Brocken. Walpurgis Night is pretty much the biggest party there is. I've never been, but I hear it's out of this world. It doesn't really get going for another two months, but on the *Road to Walpurgis* they party pretty much non-stop. That's seven cities full of dancing witches and Walpurgis Night at the end."

She grinned at me. "I think I'm really going to shoot myself up."

I laughed back cautiously. "Oh, okay..."

We remained silent. I had to say something. "Oh yes, that's right," I began, "Walpurgis Night ... yes ... I'd forgotten all about it, to be honest. My home is not exactly a witch stronghold ..."

"Okay ... yes, everything was already decorated in the east at this time of year ... could it be that there aren't many witches here anyway? But you're already going from house to house asking for sweets, aren't you?"

Wow, someone didn't know the Southlands very well ... maybe I could be more useful to her than she thought ...

As if she had read my mind, she suddenly said:

"Do you want to come along?"

I wanted to say no first. I had to get there straight away, I didn't have time to party. It was about my family.

On the other hand, Walpurgis Night was the largest witches' fair in the kingdoms of Walpurgis, and the witches' cauldron in the centre of which it took place was the gathering place for the best and largest witches' covens of all. And once a year, on Walpurgis Night, this cauldron reached its boiling point. It was the biggest of all witches' fairs, the highlight of the witches' year. Witches from all kingdoms and all over the world came to take part.

And then the cauldron was also home to the Bloxberg Coven, the largest witchcraft in the world. If anyone could help me bring my family back from another dimension, it was her, the most powerful witch alive. Bibi Bloxberg. And one day of the year she was known to be in her residence for sure: the days leading up to Walpurgis Night, preparing for the long night when each witch shared her latest projects with the world. And of course, the Bloxberg coven was not to be missed.

Why hadn't I thought of this before?

"Sure, that's exactly where I want to go," I heard myself say all at once, and it felt completely plausible, as if it really had been my plan all along. I *had to* go to Walpurgisnacht and easy as that wouldn't be, as today had shown. I'd never been outside the Southlands before, in fact I'd virtually never left our kingdom apart from those awful holidays in Arendelle Castle. I was a country bumpkin. With a mate by my side, however, it would certainly be a lot easier. And she looked like she had the clue I didn't.

"But ... as I said," I continued, "we're not celebrating this at our house and I'm not in the party mood, so ... we'll just pretend I have to go in the same direction and that's it. I'm not coming along to party. I have a fixed destination."

"Well then ... that's something." She nudged me playfully. "And maybe you'll get in the mood. There have been many a boy witch who just wanted to improve their witch skills in the cauldron and never got there."

I suddenly had to laugh.

"What is it?"

"The only witch far and wide and you meet a spoilt hipster witch of all people."

"Oh come on, you're okay ... if I was a bit harsh on you just now, I'm sorry. I haven't dealt with many people in the last few weeks ... and most of them have been pretty arseholes."

"Yeah, it's okay..."

We looked around us.

"The forest thing was just..." she said.

"Yes ... I have to tell you something."

"Mmh?"

"I'm not a witch at all. I'm still practising."

I saw her eyes widen briefly, but she didn't let anything else show.

"Yes, that makes sense ... but ... that's how it is with all witches. We practise as long as we're witches. That's what it's like to be a witch. And besides ... I'm no ordinary witch either ... here, pay attention."

She pulled something out of her rucksack, it was a violin.

She put it on her shoulder, played, it was beautiful.

Then she closed her eyes and suddenly something changed in the nature of the sounds, the air around us, simply everything, the sounds became more distorted, muffled and discharged in crashing, lightning-like bursts.

And all of a sudden, I saw the forest around me turning green again.

I looked at her with open eyes.

"Was that..."

"Yes, etheric music. I can control magic with music. Don't believe any of your clever books: you don't need words, you can do it with just your thoughts."

She winked at me.

I shook my head, now it was up to me not to let on. We had always been warned about people like her first when we were children. They were the most dangerous witches of all. They travelled around and left a trail of blown-up villages in their wake ...

I suddenly had the urge to ask her what she was really doing here in the Southlands ... was it something to do with the black shadow that had killed her family? Allegedly killed ... had her family really been victims of a Hate Crime, or was there another reason? Was there a trigger? But I hid these evil thoughts, didn't want to think about what I had done at home ...

"Yes, it's nice," I said instead, "... thank you too ... about the forest, that was very nice."

"Want me to play you something else?"

"Nah, that's all right. Let's just play something over the Ethernet ..."

She looked at me with raised eyebrows.

We listened to a song by Ada Lovelace. I liked it so much better. Why risk playing ethereal music live when you could enjoy it without being shredded in the air? But the speakers were rubbish, there was no comparison.

After one song we did something else.

Chapter 4

When I woke up the next morning, I suddenly remembered Ti. He must be half-dead with worry. Then a cold fist gripped my heart: had he been sucked into a hole too? I frantically dug out my mobile phone. Miraculously, I even had reception. With trembling fingers, I opened his profile.

No, he hadn't been sucked into a hole. He had posted a whole series of photos since then. The relief was immediately mixed with something else: hadn't he even noticed that I was gone?

I let my head fall back, looked at the sun rising on the horizon and straightened up again almost immediately.

No. He probably just doesn't dare. I started to type something into the text field of our chat, but immediately deleted it again. What could I write to him? Would he accept me into his castle? But why hadn't he written anything to me?

At that moment, under the furs on the other side of the extinguished campfire, my new companion, who I didn't even know the name of yet, woke up - a friendship just starting. Watch out, Bianka! The music was playing. I put my mobile phone away.

"Hey, tomorrow..."

She yawned.

"Tell me, what's your name?"

"Naira."

"Okay. I'm Bianka."

"Hi, Bianka."

I had to yawn too.

"Hey ... you've infected me."

She had to laugh and so did I.

Then we made breakfast.

Naira explained things about witchcraft to me without being asked. It turned out that musicians were also trained in witchcraft and she even seemed to know a lot about it. But it was all, how shall I put it ... very unconventional. Although I probably wasn't the one who could afford to make such a judgement. I hadn't even read the big witches' almanac yet, although it was available for free online ... In any case, it made an unconventional impression on *me*. As a layman. So.

Speaking of the Witches' Almanac, that was also one of Naira's first lessons: all those books. I should forget about them. You could find everything you needed in the Ethernet.

Naira explained to me that witchcraft is very intuitive. Yes, there are rules, but you can also feel it all.

"The witchcraft spells are just training wheels, tubes through which the magic is channelled. The same goes for the movements. If your brain can do the same, you don't need them."

"I see, but ... aren't they ... so the first thing they tell you in the tutorials is not to do witchcraft intuitively ..."

"Yes, of course. Only when you have a lot of practice in Far Eastern body and mind practices can you even think about doing something in that direction."

"Ok, and how do I learn them?"

"You need a master. Or a very experienced witch."

"And let me guess ... you could be that for me?"

"No. People like that are very rare. I was also able to learn from a great witch. It was great. And now I have mastered witchcraft. I can use magic now, like I can move my arm to pick up a stone. I don't even have to think about it anymore. It just works."

She stretched out her hand and whistled. Then an apple shot out of her rucksack, described an arc and landed in her hand with a resounding *plop*. She took a bite so that the juice ran down her chin.

I exhaled slowly.

"Wow, that's really cool. It really is. But ... I think I'll stick to the tutorials. And Elder. Ever heard of that?"

"Sure," she said, taking another bite, "that was the first thing you had to be able to do. If you can't do Elder, you don't even have to start with music. But I'm not going to stop you. The path you want to take is a shorter one, after that you'll definitely be able to do witchcraft ... whether you *should be* able to do it yet is another question. But..." she put the apple aside, "let me at least tell you a little bit about Elder. So you know what you're playing around with. Come with me."

We walked between the trees in the direction of the river.

"It wasn't the first witches' dance, you know. Nobody remembers the first witches' dance, let alone its origins. Of course there was music back then, some say music was the first witches' dance, but there is a difference ... Elder was an invention of man, they only discovered music. Elder wasn't the first witch dance either, as many people think, controlling magic with words existed before that. But Elder was different, it was ... simple. Elder was discovered by Morana Walpurgis on a winter's day. She had supposedly been thinking about it for weeks and then spoke the first words, according to legend, to throw a snowball at her stepfather's head, killing him instantly. It was a big shock for her. But she discovered Elder at that moment. But before Walpurgis, there were so many other ... great witches who went their way so that we can work with the Ether today. Despite all the disputes, there was a lively exchange between the peoples back then. Even Walpurgis did not acquire her knowledge just like that. She was with the free peoples, my people, to learn. There are records that prove that we had already invented the first forerunner of the witches' dance as we know it today and that she was inspired by it. It was called Tal'shi and is still used today to control the weather and nature, but nobody does it any more because Elder is easier. The dance only consisted of a few words, but you could theoretically have done anything with it that you can do with Elder today, it was just much more complicated. You had to dance for several hours for some spells and the choreographies were very complex. Walpurgis managed to make it easier. In fact, it is still the case today that all Elder spells are first converted into a dialect of Tal'shi and then recorded in Ether. Did you know that?"

"No ... I really didn't know that."

I didn't understand a word.

She nodded.

"But don't mention it at the Walpurgis celebration. They're slowly becoming more open about it, but they're still very sensitive on the subject..."

"Why, I mean ... it doesn't matter what it's based on, does it?"

"No, the kingdoms of Walpurgis want Walpurgis to have invented the witches' dances. This view is particularly widespread in the Northlands."

I nodded. That was why the calendar in many kingdoms of the Northlands was "according to Walpurgi's birth" and not according to the inventors of Tal'shi. There was still a lot I had to learn... but I also wanted to say something clever. Then I remembered what I had just read in an article.

"And then there are the five spheres. Fire, air, water, earth and the ether that connects everything. Without the ether, witchcraft wouldn't work at all."

"Exactly. We can access the ether and therefore all other spheres via the witch dances. They are the only way for us humans to interact with the ether. Or ... through music. You are directly connected to the ether. It's a fantastic feeling. If you want, I can show you sometime."

A warm shiver ran down my spine, but I didn't say anything back. I didn't want to play any music. It was too dangerous. But something in her voice made me want to. But I said nothing.

We had arrived at the lake. It was still early in the morning and therefore very foggy.

"How long have you been interested in witchcraft?" she asked me.

"Not for long ... I'd always read about it on the internet, but never really. I ... thought it wasn't for me ... I didn't want to be a witch who sits in her sugar house and eats little children."

She nodded. "Now you can define for yourself what kind of witch you want to be."

"Yes. I ... I want to be a witch who helps people."

She rolled her eyes.

"How nice. I just want to party hard."

With that, she got up and went back to the fire.

We set off a short time later. It wasn't long until the *Road To Walpurgis*, but we still had a few strongholds of witch-hostility ahead of us.

Chapter 5

I devoured the witchcraft tutorials these days, I inhaled them, dug through everything I could find on the Ethernet on the subject of Elder, listened to witch podcasts while riding, watched videos of witch dances before going to sleep. Soon I was writing my own Elder dances that I wanted to witch, eagerly jotting them down first on a piece of paper and then enthusiastically performing them for Naira.

Once I burnt through our entire water reserves, but overall I made great progress.

Sometimes I also caught a glimpse of her notes. She also had texts that she used to cast her spells, but she wrote them down on her paper and didn't try to memorise them in large chunks like I did and then dance them. They were dots arranged on horizontal lines, I couldn't recognise any pattern in them, it was quite strange. She called them "notes" and if you followed them, a song would emerge. It was deeply nebulous.

I just thought it was creepy that you were supposed to hold a song with these symbols, but she assured me that it was true and even (another typical Naira phrase) that you could do anything with them that you could do with Elder.

When I asked her how it worked, she said it was quite difficult to explain, but if I really wanted to, she could teach me a bit now and then. I said that I wanted to think about it again, but I didn't ask her any more.

I was now too deep into my own tutorials. Elder was so simple and there were so many possibilities that the most difficult thing was usually not *whether* you could do something with the dance, but *how*.

In principle, it was quite simple: you said the spells, stamped your foot and then the spells said were repeated one after the other. So if you touched a tree and said: "Fire sphere: burn. Water sphere: extinguish" and then put your foot down, the tree would burst into flames for a tiny moment and then cool down again instantly.

I also learnt some completely new magic words.

There was the word "if", with which you could check certain conditions, for example: "If there are more than one hundred trees in this forest: add five and five together, air sphere: give the calculated number." As the forest had many more trees, a voice above me said: ten. It was simply magical!

And finally there were loops or the "For all" magic word, the most difficult construct, but actually also quite simple: "For all water particles in this lake: fire sphere: burn." You could repeat certain spells and use them for lots of things. And that's also how I evaporated our recently replenished water reserves (just by the way).

And that was it. There was basically nothing more to know. You could now combine these things until you lost sight and hearing. You just had to know what you wanted to do with them.

When I told Naira about this, she shook her head. "There's still a lot to learn."

And she was right: I now knew most of Elder's magic words, but there was one thing I didn't have: practice.

But I should get it soon.

Chapter 6

We were just at the westernmost reaches of the Southlands and the orcish empire, which stretched across much of the wastelands to the west of the Southlands, was clearly taking its toll on the humans here.

There were always watchtowers, even those that had been destroyed, apparently rather recently. The villages we passed all had an air of fear and paranoia about them. It was the wars, those in the east and those between the kingdoms, that frightened these villages, not the orcs. At least not directly. They had known this danger all their lives. The problem was that the Southlands no longer had enough resources to support the small villages on the western border with supplies. How much longer before they would plunder our village too? Like the one before us and the one before that?

We tried to make as few stops as possible, but we might have to buy new provisions.

So we stopped off in a small village and I persuaded Naira to hide her violin better. When panic spreads, the mood can quickly turn against anything foreign. And we were strange enough as it was.

The inhabitants had fortified the village in a makeshift manner. A simple wall of wooden posts surrounded it, with large symbols against witchcraft smeared on the outside in white paint. Word of my terrible mistake must have spread even here ... I couldn't wait to finally leave the Southlands.

At the gate, a guard with a long spear blocked our way.

"What are you doing here?"

Before Naira could go up, I poked her in the side and took a step forwards.

"We are ... weavers, looking for work."

"We have no work."

"We're just passing through."

"Are you witches?"

"No."

"What about the other one? Can't she talk?"

"Her name is Naira..."

But she interrupted me.

"I'm a witch," she said with her chin jutting out, "through and through."

"No, well ..." I said hastily, but the guard interrupted me: "*Please*," he said suddenly, almost pleadingly, "you *have to* help us. Our mill has broken down and a replacement won't arrive until next month. Please, the people are hungry ..."

We stared at each other for a moment, then Naira said quickly, "Sure, we'll help you." She smiled at me and walked after him.

I followed them wordlessly.

He led us hastily past houses, the villagers silently running away from us, hiding in their houses if they hadn't already done so. I saw a pair of eyes behind a dirty window, which immediately disappeared again. I gave Naira a worried look, but she seemed calm.

We went to a house at the end of the village that looked like an old mill from the outside and inside it turned out that it had been, at least in the past. And it had even been powered by witchcraft, but something had broken. It was quite a muddy mess. The wooden beams were just twitching and the mill wheel lay spinning on its side.

Nevertheless, Naira said to the guard: "Don't worry. We'll manage."

But when the soldier turned away, visibly relieved, and stomped off, she said: "We're fucked. You'd need at least one mechanic to fix it. The problem isn't the witchcraft, that still works. The problem is somewhere in the gears."

She shrugged her shoulders.

We investigated the whole thing for a while.

"Why do they still need gears here at all?" she said after a while.

"It's all very outdated here," I said in a burst of pride at being able to contribute, "I know that from back home. We bought an ether engine for the whole castle *once* and then never again. You're happy if the witch stuff you have doesn't blow up in your face, and as long as that's not the case, everything stays the same. But the witches who were hired to set the whole thing up were given a more or less free hand."

"So you're suggesting ... we make the whole thing run completely without mechanics?"

"Yes. In principle, that's exactly what they're asking us to do."

"Mmh, that's right. They just want it to work again. They haven't said how it works and they probably don't want to know anyway."

"Okay. But you can't do that with music, can you?"

"No, it has to be a witch's dance, we have to banish it in a stone or something and then run it in a loop."

She began to gather various things together. I stood around idly.

"Hey, is there anything I can do to help?"

"Research a few spells for mills."

"Okay ... shouldn't you know all the spells?"

She looked at me. "*Nobody knows* all the spells. That's why there are tutorials. And books ... if you're into that."

"Okay. I actually like books..." I added meekly and began my research.

I had soon collected a few and even found a first witch dance that was freely available and supposedly made a mill work very cost-efficiently.

We cast it and then the mill ran smoothly again. We cast the spell on a small pebble that we found on the floor.

We simply left the rest of the mechanics in the room and told the soldier that under no circumstances should anyone enter the mill because there were powerful witchcraft forces at work.

He nodded eagerly, thanked us curtly and hurriedly led us out of the village, pressed a few guilders into our hands and disappeared again in an instant.

We looked at each other, puzzled.

"Mmh, not bad at all."

I nodded. "Yes, not bad."

I studied her eyes. They were beautiful and once again I had the feeling that she was thinking the same thing as me.

"We're going to become a real coven..."

She laughed. "I don't know ... don't you need at least three?"

She *had* thought the same thing

"Yes, that's right. But it doesn't matter."

"Yes. Ok. But I think most of them go bankrupt after a very short time."

"Not if you do it right."

We rode on and after a while Naira said: "Then we just need a name."

"Coven of the night"

"That's the name of about every second coven. *Please* not that one."

"All right."

She looked around the area, then her gaze went to the sky.

"How about ... Coven of the full moon."

I looked at her. But she just looked at me expectantly. She was serious.

"Okay," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "then we're the Coven of the full moon now. And we've already had our first assignment."

"Man, we have to make sure we don't get bought up by Bloxberg. Can you hear it? The north and all the Coven of the night are already trembling"

"Is this where the story of the most famous two-person coven in the Southlands begins?"

"I think so, yes. Starting in a small clearing and from there to the whole world! Just like in a fairy tale!"

We felt very, very good.

We spent the rest of the evening dancing around the campfire to the loud blare of my Ethernet boxes and dreaming up what we were going to do with the three guilders that the Coven of the full moon had captured on its first mission.

Naira was amazed at how well I could dance. After all, I had learnt it professionally to woo men. I took her in my arms and showed her a few steps. In return, she showed me how to kiss a man so that he fell in love with me on the spot. It was very convincing. And she showed me other things too, she could really do all sorts of things, for example she could massage tense areas of my body. I let her massage me in all the places I dared to tell her, even in places where I wasn't tense at all ...

Chapter 7

Over the next few days, we travelled through a few more villages, which were just as quick to give us breakfast, but without exception always gave us a job to do.

However, because we were always shooed away so quickly, we didn't have the opportunity to pile our now considerable piles of guilders on our heads.

There were a few travelling traders, but they refused to serve us as soon as they saw Naira's violin.

Our provisions were slowly running out, but we were getting closer and closer to more witch-friendly areas. We received an increasingly friendly welcome and in the last village they even refilled our water hoses (which I had, once again, vaporised shortly before).

But now we were approaching Stratburg, the second largest city in the Southlands and notorious for its hostility towards witches. Although we were in desperate need of cured meat and various other utensils, we had decided to bypass it for safety's sake. It was already dangerous enough in the immediate vicinity.

It was now the beginning of summer and the fields were lit up golden yellow in the morning. It was beautiful, far too beautiful for life, I sometimes thought. I wondered what else there was to discover in the world, even beyond the kingdoms of Walpurgis?

Then a farmer on a witchcraft-powered cart appeared at the other end of the road and we quickly hid behind a nearby bush. People with their witchy machines kept getting in the way, just when you wanted to enjoy the beautiful view.

We moved on. To avoid Stratburg, we had travelled further west. This brought us to the so-called "last defence against the orcs" in the west. The camp was fortified with a thick stone wall and a large stone tower stretched skywards to our left.

It was too dangerous to set up camp here in the forest. We went in through the gate.

The fortification would certainly have had room for a lot of soldiers, but there weren't many to be seen at first glance. Most of them, who were normally stationed here, had almost certainly been withdrawn for the war. A small tavern and rudimentary dormitories rounded off our new domicile. The stone tower was the only building in which some comfort had been afforded, at least as it looked from below.

It had to be the tower of Stepherhan van Weixen. As I read on the internet, Stepherhan had been appointed by the Lord of the Kingdom of Hohlstock to investigate the attacks on the local villages. Something had been different about these raids. Of course, the first assumption was that orcs were behind it, but the attacks completely contradicted their typical pattern: the villages were not completely devastated and razed to the ground. They were still standing and what was even more curious was that there was no sign of the inhabitants apart from a few signs of obvious resistance. When they had ventured into the villages, they gave the impression that they had been abandoned from one second to the next.

Of course, there was also the assumption that they had all fled out of fear of the orcs. But then they would at least have taken their belongings with them and they would hardly have done so from one second to the next. In this case, too, there would have had to be a trigger.

At first we tried to take refuge in one of the bedrooms for a few guilders, but were immediately recognised as witches by one of the soldiers, intercepted and taken to the tower.

Stepherhan greeted us at the entrance. He was dressed in bright orange colours.

"Good afternoon, ladies, I have been informed that there are witches among us, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right," I said dryly, "we're just looking for shelter for the night."

"No, I can't allow that," he said patronisingly and held the door open for us, "Here. Be my guests. I've just had dinner. But if you come in now, it's still warm. It really is. Make yourselves at home."

"That's really nice, but we've only just arrived ..."

He gave us a broad grin. "I, as emissary of Lord Freitag, invite you to dinner."

He nodded to the guards, who immediately stood at attention. He gave us his smile again. What a windbag.

I briefly considered fleeing, Naira and I could have easily taken them on, but Naira shook her head. The area was too dangerous. She was right.

"All right, then. We'll have dinner with them."

We were taken to the dining room, where piles of cabbage stood loaded onto large trays on tables.

Naira next to me was probably sick to her stomach. She mainly ate meat for her main meal, she didn't care much for plant-based food, but we sat down anyway.

"Is there any meat?" she asked.

"No," said our host.

He sat down opposite us with his legs apart.

"I come to you with a request."

"What kind of request is it when you're forced to go out to dinner with someone first?"

"Well. You have to listen to my request, but whether you accept it or not ... you can decide for yourself."

"All right."

"Right, so ... our village was infested by creatures, but when the soldiers in charge arrived in the village ..."

"Yes, we've read about it. We know about it."

