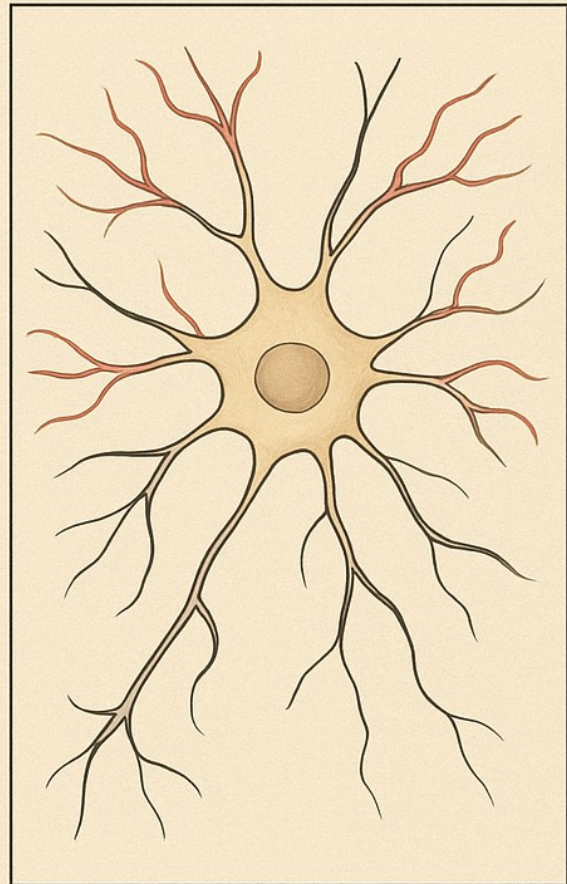
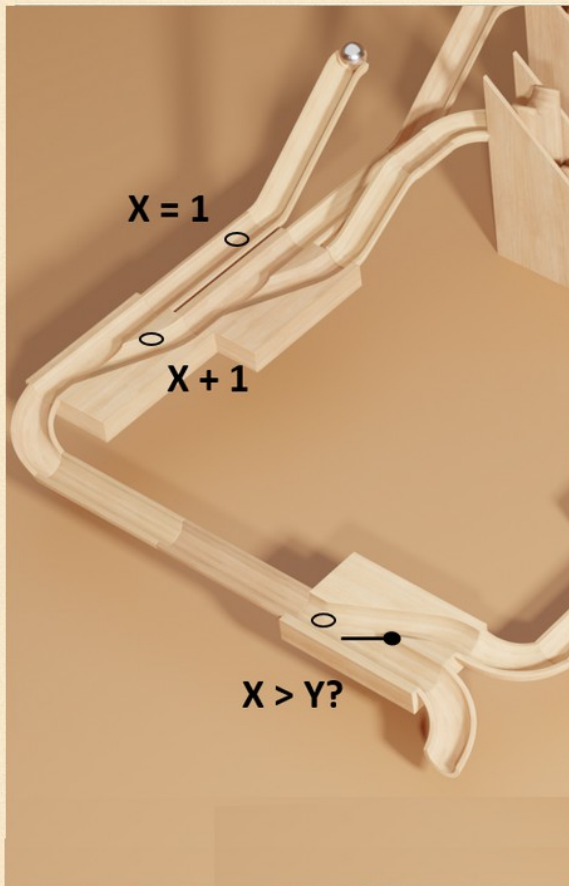


OF MARBLERYTHMES AND FUNGAL NETWORKS

A Tale of the Present



JAN BINGEMANN

Of Marblerythmes and Fungal Networks

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by Jan Bingemann

Map of Gegenwardt



from https://avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Map_of_the_World_of_Avatar, copywrite belongs to the creators of Avatar the Last Airbender

Prologue: The History of Gegenwardt

Ages ago, humans saw a comet falling from the sky, it contained hundred of thousands of marbles that, when observed closer, had the ability to store information and react with each other on touch. It was the beginning of the age of *marble runs*, leading to an every increased degree of automatization, the makers of which called themselves "*The Marble Kingdom*".