"I see, you already know everything. All right. Erm... well, that's perfect." That seemed to have thrown him for a moment. He ran his finger over the edge of his beer hump, then turned his smile back to us.

"... and do you know why I invited you?"

Naira groaned, she hated clichés.

"We're supposed to find out which creatures they were ..."

He nodded. "Exactly. Because you must be ..."

"... as *witches*, you know more about monsters," Naira finished, "I know."

She got up and went outside.

Stepherhan looked after her a little stupidly. Then he looked at me. "Was that a no?"

I exhaled. "We'll do it." I leaned forward. "If the payment's right."

Chapter 8

The troop went to a newly attacked village at five in the morning.

We accompanied him on our horses. Naira was a bit miffed that I had accepted the job without consulting her, because she thought it would only reinforce witch stereotypes and because she didn't feel like it anyway.

Of course, I was also aware of prejudices against witches. Nevertheless, I thought she was exaggerating a bit. They were normal after all ... they were just stories. They used to be told to scare us and teach us simple lessons. The witches didn't really have anything to do with it. Little Red Riding Hood wasn't against wolves either. Yes, they were sometimes cruel stories in which the witches kidnapped and ate small children, danced around the fire in the evening and sold their souls to the old gods who had been banished from the world to prepare for their return and were then killed in a cruel way by the hero. But of course none of this was true. And everyone knew that by now. Even in the Southlands.

We arrived in the village and it was exactly as described in the Ethernet: the people had disappeared, it was a ghost village. At the entrance, an abandoned cart stood in the middle of the road, the vegetables inside rotten and eaten away. Clothes that had been hung up shortly before the raid fluttered on a line stretched between two houses, and the laundry basket next to it was still half-full of washing. They really had been surprised in the middle of their daily routine, without warning, nobody seemed to have suspected anything and all of a sudden they had been robbed of their work and kidnapped.

We combed the village but found no trace.

After a while, we realised that the animals had disappeared as well as the people. Only the news pigeons, which were housed in the town's temple, were still there. And one of the soldiers found several feathers in the branches of a tree about half an hour's walk from the village. Large feathers, larger than the feathers of all the birds here.

Perhaps someone had fought with the attackers during their abduction, but eagles could hardly have raided the village, could they?

That gave me an idea.

I took out my mobile phone and searched Wikipedia for feathered monsters: Eagles, griffins, chimeras, but they didn't really fit with what had happened in the village. But then I found something: harpies. Half bird, half human. During the breeding season, they kidnap humans to mate with them. I see. They must have abducted the humans and, for whatever reason, their livestock too. The birds, on the other hand, had regarded them as relatives and spared them. Funnily enough, they hadn't had that much sympathy for humans, but that was well known: Harpies saw themselves much more as birds than as humans. Sometimes I couldn't blame them.

The soldiers set off with a roar to hunt the harpies. We didn't even think about following them and rode back to the fortifications that same day, where we collected the money and were accompanied to the gate by a satisfied Steperhan.

I wouldn't have dreamed of mentioning that we'd just looked it up on Wikipedia, but Steperhan's smug grin was apparently too much for Naira.

"Why can't you just learn how to use your mobile phones properly?" she said as she saddled her horse, "It's all there. You don't need witches for that! Any six-year-old can do it these days!"

With that, we swung onto our horses and rode off, I couldn't stop grinning for quite a while.

Chapter 9

We were now using the paved roads more and more, we both couldn't wait to leave the southlands and it was also good for the horses to be spared the treacherous trails with their holes and molehills for a while. But we were still on the alert for anything we encountered on the road.

It was the same when a huge something became visible in the distance, swaying towards us. I sucked in my breath as I realised what it was. A running witch house!

I dismounted and ran straight towards it. Maybe I would find what I had been looking for for a while: *Witches for Dummies* - THE book for learning witchcraft!

I had slowly reached the limits of what I could absorb from the Ethernet tutorials. It was nice, but I needed something to guide the rest of my studies. Not a horrible tome like the *Witches' Almanac of 530 AD*, I had something else in mind and it was about the best you could get for the money, supposedly. It was also available online, but I wanted it.

Besides, the internet was so bad here that it would have taken ages to download such large files. Just southern Germany.

I had downloaded parts of the *Great Witchcraft Almanac* out of good will and even struggled through the old book for a while, but after about 10 per cent I couldn't take any more. My head was almost bursting from all the information before I had learnt a single sentence of witchcraft.

Witches for Dummies, on the other hand, was the holy grail of every young witch. Maybe she would have it.

The house walked on big crow feet and when I called for it, it stalked awkwardly towards me and sat down noisily on the ground in front of me.

It was a small grocer's shop that was already full of old witchcraft items from the outside. Then the door opened with a yawn of pleasure and a pink tongue unrolled in front of me like a carpet. I climbed inside. It was just as cool on the inside as it was on the outside. Maybe even more so. The floor was wood-panelled. It contained all sorts of things. Useful aids such as anti-chafing cream, elasticated clothing, sticks with which you could make drawings in the ground and, of course, books.

The woman behind the counter was surprisingly young, wearing jogging bottoms and playing *Candy Crush* on her mobile phone. She had the sound on full volume - I could hear the sounds of the candy bursting all the way to the entrance. She didn't even look up when I came in.

I cleared my throat noisily. She looked up, annoyed.

"Mmh?"

"Do they also have ... witches for dummies here?"

She snorted.

"You do realise that I'm dealing in second-hand goods here."

I nodded eagerly.

"Mmh," she scratched her chin demonstratively and thoughtfully with her fingers, "... how long has it been since someone offered to buy me *something like that*? Mmh. It must have been a few years ago. Yes, it was sold on the same day, if I remember correctly."

Disinterested, she looked at her mobile phone again.

I snorted, looked around and walked through the shelves, pulling at a row of dried snakes hanging from the ceiling. I was in paradise here. A bad-tempered shop assistant wasn't going to spoil my mood.

"Yes, I know," I said in a deliberately good-humoured tone, "they're certainly in high demand here in the south, aren't they?"

She sighed, took her feet off the table in front of her, changed her mind and put them back.

"Yes ... Can I sell you anything else? ... a magic amulet? You can use it to record dances and have them recited to you later."

"No, thank you," I said and took a bag of gummy snakes instead, which I ate grumpily on my way back to Naira. They were hopelessly stuck between my teeth. But they were worth it. Behind me, the witch's house trudged on with loud footsteps.

"Oh man, what a disappointment," I said to Naira, when suddenly the stomping behind us stopped. I turned round, the house had turned round too. The witch looked out of the open window, but now she was old. Or was it her mum? No, it *was* her, you could see it quite clearly.

"Hey, kiddo," she called out, "but I might know where you could find something."

"Okay," I shouted, "where?"

"There's a town nearby with a large library. You might find something there. It's called Stratburg."

"Wow, thank you!"

"But be careful!"

"Yes, we will!"

Stratburg. The terror of all witches. It was the only place in the Southlands and the *Road to Walpurgis* haze where you could still find *witches for dummies*. The Elder forums were full of them. It was a real insider tip. I had to go there. Maybe things had become more liberal in the meantime ... I looked online. No. It had got worse. Much worse.

But after all, this was about *witches for dummies*.

I thought about what the next few weeks would be like without it and shook myself. *No, not more tutorials, not more 1000-page hams*. There was no other way. I had to have it.

"If you want me to ever become a good witch, then you have to accompany me there. Please, at least do it for the sake of our coven."

"Yeah, I don't care. Then I can also buy stuff for my violin."

"Naira, you're the best."

But when I told her why I wanted to go there, she couldn't care less.

She didn't think much of the "daft old books by some old white witches". She was right, of course, that some of them were rather long-winded. There was a lot of faffing about with rituals that had no other purpose than to get you into the right "mindset" and an endless amount of dry theory: about spheres, the first witches, the various dances that existed and the different functions of the ether, how the ether worked and how it related to the real world. It was witch-splaining as it was written in the book. But that didn't really bother me at all. There had to be something to it. After all, it was always said how difficult witchcraft was. If it was that easy, anyone could do it! Naira, on the other hand, was more the 'learning by doing' type and if she did, then at most (and only at most!) she would recommend a few fine Far Eastern books that were 'just as good, but would also make you a better person. Actually, it's not necessarily about witchcraft. But that's not a bad thing. They put you in the right mindset to handle witchcraft well. And then it's child's play." I thought she was stretching it a bit, but it was mutual: I thought her plan for Stratburg was just as stupid, unnecessarily risky, putting our safety, maybe even our lives, on the line for a bit of violin gear. It was our first real fight, if you like.

But in the end she allowed herself to be persuaded, which had a lot to do with the fact that one side of her violin broke at this very time. What a "stupid coincidence". She said she could find the right strings and all sorts of other violin paraphernalia there. After that, it would only be a stone's throw to the Nordlanden, where all the musician's stuff was again exorbitantly overpriced. Stratburg was known to have a thriving black market, but recently the policy seemed to have become more rigorous. We had to be careful.

And so we rode cheerfully, with different dreams and expectations, straight towards our possible doom.

Chapter 10

We soon reached the gates of Stratburg. They were huge structures of darkness, flanked by two black towers that watched everyone who entered the city from dead windows on the right and left. Rumour had it that behind the windows there were no humans watching the visitors to the city, but machine-people who worked only with gears, completely without witchcraft.

Yes, of course, who believed it.

Nevertheless, it was important not to lower your gaze in front of them, as this would immediately attract the attention of the towers.

We walked through, the horses on the lead, telling the guards what we always told them, meanwhile Naira reluctantly joined in.

Inside the city walls, you hardly noticed the repression that emanated from this city. The streets were buzzing with life, there was painting and culture and cider everywhere. We followed the streets for a while, they ran in a snail pattern up the hill on which it had been built.

Legends said that it had never been conquered, which was very special considering how passionately the kingdoms of the Southlands waged war against each other.

"What do we do first," Naira asked after we had looked around for a while, "or do we want to split up?"

"I am in favour of splitting."

"Yeah, me too."

"Good."

We settled down in one of the more upmarket inns (we could afford it) and then went our separate ways.

Naira wanted to buy provisions and spare parts for her violin, which was a little tricky but, as she assured me, should be possible somehow. "They've put up such a fuss here to put people like us off. They don't believe that a witch and a musician is just marching into their town. I just tell them I need dental floss. And apart from that: do you really think they don't need witches here? Why else is this town so successful? And the towers at the entrance? It's all witchcraft, if you ask me. And probably even forbidden. The people of Stratburg have such a damn double standard."

"Yes, it will be just like all the other villages around here. I'd wager there's a coven here too."

"Exactly. Maybe this is the lodge of Anonymus Covens."

We talked a lot, we had to cover up our excitement.

In the end, Naira left to fulfil her material needs. I, on the other hand, had higher things on my mind. I set off in search of the library of Valhalla Synod, the largest library in the Southlands, and for quite a while at first. I also had a tricky mission, but one that could prove decisive for my witch training: the Book of Books. Witches for dummies.

I hesitated only briefly at the entrance, then I entered.

The library was more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. We'd only had a small room of books at home, all tearjerkers and fairy tales, all of which I'd already read through several times, and we hadn't even set eyes on a book in the last few villages. It was almost an annoyance that I was looking for something specific.

But this task alone would require my full attention, I realised immediately. I had never seen so many books in one pile before; the library was spread over three floors, which were connected by lavish wooden staircases. All the floors were open to the inside, so you could see exactly who was going to which area.

And the reception was right in the middle.

I registered and, with slightly trembling hands, held the document in my hands in which I had to swear by the gods that I was not a witch, did not practise witchcraft and had never practised it. The

document also informed me that any offence or false statement regarding witchcraft would be punished with life imprisonment in the catacombs beneath the city. I gulped. The catacombs were notorious for being one of the cruelest places to house prisoners in all the kingdoms, but in the end I signed the wibe. After all, it was just a piece of paper.

Then I had to hand in my mobile phone under the disapproving gaze of the librarian. I thought she hissed briefly when I didn't put it in immediately.

And then I stood there. In front of shelves with thousands, maybe millions of books and I was looking for the forbidden ones among them. Without a mobile phone. That could be something.

Nevertheless, I was almost certain that it was here. Nobody could catalogue all these books and I had previously read on the internet that the library had been partially burnt down ten years ago and large parts of the administration had been destroyed in the process. There were supposedly whole sections that had still not been fully re-catalogued.

Before that, Stratburg had been on its way to becoming a liberal city, but the fire had sent it back to dark times. Of course, the fire was immediately blamed on witches and now we were here. You couldn't even use your mobile phone freely. But the banned books from the time before should still be here. It was curious: this forbidden knowledge was probably slumbering here between the shelves, undiscovered and right in the heart of the most witch-hostile city of all the kingdoms, just waiting to be discovered by someone. To be discovered by *me*.

I started at H and realised straight away that there was no point. Of course, everything that started with witches had been removed first. I realised that I probably wouldn't get *Witches for Dummies*. But surely there was another book that had survived the witchcraft purge. They couldn't have been that thorough. But where could such a thing be?

Of course, I couldn't just ask someone what had happened to them, or whether there were perhaps still sections with witchcraft. But what I could ask was whether I could help explore uncatalogued areas, holes on the library map, so to speak, and thus restore order to the library.

I asked the receptionist directly.

She twisted her mouth and handed me a piece of paper with departments that supposedly hadn't even been entered since the fire and that nobody was interested in because there were major problems and the library was hopelessly underfunded.

That was far more information than I needed, but ultimately *exactly what* I wanted to hear. I hid my euphoria with difficulty, and I found that I succeeded surprisingly well.

When I was out of sight of reception, I took two steps at the same time, taking care to tread quietly and feeling like a real little spy.

I didn't have to worry about other visitors. The few bookseekers who were there were simply swallowed up by the vastness of the premises. I walked through the various departments and at most saw a shadow scurrying past in the distance. I might as well have been alone.

In general, the library was not in good condition. It smelled old and a bit mouldy, I came across areas where the books felt damp and some of the covers were already rotting black. I wonder what they would have had to say? Perhaps the book I was looking for had fallen prey to mould. Water must have got in through the ceiling after the big fire, but it couldn't really have been that much water, as

many black books as I saw. Sometimes I walked past corridors with only the remains of rotten books on the shelves. I walked through whole compartments where I would have had to search to find another intact book.

I had read that there had always been problems with the library and that Stratburg had gone downhill after the fire. But I could see from the books that it had left its former heyday behind long before the fire.

I finally found the section I was looking for and started to take out the books, looking for *anything related to witchcraft*.

I soon had my first small success. *Once one of herbalism. Attunement rites for small and large witches*. I leafed through it. It was nice, but not what I was looking for.

I suddenly heard the rustling of paper behind me. I turned round. It was a lean, tall guy with glasses, leafing through a book. I hadn't even noticed him. His glasses were tinted for some reason and I couldn't see his eyes. But when he saw me, he smiled.

Chapter 11

"Oh, hi," I said, trying to return his smile, "I honestly didn't expect to meet anyone else in this department."

"Yes," he laughed shyly, "normally nobody comes by here ... I ... sort of live here."

"Quasi?"

"Yeah, something like that", he said, "*Quasi-modo*". He looked at me expectantly and when I didn't say anything, he finally added: "The name. I am Quasimodo. Hä hä."

"Oh, yeah." I laughed back a little artificially, but he didn't seem to notice and ventured a question: "Do you mind if I search here, Quasimodo? Or should I look in another compartment first?"

"No, it's all right, it wouldn't do any good anyway: I live here, sort of."

"Quasimodo," I said and laughed. He didn't laugh with me. "Your name. Quasimodo."

"Yes, and?" he said, looking at me uncomprehendingly.

"It doesn't matter. Erm... you can't help me look for a book, by any chance?"

"Sure," he said, arching his back for the first time, only to turn it into a hump again straight away. "I know my way around here and the Applied Botany section like nobody else in ..." he thought for a while, then shook his head vigorously, "because I live here, sort of."

He left it there for a while, stopped and walked restlessly along the bookshelves next to me.

"There are so many books ... you have no idea. The books from the other departments ... I don't even need them ... it won't even *begin to* take a lifetime to look through all the books I'm watching over here. There's so incredibly much to do, a lifetime, so to speak ..."

He gave me a quick glance, his eyes were wide and he said, now almost in a whisper, as if no one but me should know: "I really have everything here ... but there's a book from downstairs that I need. That I *really* need. For personal reasons."

"Yes," I said hastily, his eyes starting to scare me a little, "then let's just swap. You bring me a book I want and I'll bring you your book."

He nodded happily. "Then it's a deal?"

"Yes, it's a deal. What's the book?"

"It's a cookery book. I get very hungry here sometimes and I just ... never mind. I need it. It's called *Cooking for Reading Rats*."

"Okay ... yeah, no problem."

"Good. And you?"

"I want a book about..." I couldn't quite believe it myself, but I leaned closer to him too, "*witchcraft*."

He nodded and his eyes widened even more.

"Yes, I have something for you."

He pranced to the end of the shelf and pulled something out. *What a bummer, I almost found it myself ...*

I couldn't recognise what it was. He held it out to me, but when I tried to grab it, he pulled it away again.

"You think I'm not very clever, don't you? But I'm not stupid. First I want the cookery book," he smiled apologetically, "please, it's nothing to do with you. But I've brought books to many visitors and never got my cookery book."

"I'll bring it to you, I promise. Without quasi."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter. I'll bring it to you."

"Ok ... you have a crude, crude sense of humour, if I may say so ..."

"Well ... sort of. See you later."

"Yes, see you later."

I made my way to the other departments. I wondered why he didn't enter them himself, but as long as he got me a witch book, I didn't need answers to such questions.

I found the book almost immediately, it was in the cookery books, exactly where it should be. It had a golden cover and looked very obscure. I looked at the spine. Apparently it contained recipes for surviving on insects that ate books and promised that you could live "like a gourmet" at the same time. Well, poor Tor had fallen for something. Classic click-bait in my estimation, but maybe it did deliver what it promised.

I put it in my pocket and went back, making sure I couldn't be seen from reception.

A short time later I entered the Applied Botany department again, this time I brought a book with me and hopefully I would leave with another one. I walked excitedly between the shelves.

But he was nowhere to be found.

"Hello? Quasimodo," I said quietly and crossed the main corridor again. The empty corridors passed me by. No sign of my hunchbacked friend. Was I in the wrong department? Then, finally, I heard a noise from further back.

It sounded like: "Here!"

I went there. It came from another corner of the botany department, which I had actually overlooked. It was hidden behind one of the shelves that had been built a little too long. At first I thought it was his sleeping place, but it was just a cove between the shelves where he apparently collected books that were particularly dear to him.

Then I saw a pile full of issues of *Cooking for Reading Rats* in the far corner. But before I could process the thought, two guards stepped out of the darkness.

He walked between them.

Suddenly his gait was completely normal, the hump had disappeared and he suddenly spoke very differently. He held his book in front of me. I read the title *Witches for Dummies*.

Despite everything, I inhaled sharply in delight. This was it. The book of my dreams.

Then they grabbed my arms and took me away.

Chapter 12

They dragged me away and at first I tried to push against them, kicking frantically, but they were much stronger than me. They led me down long stone steps for what felt like an eternity, then we entered a room whose walls had been decorated with skulls and I saw where the journey was going: in the centre was a witch's cage. The room was windowless, judging by the coolness, we were deep underground. We were in the catacombs. They opened the door of the cage in front of me and grinned maliciously, but this time I braced myself with all my strength and started to scream. No, I couldn't go in there.

I even gave one a good kick to the chest, which sent him to the floor gasping, but then the other punched me hard in the side. I went down and then he threw me in, slammed the door behind me and the memories came flooding back. I saw it all again. The door, everything shaking, my father next to me, torn away into the purple hole between the mirrors ...

I punched and kicked at the cage, tugged at my hair, threw myself against the bars of my prison. *No, no, no, don't leave me here alone. No, no, let me out. Let me out!*

I screamed like a banshee, but the guards just laughed and rattled the cage.

I folded my arms over my head in despair, pulled my legs to my chest and closed my eyes until they were gone.

After a while, I calmed down again. I sat up and could even recognise the outline of the room in the darkness.

It was completely empty, with large chains hanging down from one wall and only something in one corner. I concentrated. It was so pitch black. Then I recognised it: another cauldron. And someone was sitting in it. I tried to concentrate, even though my head was pounding. She was looking at me, pushing her head through the bars. It was Naira.

"Oh, hi."

"Hi."

"Hello, pretty girls," someone said, one of the guards must have stayed within range, but where was he? "You won't be getting out of here any time soon. You're in prison. Probably for life. Not if I had my way, of course, but times have changed a bit. It's bad ... but if you're bored ... here"

He stepped out of the darkness. It was Quasimodo. He smiled ear to ear, held the book out to me, I grabbed it through the bars and immediately opened it, trying to make out the words.

"Have fun. If you manage to recognise something in the dark...", he said in a sweet voice, "I'll pick it up again in a week, maybe you can read it to each other, but I can only warn you: maybe you shouldn't read it after all. It might be the last thing you get to read in a long while. You should get used to being content with silence as soon as possible. It's not a good idea to get too carried away with daydreaming. I've heard that some people have gone mad down here because of the book they wanted to borrow."

He smiled wickedly.

"So ... see you then, tirili," he said, waving to us as he walked away.

The door slammed shut and he left us in the dark. Only a little light seemed to come from somewhere below, it was red and hostile, but if I concentrated I could just about make out the letters. My eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness.

"Leave it, it's no good in here anyway ..."

"That remains to be seen."

"Here, I've got something better," she pulled her violin out of her bag.

"And they're not insured against that, are they?"

"Only time will tell," she said and grinned.

"Okay, so this is a challenge now?"

"Yes. Well recognised."

"Okay, let's go."

Naira immediately started playing and caused her cage to shake dangerously, but it still held firm. I tried to concentrate through all the noise.

But before any of us made any further progress, guards entered the room, between them was a third person, but it wasn't Quasimodo.

"So that's it for you with the nice prison stay. It's just too loud. You can hear it all over the city. It's bad for tourism", he had a nice voice, I recognised it from somewhere, maybe from social media ... "we'll take you to the deeper dungeons. You can make as much noise as you like there."

He knocked on the wall. "Do you know where the glow down here comes from? It's the carcasses of the old gods buried beneath the city. The city was built on them. Even further down, they say, you can hear the old gods breathing. Awaiting their great day. And that's where you're going now."

He nodded to two guards who led us out and handcuffed our hands behind our backs.

"Thanks, I'll take it from here," he said and the two guards nodded and walked away.

When they were gone, he unfastened the handcuffs. I turned round to face him. It was Ti. I wanted to fall into his arms, but we didn't have time. He motioned for us to follow him.