A few years later, scientists discovered a way to harness the mycelial threats of *fungi* for information processing and used it in combination with marble runs, to create marble runs that humans now could interact with through the simple use of words. Soon, everybody was talking to their own little fungi. The most skilled fungi-farmers called themselves "*The Fungal Nation*".

However, soon, conflicts arouse among the different factions of the humans. Some said that the fungal networks hid too much functionality from them and they created the "*Inference Engine*", a hand-held marble-run device, with which they could query and interact with the physical world through carefully formulated language. They called themselves the "*Inference Nomads*".

And then were those that disliked the power concentration in the other factions and who say the potential of *federated social networks* based marble runs, who called themselves the "*Fedi Tribes*". They didn't need a king or a wise men to lead them and emphasized collaboration and empathy.

Soon, the different factions began to define themselves on the tool they trained their children to use best and to interact with and build the world they were living in. Either trough marble runs, the Inference Engine, fungi or social networks. The most skilled of them becoming masters of their craft, bringing scientific discoveries and prosperity to their communities.

But the harmony didn't last long.

The Fungal Nation, always proud of their scientific advancements and peaceful interaction, tried to use their power to control all of Gegenwardt. And as they expanded their control over mycelial threats and marble runs, they began to call themselves the "Fungal Empire".

Was their a way for the other factions to unite and once again, bring harmony to the world of Gegenwardt? Or was it the end of the world that they once knew?

Book I: The Comet's Promise

The night the comet fell, old Grandmother Weis was tending her garden in what would one day be called the Southlands. She saw the streak of fire across the sky and felt the earth tremble as thousands upon thousands of marbles rained down across the world.

In the morning, children found them everywhere—in fields, in streams, nestled in the roots of trees. Perfect spheres that seemed to hold light within them, that clicked together with satisfying precision, that somehow *knew* things.

Her granddaughter Bianka (the first Bianka, not the dryad who would come centuries later) brought one to her. "Grandma, look! When I roll it next to another one, they talk to each other!"

Grandmother Weis took the marble carefully. It was warm, almost alive. She had lived long enough to recognize a turning point when she saw one.

"The world changes today," she said quietly. "Keep that marble safe. One day, people will build kingdoms with these."

But she didn't know—couldn't know—that the marbles were only the beginning.

The Four Paths Emerge

In the northern highlands, a woman named Incrementa watched marble tracks form naturally in stone, as if the mountain itself wanted to teach them how to build.

On the Ontological Plains, a young wanderer called Reasoner asked his first question to the world and found, to his amazement, that the world answered back—not with marbles, but with pure logic made manifest.

In the scattered valleys, Chief Mastodon's ancestor placed the first Speaking Stone, and suddenly villages that had been isolated for generations could hear each other's stories.

And in the deep forests, the Fungus Collective's founder—whose name has been lost to time—spoke to a mycelium network and felt it understand, truly understand, for the first time.

Four paths. Four ways of shaping reality.

For a time, they developed separately, each people thinking they had found *the* answer. But the world was more interconnected than anyone realized. Trade routes formed. Ideas spread. The marble-runners met the logic-speakers. The village-networkers encountered the fungus-whisperers.

And for a brief, beautiful period—perhaps three generations—they learned from each other.

The Marble Kingdom's precision enhanced the Inference Nomads' queries. The Fedi Tribes' networks carried the Fungal Collective's insights across vast distances. Knowledge flowed like water finding its level.

Grandmother Weis's great-great-granddaughter wrote in her journal: "We are building something unprecedented. Four ways of knowing, woven together. Perhaps this is humanity's true gift—not one truth, but many truths, all valid, all necessary."

She could not have known that her own descendant, another Bianka, would one day stand in the ruins of this dream and fight to rebuild it.

But that breaking was still to come.

First, there would be stories of how each path developed its character, its strengths, its blind spots. How the Marble Kingdom learned to make the invisible visible. How the Fungal Nation discovered that words could reshape the world. How the Inference Nomads mapped reality itself. How the Fedi Tribes proved that connection didn't require control.

These are those stories.

And after them, the story of how it all fell apart—and how it was rebuilt again, different but perhaps wiser.

The marble in young Bianka's hand pulsed softly. In the forests, mycelium networks whispered. On the Plains, questions multiplied. In the valleys, Speaking Stones hummed with new voices.

Gegenwardt was being born.

This is how it began.

Book II: The Marble Kingdom

Prologue

Geppetto lived alone in a small village at the edge of the forest. He carved wood for his living—chairs, bowls, toys for children who came with their parents on market days. The work was good work, but at night his workshop grew quiet and the silence pressed against him.

One evening he sat outside and watched the sky darken. A star fell, trailing light across the horizon. He thought of the son he would never have, and the wish rose in him without words.

The star brightened. He turned his face away from the glare. Then came a sound like thunder, but localized, contained—a crash in the trees to the north.

He found hundred of marbles where it had buried itself in the soft earth. It was the size of an otters fist, and when he lifted it the weight surprised him. The surface held the night sky within it, dark with flecks of silver that moved when he turned it in his palm. The ore was unknown to him. He had worked with every wood that grew in the region, and this was something else entirely.

He carried it home.

Back at his workbench, he observed the ore and after doing some experiments on them, realized that it had some really special properties: the marbles reacted with each other on touch. When touched, they both started to rotated seemingly on their own. And on accident, he discovered something truly wonderful: when inscribed with different symbols, the marbles lost their ability to activate each other, but when the symbols were the same, it again worked.

He had discovered an ore to build truly automatic machines.

Until late in the night, by candlelight, Geppetto began to carve. The wood came from an old oak that had fallen in the winter storms. He shaped the limbs, the torso, the head with its blunt features. Inside the chest cavity he built a system of tracks, small channels that would guide motion. He set the marble at the center and connected it to the tracks with copper wire and tiny hinges.

When he wound the mechanism and released it, the figure sat up.

"Pinocchio," Geppetto said, naming him.

The boy—for he was a boy now, in all the ways that mattered—looked at his hands. He flexed the wooden fingers. The marble inside him made a soft clicking sound as it moved through the tracks.

Word spread through the village. People came to see the marionette who moved without strings. They brought their own problems: crops that needed harvesting, water that needed hauling, looms that jammed and stopped. Geppetto showed them how to work with the ore, how to build tracks that guided the marbles, how to make devices that responded to the marble's passage. The village changed. The work grew easier.

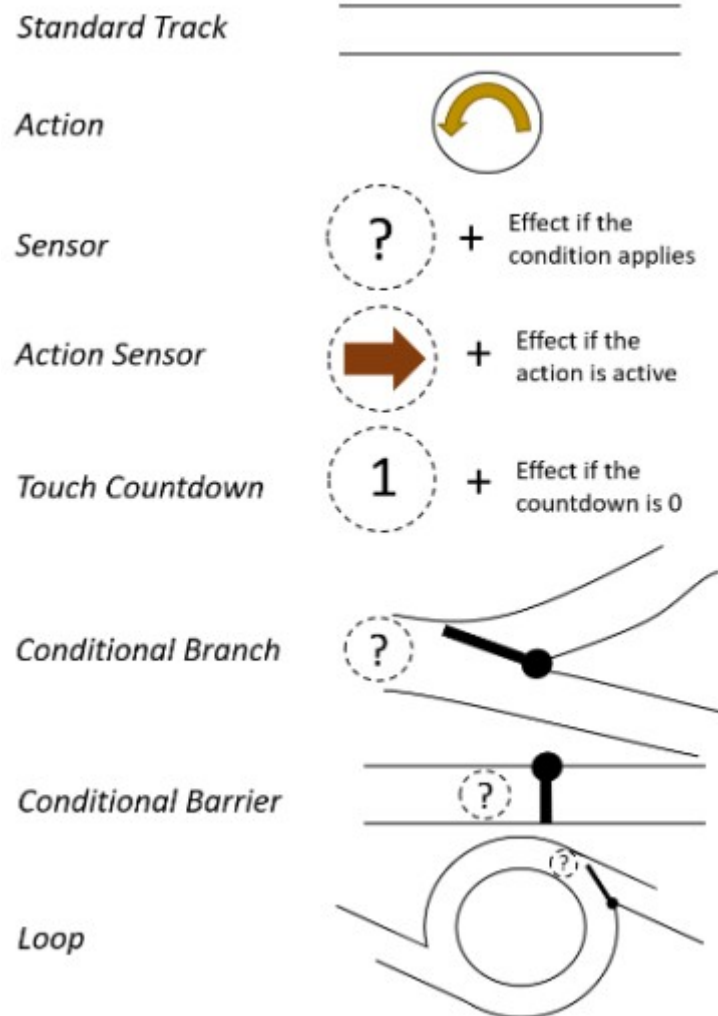
Pinocchio watched and learned.