"Ti!" I hissed at him as we ran through the corridors.

He smiled at me and wanted to take my hand, but Naira pushed her way between us and we ran on.

"Hey," she said, turning to him for the first time, "do you have any swords for us? We need to get out of here. Preferably out of the whole town."

"I know. We're on our way there now. But ... no, I don't have any weapons, but I saw an armoury back there."

"Perfect."

"Go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

He turned into another corridor and we went into the armoury. It was filled to the top with the best weapons Stratburg had to offer. I grabbed a thin rapier. The monsters here were of a finer nature, that much we knew now.

"Isn't he cute?"

She said nothing.

"Do you think maybe ... he could come with us?"

"Bianka," she said slowly, "didn't you see the symbol on his cheek?"

I looked at her indignantly.

"He just has face tats. Why so judgemental all of a sudden?"

I put the sword back and tried a light sword. It didn't feel bad in my hand.

Bianka took it from my hand and pointed to the mark on the sword hilt, it was the same as on Ti's cheek.

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. That's the sign of the Rococo. He's a *cultist*. People like him believe in the reappearance of the old gods from the Ether. They think the end of time is near."

"I don't know what you're talking about. It's an old southern symbol of love. Isn't rococo a romantic literary genre?"

"Bianka. He doesn't want to run away with us. He wants you for his experiments. He wants to bring the Singularity to the Southlands so that they can rise above the Northlands again."

"No, Ti would never do something like that ..."

I wanted to say more, but suddenly Ti was standing in the doorway again. Was I mistaken or had the mark on his cheek started to glow faintly?

"Well, girls. Can we?"

I looked at Naira and we followed him in silence.

We crept quietly through the corridors, Ti obviously knew his way around, but that didn't have to mean anything. I thought I remembered that his father had often travelled here on business. He must have travelled with us from time to time and, as so often, he must have been bored. *His* father had taken him out into the world ...

We finally squeezed through a thin gap in the wall. A field of apple trees opened up in front of us; the cider made from them in the town was famous the world over. We had left the city.

We just stood there for a while, Naira looking back and forth between us. It was a bit strange.

"Yes ... thank you, Ti."

He laughed, "No problem. After what happened to your family ... I'm really sorry."

"Mmh ... yes." Ultimately, it had been his fault. If his father hadn't ... but that didn't really matter now.

"Well, then," I began, but then he suddenly burst out: "I just had to see you," and he continued with a pathetic expression: "I realised: I love you. Will you marry me?"

I didn't know what to say when he knelt down in front of me in all seriousness. Naira looked at me, but it was a bit touching, but somehow ... the spark just wouldn't ignite. I should have seen two futures in front of me, but the one he wanted to give me, I just didn't see it.

Then he also took out a ring. Naira gave me a look and said "Rokoko" silently with her mouth.

"Um, so ... wait a minute. Let me take notes again ...", I said.

"Is that a no?"

"No, so ... yes. I don't want to marry you, Ti."

He fought his way up.

"You've gone mad," he said for the first time, addressing Naira. I couldn't believe my ears, "she's turned your head, admit it, witch."

"No, Ti, I did it myself. I wanted it."

"I don't think so."

"It was you who found out about witchcraft."

"Yes ... but not to become one."

I couldn't believe my eyes, there was ... disgust on his face. His symbol glowed angrily. Was it really the truth? Did he really just want me for the purposes of some weird cult?

I looked at him and then a terrible thought occurred to me.

"Ti ... how did you know we were captured? Have you been following us the whole time?"

He remained silent.

"You don't really want to marry me, do you?"

His face contorted in pain.

"Yes, of course."

"How long have you known we were in the city?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't have to apologise for loving you."

"You were spying on us ... to propose to me?" I snorted. "Ti. Now talk plainly. It's awfully nice of you to save us, but ... does your family follow witches? Naira said something about a cult ... I don't even know what words I'm supposed to believe from your mouth anymore."

"Erm, I... I don't know, no, well... I got into something, but I've still got it under control, really..."

"Ti, are you serious? You work for these people?"

"Yeah, okay, we have contacts here, but it's not just my family. There was a decision by many families to persecute witches more, we expect to be at war with the Northlands soon. And if we are, better sooner than later. We're just getting into position. We're closing ranks. And to do that, we had to join forces with the Brotherhood of the Rococo. There was no other way. Your father was the only one who was against it."

"Okay ... that's awesome." I really hadn't expected that. Father had ... helped persecute witches?

"But that doesn't change my love for you," he continued, "don't listen to what she told you," he pointed at Naira without looking at her, "I want to be with *you*. I don't care what you are, what you do. All that matters to me is this."

He tried to take my hand, but I pulled it away.

"Ti ... just be quiet."

"No, well ... I don't recognise you at all. You don't really want to be that," he gestured to Naira, sending a stab through my heart, "that's not you."

I punched him hard in the face and he spat out, then we walked away and I looked for Naira's hand and found it, still clutching the book tightly to me.

"Are you OK?" I whispered to her.

She nodded, "yes, thank you," she said softly, "come on, we have to hurry," then we ran off.

"Bianka! Are you serious?" we heard him say behind us. "I want to marry you! Do you hear me? I love you! And I still have your number! I'll just write to you, yeah? Isn't everything good between us?"

I let go of Naira and gave him the finger over my back, Naira laughed.

After a while, I looked behind me. Ti was gone, the crack in the wall too ... I turned round again. He had always been a bit impulsive. But that he was also so against witches ... I really hadn't thought that. And the way he had looked at Naira ... I hope it hadn't hurt her too much. Then I looked ahead again. We needed horses. Luckily, at least we still had the most important things on our bodies.

We came to a fork in the road, on a path it was written in red: Hexenstraße. I hope it was just colour. We decided to take this path.

"There. That was probably the worst of it. It's only going to get better from now on."

"Yes, I hope so."

Naira's gaze had turned inwards. I had to give her some time to herself later, but first we had to get away from here.

Later, when we had got horses, travelled for a while on paved roads and were now back on more deserted paths, Naira was in a better mood again. "I would have made it before you, she said," and I laughed with relief, but then she followed up with, "God, let's crash really hard once we're on the road. Okay?"

"Sure," I said, still hoping she was just bluffing. It was actually quite nice the way it was, wasn't it? Why did she want to "shoot herself" so badly? Maybe she was just saying it to shock me, to tell me that she needed my help. Unfortunately, I knew her better by now.

Chapter 13

When we stopped to rest, I had time to spend with my new treasure for the first time. Naira didn't necessarily have to notice, so I stole off into the bushes.

And when I squatted down and opened the book, looking around among the willows and ferns like a thief (which I kind of was) and happened to open the chapter "What you should NEVER do", I found something amazing: *Never summon all the things in the universe. This creates an infinite loop and this can open a portal to another dimension that can jeopardise space-time and plunge our entire universe into ruin.*

I stared at the sentences for a few seconds, remembering the spell I had done back then. *For all things in the universe ...* I had made an infinite loop ... the internet article had been a fake ... it *had* all been my fault.

I went back to the camp and pretended everything was normal.

But she wasn't there.

When I got to the camp, Naira had disappeared. I began to search for her, scouring the nearby woods. After a while, I found her leaning against a tree, her eyes closed, glass crystals hanging from her hands, which she held in the air in front of her. Her lips were moving silently.

I was about to pull away, but she had already noticed me.

"Oh, it's you."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you ..."

"No, no, it's all right ... why don't you sit down?"

"Okay..."

I sat down and she placed one of the glass crystals in my lap.

"It's from my family. They were glassblowers. Or rather ... glass musicians. They made things out of glass with music. For many generations. It's the only thing I still have from them."

"They are beautiful." I didn't know what else to say, and it was true: they were twisted and very finely made, the light refracted through them and turned the floor into a sea of colour.

"No glassblower in the world can work glass with such finesse as the glass musicians of the free peoples. But soon there will be none of us left to do it."

"You don't even know that."

"No, but the art is slowly dying out. You can now also make it with Elder. It's almost as good. We'd have to start all over again, assert ourselves in this new field. I don't know if anyone has the strength to do that ... I don't have it anymore."

I took her hand.

"I'll help you if you want."

"No, it's all right. Come on, we have to keep going."

With that she stood up and I followed her back to the camp.

Chapter 14

In the next village we bought new horses, which cost us almost all our guilders. My new horse was a grey with a jet-black mane. I called her Frida. I liked her, but she was nothing compared to Frederick ...

In the meantime, Ti kept writing me longer messages. I read them for a while, but soon I just deleted them. I also discovered more and more dodgy posts on his social media account. Also from before. I had simply liked them without reading them. I soon blocked his contact completely.

We came to more and more liberal towns and villages and were able to advertise our abilities as a travelling coven more and more openly. In some we even stayed for a few weeks and we got used to setting up our quarters in the local forest, as was more common. It was useful to be able to accept and fulfil orders from the local population from there. We slowly became really professional witches.

We were now just before the *Roat To Walpurgis*, but things got really hairy again in a small town called Boltlenbrück.

We stayed in one of the hostels and were eyed suspiciously as always, but the last few villages had actually been a bit more liberal.

However, it turned out in conversation with the barman that our arrival was being watched by the whole village and officially reviled, but unofficially eagerly awaited for days.

We sighed. We were back in the Southlands. Hopefully for the last time.

We told him that we would listen to it and he took us to the village elder.

After the first few sentences, I could see that Naira had had enough again. We were supposed to do nothing less than restore peace in the village. There was a female vampire in the town and she had fallen in love with a young man. This had been *the* talk of the village for a while, but now the vampiress had become pregnant and the village was on the verge of an uprising. Before blood flowed, we should mediate, as witches were generally said to be close to everything that had to do with monsters in popular belief. Keyword: prejudice. They were slowly starting to get on my nerves too.

But the very fact that they hadn't staked the vampire directly showed that the village was actually relatively liberal. Or at least not openly racist.

"We're witches," said Naira, who hated it when people tried to hire us for such social problems, "we're witches and that's it, we're not your herb mixers and we don't bake gingerbread houses either. And if you ask us next if we can read your fortune from a fucking crystal ball, I really will turn you into a frog."

The man's look was not bad.

Of course, we tried to help anyway.

We spoke to the vampiress. She was very upset, she had never thought that she could get pregnant by a mortal.

Naira had another pill for afterwards, which she gave her, and we advised her to leave the village as quickly as possible. Naira asked her what she was doing here anyway.

"I came here as an orphan. The monastery took me in. I've never sucked anyone's blood either ... not really."

"I know, we believe you," Naira said and looked to me, I nodded uncertainly, "it's all okay. It really is. There's nothing wrong with you. But you need to get out of here. You're not safe here anymore."

She left the village the same day.

The village elder thanked us profusely afterwards. The next day the two would have been put on trial, we had come at just the right moment, he told us as we were saddling our horses. It certainly wouldn't have ended well for them and the vampire issue in general was a bit sensitive at the moment and he thanked us for helping to resolve it so discreetly.

He then wanted to give us a guilder "for our inconvenience", but we didn't accept it, whereupon he was downright miffed. He was lucky that we just let them get away with it.

We also left the village at nightfall and set up camp in the forest.

We looked for a while to see if we could find the young vampire somewhere nearby, but to no avail. We couldn't find her on social media either.

We sat around the campfire, unable to go to sleep and feeling guilty. Why had we gone back to the village in the first place? To get our horses, of course, and yet it felt wrong. I asked Naira if we should post something on social media about it, but Naira said it wouldn't help her, the vampire, much either.

"It would only be for us."

From then on, we always set up camp in the forest next to the village where we were stopping.

Chapter 15

For the next few days we travelled on with one eye on the forest and one on the local news sites, in the evenings we continued to comb the forest, in the villages we rode through we asked about her, but to no avail. We found her neither dead nor alive.

At some point we realised that we wouldn't be able to find the vampire. She was on her own now and she would make it, just like us. Even if she had to become something else to do so.

Nevertheless, every time we saw a corpse in a ditch, I flinched violently and had to calm down for a while before we could continue riding.

To recover from the shock, we didn't do an assignment in the next town. We visited a spa and went shopping. There were now even a few witch shops for tourists, run by local people and a collection of the old witch clichés. Naira thought they were awful, but I really wanted to go inside one. I tried on pointy hats, looked at myself in crystal balls and stirred around in a large witches' cauldron, whereupon Naira couldn't stand it any longer and left the shop.

In the end, I decided on a bright green hoodie with a triangle with a horizontal line on it, which stood for the fifth element, ether, like everywhere else. Naira thought it was totally stupid when I sent her a picture, but I liked it.

It didn't improve my mood, but I bought it anyway and bought a few more "witch creams" for my dry skin, and a few more "witch pills" just in case. Then we moved on.

We set up camp in a birch forest. I thought that was pretty funny. Birch trees were known to be the trees of witches, but Naira didn't really find it funny. She'd had enough for one day and I could understand that. I should stop teasing her like that. It was just wrong after everything she'd been through.

But if it did stop me from thinking about the vampire ... I watched funny videos on the Ethernet instead.

The next morning we set off again. The roads were still foggy, as is often the case in this area, but this morning the fog was even thicker than usual and Naira had a bad feeling.

"Something's not right."

She sometimes sensed things that I didn't, it had to do with her connection to the ether through the music and most of the time she was right in her assumptions.

We came to a fork in the road and chose the left fork this time; we could only see a few metres, even though it was already around midday. We thought we would have to set up camp here in the middle of this foggy hell, but then we suddenly came to a farm. Naira raised her hand, looked at her mobile phone and I stopped. According to the map, the next village wasn't due for another two hours. Although it wasn't unusual for villages not to appear on maps, as often as villages appeared or blew up, we were still on our guard. On the other hand, of course, it would have been more pleasant to stop off at a bar to wait out the next day than to set up camp in the middle of the wilderness. And as we rode past the farm, we suddenly found ourselves in a marketplace. It really was a village: the outlines of the houses stood out clearly against the walls of mist around us, like giants looking down on us.

But when I stepped closer to one, I saw that the windows had been smashed. Blind giants. But maybe they're watching us anyway. Like in Stratburg. I felt very uncomfortable, but we had no other choice, as Naira's gaze made me realise. The fog was too thick, we had to stop here.

We wandered through the village, none of which seemed to be inhabited, the buildings were all deserted, but then, finally, a tavern from which a golden-yellow light shone.

We tied up our horses in front of it and went in.

The room was deserted, except for an expensively dressed noblewoman sitting at the bar. She sat with her back to us, a large glass of wine next to her. With a graceful movement, she stood up and scrutinised us, the wine glass still in her hand. She towered over us by at least two heads and in some places her clothing was reinforced with metal armour. She crossed her arms and sipped her wine with a smile on her lips.

Then she walked away from us to the other end of the room to a door and motioned for us to follow. We looked at each other. She didn't seem to be fundamentally hostile to us, which was nothing to sneeze at, besides, we had no choice. We followed her.

The door she opened in front of us led downstairs.

She told us to go down first.

"Where is this going?" I asked her.

"To my castle."

Naira next to me closed her eyes and nodded.

"She's telling the truth. Let's go."

Wow. I didn't realise she could do that too, but I still gave the woman a suspicious look. She smiled and I had to revise my first observation: the room had been deserted, the woman in front of us was not human.

We went through a tunnel underground, soon the wooden walls gave way to stone walls and it went uphill again and the corridor became wider and wider. Suddenly we entered a carpeted hall of fame, into which the tunnel had seemingly merged seamlessly. We walked past the showpieces. There were weapons and armour on display all over the walls.

It was impressive, but the face of our presumably new client showed no emotion. She walked calmly beside us, almost a little too slowly. I tried to take a closer look at her unobtrusively. It was impossible to tell her age. I wondered if she had had anything to do with the vampire from

yesterday. Was she her daughter? Had she escaped from here? Or had she been thrown out? Vampires were known to do that from time to time. But there were all sorts of rumours about vampires and I didn't dare ask. Most of the rumours about witches weren't true either. At least not any more. And vampires had changed a lot too. Most of them were strict vegetarians these days and only ate sweet potatoes.

We walked up a stone staircase in silence and soon came to other rooms until we reached a wooden door with a heavy bolt.

The woman turned to us.

"We are here. Behind this door is the cellar of my castle. There's one thing I'd like to show you. Would you be open to an assignment?"

Of course, that was hard to refuse now that she had brought us to this godforsaken place, but she didn't seem the least bit deceitful. Perhaps she had simply become a little socially incompetent because of the seclusion in which she lived.

Naira must have been thinking the same thing and said: "Sure, I'd love to. What's up?"

The woman laughed briefly and so I saw her once again in all her splendour: she had pointed, white teeth, but when she saw that I had seen it, she quickly closed her mouth again. She was uncomfortable. How cute.

"I'd better show you," she said, wiping her mouth with her hand as if she were wiping a crumb of bread. Before we could see her mouth again, she turned to the door and with a bold grip she lifted the bar of the door, put it aside, kicked the door and it swung open with a crash.

Behind it was absolute darkness.

You could only see so much: It was going down again, it was impossible to say where.

"What's down there?" Naira wanted to know.

The vampiress sighed.

"There were some problems with ... one ..." she fiddled nervously with her hair, "well, how can I put this? One of your colleagues is responsible ..."

Naira gave me a look.

"Okay, and on what?"

From the darkness of the cellar, I suddenly heard strange noises, both human and metallic at the same time.

"No," she said, "it's impossible to explain."

"Okay, fine," Naira finally said and we followed her. It soon turned out that it *would have been* impossible to explain. We were already used to being confronted with equipment that had been put together by witches of dubious talent and then having to completely redo everything in order to restore the witches' honour. But in all cases, the machine's task was obvious: to operate a mill and channel water through the village, but in this case ...

It was a pile of scrap that twitched in some places, metal fingers, Ethernet cables that ended in nowhere.

"Who did this?" Naira asked her.

"I don't know. It's been in my family for many generations." She leant towards us. "Supposedly it was the great Walpurgis herself. Just think how old this machine is ..."

Naira nodded and circled the machine. It was completely unclear what it did or had ever done. Whoever had created it hadn't been too keen on documenting their work.

And the vampire couldn't tell us either. Apparently no one had known what the machine had been built for. It had been in the castle's large cellars all these years, working away without anyone knowing or wanting to know what it was doing. The doors had been locked and there was no intention of ever opening them again.

But recently, the lively activity that was usually the only thing that could be heard from the "cellar monster" had fallen silent and this had triggered a deep sense of insecurity in the local population. In the last few days, bad signs had finally piled up: Children had been born dead, goats had given blood instead of milk and people's teeth had fallen out for no reason. People expected a great disaster to be imminent and had taken flight.

"You see, I'm speaking to you in a time of need. Get it working again, however you do it. If it stays still much longer, they might not come back at all, and even if they did, we wouldn't be able to prepare for winter in time. Please. Can my kingdom count on you?"

At this sentence, a twitch went through my body and I suddenly had the strong urge to leave, I didn't want to be in this locked basement room any longer. The air was pretty bad down here too, wasn't it?

"Do you really think it's the machine?" I asked her, squinting towards the exit.

"What else could it be? Of course it's the machine! As soon as it stopped making its noises, they were gone. Please, help me, and preferably as quickly as possible. My potatoes are literally going mouldy in the fields. And..." she hesitated, wiping her mouth frantically, "what else am I supposed to *do*? I've already gone to the fields myself, but they're starting to rot ... please, I can't ... fall off the wagon. Do you understand? I *can't*."

She looked to the side and pointed at her sharp teeth, only to make them disappear again immediately.

"We understand. Don't worry, we'll manage. How long do you have ... supplies for?"

"For a week. At least. If I stretch it, two. I'm already stretching it as best I can."

"Mmh. That won't be necessary. Feel free to treat yourself to a bowl of sweet potato fries today. From the looks of it to me, this is a big pile of junk that's been jinxed with bad dances. We should be done in an hour."

For the first time, the vampire beamed at us openly.

"Thank you. You don't know how happy that makes me."

"I don't know ..." I objected, "someone must have built it ... do you really think they would have gone to so much trouble for a scam?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "That's true ... it's chaos. But almost everything seems to be doing something."

We inspected the thing in front of us more closely. It had had metal legs and fans, bellows and gears. Witchcraft had also been used on it, that much was clear, but it didn't really seem to make any recognisable sense.

"Um, sorry," the vampire spoke up, "... do you still need me here, or can I...?"

We didn't even know what she meant at first. Such worldly information no longer got through to us. We were in the tunnel.

"I see. No, they can go," Naira finally said.

"And what if ... I could watch you for a while?" she smiled shyly, put her hand over her mouth again and looked down at the floor, "not that I'll make you nervous if I stand here like this ... but ... I'd like to know what I have in the cellar this time."

"Yes, no problem."

We took some measurements. The ether activity was enormous. More than anything I had ever seen. There must have been thousands, if not millions, of spells spoken here. How had it even been possible to dance them all? But Naira had an idea. "I've downloaded an app that allows us to see the dances that were captured in this machine. Okay?"

"Okay."

Naira looked at the vampiress. "There, that could take a while. Who knows how many spells this machine has in it. With all the rubbish here, probably a lot. Could you leave us alone for a while?"

"Sure. I'll be upstairs if you need anything ... wine or ... whatever else you mortals take ..."

"All good, thank you."

She gratefully left the door open behind her. I didn't like this cellar and I sensed that Naira was thinking the same thing.

As soon as she was gone, Naira activated the app, then scanned the huge twitching heap of metal in front of us. Only a short sentence actually appeared on her display. *Ether sphere: give me a message flying around inside you. Release it here.*

It was Elder, but I didn't understand what it was doing.

"And what does that mean now?"

"Mmh ... the thing in front of us is fishing messages out of the Ether Sphere. It could be all kinds of spells from witches all over the world. It intercepts them and then releases them here."

"It's a surveillance machine?"

"No ... well. It's ... Whoever did this might not have known exactly what they were doing ... anything could have happened down here. I mean, the machine was basically constantly releasing spells ..." she faltered suddenly and as she continued, her voice had changed: "... hey, look there ..."

She pointed to a corner of the cellar where huge scratch marks could be seen, with the mobile phone we illuminated other parts of the cellar, saw more scratch marks, collapsed pillars, the shimmering air in one corner of the room seemed particularly strange to us. No wonder the door

down here had been locked and barred ... Everything *had happened* down here. Worlds had come and gone. It was a miracle that it had stayed in this cellar ...

Next to me, I heard Naira inhale sharply. She was looking into a very dark corner at the back of the room. I followed her gaze.

"By the old gods..."

At that moment, we were gripped by sheer panic.