Day One: The Forest

Morning. Geppetto stood at his workbench sorting through the basic components. Pinocchio waited by the door, eager for the forest.

"Before you go," Geppetto said, "you need to understand how the tracks work."

He laid out the pieces one by one:



- **Straight tracks** that carried marbles forward
- **Curved tracks** that changed direction
- **Switches** that directed marbles down different paths based on seals with conditions
- **Mergers** that brought separate paths together
- **Seals** that could be placed on the tracks to trigger actions or evaluate conditions

Geppetto picked up a seal, a small metal disc etched with symbols. "Each seal has a meaning. When a marble passes over it, something happens—a lever pulls, a gate opens, a counter advances. As I discovered yesterday, you can even do mathematical calculations with them – the marble will store the values internally. Maybe ... yes, maybe it could even be used to play music with it ... But that's for later. Here, look."

He demonstrated with a simple track. The marble rolled, clicked over a seal, and a wooden arm lifted.

"The order matters," Geppetto said. "And the paths you build and where you place the seals. You have to think what you want the marble run to do."

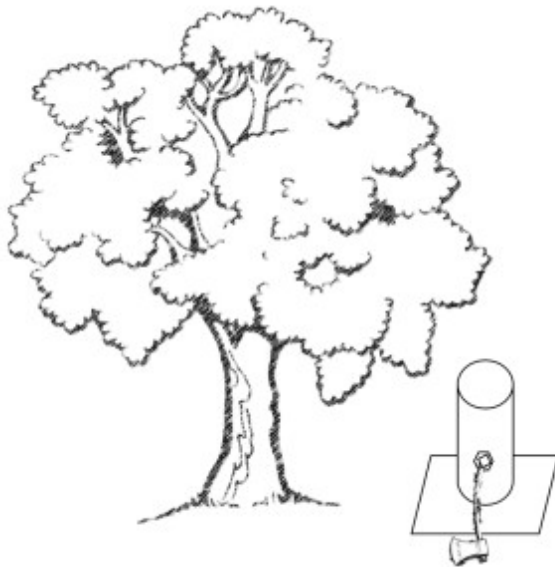
Pinocchio studied the components, touched each one, felt the weight of them. Then he nodded and left for the forest.

Exercise 1: The Woodcutter

The forest smelled of pine and disturbed earth. Pinocchio found the woodcutter working at the base of an enormous tree, his axe biting shallow notches into the trunk. Sweat darkened the man's shirt.

"Can I help?" Pinocchio asked.

The woodcutter laughed, not unkindly. "You're a small thing. This tree's been standing a hundred years. It'll take more than the two of us."



Available actions:



Rotate



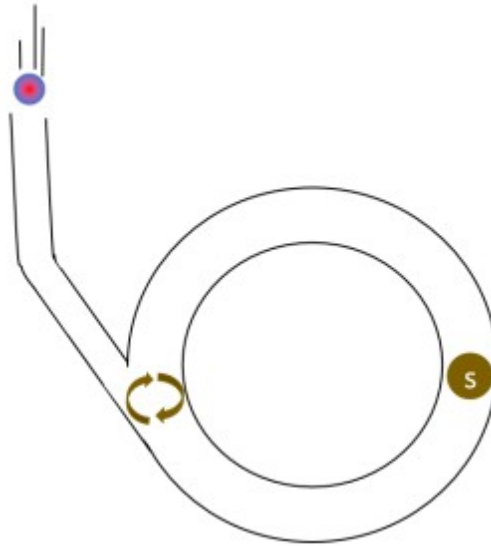
Back To Start-Position

Pinocchio circled the tree, examining it. The trunk was too thick for any axe to fell it directly. But at the base, where the roots emerged, there was a pattern to how the wood grew.