We destroyed the machine and every last bit of it, left the castle head over heels, and rode off without ever saying another word about it.

It doesn't mean that witches can't be afraid of witchcraft. On the contrary. They are the ones who fear it the most.

Part III - How To Hex Yourself A New Boyfriend

*"Anyone can do witchcraft, it's really not witchcraft. (laughs)
And love is pretty much the easiest form of it. (laughs again)"*

(Excerpt from "Bibi Bloxberg - From witch to witch - How I managed to found the biggest witch coven in the world and still kept my sense of humour")

Chapter 1

And then we came to the road to Walpurgis. The road of the witches. There was no sign at the beginning, no big banners, no welcome canapés, but you immediately had the feeling that everything was different. We were surrounded by other people laughing and singing in no time and I was sure that some of them were even real witches, even if they looked very different to how I had imagined them. Almost none of them wore pointy hats, it was almost impossible to tell what made them witches or different from the other travellers, but it was something. I was glad I hadn't bought the pointy hat after all. Although, maybe I would have fitted in anyway, precisely because I wouldn't have fitted in.

I asked Naira and she said that it wasn't something on the outside, but something on the inside. Another typical Naira sentence.

Naira went to the first tavern almost immediately. I barely managed to get our stuff into the only inn in the village. It was an exception, but now, with the Southlands at our backs, I felt we could make it without worrying, even if I had immediately had the feeling at the reception that the owner was looking at me with hostility. But maybe I was just imagining it.

Then I crossed the market square to the tavern where Naira had disappeared and looked around. Walpurgis jewellery was nowhere to be found here. Was the village really as liberal as Naira thought, or was it just its visitors? After all, we were still in the vast foothills of the Southlands, weren't we? I checked the map on my mobile phone, which loaded immediately and then put it away again. The Ethernet was getting better, there wasn't really much less of the Southlands. Maybe we really had already made it. I had to start worrying less.

When I entered the stuffy room, which smelt of sweat and root beer, Naira was having a lively discussion with the barman. As far as I could make out, she wanted to give a concert. She would have had enough of an audience for that, but the barman seemed to confirm my fears.

"I don't want filth like you here."

"Just *a* song," said Naira. The fact that she didn't smack him straight away made me take notice. She *really* wanted to play music.

"One song and my whole house is in ruins, no thanks. Pull the line."

She snorted.

"What do you think will happen when word gets round here that the first village on the Road to Walpurgis is witch-hostile, mmh?"

His face fell for a moment, but then he regained his composure.

"Pull the leash or I'll call the Inquisition."

Then she went for him after all. Before she could do him any major damage, I pulled her away from him. She was incredibly strong when she was like that. I could only just hold her.

"Forget him," I squeezed out, "we'll just give him a really bad rating."

Once we were outside, she pulled away from me, "Let's get out of here."

We packed our things and left. I avoided mentioning to her that I hadn't even asked the owner of the inn if we could get our money back.

Chapter 2

It took three more villages before Naira got her moment.

Meanwhile, I became increasingly worried about her. It was hard for her to bear, these colourful people all around us, living out their witchcraft freely. Somehow she couldn't see it all unless she could play her music. And yet it was only one or two villages away. Why was she suddenly making such a fuss when we had already held out for so long?

Then we came to a small town, which we could see from afar was decorated in the colours of Walpurgis. I looked happily at Naira from the side, who just smiled quietly to herself.

This time I persuaded her to set up camp in a nearby meadow instead of the forest or one of the racist inns, where a few other witches had set up camp for the night and the mood was generally relaxed. I would have liked to spend some time there, but Naira muttered "hipster witches" and headed straight for the nearest bar again, and even though I didn't really want to, I followed her. After all, someone had to look after her.

But when I entered the bar, I got scared: there was a huge witch cage in the centre. Naira, on the other hand, didn't seem to be impressed, on the contrary, she went straight up to it and hugged it. When she saw my reticence, she waved cheerfully at me.

"This is going to be really good!" she exclaimed.

Do you think that's a good idea? everything inside me screamed. But I didn't say anything, she already knew what she was doing. I wasn't her mum.

Then I saw her walk towards the bar and exchange a few words with the barman. Things seemed to be going better this time and I let my gaze wander round the room. There was already a lot going on, I even saw a large orc in one corner and a group of witches all dressed in black clothes. There was a smell of herbs and something I couldn't name in the air. Suddenly Naira was standing in front of me again.

"Hey, the music's playing here. Hello?" She waved her hand in front of my face. She was completely beside herself. "I can play something! I can *play* something!"

"Great! How great is that," I said, trying to sound light-hearted, which of course I wasn't. Not at all. We gave each other a quick hug.

Then she took out her violin with a flourish, struck a note and a change went through the room that I had never seen before: I was used to the attention we were getting by now, but it was always passive, out of the corner of my eye. And above all: hostile.

This time, all eyes were on her and she was beaming. People stood up and flocked to the dance floor. And Naira was beaming too.

She entered the witch's cage to applause, slammed the door herself, struck a graceful pose and then began to play, quietly at first, then louder and louder, her movements becoming faster but never frantic, and like last time, at one point other things came in, a drone behind the music, ethereal discharges, wave-like pulses kept going through the audience, making them hoot and howl. Then suddenly the people around me started dancing and things really got going.

It seemed as if she was suddenly playing polyphonically, she played something, stopped, but the music continued, so she put melody over melody and at the height of the spectacle the ethereal discharges were added again, but it didn't sound mechanical, it just sounded different from anything I'd ever heard, not like the stuff on the radio either, it went completely into the whole body and slowly it became almost uncomfortable, even the inn seemed to sway under the weight of the performance: The forces were already pulling at the witch's cage, making it sway dangerously back and forth, and the inn was already creaking and cracking dangerously too, but people just kept dancing. And I just danced along. I couldn't help it. You couldn't stand still. Not to this music.

Then she played a different tune and that seemed to reverse the whole thing, the cracks in the walls of the inn disappeared, she had everything under control. I laughed involuntarily. It was all good. And then I really surrendered to the rhythm, danced and just let go.

Then she came straight to me. She was grinning from ear to ear, she was completely out of breath. And so was I.

"Did you see that? Wasn't that crazy?"

"Yes, really great."

I was also completely out of breath.

She laughed and threw her arms around my neck, I could smell the odour of her perfume mixed with her sweat.

"Come on, we have to keep going," she said and jumped round me.

I wanted to reply that we had only just arrived, but I said nothing and let it happen. Maybe I should learn to let go more often. Like Naira.

Chapter 3

If the last town had given Naira an ounce of satisfaction, she didn't let it show. She slid around in her saddle with the same excitement when the next village came into view. This was where she really wanted to know.

It was a village that could hardly have been described as such. It consisted of just a handful of farmhouses, a bar and a completely dismantled inn with a witches' cauldron in the centre. And around it: meadow, lots and lots of meadow, and the meadow and the surrounding paths were full of witches. If I had thought there had been a lot of witches in the last village, I was now proved wrong. There were witches as far as the eye could see. Maybe that's why the inn was broken. Naira confirmed my theory when she saw him: "You shouldn't let people play music who don't know anything about it." She laughed shrilly. "I'll show them how it's done. I'll set it up again."

She let me persuade her to do a small job *beforehand so that* we could at least buy some food. But she made me swear that we would get rid of half of it straight afterwards.

I completed the job more or less single-handedly.

"Here. Your half," I said afterwards, but she just snatched everything out of my hand and I didn't even see where she disappeared to. The meadow was full of tents and I honestly didn't feel like looking for her in every single one.

I tried to socialise a bit with the other witches in the meadow, but didn't know how to approach them. I spent the rest of the day riding across the meadows with Frederick.

When Naira came back, she was completely different. There was something wrong with her eyes and she was talking louder and faster than usual.

I didn't understand what she was trying to tell me and then she hissed off again.

I tried to hold her back, but she was so frantic that she almost dragged me into one of the tents. I tore myself away from her in a moment of panic and when I turned round, she had disappeared. I looked into the tent she had tried to drag me into. There were witches lying close together, with tubes in their veins, and I quickly pulled the tent closed again.

Suddenly I started to panic. What if I were to lose her too?

I picked my way through the crowd but couldn't find her. She was not in one of the larger tents, not on the dance floor of one of the open-air concerts that had sprung up like mushrooms that day, not in the improvised latrines at the end of the meadow and not even where she usually preferred to be: next to the witches' cauldron of the destroyed inn, trying to find someone in charge who would let her make an appearance.

I eventually found her, outside, wandering aimlessly along a path and chatting up random people who ignored her or pushed her away gruffly.

I didn't even recognise her at first.

"Naira? Hey, come on, let's go back to camp now, okay?"

"Mum? Is that you? Where am I?"

"Come, here, it's me, Bianka. Come with me," I took her under my arms and supported her as we returned to our camp, holding her hair as she threw up in the bushes.

I covered her up, the other witches gave us worried looks, what arseholes. One of them must have given her something ... fucking junkies ...

From then on, I always insisted that we set up camp in the forest, far away from the other witches, as we had planned since the vampiress. There would be no exceptions in future.

As I fell asleep that night, I decided for myself that I would just pretend that today had never happened. And it probably would have worked if it hadn't happened again ... and again ... and again ...

Chapter 4

The temperatures were slowly getting warmer. It would probably have been really nice to ride along like this, through the sun-drenched rapeseed fields, but instead I had to keep a constant eye on Naira so that she didn't fall off her horse. For long stretches, I let her horse walk slowly behind me on a lead, even though Naira vehemently resisted this in her more alert phases and refused to be tied to the horse's back, which is why she actually fell off twice and only agreed to let me tie her up after almost breaking her arm.

As you might have guessed, our progress was slow.

But it got even better.

As we rode through the forest towards evening, I suddenly had the feeling that someone was following us. I thought I saw a black shadow that kept appearing in the distance. But I didn't tell Naira about it yet.

It couldn't be. We had almost left the Southlands. Nobody knew us here.

We set up camp in the forest, although this time I would have found it better to go to an inn one last time. But we had made up our minds and so we went through with it.

Around midnight we heard noises. They came from the darkness and you could tell straight away that it was something big and that it was getting closer.

I threw back the furs and stood up. A woman came out of the darkness, dressed completely in black, with an opaque cloth over her face.

"Hello, I'm Illias."

She had a long, black sword dangling from her hip. It was a sword of the night, such swords were only forged for a single group of people. I was immediately on the alert. She was an inquisitor. I called out to Naira, but of course she was fast asleep and instead I drew my sword that I always slept with, pointed it at her and slowly walked towards her.

She raised her hand.

"Princess Bianka from the House of Durmstrang?"

How I hated that name.

"Yes."

"You are accused of committing witchcraft in at least ten villages."

It must have been the guy from the bar. He had actually called the Inquisition.

"Yes, that's true, but as far as I know, no one has had any complaints about our service," I said, trying to sound calm.

"That's incorrect. It's on record that one of the mills you were supposed to repair blew up. Two people were injured."

Crap. We must have made some kind of mistake. But then it couldn't have been the bar man. It had been much earlier ...

"But don't worry," she continued, "I'm not here to take you to court. I could, but I'm not. I'm here to give you a message. From a certain Mr Notnagel, whom you may know."

Ti.

"He asks them to repent. He says they don't have to live like this, you choose everything you do. That is all. He's giving you one last chance to come along voluntarily. Otherwise he'll send the four horsemen."

"If you knew what Ti was up to, you wouldn't be doing what you're doing. He's joined a cult that practises witchcraft itself."

She didn't say anything for a while, I couldn't recognise any movement behind her veil. Then she said, without any change in her voice: "When they come, they'll only show as much mercy as is absolutely necessary. I'll give you one more chance."

"No. I'm not coming with you."

She nodded.

With that, she went back into the undergrowth. Shortly afterwards I heard a horse.

"What was that?" Naira moaned under her furs.

"My ex-boyfriend, well ... more like ex-acquaintance. The guy from Stratburg."

"Ah yes. The rococo arsehole."

"He doesn't agree with my latest life choices. We wanted to study painting together ... well, he wanted that."

She nodded, straightened her head, burped hard and spat something into the bushes.

"Were you close?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Yeah, no. I didn't actually know him at all. I still can't believe he was such an arse."

She groaned.

"Can't you tie me up this time? I think I can do it again."

She straightened up. She could actually stand again, albeit on shaky legs.

"I feel so stupid. How could I not have seen it?"

"As long as you learn the right things from it, it's all good," she smiled at me and held on to the tree trunk next to her, "if you don't do anything, you won't make any mistakes. Old Elder wisdom."

I smiled gratefully at her. Even half-drunk, she could still cheer you up. I helped her into her riding clothes, which I had taken off so that she could breathe better, and we started to collect our camp, stuffing the essentials into our riding bags, leaving most of it there. We didn't have time.

"Can you ride on your own?" I asked her when I had helped her mount, even though it wasn't really a question.

"Yes, of course, let's set off right away," she said, turning towards me on her saddle and almost falling off, I held her tightly until she had regained her composure. "I've already met the four riders once," she continued, panting, "they're not on our side."

"Yes, it's best to just ride straight ahead."

"Bi ... do you think this is the first time I've ridden a bit ... tipsy?"

"You're not ... oh, never mind. Come on, let's go."

We left the rest of our things behind and rode faster than we had for a long time, Naira held on to the saddle remarkably well for her condition, but we were still far behind our normal riding speed before we reached the *road*. My eyes kept darting back anxiously, but there were no riders, just the dark green of the night. All was still well, was Ti just bluffing? His sphere of authority must be slowly weakening up here. On the other side, we were in a forest and it was well known that different laws applied there.

Who would have thought that he had been *such* an arsehole?

We rode through the night, Naira seemed to have gathered all her strength, but she wouldn't last forever. We took a shortcut across a vineyard, which would leave the last belt of the Southlands behind us. We wanted to leave the territory of Ti as quickly as possible. Just another half hour and we would have reached the border to a kingdom of the Northlands.

We rode along the moonlit vineyards that the Southlands were famous for, and which were probably the last we would see for a while, and I was already feeling a little wistful.

But then I heard a rustling behind us and suddenly they were there, emerging from the vines on all sides. Black armour on black horses, seemingly without faces, hidden behind black cloths that they wore over their faces.

There were four of them. Two in front of us and two behind us. We slowed our horses down. They had surrounded us.

Nobody spoke a word yet. We dismounted, swords drawn. The riders dismounted too. There was no point in negotiating with them, but Naira wasn't prepared to fight either. They were going to take us, there was no doubt about that. They would not kill us, they would probably be severely punished if they did. That was our advantage. They weren't allowed to kill us. Most probably.

I immediately went for the first rider. I hadn't hunted monsters for years for nothing.

She blocked my blow and punched me in the pit of the stomach. I would lose.

Nevertheless, I tried it again and took another swing, this time with more force, but the rider parried it with a quick movement and immediately struck back, so that I could only just fend it off and my

wrist cracked painfully. She squeezed harder and pain shot through my arm, causing me to let go. With a kick, she sent my sword flying into the bushes.

Then she punched me in the face with her bare fist. I went down and felt them grab me by both arms. Just like in Stratburg. *No, not again.*

Then I heard a violin playing behind me and suddenly I was let go. The riders' bodies fell to the ground around me.

I picked myself up and blinked. What had that been?

I turned round. It was Naira. She stood there and put down her violin stick. She had only played a single note.

I pulled myself to my feet, wanted to throw my arms around her neck, but her face was pale, almost pale, she was about to fall over, but didn't want any help.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed at me and fell to the ground, trying to pick herself up but collapsing again and again. Finally, she stumbled half-bent over into the vines.

I'll never forget the look on her face. It showed sheer horror. I didn't follow her, I wouldn't have known what to say to her. She shouldn't have killed people because of me. It shouldn't have happened ...

In the meantime, I examined the bodies of the riders. I checked their pulse first. It was still there. Luckily, she had only rendered them unconscious. Still, it must have been a shock for her. To use violence against another human being, through music, even on such a small scale, must have been terrible for her.

After a while, she came back. I couldn't see any tears, but she looked very upset.

"Ti's sphere of influence ends here. That's it," I said to reassure her, but she just nodded and lay down on her horse, letting me tie her to it without saying a word.

Somehow I sensed that something had just broken between us, that I might not be able to do anything right again. At least for a while. On the other hand, she was also drugged up, maybe she would never remember it ...

I pulled the unconscious riders a few metres between the vines. It would be a while before they were discovered. If they didn't wake up first. Either way, we didn't have much time, the sun was already appearing over the mountains. We rode on.

Chapter 5

So we left the southlands. When the sun poured over the mountains, the morning came over us like a flood and warmed our exhausted bodies, we had made it. But we didn't take a break, we wanted to at least reach the next place where the law of the Northlands really applied. We wanted to leave the grey areas behind us and finally step fully into the light.

The next town was Wegatz, a place known for its lively gambling and fortune-telling scene. It was a tourist magnet and more of a fairground than anything else. Naira had thought we should have

avoided it (she hated the place more than anything), but someone had to look after her. She was not well.

I took her to a local sanatorium. Fortunately, it already had the latest innovation in witchcraft medicine. Naira had her stomach pumped and was soon feeling better again. What kind of unclean shit had she taken?

Naira was still very dazed afterwards and I decided to take it a little easier.

We went to one of the local 'witch houses' that were dotted around the streets. I was surprised that Naira came along at all. But that just showed how much she needed some peace and quiet.

We entered the first orange tent we saw, and as we entered, roasted orange slices were hanging from the ceiling on ropes. Yes, I had read about this ritual in the Witches' Almanach. Maybe it wasn't as bad as Naira said ...

There was a large table in the centre, at the end of which sat a woman with orange rings hanging around her ears. She was a witch. She was very middle-aged, plump, wore baggy clothes and an oversized pointed hat, but her eyes were alert. We stepped closer to see what she was doing. There was quite a lot going on in the tent. Was it a coven meeting? But why here and not in the forest?

We were horrified to see that she was reading cards. Fortune telling. I had to hold Naira back next to me.

"It's probably just self-deprecating," I said, "let's look at it first."

"Okay."

We watched her as she laid out the cards one by one and then read the future for the black-haired man in front of him.

"I see a great future in your life. There will be sunny days and dark days ..." She turned over the next card, "you will walk in the light of a willow and ... you will recognise new melodies in old songs ..."

Then Naira could no longer suppress it and slammed her hand down on the table.

"What exactly is this supposed to be? You're not a witch, this is bullshit," she stumbled a little, but caught herself, "you're tarnishing the reputation of all witches with your sleight of hand, you do realise that, right?"

The other witch paused on the last card, her eyes calm. Then she turned her gaze to her customers.

"I-I, um," she smiled apologetically, putting the card back and clapping her hands together, "could you give us a minute? We'll get straight on, yeah?"

The surrounding guests moved away sullenly, looking angrily at Naira.

"So, where were we," the other witch straightened the cards on the table and eyed Naira over her glasses, "oh right, you scared off my customers. You and your high ideals."

Then she turned her gaze to me and pointed at Naira. "Don't be so stupid as to think she didn't do it once to earn a few extra guilders and get her hands on her stuff. Do you want to know what she *almost* did for me?"

I frowned and looked at Naira, but she was staring ahead.

"I didn't realise you had such a big heart," she said coldly, "that you still think I *almost* wanted to go through with something with you. But ... I'm going to help you with it now, here."

Naira reached onto the table and turned over the last card. "Ah, how *appropriate*," she said, "the universe is really clever. Because you really are just a little girl who still hasn't grown up."

"Sorry," said the other, "but you couldn't even stand up to me soberly in discussions. I don't know what to say to that ... if you were trying to offend me, it certainly didn't work."

Naira turned round and crossed her arms, annoyed.

Both remained silent.

"You ... know each other," I asked.

Naira said nothing.

The other turned to me with an affable smile. "Yes ... something like that. We used to be ... a kind of couple. Or rather part-time couples. Whenever we ran into each other, we slept together. But ..."

Naira was still looking away.

"... it was more of a love for a purpose, as it turned out. She just wanted my drugs. Because when I landed this great job and wanted to make more out of our relationship than just shagging around, your defenceless partner here just didn't want to help. It would have been perfect ... everything was already planned ... we just needed *a* partner quickly ..."

"It was too dangerous," Naira said sharply, "it's not a perfect plan if it fails because of one person who doesn't come. It was an agreement from the start: I'll come to you in the Southlands, but I won't play along with your crooked games. And besides..." she looked at me briefly and I could see how uncomfortable it was for her to say the following: "it wasn't just because of the drugs."

They looked at each other for a while. The embarrassment on my part was hard to bear at this point.

Finally, the other shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, but that doesn't mean you didn't let me down. I would have needed you. I *really needed* you once."

"I know ... maybe I should have gone along with it, but ... that doesn't change the fact that it was good to break up with you. Come on, Bi." She took my hand and pulled me after her.

"Bi? What kind of name is that?" laughed the other one behind us, "I bet she can't kiss as well as me!"

Even as she was walking, Naira paused once more, went back and swept the tarot cards off the table, scattering them all over the tent. The woman's head swelled red. We disappeared through the back exit, hearing her shout behind us: "I know which card it was, I *know!*"

"Don't say anything," she said back in the marketplace.

"Are we suddenly together now?"

"I never said that."

"You didn't correct them."

"Because I didn't have to."

I smiled.

"Let's discuss this another time," she said.

"Okay."

We went back to the horses.

Chapter 6

Soon it was no longer so easy to make real money with our witch skills. We were now sharing the street with all sorts of other witches, some of whom were of an impressive calibre. They performed dances that were longer than anything I had ever danced *in* my short career as a witch, with huge, convoluted if-sentences that involved complicated calculations and automatically controlled entire cities.

The clients also became more and more demanding. The small problems we had struggled with in the Southlands proved to be mere finger exercises here. Problems that we had sat on for hours were solved here in one swift movement.

Here, mills had long been running fully automatically via the Ethernet. They were even connected to each other, there were villages that were largely automated and in which, for example, the water supply functioned completely without human intervention.

The orders displayed on the boards were correspondingly specialised. *Interface between mill component and wheat purchase system required. Payment: 100 guilders.*

And there were witches hanging around in the bars who actually looked like witches. They seemed to be *born* for such jobs and were probably a thousand times better than us, or at least than me.

When I asked Naira about it, she just shook her head and said "hipster witches", but you could tell she was a little nervous too. It turned out that although every second coven really was called "*Coven of the Night*", "*Coven of the full moon*" was probably only two places behind. I didn't think it was bad, but she was visibly embarrassed. When she was asked what she was doing here, she didn't mention our coven at all.