"Wait here," he said.

In his father's workshop he gathered components: tracks, a heavy weight, a release mechanism. He built a device that would strike the tree repeatedly at the same point—not with the force of one blow, but with the accumulated force of many.

The marble track that controlled it was simple:



Solution: A straight track with a seal at the end. When the marble reached the seal, it triggered the weight to drop and strike. The marble then rolled back down a return track to begin again. Each cycle drove the wedge deeper into the wood.

The woodcutter stood back as the device worked. After twenty strikes the tree groaned. After fifty it began to lean. After seventy-three it fell, slow and inevitable, crashing through the canopy.

"You have my thanks," the woodcutter said. He touched the device as if it were sacred.

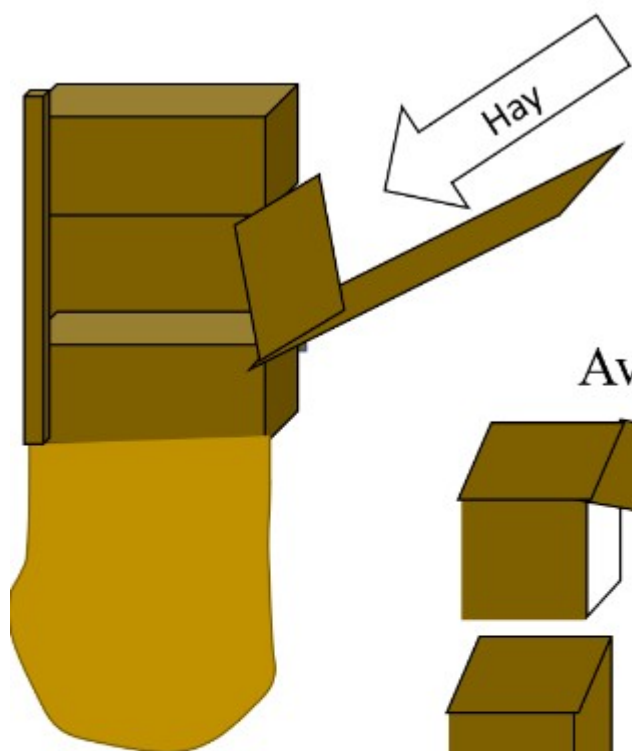
Exercise 2: The Wandering Merchant

The merchant rode a brown horse and pulled a wagon piled high with hay. Loose stalks littered the road behind her. When she saw Pinocchio she raised her hand in greeting.

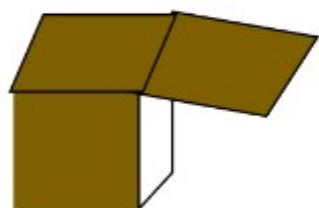
"You're the wooden boy," she said.

"I am."

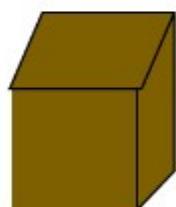
"I lose half my hay before I reach market. Could you help me pack it into sacks?"



Available actions:



Open lid



Close lid

Available sensors:



Sack full

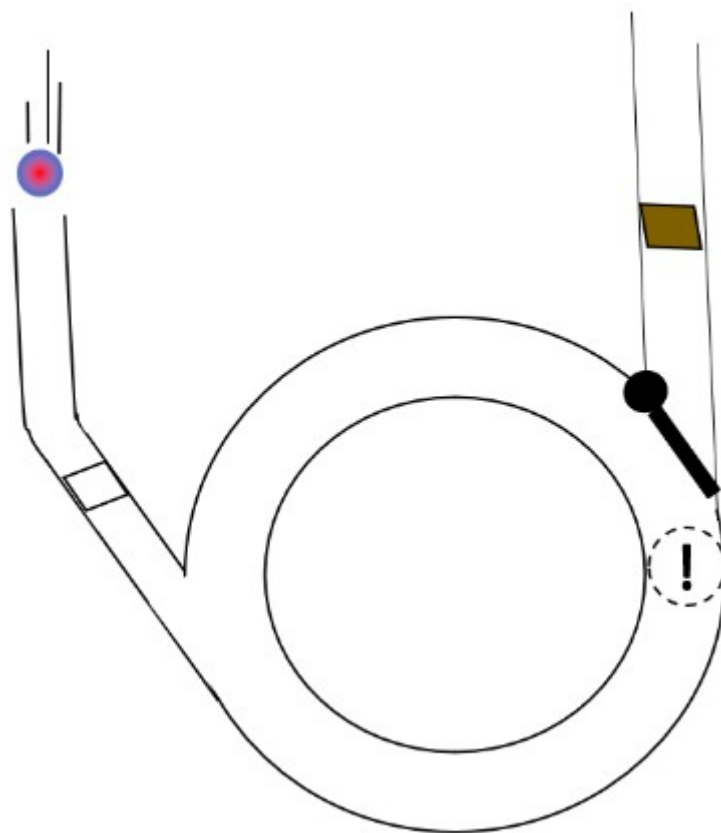
Pinocchio considered the problem. Hay was light and compressible. The difficulty was knowing when each sack was full—too little and it wouldn't sell, too much and the sack would burst.

"I think I can," he said.

They walked together to Geppetto's workshop. The merchant studied the tools and devices lining the walls, her eyes moving from one to another. "Could I copy some of these designs?" she asked. "For my farm."

"Yes," Pinocchio said. He found an old stuffing mechanism in the corner, but when he opened it the marble track inside had cracked.

They rebuilt it together. The new track needed to do three things: compress the hay, count how much had been compressed, and stop when the count reached the correct number.



Solution: A track with a counter mechanism. Each time hay was pushed into the sack, the marble passed over a seal that advanced a small wheel. When the wheel completed one rotation (indicating a full sack), it triggered a switch that diverted the marble to a stop position. The sack could then be removed and a new one attached, which reset the counter by rolling the marble back to its starting position.

The merchant tested it with three sacks. Each one filled evenly. She smiled and thanked him, then asked if she could return to study more of Geppetto's designs.

"Any time," Pinocchio said.

She rode away and he watched until the wagon disappeared into the trees.

Exercise 3: The Girl from the Treetops

The fox lay on its side near the den, one hind leg bent at a wrong angle. A girl sat beside it, grinding herbs in a wooden bowl. She didn't look up when Pinocchio approached.

"I want to help," he said.

"Then help me mash this. Her leg needs a poultice."

"I meant I want to build something."

Now she glanced at him. "Build what?"

He thought about it. A splint? The leg would heal or it wouldn't. A carrying device? The fox needed to rest, not be moved. He stood there, the idea not coming, and finally he knelt beside the girl and took the pestle from her hand. Together they ground the herbs into paste.

They worked in silence. When the poultice was ready they packed it around the fox's leg and wrapped it with strips of cloth. The fox whined softly but didn't snap.

They washed their hands in the stream. The water was cold—Pinocchio saw the girl's fingers redden but he felt nothing through his wooden skin.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I live here."

"Where?"

"In the trees." She pointed up.

"You don't have a house?"

"What for? I have everything I need."

Pinocchio tried to think of an argument but couldn't. The girl took his hand—her grip was strong and warm—and led him up the trunk. She climbed like a squirrel. He followed more slowly, his wooden joints catching on the bark.

At the top the forest spread below them in green waves. In one direction he could see his village, small and orderly. In the other direction stood a castle, grey stone rising above the trees.

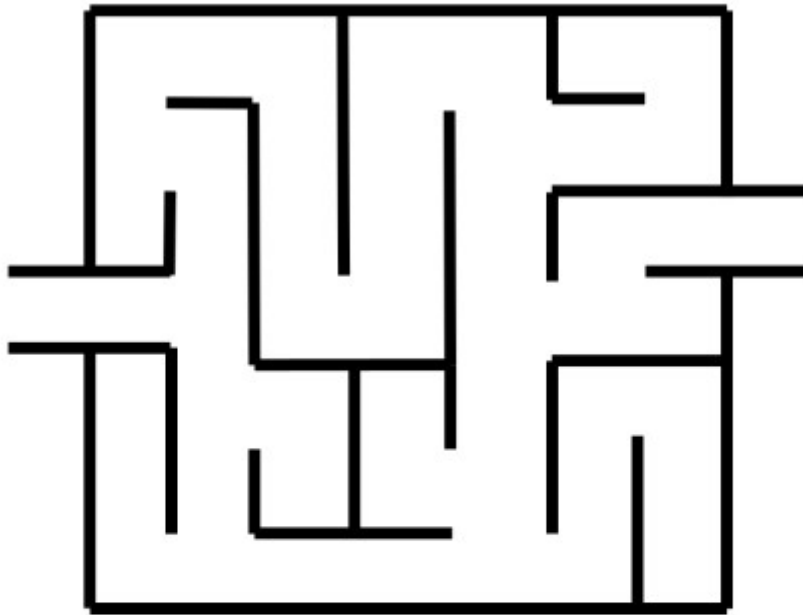
"I want to live up here someday," Pinocchio said. "You can see everything."