We simply weren't good enough and our money was slowly running out. Even before, when we got into money trouble, a haze would come over her eyes, she was irritable and sometimes I thought I could see panic on her face. I was starting to get seriously worried about her, but on the other hand, maybe it would be good if she took a break from that stuff. Maybe that would get her off it.

Besides, the money problems were the more pressing issue. The hunger I soon felt was so strong that I even briefly thought about laying cards for money (if then secretly, of course, so that Naira wouldn't notice, although that wouldn't have been difficult anyway, as out of touch as she was).

Oh, how we needed the *100 guilders*, but I didn't even understand what the job was. It was so humiliating and there was only one way to overcome it: I had to get better. And quickly.

I practised *witchcraft for dummies* almost continuously and actually got better and better at witchcraft, but not good enough to earn money with it. The other witches here had years of experience that I couldn't possibly catch up on in a few days.

Soon we didn't even have enough money to buy food for our horses.

So I went back into the forest and shot animals, which wasn't so easy as the landscape had become flatter again and I had to ride for a while to reach the next forest. But at least I was alone here. The hipster witches were no longer comfortable in their natural habitats. Instead, they wanted a connection to the local water and Wi-Fi supply.

I immediately realised how good it felt to go out riding again without Naira. And it also took some of the pressure off our most pressing problem, which I didn't know how to tackle, so sometimes I just went into the forest, even if I didn't want to hunt, and read while Naira did whatever else. She would be fine, I told myself, and explored the forests of the Northlands, which were actually very similar to those in the South.

I would often tie Frida to a tree, climb up it and continue reading my book with one leg dangling down. If I closed my eyes, I could even imagine that I was sitting at home in my parents' garden and reading.

I liked *Witches for Dummies*. Instead of just confusing me further like the *Witches' Almanac*, the witchcraft became more and more understandable as the book progressed.

I particularly liked how clearly structured it was and that you didn't need any prior knowledge. It started with the basics (there are the five elements, you can call them with so-called spheres, otherwise you can simply name any thing in the universe when you're near it, which is also called a sphere), and it also gave you a few little tasks to practise with. Nothing earth-shattering, but at least I was witching and felt safe doing it. For the first time, I really felt like I knew what I was doing when I was witching and that felt great.

I also recognised things that I had done wrong from the start.

For example, I learnt that with Elder, you typically didn't move while casting and then when you finished a spell, you made a random move to complete the spell. I'd seen this with the other witches on the fields, but always thought *they were* doing it wrong. I had once even considered showing them how to do it properly. Good thing I hadn't done that. It would have been so embarrassing. It was a miracle that my dances had somehow worked anyway, but it made sense now that bigger dances had almost never worked.

The first exercises had consisted purely of number exercises: the hexogram (the name of a pronounced Elder dance) was supposed to add up a handful of numbers and then tell you the result.

It took me a while to get the hang of it. I first had to scribble the text on the forest floor with a stick and felt really stupid. I'm sure the real witches could do that off the top of their heads. But I was assured in the book that it was completely normal. That everyone had started out like that. I was soon satisfied with my result.

I stood up excitedly and danced:

Let X be a number with the value 0 (movement).

Do the following for all elements Y of the number list 1, 2, 3, 4: (movement)

add Y to X. (movement)

Air sphere: Pronounce X. (movement)

I put my foot down and sure enough, I heard something say "ten" around me. It just seemed to come out of the air. I couldn't believe it. It had worked. I had danced my first working witch dance!

The feeling was unique, not only because I finally felt like I had something I could become really good at, but also because it was so immensely satisfying.

What power witches had! They could change reality with just a few movements and words! It was almost as if you could create something alive. Maybe that's why I loved it so much. You could bring things to life.

Now I just had to make sure that I could say the numbers in advance. So that you could enter any list you wanted.

All I had to do was let the air sphere listen for numbers and let the whole thing run in a loop until I said the code word "end" and the result would be calculated.

The dance I came up with looked like this:

Let X be a number with the value 0 (movement).

Let L be a list of numbers. (Movement)

Until air-sphere: hear if "end" was said, do the following: (move)

Air sphere: hear number and insert it into L. (movement)

Do the following for all elements Y of the number list L: (move)

add Y to X. (movement)

Air sphere: Pronounce X. (movement)

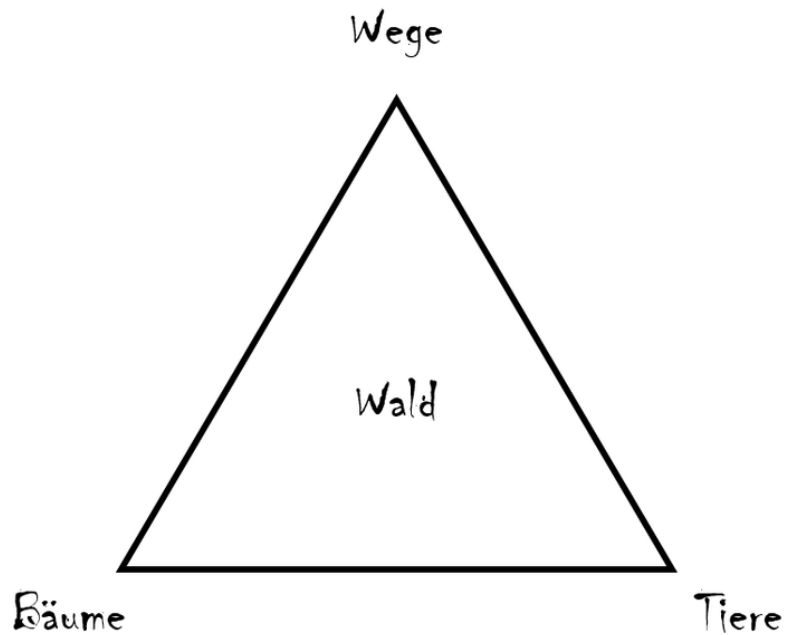
I put my foot down and said a few numbers out loud. And it actually worked! Was I the best witch in the universe or what?

From this numerical level, it quickly moved on to practical things and the book gave me a better idea of how to incorporate the things of this world into a dance.

I learnt that there was an object in the ether for every thing in this world and that the objects in the ether were connected to each other in orders.

You could then address certain things via these connections and do things with them.

There was even a separate presentation for it:



In the forest, for example, you could simply address the forest paths and make them float with the power of the Air Sphere or set them on fire with the Fire Sphere.

For example like this:

For all the paths of this forest, do the following: (Move)

Fire sphere: Burn! (Movement)

There were unlimited possibilities. You just had to utilise them. Sometimes the size of these possibilities even made me a little dizzy. It was just *too much*.

Soon the Elder words, which I already knew, were added and I learnt to use them in completely new ways, for example by combining them with the knowledge from the object diagrams:

For all men in the neighbourhood: (Movement)

When the man harasses me: (movement)

Earth sphere: Man's privates: Exert force. (Movement)

I used it to build myself an amulet in less than five minutes that I could use to keep pushy arseholes off my back. I was particularly proud of the "Earth Sphere: Man's privates: Exercise power", because I found that I used the connections between the objects particularly well.

Apart from that, I met up with other old acquaintances. I already knew the "For all" by heart and I had already internalised how dangerous it could be more than I would have liked. But it was still nice to read about its subtleties again.

What was actually new were variables, things that you could give a name to yourself, but for which it was not yet directly defined what they were. Sounds complicated, and it was at first. I was slow to get used to them, but with a lot of practice I was soon using them without even thinking about it:

Be X the next tree in my neighbourhood: (move)

if X is an apple tree, do the following: (move)

Fire sphere: burn. (movement)

So you could make baked apples very quickly. All you needed was vanilla sauce. I didn't have a dance for it yet, but I'm sure I'll think of one soon.

Over time, the tasks also became really difficult.

For example, there was a task to conjure up a small tic-tac-toe hexagram that you could then play with on the ground. That was really difficult and I must have spent half a day on it until the hexogram was so good that you could play against it properly. In the beginning, it just did something. But in the end I even lost to it once by mistake. And that was enough for me for now.

Witchcraft became more and more natural to me. I had to be careful not to accidentally grill the local king when the reception was bad again and I scolded him.

I was soon speaking more Elder than my own mother tongue.

I practised for several hours every day and sometimes realised in passing how much progress I was making. After a few days, I could only laugh about the tasks that had taken me so long at the beginning. Now the Elder dances for these and similar tasks came to me almost immediately and I could have started dancing straight away. But as I progressed, so did the tasks: I had to conjure up an automatic guest list that managed the guests of an inn, counted them, calculated the profit, and so on. I scribbled three sheets of paper full of text and when I danced the dance, nothing worked. The dance was finished and I spoke a few words as the first input for the guest list, but nothing came back.

Then after a while I found the mistake: I had forgotten to make the outputs of the hexagram with the air sphere loud. They had flowed into the infinite expanse of the ether without being heard.

After that it worked great. I danced, said a few names, then the hexagram read out all the names I had entered and I was even able to do a few calculations on it: how many guests are there, and so on. It wasn't spectacular, but I was still very proud.

And even Naira, in her waking phases between sleep and feverish delirium, paid me her respects when I told her about it.

Chapter 7

But I soon reached my limits with *Witches for Dummies*. I had almost finished it and I still couldn't earn any money with my knowledge. What I needed most to get better was practice. But I couldn't get that if I hadn't improved beforehand.

It was a tricky situation. Maybe it was impossible to become a witch through self-study, as all the hipster witches in the bars kept assuring me. Maybe you had to go to one of the witch schools in the big forests in the east. The hipster witches had all studied their witchcraft there, of course, and worked in the big covens of the north while they were at it.

How was I ever going to catch up?

But then Naira and I had an idea: we needed our own job that would give me practical experience but wasn't paid.

Maybe it could even be something useful that we could market later.

"We're making an app."

It had been Naira's idea, but I wasn't at all enthusiastic about it, even though I was of course glad that Naira was thinking about something other than partying and drugs again.

"I wanted to start small. That must be really complicated."

"No, it's not. The difficulty is only in your head. It's just as easy as anything we've done before. You just need access to a sphere to witch apps. But that's easy too. Here, let me show you."

We walked into a clearing where there was a tree stump that offered a reasonably flat surface.

"Here," she placed a few sticks in a square on the tree stump and clicked around on her mobile phone for a while.

"I have now downloaded the Sphere of Ra from WitchLab and banned it to this tree trunk."

I looked at her in amazement.

"You can download them for free. It's *nothing criminal*. My God. Now pick up your mobile phone and witch," she said impatiently, "Here. What are you waiting for?"

She pressed her mobile phone into my hand. "There you can see the spells of the sphere. They work like the spheres of the elements. All you have to do is call up the spells and the sphere and off you go."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, the sphere is good, I've already made many apps with it. Nothing can happen."

I looked at her.

"Come on, do it now."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Okay."

I read through the witch spells of the Ra sphere for a while, trying to memorise them.

Then I started to dance and said: "Ra sphere: create a new app," I looked uncertainly at Naira, who nodded encouragingly, "create a button, whenever I click the button: if there is a tree and this tree is alive and has leaves, calculate half the distance of the tree, walk this distance up the tree and air elemental: exert power vertically."

I put my foot down.

"Very good."

"Why the sticks on the tree?"

"That was just a guide for you."

"I see. Not bad. And now?"

"Well, try them out."

"Now?"

"Yes."

I picked up my mobile phone and found a new app. I opened it and clicked on the empty button.

Nearby, there was the sound of a short, sharp gust of wind, followed by the loud cracking and splintering of wood.

"Oh fuck. Tree's falling!" Fortunately, it fell in the other direction.

We spent the rest of the day cutting down trees and creating more apps. The most innovative thing we came up with was an app that allowed you to use a broom as a means of transport. For some reason, it only worked with brooms. We decided to find out what the problem was at some point.

Soon we were flying through the air, cheering.

"Great, and what do we call it?"

"E-Broom."

"Not bad. Where did you get that?"

"I've had the name for quite a while. I just needed a product for it. Otherwise I still have iWitch and Manti-core, if you have any other ideas."

We then went to a smaller witch fair nearby. E-Broom sold like hotcakes.

After that, we always had enough money. But with the money, Naira's problems increased again.

Chapter 8

We sold our horses with a heavy heart and from now on we travelled by flying, but that didn't mean we made any faster progress. Naira still wanted to take us to every village that we would have visited on the way on horseback and so we actually partied just as much as before, with fewer breaks in between. Our night-time rides between the villages, where her alcohol and drug levels had at least dropped a little, were almost completely cancelled.

For the first time, I thought about moving on without Naira. But could I even reconcile that with my conscience?

Naira's actions became increasingly self-destructive and she became more and more careless. I had slowly realised that she was taking the stuff more or less permanently and had always taken it, and that I was pretty much following her on her final shooting spree if she carried on like this.

And then it got even more complicated. Because then we met Ferdinando.

To be more precise, it was Naira who met him. She had made it a personal challenge to date guys in cemeteries and preferably get down to business with them on a gravestone. She was a pretty morbid type, but there were always men who were up for it. Ferdinando was one of them.

I met him the next day and realised relatively quickly that he was nice, but that his Walpurgis hype was already starting to get on my nerves. He wasn't a witch, was he? Then what was he doing here anyway? No question, he was nice, but I had got so used to travelling the countryside alone with Naira by now ...

"He's a bard," she said as matter-of-factly as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

No, he wasn't a male witch, he was something much worse. All the stories had warned me my whole childhood about something like him: he was a bard. A *male* singer.

"Not seriously."

"Yes, he sings. And? What's so bad about that?"

"Naira. Bards are known for ..."

She eyed me.

"Yes, of course. He's probably a really great guy."

"Wait until you hear his lyrics."

"Mmh, can hardly wait."

So I met him. He was no Casanova, he wasn't even really good-looking. But his lyrics fitted perfectly into the picture, even if they drifted a little into the metaphorical, almost poetic realm at times, it didn't change the fact that they were first-class schmaltzy songs. The *very* old school kind:

*Your black hair as beautiful as the night,
Your walk as gentle as the evening,
Your voice as soft as the dawn,
swift yet fading,
With sunbeams on my lips I look up to you, Like the sun that cannot believe
what it replaces,
I praise you oh my beautiful Naira,
Queen of the night,
Queen of all,
and like the sun that can't believe how it replaces, A bright summer dawn
that leaves no trace of what it replaced,
A spring to fill the void,*

*A summer to replace
the fullness,
You hold me tight in my hair, and I weep through you.
Your bright summer dawn that leaves no trace of what it replaced,
I hold you so tight that you can see me through my hair,
I cry through you, I look at the sky through your eyes,
Queen of the day,
Queen of the night,*

He had underlaid the whole thing with an obscure beat, but he had a knack for beautiful images, even if he still urgently needed to work on his meter. But apart from that, it was passable entertainment. Guilty pleasure category. I started clapping loudly.

"Wow, Ferdinando. Really really nice how you do that. Thank you. I really hadn't heard such a good bard in a long time."

"Have I made the threads of sound in your soul vibrate?"

"Mmh ... yeah, don't take it too far, okay?"

"Okay."

Naira was grinning from ear to ear, I'd never seen her like this before, she seemed transformed. It was terrible. She had never done that with me.

"I liked it," she said and then he smiled too and I suddenly felt very out of place. I apologised and went into my tent, put my headphones on and listened to music. Very, very loud. *Black Sabbath*. I still couldn't believe it. And she hated bard music!

But things got even worse. The next day, Naira told me that Ferdinando wanted to move with us. He wanted to ditch his plan to become a professional bard and become a sorcerer. It was quite a lot at once.

"He wants to ... join our coven? A man?"

"I had thought it might even be quite good ... I mean, then we'd finally be a presentable number. Odd ones at that."

Since when did Naira pay attention to number mysticism? That was something from the century before last. Even though I was flattered that she seemed to be a little afraid of my opinion, I couldn't leave it at that.

"Nothing is more presentable with a *man*. We make complete fools of ourselves. And apart from that, he can't do anything. I thought he wanted to be one of the new Walpurgian pop poets."

She wrinkled her nose.

"You couldn't do much at the beginning either. On the contrary. You were a danger on two legs. For yourself and others."

"Wow. Okay. Yes, thank you for taking care of me."

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that. I just want to say that everyone starts small."

"Yes, you're right about that. I just don't like him. I think he's holding us back. Couldn't we just move on without him? Like we used to?"

I looked at her pleadingly. She sighed.

"Wow, Bianka. You're not seriously jealous."

I looked away.

"Okay. I want him to come with me. Is that clear? Either both of us or neither of us."

"Yes ... okay. Then ... you ... both," I said with difficulty.

She went away.

I stayed behind and did a little witch dance, ripping out one of the local trees and sending it flying into the nearby lake. The sound of it hitting the water gave me far less satisfaction than I expected. At least I hoped Ferdinando had heard it.

But when I got back to camp, he said "Hi" to me with his stupid grin as if everything was fine, as if he had always belonged. I said hi back sourly. He really was a pest.

And while I thought we'd have to leave him behind after three villages or so because he couldn't keep up with our pace, the poetic, refined spirit of Ferdinando proved to be surprisingly tenacious.

During our flight breaks, he and Naira made little hexagrams out of sticks and twigs nearby, which made them dance around. Soon he was able to do it on his own too, so when Naira wanted to go out and celebrate, he stayed behind. He said he wanted to "dress up" our camp a bit. "For the atmosphere."

But Naira hated such things!

When she was back and I was already looking forward to a thunderstorm, I suddenly heard noises that sounded nothing like thunder. I couldn't believe my ears.

Who was the witch here? Him or her?

Chapter 9

I soon started a small private project, which turned out to be a great distraction from the annoying lovebirds and which I could work on alone until I proudly showed Naira the first progress, even though she was only listening to me with one ear. I didn't know exactly what it was going to be yet, only that it should be "lively" in some way. Whatever that meant. So far it was a cogwheel that, when you nudged it, wouldn't stop rolling and was supposed to follow you, but instead kept rolling away from you. It was a bit frustrating. I just couldn't find the error and couldn't find it.

When I didn't feel like riding my bike at all, I took a closer look around the meadow where we were currently staying and found an even better distraction: a so-called "coven speed dating" event, which was offered in one of the communal tents nearby. You were split into groups that formed a completely new coven for a short time and then had to solve tasks. All against the other teams.

Whoever came up with the best solutions at the end received a small starting salary to realise their plans.

Naira didn't think much of it, of course. Witchcraft was a "serious" matter. She said that seriously. She. But I showed good will and asked her anyway if she wanted to go with me. "Definitely not," she said and so I went alone. I didn't talk to her at all after that. I had a new coven now. Even if only for a week.

And what can I say: it was wonderful. I learnt all over again that witchcraft wasn't something you did alone, in your own patch of woodland or in the cellar of a remote hut, no, you danced together, laughed together, thought up lyrics together, solved problems, ordered pizza, it was teamwork.

I also got to know a new witch who I really liked: Margarita, who was apparently a real little witch influencer, who had come all the way from great Brittanica, as the others told me later. She had studied at this aspiring new school called "Hogwarts", which was known for their barbaric initiation rituals and irresponsible teaching staff. But you couldn't tell by looking at her. She was cool.

There were various team-building games that would probably have made Naira vomit: we had to knead something together out of clay and then have it do certain things with witchcraft.

It wasn't so easy to make a little mini-golem walk around the room, or to make a clay vase that could water itself if the plant in the pot didn't have enough water. It needed good ideas and the whole thing was made more difficult by the fact that we were not only supposed to write a text that was danced by a witch, but that we all worked on a text that we later danced at the same time, but in different parts, so that in the end a hexogram emerged.

I arrived at Naira's house completely overwhelmed and threw my vow not to tell her anything more for the time being overboard, filled to the brim with enthusiasm and new ideas. But she just said "Aha" and turned away.

Margarita and I, on the other hand, had a lot of fun and she told me later that she had the impression that I was already very good for my level of experience and whether I had practice in bringing life with witchcraft.

I was beaming with pride. I showed her some of my little projects and she eagerly took notes and we had a lively discussion. In turn, she showed me how to use the hum of the voice to achieve certain modifications of the sphere spells. She explained to me that this was an extension of the classic Elder dance and, although a little more complicated, gave you many more options to make your dances even better.

"I'm sure Naira would have enjoyed that too," I thought wistfully, but only briefly, because then Margarita explained to me how you could make your own spells and how you could bundle them in your own sphere and share them with other witches via the Ethernet on a website called "WitchLab", a kind of social network for witches. Hadn't Naira also used something like that? Yes, but only to show off, she hadn't explained it to me. She wanted to keep me down. She liked knowing more than me. Margarita was completely different, she wanted me to be better.

It was a wonderful day. I think it was the best day in what felt like an eternity. I never wanted to go back to my old coven!

But then the handover came closer.

It started with her suggesting that we secretly put our menstrual blood into the mate tea of the other covens. She sometimes had these ideas. We dismissed it as a joke at first, but it went on and on. Margarita increasingly turned out to be a self-centred, narcissistic, toxic bad-witch (not like in the fairy tales, but not far off either).

When the first members of another coven finally went missing, it became too colourful for me.

I wanted to go back to my old coven!

But I was afraid to leave the coven. The other witch I had never really paid attention to was called Ylvie and she had tried to escape. She had apparently been intercepted by Margarita at the end of the camp as she was sneaking away and had then sworn in front of us all that she would never try to escape again. We didn't know what she had done to her, but I didn't want to find out myself and from then on I just tried to survive the project.

But Margarita also wanted to see success and pushed us to new heights, whereby she took over the connections of the components, leaving us in the dark most of the time about how our solution actually worked in order to prevent knowledge from being passed on to other covens.

Under the merciless yoke of the terrible Margarita, we actually managed to present the best solution for the task, but immediately after the prize-giving, during which Margarita hugged us and I even thought I saw tears in her eyes, we all quickly left.

I had headed straight for the exit, and when I left the tent I had even run.

But when I arrived shortly before our tent, Margarita suddenly stepped out from between a tent and stood in front of me with her legs apart.

"Oh hey, Bianka..."

"Hi..."

"I hadn't realised that you wanted to leave early."

"Yeah..."

"We were supposed to have tea together."

"Yes, I'd really like to, but I really have to go now ..."

Her face showed genuine disappointment.

"You know, I was thinking ... with everything going so well, maybe we could just move on from here and become a real coven. What do you think? Would you be up for it?"

"Mmh, yes, I'd love to, but I'm already part of a coven."

"Oh, I see. Yes, that's a problem then, of course ..."

She looked down at the floor and casually scratched her forearm. She suddenly seemed weak, almost vulnerable. And then, I could hardly believe my ears: she sniffled. She really did.