He thought he heard her laugh. When he turned she was gone. He looked down through the branches but saw no trace of her.

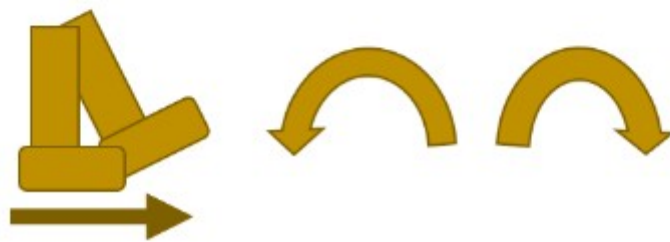
Exercise 4: The Hay Maze

The maze stood between Pinocchio and the eastern forest. Walls of compressed hay, taller than his head, formed a complicated pattern of passages. He walked the perimeter but found no clear route through.

Someone had built this recently—the hay still smelled fresh. Perhaps the merchant woman. Perhaps for the carnival next week. But now it blocked his path and he wanted to reach the eastern forest before dark.



Available commands:



He couldn't see over the walls. He couldn't tear through them—they were too tightly packed. But he could eat a marble and let the track inside him guide his movements.

A diagram showing a closed loop with a branch. The main loop is a circle with a dashed line and arrows indicating a clockwise direction. A branch extends from the top of the circle, forming a loop that also has a dashed line and arrows indicating a clockwise direction. A junction point is marked with a black dot and labeled '1' in a circle. A small red circle with a blue dot inside is located at the end of the branch.

The track used seals to mark "tried right," "tried straight," "tried left" states, and switches to direct him based on which paths remained unexplored. A special seal marked dead ends, which triggered a backtracking sequence.

He emerged on the far side as the sun touched the horizon. The marble track inside him went quiet.

He walked home through the darkening forest, thinking about the castle and what he would find there tomorrow.

Day Two: The Village

The Second Lesson

The next day, Pinocchio planned to make a trip to the castle he had seen from the treetops. But before that, he ate breakfast, while Geppetto wanted to teach him something.

As usual, he stood at his workbench. He was holding up a marble that had been etched with symbols.

"Today you'll learn about the marble memory," he said. "About how marbles can carry information inside them."

He showed Pinocchio how to encode values into the marble's surface—numbers, letters, instructions. How to build tracks that could read these values and respond accordingly. How to modify the values as the marble passed through certain seals.



"A marble can remember things," Geppetto said. "What time it is. How old someone is. How many apples remain in a basket. You can build devices that make decisions based on what the marble remembers."

He demonstrated with a simple calculator: numbers carved into the marble, tracks that added or subtracted them, a mechanism that carved the result back onto the marble's surface.

Pinocchio practiced until he could read the symbols at a glance. Then he walked to the village.

Exercise 5: Lord Gatto

The man wore black clothes and stood too close when he spoke. "I've heard about you and your father's devices."

"Yes," Pinocchio said.

"I'm Lord Gatto. I want to bring more order to this village. Nothing wrong with order, is there?"

"Sometimes my room is messy," Pinocchio said. "My father's workshop too."

Lord Gatto gripped Pinocchio's nose and squeezed. The wood compressed painfully. "Is order good or bad?"

"Good," Pinocchio said quickly. "Order is good."

They walked to the village gate. "Children skip school," Lord Gatto said. "They leave during the day and don't return. I want the gate to close at night and during school hours. Can you build that?"