"The others don't want more either ... I don't even know why. I mean ... sorry if I was a bit too *intense sometimes*, I just always have this feeling that I'm not good enough. I just wanted our coven to win."

I looked at her doubtfully. "Margarita, you're one of the best witches I know. Even if it's not exactly difficult now, but ..."

She came to me ... and hugged me. "Really?" she breathed into my neck, "*Thank you*, Bianka. That really means a lot to me. I know I work too much. It's not healthy, but I just enjoy it so much. I just need to get a bit more control over my impulses ..."

"Yes, Margarita. Please, please get a grip on this," I pulled away from her embrace, she was almost clinging, "You know that there is professional help for this kind of thing?"

"Yes ... maybe I really should ..."

"Okay, good. See you then."

"Yes, see you then."

As quickly as I could I made my way back to camp, suddenly filled with a terrible fear ... why had I told her about my coven? ... I ran faster ...

I was so happy when I saw Ferdinando from a distance, sitting by the campfire strumming his guitar with Naira next to him, that I wanted to kiss him. Maybe he was okay after all.

Chapter 10

If there was one good thing about Ferdinando's presence (and I admit that I realised this more and more), it was (above all!) that Naira's condition improved again because of him. She slowed down on the dance floor and his relaxation exercises soon became a regular part of our morning routine. He brought out the good in Naira, but also some of the bad: she was constantly lecturing him, giving him tips on his exercises, while she paid almost no attention to my training. I started reading more and more on my own, while they disappeared laughing into the bushes to do witchcraft and whatever else.

He held her back, in my opinion. I had never seen him dance a straight dance before.

At the next opportunity, I would also get a friend.

We next came to a larger town called Venitios, which was already halfway to the Brocken. Slowly we entered the first foothills of the Cauldron, the work of the larger covens now more visible in the townscape, we walked through towns where no one had to work anymore, where the Ether took over everything, where witches rode around in golden e-carriages and strolled the streets in long robes, passing kneeling people holding out their mobile phones for them to touch with their manicured fingers and transfer a few of their immeasurable number of e-florins.

It was a bit too much for me at first and I got quite drunk on the first day. After that it was okay, but that day I really overdid it. And as I was staggering through the streets of the city quite drunk (Naira hadn't even taken a glance at me while dancing), I happened to walk under an iron gate and suddenly found myself in a cemetery.

Crap. I would end up just like Naira and meet a guy on the bones of dead people ... I turned round and there was actually someone standing there: he was wearing elegant clothes, his face was made up, but not as exaggerated as some guys these days, but discreetly, as if painted on ceramic with fine

brushes. He was standing in front of a grave with his eyes closed, his face looked so peaceful, almost like that of a little boy. I couldn't stop looking at it, it reminded me too much of my little brother. I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

Then he saw me. He nodded at me, but I just stood next to him. There was something about his eyes, maybe it was because his pupils were different colours.

"Peace, what's up? Cool eyes."

"I'm grieving."

"Mmh."

"You're pretty drunk. What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for the love of my life. I mean: we're in a cemetery. What are *you* doing here?"

"I mourn the loss of my wife."

"How macabre."

I laughed and he grinned.

"Honestly, I'm not here to mourn, I was talking to her. I got a death speaker from a witch. I wanted to ask her permission if I could organise a masked ball."

I tilted my head.

"How sweet."

"Yes."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Did she say yes?"

"I don't know, she was quite hard to understand, she didn't seem to ... really listen to me at all."

"I think it's very nice that you want to ask her. You should do it for that reason alone. Why do you think she wouldn't want it? You're not doing her any favours if you give up all the good things in life now. I've also lost people recently ... but I've realised that there's no point in grieving for too long. And besides ... I'm in the process of getting them back. It's all the more pointless then."

He laughed.

"Yes, I can see that."

The whole scene became increasingly bizarre.

But it got even stranger: he suddenly leaned forwards and kissed me on the mouth. Right there. In front of his dead wife's grave. If he had wanted to remove the first impression of an obdurate widower, he had made his point; only he didn't really make it any better. But for some reason, the kiss turned me on immensely. Who knows how long his wife had been dead? Maybe she had been lying here for decades and he had just been waiting for the right one. Naira also dated in cemeteries and she was completely normal.

I kissed him back. He didn't kiss badly, considering that his wife was practically there.

Then he asked: "Do you want to come to my masked ball too?" and my heart skipped a beat.

And I said, in my drunken stupor: "Sure, Mr Graveyard. I'm in. See you around."

And then I ran away, really, I ran, laughing and laughing. How long had it been since I'd been *invited* to a party?

The Coven of the full moon would probably stay in the city a little longer.

"To *whom*?" Naira asked when I told her and I realised that I hadn't asked him his name. But as long as she didn't ask me *where* I'd met him, everything was fine.

"Mr. idiot."

"I see."

I threw my hands up in the air. "Call me a witch from now on ... in *loooove*," I said, falling down and throwing up in the bushes. This time Naira held my hair.

Chapter 11

To pass the time until my nameless lover's big masked ball, we went to a party thrown by some witch Naira had met at a concert. And since I didn't want to leave her alone with her (Ferdinando wasn't really to be taken seriously), I naturally went along.

I immediately felt very uncomfortable. It was all full of people I didn't know and they all seemed so self-assured, especially Naira, who was immediately greeted by the hostess of the house, while she didn't even notice me.

I stood inconspicuously with a small group and listened without contributing to the conversation.

A long time went by.

Then I suddenly struck up a conversation with a man who claimed to be the best sorcerer in the world, which probably wasn't very difficult because there were hardly any sorcerers. But he seemed very impressed by this statement and offered me a biscuit, which he took from a biscuit cauldron on the table with the alcohol. He said he had brought them with him. The cauldron was practically still full. Out of pity, I took one.

I bit into it, it was chocolatey and at the same time I tasted cinnamon and peanut butter and all that made me very happy. And him too, apparently. He smiled and even asked me a question for the first time, which I also really liked: "So, what are you doing?"

I thought about it and then simply said: "I'm a ... philosopher. Well ... at least that's what I hope to be later on. I'm still studying at the moment."

I suddenly felt dizzy and my vision began to blur.

"Here?" I heard him say, as if from far away.

"Yes ... exactly ... here ..."

"Wow, okay. So, what do you do there? It must be pretty complicated, right?"

"Erm, no, that's fine..." I said and felt myself starting to sweat, but not because of the conversation, or not just because of it.

I grabbed my forehead, felt thick drops of sweat and almost at the same moment I felt unwell. My vision started to go black around the edges and I felt him grip me firmly by the arm.

And then he screamed. He must have shouted very loudly, as I was told later, but at first I didn't care much because I hit the ground hard and lost consciousness.

The following evening I had terrible stomach cramps. Drugs had never really worked for me and those used to make people compliant were not known for their digestibility. And as I warmed myself by the fire, but the cramps were getting worse, Naira began to stroke my stomach slowly and I smiled at her.

"Can you give me a massage ... like you used to?"

"No..." she said, "I know something better."

Then I heard her start to sing softly. A lullaby, the kind you sing to small children to put them to sleep. And all of a sudden it got better, I could feel the cramp loosening and being replaced by something warm.

I squeezed her hand tighter, knowing that I didn't want her to leave my side ever again.

"I was worried about you, Bi."

"I ... what was that guy?"

"We didn't catch him. They're looking for him in the city now ... but you probably rendered him incapable of procreation with your amulet the way he was screaming ..."

"Naira," I interrupted her, suddenly not caring about him at all, "I had the feeling yesterday ... I'm not good enough for you, am I? You simply deserve better ..."

"No, Bi. You're great. You're not as deluded as all these posers here."

"No, I'm just shy, actually I'm a total show-off. I'm arrogant, egotistical and then I can't even hold a proper conversation. I ... am the most pathetic show-off in the world."

"That was really showing off. The *most pathetic* show-off in the world?"

She laughed and I laughed too.

"Okay, thanks, Naira."

"You're the best friend I've had for a while."

"I feel the same way about you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"What about Fernando?"

"Bi ... I love him ..."

"Oh..."

She looked at me. "But I love you too."

I didn't dare ask what I was about to ask, "like him?"

She looked at me, "No, not like him. Like ... sisters. What do you think of that?"

"Yes, sisters," I said. It was better than nothing, sisters ..., "that sounds good."

We lay in each other's arms for a while. Then I asked her if we wanted to watch another film together.

She said, "Yes."

And while we were looking, I took her hand, she didn't do anything at first, then I felt her squeeze it lightly and I smiled at her. And she smiled back. Maybe sisters weren't just better than nothing after all. Maybe it was even more than that. Maybe it was actually all right.

Chapter 12

I thought about putting my make-up on beforehand, after all, he would probably do the same and I didn't want him to feel uncomfortable. He'd done it so responsibly last time, I didn't want him to overdo it this time. But I couldn't ask Naira because she was always making out with Ferdinando.

In the end, I left it at that, took a photo of my face without make-up and uploaded it to the Ethernet, daring as I was. I was actually quite happy. It also occurred to me that we were wearing masks anyway. And it wasn't said that we would take them off, or wanted to take them off, at some point during the evening. I had to laugh at my own stupidity. Shortly afterwards, my photo was liked by Naira and Ferdinando and she wrote below it: "Totally cute, love <3".

As much as I had grown to love them both, I didn't like the fact that they both wanted to come to the party. I was already super excited and so I would have to worry about how I should behave with him in their presence. However, I couldn't think of a way to politely talk them out of it. Naira would probably be turned away at the entrance anyway, I thought, but because it was a bad thought, I hid it at the back of my mind and concentrated on the more pressing questions: where the masked ball was taking place, what the name of my favourite host was and where I could get a mask before tomorrow.

The former turned out to be frighteningly simple: the whole city was full of masked balls, apparently Venitios was even known for them and the biggest one was held at his place: the so-called bird wedding was apparently quite famous and infamous. Pictures of him in colourful, dark feathers and a bird mask hung everywhere, and he stared out at the viewer with insanely wide-open eyes. It was a kind of open-door party. Anyone could come, but there were different floors, and the upper floors were not accessible to everyone. And that's how I learnt his name: His Lordship Piccadilly-Medici von und zu Dü, or, as he wanted to be called in connection with his party: *the Great Spotted Woodpecker*. He apparently came from a long noble family who had all given themselves bird names for their extravagant masked balls. And I had thought my family were weird birds.

However, getting hold of a mask proved to be a far more difficult task, as between the preparations for the festivities and the enormous rush of people on the approaching Walpurgis Night, all but the last of the masks within a radius of three kingdoms were sold out.

Eventually I did find one that was finely decorated and completely overpriced, but when I looked at myself in the grocer's mirror with it, I thought it was very good.

I even bought myself a new dress, a white one that perfectly contrasted the blood-red mask. I decided to call myself "the little robin" if he asked. I also modified my amulet so that it also worked against drug biscuits. Just in case. I changed into it, even though it didn't really match the rest of my outfit, put a peacock feather in my hair and felt perfectly prepared and très chic.

We arrived half an hour after the start, when the bird wedding was already in full swing. The whole building was imposing, with marble pillars reaching impossibly high into the sky, small pavilions set up everywhere, decorated with almost decadent pom-pom and people wearing bird masks standing around. As the party was open to everyone, it was no problem to get in. Reaching one of the upper floors, on the other hand, was more difficult. At the same time, I wanted to "accidentally" lose Naira and Ferdinando in the process so that I could be alone with my lordship.

But I couldn't find an opportunity. There was simply too much to do. There were cages everywhere, in which his lordship's employees were apparently lolling about, some of them had an extra pair of arms, one had glowing orbs worked into his eyeballs. It was all too bizarre to leave as it was, but we moved on. I had a feeling Naira was uncomfortable around her and we made our way into the building, which was similarly decadent.

And then a strange, blaring sound rang out. It was the melody of *the Bird Wedding*, the old bard's song. *Fideralala Fideralalalala*.

And as if on cue, everyone rushed to the windows. We followed behind.

There were people out there in pipes that looked like cannons.

I took a closer look. They weren't real people. They were clay people. And before I could make sense of it, they were blown up with a huge bang. And then I saw a small group of people with bird masks and huge guns shooting at the clay people. I laughed out loud when one hit one and went off in a huge explosion of confetti, but when I looked at Naira she had turned away and at that moment I felt strangely detached from my body. I looked at the people around me, their faces contorted with laughter, almost as if they were choking.

I saw Naira disappear into the toilet in slow motion and turned my gaze back outside.

When the penultimate clay man was shot into the air and everyone shrieked in delight, I felt normal again and stealthily moved away from Ferdinando, asking one of the waiters standing around if I could be taken to the Buntspecht, I was a "close friend". He nodded briefly and disappeared without asking me my name.

I thought I would never see him again when he came back at that very moment and led me at a quick pace up the lavishly decorated stairs, which spiralled higher and higher.

I looked round. The crazy Ferdinando hadn't even noticed that I'd left them alone. Then I was on the next floor and now they really couldn't see me any more, but the waiter took me further up.

It was the top floor where he stopped, bowed to me and made his way back down.

The room was surrounded by huge paintings, the ceiling consisted of a huge dome, which, like everything else, was decorated with intricate ornaments and pictures.

A few steps further on were some seats, and there he was, his legs crossed, chatting animatedly with an older woman who already had grey hair but was still very articulate and radiated tremendous wisdom and attractiveness.

He was wearing a gigantic wig and looked like the dark bird he was. I was already counting the layers it would take for him to undress. It looked like a lot ... but maybe that would be part of the fun ...

When I walked up to them, they both looked at me and looked at me intently.

"Hi, um ... I just wanted to say hi."

The woman smiled. "How *nice* that you're here, darling."

He also greeted me and said: "Yes. How nice. How nice. This here is Isabella, my ... *possibly* new chief surgeon."

"Oh, okay," I shook her hand, her handshake firm and precise.

"Well, I'll leave you two beauties to it then. I'll see you later, right? Then we can discuss my ... offer in more detail."

"All right. It's already been an honour."

She bowed her head. "The honour was all mine. You really are ... unique. See you then."

"Yes, see you then."

She smiled patronisingly at me and then disappeared with quiet steps. We didn't say anything until we heard a door close.

Then we kissed impetuously and soon we were undressing, right there under the huge dome, it was pretty hot until a waiter came up with shrimps and nearly dropped his tray. We then retired to his chambers.

Chapter 13

He played me something on his gramophone in his bedroom. He had all the great current pieces on disc, supposedly ordered them straight from the factories here. As he had a very good nose, he could always hear the latest pieces before anyone else, but he admitted that he also had a cellar full of music that he had only heard once, if at all.

Then he told me about his vice.

He had a ticking sound in his head. That's why people called him "Lord Tick-Tack". He had once been addicted to cosmetic surgery for a while and had virtually every part of his body mechanically replaced.

One day, a ticking noise appeared that the surgeon simply couldn't explain. He had it taken apart completely without being able to find the cause, but when he put it back together again, it was still ticking.

"I now think it's just in my head. I've got used to it ... it used to be different. I travelled, to new doctors and some who just called themselves that. I let them take me apart, put me back together again and again and again."

"Then who was she?"

"She has a completely new approach. I'm thinking about making one last attempt."

"I see. Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I don't know. But I have something else on my mind."

"I'm listening."

"Ok, I'll just ask you now: am I still the same? I mean, there's nothing left of the old great spotted woodpecker ... except this mask."

I didn't know what to say.

"What does it matter? You are who you are. All I know is that I want you."

But that didn't seem to be what he wanted to hear. He had his eyes on a window.

"That's why you were at the cemetery, wasn't it? It wasn't your wife ..." I tried again. He would get in the mood.

"Yes, it is, too. All of my mortal remains are in the cemetery. I'm already buried there with my wife. I'm sorry."

I took his face in my hands, it felt cool, but now that I knew the reason, I was no longer afraid of it.

"Why should you be sorry? Thank you for telling me. Everyone has their vices. We can't all be perfect."

"Thanks ... it's a bit embarrassing, but ... what's your name?"

I had to laugh. "I've been meaning to ask you that all along."

I stroked his chest, which was still covered in feathers, "I'm Bianka."

"Bianka..." his head suddenly jerked round and he let out a loud, shrill cry. "We have to get to the window, the main part of the bird wedding is about to begin: the mating."

I pressed into his feathers, "ok, if it doesn't take too long ..." and together we walked to the large panoramic glass front that filled the walls of the room, looked down. There were two people in bird costumes slowly walking towards each other. There was absolute silence. The high and low company of Venitios held their breath tensely.

We stood there naked, I hoped they were tinted from the outside. He looked at me from the side. But I didn't really care, I thought.

He averted his eyes, but I didn't want to look away.

'Come on,' I said into the silence, 'we don't have to watch this, do we? We can have a bird wedding here too. Just for the two of us,' I turned his face towards me and he gave a questioning coo, "and much closer." I gripped his bum with my hand.

He made a new bird noise, I think it meant "yes."

Then we went into his bedroom and slowly began to take off our masks.

We lay down and kissed vigorously, and in the meantime I realised something that had occurred to me the first time we kissed: his lips were cold. And the same was true of his whole body, was it really ceramic? But I didn't want to hurt him and acted as if nothing was wrong.

But then, when he wanted to get condoms out of a drawer in the bedside table next to the bed, I also saw a winding key next to it, like the ones used to wind up small robots. In the past, or, in the Southlands, I had also had one of those things ...

He realised immediately.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that. But..."

"It's okay, no problem. Do you want me to stick this somewhere, or?"

"No ... that's not necessary."

"Really, it's no problem for me ... if it turns you on ..."

"No, please ... it's fine like this."

We carried on.

"Do we still need this at all?"

He had taken out a condom.

He looked at me. "I think we should play it safe."

"Have you slept with a lot of people recently?"

I immediately felt a bit stupid. He was having masked balls and kissing strangers on the grave of his own mortal body. How naive was I really?

But he said: "No," and then: "I haven't slept with anyone since my wife died. But I get my parts changed a lot and I don't know where some of them have been."

"I see."

"Do you think that's disgusting?"

"Well, a little bit, but ... thank you for your ... openness."

"Okay. So ... do you still want it?"

I looked down his body.

"I don't know..."

"Okay, then let's just wait a while longer. It's perfectly okay if you don't want it, you know."

"Yes ... maybe we can try again next time ... we could do something else."

He straightened up.

"Like what?"

Some time later, as I lay with my head on his chest, I concentrated and really thought I heard a soft ticking from inside him. But I didn't tell him.

I didn't meet Naira and Ferdinando again until the next morning.

They had far less to say than I did. But my lips were sealed.

"You're very quiet this morning," said Naira after a while, "was everything all right yesterday? You were away quite a while with his lordship."

"Mmh-mh," I just said and sipped my herbal tea.

Then I looked at my mobile phone. He had texted me back.

"I'm also travelling in the direction of the cauldron. Can we meet again?"

"Yes," I wrote, "maybe we'll bump into each other on the grave of one of our relatives."

He sent back a smiling smiley face.

"Who are you writing to? With him?" Naira asked impatiently, "Let me see."

I just shrugged my shoulders, put the mobile phone aside and went back to reading *Witches for Dummies*. I was on the last ten pages. Soon I would have to enquire about further reading. But not today, there was still a little time today and I let my eyes linger on the same spot.

I could hear Naira swearing in the background when Ferdinando couldn't even do the simplest of spells. I had to force myself not to grin too conspicuously and pretended to carry on reading.

Chapter 14

It is said that Pal'exia, the city of the gods, was lifted from the depths of the Ether itself by three higher beings, having been formed over the thousands of years when the first humans sang to their gods, like a stone slowly polished into beautiful shapes by the rough tides of the sea.

Today it is the largest city in the kingdoms of Walpurgis and old buildings still stand everywhere, remnants of the first peoples when their empire extended over half of Neutreda in the early centuries.

It is also known as the city of music and it was said that you could get closer to the ether here than anywhere else in the world. It was Naira's paradise, her dream come true. I didn't begrudge her it, she was beaming almost all the time.

We walked between the three columns at the beginning of the city, the city's landmark, which had been partially demolished over the centuries and had partly collapsed, but were still impressive in their ruins.

Even though live music was officially strictly forbidden here too, it was generally known that it was not penalised here. And interestingly, Pal'exia was one of the safest places, with the least catastrophic witchcraft in all the kingdoms.

The three of us went to a club, which was a disaster. I just couldn't find them at some point. They were probably snogging under some marble statues. I wrote them a message and then went off on my own.

There were enough clubs here for me to go partying alone. In fact, there was no better place than this, but somehow I wasn't in the mood. And besides, I still had my amulet with me.

Oh, if only my fine lord of copper and ceramics had been here ... we'd had such fun last time.

I thought about writing to him, but didn't. I was already writing to him far too often anyway. He probably already thought I was a bit desperate. Which of course I wasn't! He was the one who was supposed to be desperate. He should consider himself lucky that I got involved with *him*. He was the machine man.

I didn't call him.

I thought about what Naira had said to me the other day, even though I wasn't sure if it was true or if I had just dreamed it: "He's an automaton, Bi. He's made to please you."

"No. He's still the same," I said.

"Even if that's the case, don't tell me you haven't toyed with the idea of changing him a little. Admit it, you've thought about how you could make him an even better friend? Don't you think he's strangely similar to your personal project? I just don't think it's good for you."

"I want my family back, not a new boyfriend!"

"Oh yeah? That's just as wrong. They're dead. They're not coming back."

"Wouldn't you do anything to get your family back into the world?"

"No, I wouldn't. Maybe *that's* what makes us different."

"Oh, there are a few things that make us different ..."

And so it went on. We had had a big argument. I'd gone on about Ferdinando and Naira had said more nasty things about my lord and my idea of bringing my family back, calling him "his powder puff" and other disgraceful names. She really did talk about him as if he wasn't even human but just some crazy bird. But she didn't see: he was *my* crazy bird. I no longer understood the world. How could she be so intolerant? She of all people?

Yes, I had said a few things that I regretted. But if she was that intolerant herself!

But what if she was right?

If they were really dead? If he was dead?

So I didn't write to him. What if I really wanted to change him? What if I had created him there in the graveyard with my experiments? Had he come out of my dreams from the Ether like Pal'exia? Naira had often observed that I talked in my sleep ... What if I had created the perfect man in the land of dreams, a man I could no longer find fault with and had somehow taken with me into this world? And did that make him less real than ... me, for example? Didn't we all come from the Ether and return there at some point? No, not at all, he was alive. I was alive. I kept thinking it in my head, but it just didn't sound convincing.

I had suspected before that the images Ti had sent me ... that I had created them myself. That I had bewitched him because he would never have done anything like that. Maybe *I wasn't* to blame for everything? But I no longer thought that. I knew a bit more about Ti by now. And it was certainly the same with Mr Bird. He wasn't human, but that didn't mean that I had created him.

And why should it even be up to me or Naira to decide what a person is? *He* still felt like one, anyway. He couldn't be dead if he hadn't felt death, if it had just gone on, could he?

I should write to him ...

But first I should at least make sure once again whether something was different with a normal, i.e. living, guy, whether it would feel *more real*. Then I would know that it was true between us and that he was alive. Because love cannot be fooled.

So I went to a club and picked up the first random guy. We danced closely to the songs of Taifun Umar and painted each other with this bright colour that is always available for free in bowls in the clubs.

Then we slept together. We didn't even have to switch on the light because we were still glowing anyway, but apart from that it wasn't really good. Afterwards, as we lay between the sheets glowing from our vapid sex, I knew: I had loved the bird, or at least there had been something like that. With this guy, on the other hand, I felt nothing. And I also knew that I had made a terrible mistake.

I was alone now: I had put Naira off and now my feudal lordship as well. Should I call one of them? No. I didn't and shed hot tears of despair into my pillow. Then, when the tears had dried up, I slowly satisfied myself.

Chapter 15

In the days that followed, I worked more on my own little project, in which I wanted to witch something living. I threw myself into it and almost drowned myself in work. And still I made no progress. I had knotted a little something out of twigs and grasses that staggered back and forth, but after a short time it just stopped and I didn't know why. I couldn't see anything wrong with the Elder Dance. All the spells were exactly where they should be. It *had to* work.

I was on the verge of despair and, in a sudden burst of rage, tore its head off and simply threw it into the bushes, sad about myself and my failure.

And then Ferdinando came and asked me if I could help him with something. That was all I needed. I sighed out loud, but when I saw the look on his face, I was reminded of myself and of course I was a little proud that he had even asked me. So I listened to him. It was an interesting problem. And he

had found an elegant solution. He had just forgotten to give it out into the air. Just like I had back then. Maybe Ferdinando wasn't such a complete idiot after all ...

"Oh crap," he said, hitting his forehead, completely perplexed.

Then it worked and Naira was there too and it was just too infectious: his joy that it was now working. And then somehow everything was fine again.

We finally got to witch together again and Naira posted the result on social media at the end. Funnily enough, a few witches from the neighbourhood joined us a short time later and soon the whole thing had turned into a real witch festival.

We partied and joked together. It was just great.

The end result was a weird thing that could tap water from local water sources and then spray it around. Ferdinando managed to get it to stream the latest ethereal music from the ether as well. The jam turned into a party and more and more people turned up. It was great.

In the end, Ferdinando told me, beaming with joy, that he was now really sure he wanted to become a witch too. Well, a witch, he corrected himself and laughed. I laughed too and I really hoped that he would succeed. I wouldn't begrudge him that. He could even sing songs later about all the great things we would experience with our coven. But I didn't like it a bit either. I was beginning to enjoy looking over his shoulder. Soon he wouldn't need my help any more. But maybe he would. Maybe we would be able to learn from each other.

In the end, it was just Naira and I sitting around the campfire and I tried to make peace with her.

"Would you like to tell me something about your family?" I asked her. The full moon was in the sky in front of us. It looked so close you could touch it.

"Not really"

She sat up in the grass and eyed me. "What do you want to know?"

"Never mind. Anything."

"Okay. I remember flowers that I used to put up with my grandmother. Flowers were always very important in our family. When I came home that day, there were no flowers, the vases had been knocked over. The first thing I did was to make all the flowers in the house right again."

"Do you ever think about going back? What was it like, did you travel around all the time?"

"No, my family had been living there for two generations. It had been our home. I had never known any other home."

She looked into the distance. "But no, I have no intention of going back there again. There's nothing left for me there."

"Why didn't you move further east?"

"That's where the war is."

"Well ... there's more there. You could have gone to the Sea Peoples."

"Yeah okay, I know what you mean," she shrugged, "it wasn't a conscious decision. It was just the direction I was riding in ... and her. You've already met her. But it didn't work out ..."

I nodded. "Yes, it was similar for me too ... so, very different of course, but ..."

"Yes, I understand. Anyway, I'm glad I rode in that direction."

"Yeah, me too."

We sat there for a while. Then I felt like eating something tasty. We actually found a small tin of my home country's speciality in our provisions: sweet cheese. We ate it and shared the pieces. It was lovely.

Naira often told me stories about her family in the near future, but also stories that her grandmother had told her, from the time when witchcraft had only consisted of music, before there were any words at all. When people only talked about music.

They seemed far away to me, they were different from the fairy tales of my homeland, but I soon got used to them and looked forward to the stories we told each other around the campfire.

Chapter 16

That same night, I arranged a meeting with his feudal lordship. He agreed immediately and we met in one of the next towns in a fancy restaurant where he felt he knew everyone.

I told him about what I had done. How I had tried to find out whether our love was real.

He was of course shocked, but I assured him that I was now sure that we could work things out, but he didn't like the whole thing at all.

He said that he needed a break and some time to think about whether there was still any point between us. I had hurt him.

It hurt, but at least we would know where we stood afterwards.

His message arrived the next morning. He wanted to put our relationship on ice for the time being. He was going to take part in a big experiment that might make the ticking disappear and he needed his rest. He told me that I should think of him and keep him in my mind if he didn't survive.

Of course, I was just saying that. He wasn't really alive anyway.

I found the whole text heartbreaking and flew straight to him.

When I arrived, he was already dead. He was lying in a huge bath full of feathers. What a stupid, stupid feathered creature you are, I said, slapping his body, which still showed the scars from the last operation, but no tears came. I only cried one tear that day: when I stood among all the other people in bird masks at the funeral and we cried to the heavens together.

Then I returned to Naira and Ferdinando.

We were just before the Brocken, the Bloxberg, the Walpurgis festival, the great witches' Sabbath, was near. And I had an assignment.

This time I had to make it, this time I had to save the one I loved. I couldn't lose them too.

Part IV - How To Survive Walpurgis

"We have always associated Walpurgis Night with the scent of wet grass, inspiration and progress. And that is still the case today. But recently we have been asking ourselves whether it can still keep up with the current pace of change. The witchcraft community should not wait until the next Walpurgis Night to decide where witchcraft should go in the future and what limits should be placed on it."

- Babette Pandora Moreau, former First Grand Witch of the Bloxberg Covens Research Department (missing for three years)

Chapter 1

We could already see it from very far away. Three days' flight before we arrived, it had already appeared in the sky like a giant devil's spike. The Brocken. The mountain in the centre of the witches' cauldron. We weren't *in* the cauldron yet, but it wasn't a fixed area anyway, like the borders of kingdoms and duchies. It was more of an idea than a fixed place. Centuries ago it had become the epicentre of witchcraft, ever since the great Walpurgis had spoken the first words of Elder here, it had been steadily expanding until it would eventually absorb all the kingdoms, as some said.

But as strong and powerful as it seemed today, the cauldron could never have maintained its position if not for the hand, or rather the words, of a petite, unassuming woman who wanted to found a witch coven here at a young age, without prior knowledge or practical experience, just like that, without being instructed by an arch-witch, which no one had ever even tried before.

In the beginning, she was ridiculed and the other covens in the region tried to keep the newcomer down. It was a long way before her coven had risen to become one of the largest witch covens in the world, but it wasn't long before the lump was used to represent her coven. It was Bibi Bloxberg, the destination of my journey. My aunt. She had achieved the impossible. She would be able to help me. We just had to find her.

It wouldn't be difficult, I thought, as we flew over the villages in the area. Everywhere we saw the colour of their coven, the Bloxberg coven, which made up a quarter of all the inhabitants of the Cauldron. There were fields full of murex plants everywhere, from which the purple was later extracted and processed into robes, cups and creams.

But we were only at the edge of the witches' cauldron, if you could even say that. It would be a while before we reached our destination.

The landscape had suddenly become much hillier in the last few days. Pointed peaks had shot out of the ground like arrowheads, large, stony monsters that had seemingly impaled the flat landscape. But the Brocken towered above them all. There was no escaping it here. That had made me uneasy at the beginning, it gave our mission something final, we were heading towards a point where we hadn't yet discussed what would happen next.

Eventually we ended up in a village to take a break.

We looked around and didn't see anyone working, everything was automated. It really was a witches' cauldron. We were there now or had been there for a while. I felt a strange tingling sensation go through my body. I was excited.

We set up camp in a meadow and there was free water and food for everyone. Money had been completely abolished in the Hexenkessel. All needs were calculated and managed by a large hexagram, which had been distributed decentrally via the Ether. Nobody had found a flaw in it for four years. Since then, everything had been running like clockwork. Four kingdoms of the Northlands had already joined and it was only a matter of time before more would follow. The official name was "Actual Super-Ego (ASE)", but most people just called it "Alfred" or "Al" for short.

I looked to my left. There he was again. Back there over the mountains, he was peering out menacingly.

The Brocken haunted us here. You saw it everywhere. You saw *her* everywhere. The Brocken also had another name: Bloxberg, after which my aunt had later renamed herself, but her fame now almost eclipsed that of her namesake. Almost nobody associated the residence that Bibi had built on its slopes - the hanging gardens of Bloxberg - with the mountain as it was originally intended.

We came to a large clearing where witches in green and beige robes were lolling about, eating fruit, doing the latest witch dances and massaging each other. They sat together in small and large circles, some alone, but never more than six or seven witches.

This was probably one of the first outlets of the witch's cauldron, it had no sharp boundaries, no start, it was a constantly changing, adapting organism of progress and innovation. And we were currently at its outermost membrane.

We sat down and after a short time we were presented with writings by little clay people.

I had the sequel to *Witches for Dummies in my hand: Witches for Advanced Learners*, Naira had a book in her musical language in her hand, *Ferdinando* found himself with *Witches for Dummies* in his hand. "Thanks, Al," I said and the little golem waved cheerfully at me.

We started reading straight away. In between, we joined in the massage sessions, where we talked about our books, asked each other how we were doing and talked about the latest innovations in the witch world, then we went back to reading, we soon got used to the rhythm.

In between there were sports sessions, meals (always exactly what we wanted or what our minds knew we should want) and an incredible amount of reading.

In the distance, against the sun, we also saw witches dancing, striding along the meadows with slow, purposeful, almost meditative movements, as if the movements had completely passed into them, and they probably were by now. Contrary to the sun, they were just shadows. Light figures, no, shadows, defined only by the light behind them.

After two days, we moved on to the next group. Ferdinando in particular seemed to really enjoy life here. He seemed to have changed, speaking much less and when he did, it was in slow, meaningful words. He seemed to have almost completely given up singing. He was a different person. We all were.

On the third day, he informed us that he would not be accompanying us any further. He wanted to stay here. In the Bloxberg coven. We didn't contradict him. If it was his way, he had to go it.

I was surprised myself at how clear and obvious his decision seemed to us. This place not only changed, it also changed everyone who was in it and, with them, itself again.

Naira explained this new understanding between us and everyone in the cauldron with something she called the "ether body": that part of the human body that exists only in the ether, that every human being has, and that every human being can use to make contact with other ether bodies via the ether body. This is because, unlike our physical body, it also has a connection to all other ether bodies of all people who are also connected to the ether. So all people who are connected to the ether, and there are many of them in the cauldron, are also connected to each other and form a large body held together by many connections. And so, in all probability, the centre of this body was currently in the cauldron.

If the gods should one day come to earth in the form of the Singularity, as prophesied in ancient writings of Walpurgis, then here it is. *When the Ether and our world become more and more blurred and the worlds collide, the Singularity will rise from the Ether to the world, so the prophecy said.*

"I just don't know if we're ready for it yet," she said as she let me knead her back.

She had often told me things along these lines, but for the first time I understood what she meant.

"There are things that humanity first has to be ready for. And I don't think we are yet."

I nodded. I understood.

It was a place of wonder and I found it increasingly difficult to remember what the original purpose of our journey had been and even when I did remember it, it seemed increasingly irrelevant and I struggled to see it as anything else. In contrast to what we were experiencing here, everything in my life so far seemed much less intense. And even what still lay ahead of me ... No, there was no comparison. We were making the future here. Even more. We were already connected to this future. We were a *part* of it. And it would only really start soon. We all felt that. It was in the air. There was much, much more to come.

The dawn of a new era.

Why should you just stand by and watch?

Chapter 2

At some point, we set off. We had a mission, everyone understood.

We got on our brooms and travelled the rest of the way to the Brocken in one flight. The fear I had felt before had disappeared.

Our destination was Bibi's residence, the hanging gardens of the Bloxberg. It had been built on a rock face of the Brocken and had several tiers of different vegetation that opened up to the south and had sun all day despite its many tiers. There were supposedly swamps, forests, gardens, cemeteries and vast fields, so there was something for every witch. Whether swamp, forest or goth witch.

In other words, it was paradise for every witch, everyone who had ever seen it said so: here the witch was human, here she wanted to be.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the gardens were kept a big secret. There were no photos on the Ethernet. Even those that had ended up there by mistake had been removed by Bibi. Yes, she had that power. It was just a finger exercise for her.

When we reached the foot of the Brocken, we put our brooms in our rucksacks.

We surmised that it would be more inconspicuous to climb the mountain on foot to attract less attention. All the witches flew here (E-broom had already fully established itself here, of course) and the airspace around the gardens was certainly monitored. On the other hand, nobody would expect witches to climb the mountain on foot.

The climb was difficult, but doable. It was something else. Once again I missed Frederick and slowly the effect that the stay with the other witches had had on me began to fade and I was more excited again.

We climbed the last hundred metres up a steep, sloping slope, clawed our hands into the stones, pulled ourselves upwards on branches and rocks and finally reached the plateau. We could hear birdsong and the scent of flowers. This had to be the beautiful floor. Surely there was also a creepier, more dramatic level with fog and all the trimmings. The goddess who ruled here had taken care of everything, you could see that straight away. Everything was meticulously arranged, but still with such a degree of chaos that it might as well have been somewhere in nature. It was simply perfect.

I looked round.

So here she had done it.

"Wow. The hanging gardens of Bloxberg."

Naira shook her head, unimpressed. "It's wrong. It has nothing to do with the original idea of witchcraft. Not even Walpurgis would have approved. These gardens should be open to all witches. And she should have called it something else."

Sometimes she could be really annoying.

"What's so bad about the name? She just inspired them by the real ones. She copied them. That's nice."

"Stolen is more like it."

We walked through the trees and were right in the forest, even though there really shouldn't have been any forest here at this altitude.

We didn't see any other witches at first, although there should actually be a lot here. Bloxberg was also very liberal when it came to working from home. Nevertheless ... the view was marvellous, anyone working in their own puny forest couldn't really be helped. But no, we didn't see anyone. The site must be huge.

We wandered for a while through the woods that we first felt drawn to and then stepped out of the shelter of the trees for a moment into a large meadow where we hoped to get another view.

We looked for what felt like kilometres, but we still didn't see anyone. Not another soul.

We set off to try another side of the forest when suddenly someone stood in front of us.

An older witch with grey hair came over the branches towards us.

"You're very welcome. Do you want to relax first or do you want to see the real shit right away?"

Naira gave me a sour look. I exhaled and said in a firm voice, "The bad shit, please."

"Okay, all right, then come with me."

I cheerfully gave Naira a thumbs up, who just shook her head with a laugh.

The witch led us at a brisk pace out of the forest into a large meadow, where I felt strangely uncomfortable, somehow watched. We passed a large clearing. We climbed up a slope and reached another level, where a forest was also waiting for us.

Then we crossed a moor and finally we met the first witches. So they had been on the other floors. There, in a meadow in the distance, we saw them, but not in small groups as we had seen before. A meadow where it felt like a hundred witches were contorting themselves on the grass and in their midst, a man moving slowly ... but his movements didn't seem organic. He shimmered copper against the sun. Was it a man ... or something else? Was he wearing a bird costume? I tried to take a closer look ... but Naira pulled me onwards and the strange gathering disappeared behind a line of trees.

"Hey, wait ..."

"*You* didn't want to relax ... come with me ..."

She was right, we had to focus.

We walked across a bridge that led over a river that split open from spells and continued to run along the ceiling. It was nice, certainly not easy how they managed it, but hopefully not what she had brought us here for.

"So, here we are."

She turned her upper body once in the air, as she put her foot on the ground, out of the water came two men on companions who could ride on the water.

"It doesn't work on land yet, but all the more so on the water ..."

I looked at her.

"I want to see her boss."

"We don't have bosses. We have flat hierarchies. We may be a witch's work, but we have the best coven atmosphere here. Mrs Bloxberg pays very close attention to this. She's not higher above me than I am above you or you are above me ... we're all ... witch friends here."

"I see. Just take us to her, will you?"

"I think it's clear that that won't work."

"I'm her niece, *Bianka Bibi* Durmstrang. As her witch friend, you will know that Bloxberg is not her real name, right?"

That actually seemed to throw her for a moment. She nodded.

"Of course ... I'll check it out."

"Yes, they do."

After a short time, she came back.

"Come along, Bibi will see you."

"Erm... did she say anything else?"

"No, she once confided in me that she has no contact with her family," she said and added with a subtle smile, "I hope it doesn't get *too* tense."

I swallowed. It was true. She had lost her family, just like me. Only, in her case, of her own accord. She had turned her back on them and never returned. There were many stories about why she had done it, but none of them were particularly favourable. And each of these stories had certainly been created by people other than her.

If I brought my family back, would people tell stories like that about me? No, I would tell my own stories.

Bianka, the evil witch. Was that what they were whispering to each other in another dimension to scare their children?

"Anything else?"

"No," she thought for a moment and added, "she just said she liked my new hairstyle."

Her hairstyle *wasn't* bad.

We followed her, I hadn't paid attention to Naira's face. I should have told her beforehand that Bibi was my aunt, but she had probably guessed it anyway, but something in her face had changed. She seemed more distant. But my thoughts were cut off abruptly as we walked through buildings made of marble, offset with grey granite and areas of glass, the whole thing suddenly opened up into a huge forest clearing, which seemed to be covered in a deep fog on all sides.

And in the centre stood Bibi Bloxberg.

She moved slowly but deliberately, a small, metal ball hovering motionless in the air in front of her.

(Music video suggestion to round off the second chapter: Lorde - Mood Ring)

Chapter 3

We stepped closer to her, but with a wave of her hand the witch ordered us to stop.

"So," said the witch, stopping, "she's in the witch tunnel right now. She's working on a new project. Please be patient. She doesn't like being interrupted."

We had no intention of doing so.

We looked at them in silent admiration. Or at least I did. Naira began to whistle in all seriousness in between.

But Bibi didn't let this upset her. The small sphere in front of her had begun to spin wildly and circle in cyclical orbits around a non-existent centre, faster and faster.

She was dancing barefoot. I wonder what that was all about? I made a mental note to try it out myself.

Then she gently stepped on the floor and the ball became something else, it was suddenly four dimensional and thin, she immediately started a new witch dance, it was one fluid movement.

Meanwhile, her face was completely calm and her eyes were closed. She seemed happy and for the first time I wondered if she ever wanted to come back. Did she even *want* to help me bring her family back?

She stood there, dancing around on the grass and mumbling incomprehensibly to herself.

We waited, waited longer, waited for at least half an hour.

Then, finally, she tapped her toe on the floor and looked in front of her.

The bullet had fallen to the ground.

She shook her head and for a moment I thought I saw her features contort in anger, but if she did, she immediately regained her composure.

She picked up the ball, dropped it on the grass in front of her and looked up at the sky. We still didn't dare to intervene. We couldn't hear what she was saying, but her mouth had moved briefly. It seemed as if it hadn't worked the way she wanted.

Then she turned her gaze to us for the first time. Surprise appeared on her face and she looked at the grey-haired witch.

Then the employee cleared her throat and walked away.

She smiled at us. We could go to her.

We walked towards them.

She looked at us expectantly. She actually looked quite normal, and yet something about her manner told us that she was used to keeping people waiting without having to apologise.

"The hunchbacked relatives are coming to visit me? That's never happened before." A subtle smile curled her lips.

I laughed nervously. "Yes, that's right. I wanted to ... come and see you."

It had just slipped out, but it just seemed too rude to turn up with problems on my first visit in ages.

"Well then, come along. It's really nice that you thought of your great-aunt."

"I'm your niece, Bianka. This here is Naira, my girlfriend. We brought E-Broom out together."

"Mmh, yes, I've heard about that. It's nice." She nodded as if to herself, "Bianka, very nice name you have there," she laughed, walking lightly in front of us, she had very long legs, we had trouble keeping up with her.

She led us up a staircase that wound around a tree, ending between the branches in a wood-panelled room. We took a seat at what felt like an eternally long table made of dark wood.

She placed a cup with eyes on all sides in front of each of us and as soon as she put it down, it started screeching like a spit. It had to have eyes on the bottom as well. I quickly picked it up and it actually stopped for a moment, but because my fingers were still touching the eyes, it immediately started screaming again. I used my other hand to help, but there were so many eyes blinking at me, I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to hold him.

I finally found two spots and spread my fingers uncomfortably.

"Does it taste good?" asked Bibi.

"Y-yes," I sipped awkwardly from the cup, from inside which a mouth grinned broadly at me, "very good."

"These are from my research department. A little joke I allowed myself." She chuckled amusedly. "Come on, give them here. I'll get you some real mugs."

"... thank you."

I looked at Naira, who had pushed her hairpin through the cup. He would never screech again.

"Nice," said Bibi, collecting the cups and going to get more.

"What are you doing?" I hissed at Naira, but she just shook her head and looked away.

Eventually Bibi came back with new cups. I sipped from them, I had become cautious about drinks from people I didn't know very well.

"What did you do there?" I finally asked, "with the metal ball? Is it some kind of mini mobile phone or ..."

"We will unite the kingdoms of Walpurgis. They are a patchwork of kingdoms that are constantly at war with each other, they are old and ... simply from the day before yesterday. They are not ready for the new age in their current state. I intend to give them an update. The sphere ... has something to do with it."

I looked over at Naira, but she was still looking away.

"Okay, cool. And how?"

"With the Bloxchain," she sighed as I shrugged helplessly and looked off into the distance, "it will work so beautifully. The stupid muggles won't understand of course, but they don't have to. It will just be ... magic to them. They are already believing it now when it doesn't even yet exist. I think it all will be easier and also saver if not everyone knows how certain things work."

"Can't you just make sure that I don't keep getting anonymous hate messages," said Naira for the first time. *Yes, I thought, or Dic Pics ...* but kept quiet and looked at Bibi intently.

"We have to allocate our resources sensibly," she replied dryly, "and the Bloxchain is the top priority at the moment. It's a project of the century."

"And can I guess who will have power over the Bloxchain?" asked Naira, smiling wickedly.

"No, no," Bibi shook her head excitedly, "that's just it. It's not *centralised*. The Bloxchain is completely self-sufficient in Ether. People could use it to exchange goods without having to use one of the thousand and one currencies that exist in the various kingdoms. It will unite people in a completely new way."

"It sounds more like anarchism to me. It has to be controlled by someone."

Bibi looked into the distance again.

"Oh, my child. If only you could *see* what I see. What would be *possible*. A united Walpurgisland. Not a patchwork quilt in which everyone does their own little thing, but one big whole. Managed by a single institution."

"From AI?" I ventured meekly.

"Mmh, maybe at the beginning. But that's only temporary. No. Eventually from the singularity."

Naira snorted. "Walpurgisland? Are you serious?"

"Yes, the only reason we are not evolving is because we are constantly at war with ourselves. We are a patchwork quilt. Half our cities are constantly blowing up because of some avoidable triviality. That can't be the state we want to enter the new era in! Do we want to carry on like this for all eternity? No, we need a better solution. A solution through witchcraft. Of course. With what else? *That's what witchcraft is for*. To move us forward."

Naira mumbled something to herself, but Bibi didn't respond.

"But ... the Southlands are hardly going to go along with that, are they," I asked.

"No no, of course not. That has already been taken into account. But we were able to find an attractive solution for that too."

She pulled something out of her robe. She threw it carelessly onto the table so that it almost fell off. It was a piece of metal, or at least that's what it looked like.

The piece of metal lying there made no movement, it was long and thin, had a handle, no idea what it was supposed to do, maybe an etheric toothbrush? But of course we knew that it would probably make some ultra-cool shit possible. A new gadget that would flood the kingdoms of Walpurgis one by one and perhaps, after ages, be touted as "the coolest shit" in my home country too. At least from what was left of my homeland ...

"With this."

"What's that?" asked Naira with wide eyes, her voice trembling.

"That's what I call a firearm," she shrugged, "you can kill people with it."

"No, it can't be," Naira said and I could hear her struggling to hold back her anger, suddenly I didn't know who I should be more afraid for here, but she continued, "you can't make a weapon with a witch dance. It would be witchcraft in real time. It's impossible, Walpurgis has made sure that you can't do that."

"Well, that's right, that's why I had to change Elder's translator."

Naira drew in a sharp breath beside me. She looked at me. There was fear in her eyes. She wanted to disappear. I looked back at Bibi, who shrugged apologetically.

"It's written in a dance that you should actually know: Tal'shi. I am fluent in it. Probably one of the last ..."

"No, that..." Naira stammered, hitting her head next to me in despair.

"It wasn't that difficult."

"Isn't there another way?" I asked quickly.

"Of course. It's just a plan B. The Bloxchain will be realised, with or without the Southlands in their current form. Talks are already underway in the North. All the archwitches are in favour. We just have to talk to the South. If they agree to all my demands, everything will be fine."

"They will never agree, not a single one."

She turned away. "I know. That's why we have to crack down. Violence is the only language these people understand."

She crossed her arms.

"Yes, it's not right, I know that too. But when it's finished, everyone will realise that it was all necessary," she looked at me dreamily, "Bianka, it will be so beautiful, so infinitely beautiful. It will make the world a better place, it really will."

I gave Naira a worried look. She just sat there and breathed in and out quickly.

"... but what if people aren't ready yet? They won't accept this great new world if it's forced on them by you."

"I don't want to force it on them..." she said a little louder now, standing up and pacing back and forth restlessly, "why is it so hard to get anything resembling praise from any of you for what you've achieved?"

I stared at her, not knowing at first who she meant by "her", but then I knew: our family.

"I," I stammered, "I'm proud of you. I mean ... you're my heroine. Always have been. Everyone has spoken of you with reverence."

"Really? Well, then they must have changed their minds a lot. Back then, they didn't understand at all, when I wanted to do witchcraft, they were against it. They wanted me to become queen, to find a king, rule and have children. That's all they wanted from me. But that's not what I wanted!"

"Erm...", I said. I really hadn't expected such a reaction. After all these years ... "they've become more open to witchcraft. They've even encouraged me to try witchcraft..."

She stared at me, speechless for a moment.

"I don't think so."

"Yes, but ... an accident happened."

"An accident?"

I nodded. "They've gone. All of them."

"S-are they dead?" she asked quietly.

"No, I think they're in another dimension or something ... I had dreams, they seemed very scared, but so far okay ..."

"How did that happen ..."

"I ... have opened a portal ..."

She raised an eyebrow.

"... in an infinite loop."

"Wow, okay. You have ..."

I swallowed.

"Yes ..."

She snorted, almost amused.

"I was still very inexperienced. I'm sorry. I really am."

She nodded as if she heard this every day.

She didn't say anything for a while.

"No, it's totally okay. It happens to everyone. So ... if you'd done that in one of my covens, you'd be expelled now, of course. But of course, at the beginning ... Well. I'm sorry about that. I mean ... our contact was never really good. But I'm sorry for you. Maybe they really were on a better path ..."

"Yes, well ... that's actually why I came here."

She drew her eyebrows together.

"Do you have any idea how I can get her back?"

She turned away, looking out of one of the windows, her arms crossed behind her back.

"No," she finally said.

"But ... you're a witch. It must be possible!"

She sighed and I was surprised to see her wipe a tear from the corner of her eye.

"My darling, I would really like to help you, even if it's not without a certain irony that the witch has to fix everything again. But I can see that you are just like me. I like you. They've tried to create a new version of me through you. Just like they always wanted me to be. They even gave you my name. They wanted my genius, but without my unpredictability. Well, they failed. As I said, I would love to help you. But even I have my limits. I may be able to do witchcraft, but I can't override the laws of nature."

"It must be possible! If anyone can do it, it's you!"

She scratched her chin. "Mmh. There is a thing. It's called quantum sorcery. You build a huge, powerful hexagram in which you can simulate entire worlds and then use it to look into another parallel dimension. You could see your parents there again if you find the right dimension. I have the theory for this in my labs, but ... getting them out of this world? No, that's not possible."

"But I'm telling you: they were pulled where. If it worked in this direction, it must also work in the other direction ..."

Her face hardened and I fell silent. For the first time, I heard contempt in her voice.

"Do you think if I could bring people back, I wouldn't have tried it yet? Do you think you figured it out sooner than I did? I've lost people too, Bianka!"

She looked at me angrily, but then looked down.

"No ... sorry. It's just not like that. We still know far too little to play around with dimension holes. You should know better than anyone that you have to be careful," her rejection hit me full force and tears welled up in my eyes, they were really gone ..., "... listen to me, I can't help you."

"No, I ... of course not."

"Bianka. What you want is a miracle, but I can't do that. I am a witch. What I do is witchcraft. If you have a question about that, my ear is open to you, but otherwise ... you want something from me that I can't give you."

I nodded, that had worked, but she had also made me angry. And I had seen her eyelid twitch briefly.

I wiped the tears from my eyes.

"I don't believe you! You know something! You don't want to help me! Isn't this family worth anything to you?"

"I've only done all this for our family! So that it can finally come together. When the country becomes one and witchcraft spreads everywhere. Then they'll accept me again!"

Her face slumped for a moment, the lifting spells wearing off dangerously. She was old, old and sad.

"Go," she said and we left.

We trudged back through the forest, over branches and tracks.

"Your aunt is obviously out of her mind," said Naira after a while, "we have to help her."

"What do you mean? She was nice."

"Are you serious? Walpurgisland? Weapons that run on witchcraft? Do you know what will happen to people like me if what she said really happens? It's all going to get worse! She doesn't even know what she's doing. Someone has to put a stop to her."

"And you think we could?"

"We could at least try. We have to."

"We don't have to do anything. We have to save my family."

She snorted.

"Typical. All you care about is your family. No, it's not even about that. It's about overcoming your own guilt. That's actually what this is about. Otherwise, you want to keep doing everything the same as before. You're no better than them, you know. You're exactly the same."

"Mmh, okay. What would your suggestion be?"

She shook her head.

"Forget it."

"Okay, I'll forget it then."

"Wouldn't be the first time ... Bibi."

Aha, there it was after all.

"Okay, you want to discuss this *now*, okay ... Yes, I know, Naira. I should have told you about Bibi, I ..."

"It's not about her. You are from House Durmstrang."

She spat it out like some kind of swear word. What was she thinking? It was my family name!

"So what?" I said irritably.

"They ... they were among the main financiers of the war in the East. Didn't you know that? Seriously? Your family's names were on the guns of the attackers."

"No, I ... we only ever supplied weapons to people who were confidential ..."

"Obviously not always ..."

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Naira, I... I know how incredibly stupid this sounds, but..."

"Yes, it sounds ..."

I nodded, we were silent, then she walked away, pushed herself up into the air with her feet and flew off.

"Naira! Wait!", but she didn't stop. She flew far too fast.

I flew after her, the various floors passed by beside me, and finally the summit of the Brocken.

"You know we can't stop them, right?" I shouted after her. "But isn't there anything else we can do?"

She stopped in mid-air. Waited until I was there. The air was already very thin.

"Yes. There would be something."

She looked into the distance.

I had read that you could see all the kingdoms of Walpurgis from the Bloxberg. But on Walpurgis night, of course, it was constantly covered in fog. We couldn't really see very far.

"What I said. It doesn't have to happen," she continued, "if we make sure it doesn't."

I nodded. "Then let's try it."

She sniffled. "Let's talk about this another time. I want to go home."

"Okay. Come on then. If it makes it any better: my family's gone now too. Forever."

She sighed and said, "No, it doesn't."

Then she flew closer to me and hugged me.

"We have to stick together. In these times. You and I are the good guys. If we don't stick together, who will?"

I returned her hug, even if I wasn't so sure that I really was lately. One of the good ones.

(Music video suggestion to round off the third chapter: Lorde - The Fall Fruit)

Chapter 4

"And now?" I asked, standing on the summit of the Brocken, directly above the main campus of the Bloxberg company. The highest floor loomed below us: the Wastelands. It was the floor for tough witches.

Naira just shook her head.

We had actually only wanted to stop for a short break, but now that we had calmed down, it didn't seem so extreme, almost normal. Just the everyday madness of living in our crazy times.

And once again it seemed to me that it should be so unfair that all these miracles should be possible, but the very miracle I needed was impossible. I stepped down a stone into the wastelands.

"I had put so much hope in this meeting with Bibi," I said, looking off into the distance, "I mean, she was my aunt. And she's one of the greatest witches in the world."

"And megalomaniac."

"Yes, that too."

But then I had an idea.

"Wait. Didn't she say she had all the stuff for this quantum witchcraft in her lab? We'll just do it ourselves. We'll break into Bibi's house and do it in her little forest. There should be everything you need to do something like this."

"I don't know, Bi..." Naira said, the first time I'd ever seen her really doubtful. No, not doubting, worried, but it wasn't like that ... she didn't have to worry.

"Yes, please, Naira, I need this. And we'll fly home straight afterwards. I promise."

She threw her head back and screamed to the heavens.

Then she sat down on her broom.

"Okay."

So we broke into the Bloxberg coven once again, but this time for real.

It wasn't exactly difficult. The Bloxberg campus had virtually no guards. Bibi Bloxberg's reputation preceded her. No one knew what happened if you wandered into her private woodlands and so no one did. But if something did happen, we didn't realise it. We reached her main research sites without harm.

There we sat down on the grass and thought about how we could set up the dance. We needed a gateway into this other dimension. That wasn't a problem, Naira had copied a dance from the Ethernet, which she now recited. The tricky thing was how to present this information and how to establish the connection to my family's dimension, which we didn't even know yet.

So first we had to find out where my family was.

Fortunately, we found what we were looking for in her forest. She had a stone that you could ask about dimensions. It turned out that the dimension was called Alpha-3.

As a representation, we thought of drawing the whole thing in the water with the colours of our mirror images.

We tried it out and it really worked.

We saw my family. And they looked like they were at least not doing badly. They were working and reading. It was all a little slower, but otherwise everything seemed fine. I saw them, but of course I couldn't touch them, but I couldn't help it and tried anyway, touching the surface of the water, but my hand only sank into the water and the waves blurred the image for a short time, only taking me further away from them.

They didn't seem to notice me. Did they think of me sometimes? I wish we had somehow managed to make them hear me ... I wish I could tell them everything I had been through in the last few weeks. What I had gone through to be able to see them here now. Would they have been proud of me? I think so.

I couldn't say much during this time.

We looked at each other.

"I think we should leave it at that."

I hesitated. I knew that a lot depended on this moment. I had the choice of looking forwards or backwards.

So I said, "okay."

We dismantled everything again and left it as it was.

And so we went back, leaving Bibi's private woods.

But then I heard a rustling behind us, as if from a strong wind.

No, it came from above. On a broom, it was Bibi.

"Hey! Hex hex," she said and laughed, she had her firearm in her hand, "look, remember this? I've improved your E-Broom! I can now cross the Northlands in two days with it, not bad, right?"

"Yes, great. We're off again, Bibi."

"No, wait, I ... I want to see her too."

"Bibi ... we've already dismantled it."

"Yes, you can do it again. It's quite simple. If we do it together ..."

I watched Naira, she had her eyes on Bibi's gun.

I nodded okay, "come on", we went back and once again looked through the lake into the other dimension.

She sighed and put her arm around me.

"Thank you, Bianka."

She turned me round to face her. "Can I become part of your coven?"

She was serious. "That was always the part I enjoyed the most. I didn't want all that ... I just wanted to do a bit of witchcraft with my friends ..."

I nodded and carefully took the gun from her.

"There, we don't need that anymore. Okay," then I looked her in the eye, "Bibi, you can't be part of our coven. You have your obligations here."

"Yes ... but can we keep in touch ... I always feel so lonely ..."

"Sure, always, Bibi. I'll give you my number."

She waved them off. "I've got them just like that."

She hesitated. "Yeah, okay, just give it to me like this. It's a bit nicer."

I gave her my number.

Then we left.

"Should I have done more?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

We left the garden.

Now we just had to decide what to do with the weapon.

I needed to rest completely for a while, Naira understood this of course and set off in search of Ferdinando. When I emerged from my chambers again the next day and showed myself to the sunlight, she told me that she hadn't been able to find him. He hadn't been in touch with Naira for a while and he hadn't replied to her messages either, but she hadn't wanted to annoy me and so hadn't told me.

She asked me if I could help her and of course I agreed. In fact, I was really grateful to have something to do.

We combed through all the nearby covens, even briefly joined the witch groups on the edge of the cauldron and circled the Brocken at least twenty times without finding it.

Eventually we found him in one of the spas, he was completely over the edge, apparently his witchcraft had paid for a cure. Because of burn-out, we learnt from one of the staff. It was a beautiful place, I bet the Bloxberg coven was a big part owner of the whole thing. But certainly one that was responsible for most of the customers.

He cried and whimpered in Naira's arms. He hadn't wanted to report to her like this and had accepted the cure without any objections. He had failed, he had wanted to give his all, but there had been too many mistakes in his dances. What's more, the other witches had sometimes made fun of him behind his back because of his dance moves. And last week they'd had to work overtime because of Walpurgis night, which was tomorrow, and pretty much everyone he knew had only just been able to keep up with the workload ... he hadn't been the only one to leave, he kept telling us. She comforted him and told him it was all good. He said he never wanted to work in a coven again. He made us promise him that if he left our coven and never covened again that we would still be friends. We promised him as often as he wanted to hear us say it.

After that we were fine again and we flew over the countryside with our brooms for a while, with the witches' cauldron below us, small and completely insignificant, by which time Ferdinando was feeling better again.

That same evening, he was already reading his witch book again. It was a day that we couldn't really say whether we had learnt anything useful from it, whether it had left a lasting impression on us or whether it had permanently disturbed us, but the lesson we could all agree on was that we never wanted to start working in a witch's workshop. Ever.

The future belonged to the small covens! We decided to toast to this and we already knew in what setting: at the big Walpurgis night, which would take place tomorrow.

Chapter 5

There were many ways to Walpurgis Night, it was a kind of pilgrimage for witches. Every self-respecting witch travelled here sooner or later. Walpurgis Night was an institution.

My excitement was correspondingly high.

"Am I even a real witch yet? Look at all the cool witches here!" I had crawled into my furs.

"Oh no. You're already cool enough! Don't let the hipster witches impress you. Now come on."

In the end, I went along. Besides, I still had my amulet. If not, I'd switch it to women too.

So I finally came along after checking the code of my amulet, running a few tests and reading a few testimonials about what to watch out for at Walpurgis Night so as not to die or accidentally sell your soul to one of the old gods. The bottom line was that you always went with someone and that you shouldn't sign anything under any circumstances.

We chose one of the less frequented party miles on the Brocken, as it was further away from the Bloxberg residence than any other.

We first went to a club where it said something about a black mass. That sounded exciting. It didn't have a ceiling, which was a bit strange, but I liked it because the air wasn't so bad and the music wasn't so loud.

It was really cool at first and I danced for a while with a young witch who really had it, but then, when the climax of a song seemed to be approaching and it was in the air that the beat would drop at any moment, she shouted in my ear: "It's about to really start!"

"Like what?"

Then there was a loud bang and suddenly everyone around me took to the skies. They flew out into the night like sparks, screeching and singing. I was suddenly alone on the dance floor and stopped dancing, looking after them.

Nobody had said that you should take your broom with you ...

I left the club inconspicuously.

I started looking for Naira. It wasn't difficult. She was known to attract attention.

In fact, she gave another concert, this time outdoors, playing with a number of other singers in a local forest where they ripped out the trees around the band and left them floating dangerously in the air, but as the song progressed they successfully replanted them one by one.

"Come on, there's a club at the back that I really want to go to," she said after the concert, "it's called *the Pantheon of the Night*."

She pulled me along, but the club looked kind of scary. There was something different about it compared to the other clubs here.

"I don't know if I want to go in there."

"Come on, Bi."

"Erm..."

"Besides, you still owe me one."

"Oh yes, and what?"

"I don't know."

She threw her arms in the air in despair at me.

"Come on, while we're here, we have to have a bit of fun. *The wild night of Walpurgis*. Bi, seriously, the whole thing here is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Do you know how many people ever get the chance to do this?"

"Literally thousands every year. Everyone after school does it. I just don't want to lose control."

"Okay, I'll tell you what: you don't have to go, but you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"Well, that's nice. But just this one, okay?"

"Okay," she said and pulled me with her.

Naira naturally wanted to go to the Pantheon straight away. The Pantheon of the Night was the largest club at this fair. The witches who organised it every year had specialised in shamanism and displayed their elaborate exhibits all over the grounds. But Naira and I had had enough of cool witchcraft shit for now.

We mainly wanted to live in the moment.

We stormed into the Pantheon and as the darkness and neon lights greeted us, I just let it happen.

We danced our hearts out, it was almost ghostly. I even thought I saw some creatures that I had previously thought were legends. Ghouls, unicorns, banshees and I even saw a few orcs, I had heard that in the Northlands, individual orcs had been given access to universities. But I thought I had only dreamed it ... And I even saw a minotaur and a dragon ... what was going on here?

And then, from a neighbouring room, I saw a shadow step out, with snow-white skin and a fine grin. It was Gretchen, one of the most famous witches, who had earned the witch in the Southlands such a bad reputation because she makes a covenant with the she-devil Mephistophelia to find herself and in the process drags a man to his doom. I saw her dancing, wearing all kinds of jewellery, laughing and rejoicing. Had she already slept with him? I wondered where Mephistophelia was, but I didn't see her.

I walked towards her as if in a dream.

"Gretchen, is that you?"

"Yes, come on, dance along," but I couldn't move and for some reason it was perfectly fine to talk here, you could understand everything.

"Can I ask you something, Gretchen?"

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. But get going, I don't have forever. We've got to get going."

"I-I wanted to ask if it's all worth it."

"Worth what?"

"Well, fighting for something when you have something to fight for."

She looked at me seriously.

"If you have something like this, grab it and hold on to it tightly. Never let it go, don't end up like me."

Suddenly her head flared up, the skin was rotten, in her eyes there was panic, desperation, madness.

I stumbled back, saw her approaching a tall man with a snake tattoo.

Then I turned round and suddenly the music was deafeningly loud.

But when I was outside, everything was as it was before and there were no creatures.

A short time later, Naira stumbled over to me.

"Did you see that too? In there?" I asked her excitedly.

"Yes," she said, "I even had a chat with them."

"With the orcs?"

"No, which orcs? With the gods. They were all there."

"Yes ... right."

She must have seen something different to me.

"What did you ask her?"

"I spoke to Bas-We. She gave the music to the people. I asked her why she did it."

"So?"

"She said she no longer wanted to sing alone."

"So, do you think it was worth it for them?"

"I think so."

She smiled at something and then turned to me.

"And you? Have you talked to anyone?"

"No ... not really, they were all busy ... Come on, let's try another club."

Epilogue

We stayed there for a long time, enjoying the festivities. We got to know a lot of people and I even felt a growing bond with Ferdinando. He also had a talent for dancing badly. There was no other way to put it. He danced so badly that it was a joy, because in return it didn't matter how badly you danced yourself. I loved going to parties with him.

The whole thing was rounded off with a big witch jam, where witches from all over the world came together on the Brocken and created something in small groups. I kept an eye out for Bibi, but I didn't see her.

The next day, the festivities were over and the witch's cauldron slowly returned to its daily work rhythm. He had gained a few new workers, and perhaps scared a few away for good.

We unanimously decided that we didn't want to stay here. After everything Ferdinando had experienced in the witch's work, we didn't want to work here. We could just as well look after ourselves.

Then Naira had the idea of going south again, where there was more work, to show people how useful and clever witches were and to change the Southlands. Me and Ferdinando immediately thought it was a good idea.

And so we decided to head south again. Maybe even to the Southlands, we would see where the journey would take us. Travelling witches, becoming travelling witches and then ... let's see. I had first dreamed of rebuilding our castle, legally I should be the legal heir, but I didn't know if I had the strength for it and rejected the idea. Why not go travelling and adventuring with Naira and Ferdi instead?

We also switched back to horses, they would be more accepted in the Southlands than our flying brooms and it felt really good. For the first time in a long while, I felt like I was looking towards a future that had something in store for me that I wanted to do for longer and that I was actually looking forward to.

And so we saddled our horses and rode off, the cool, black metal of the firearm hidden deep in my riding bags ...