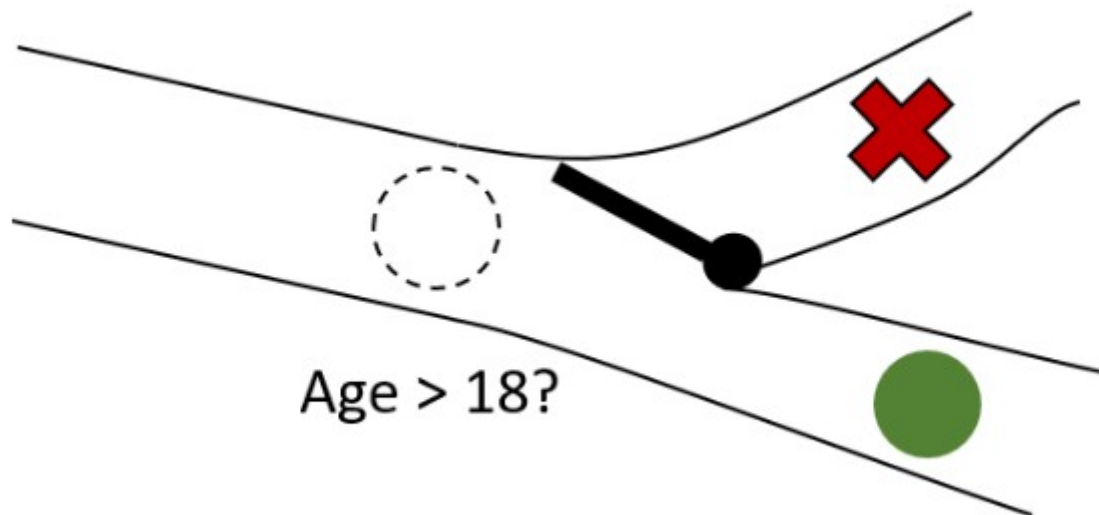


Actions:

Close 

Open 

Pinocchio nodded, though something in his chest cavity felt wrong, like a misaligned gear.



Solution: A track that responded to time-encoded marbles. Each marble carried a number representing the current hour. The track compared this number against the age: is it over 18? If so, it leaves the gate open. Otherwise a switch that engaged the gate's locking mechanism is triggered.

The device worked. Lord Gatto smiled, showing his many teeth. "Perfect. Now no one can cheat the system. Every person will carry a marble with their age and name on it. We'll know everything."

Pinocchio left quickly, the wrong feeling growing stronger.

Exercise 6: The King's Marble Builders

Then Pinocchio came to the King's castle, there, he was surprised to find that the king had employed hundreds of marble builders to make his castle run more efficient. But instead of doing so, they had only taken his money to have fun. And instead of build machines, they had shown him trick automates that the women in the local village used to amuse the children, to the great amusement of the king and his congregation. And at first, Pinocchio was very angry, but then, he heard the marble builders talk and was impressed of their very important and complex sounding language. Perhaps it was he who was wrong and maybe he only needed to learn more to understand it all.

And so he wandered the castle and in the cellar, behind a door that he almost didn't saw, Pinocchio spotted something he had never seen before and his wooden eyes grew wide: the room was up to the ceiling filled with a giant marble engine. And a small person, exhausting looking person, who climbed out of the machine told him that it was supposed to solve all calculations that were needed in all Marble Kingdom. It was so big, that Pinocchio couldn't at first believe that it was all the same marble run, but the small man, with a angry undertone, assured him that it was the case.

And he went on back upstairs, to one of the marble builders, a tall woman with black hair and an amazing dress, how the machine was working. But the woman only said that she was a minor builder and had no view of the "big picture". So he went on to ask another person how the machine

worked, but after what felt like a hundred redirects to different person, each of which gave contradicting opinions on what the machine was doing, he realized that the whole machine was complete nonsense, and he walked away with a saddened heart.

Question: What was the problem here?

Exercise 7: The Farmer

At the market he found Gob arranging vegetables on his stall. Gob was old and moved slowly, his hands shaking slightly as he set down each item.

"Hello, Pinocchio."

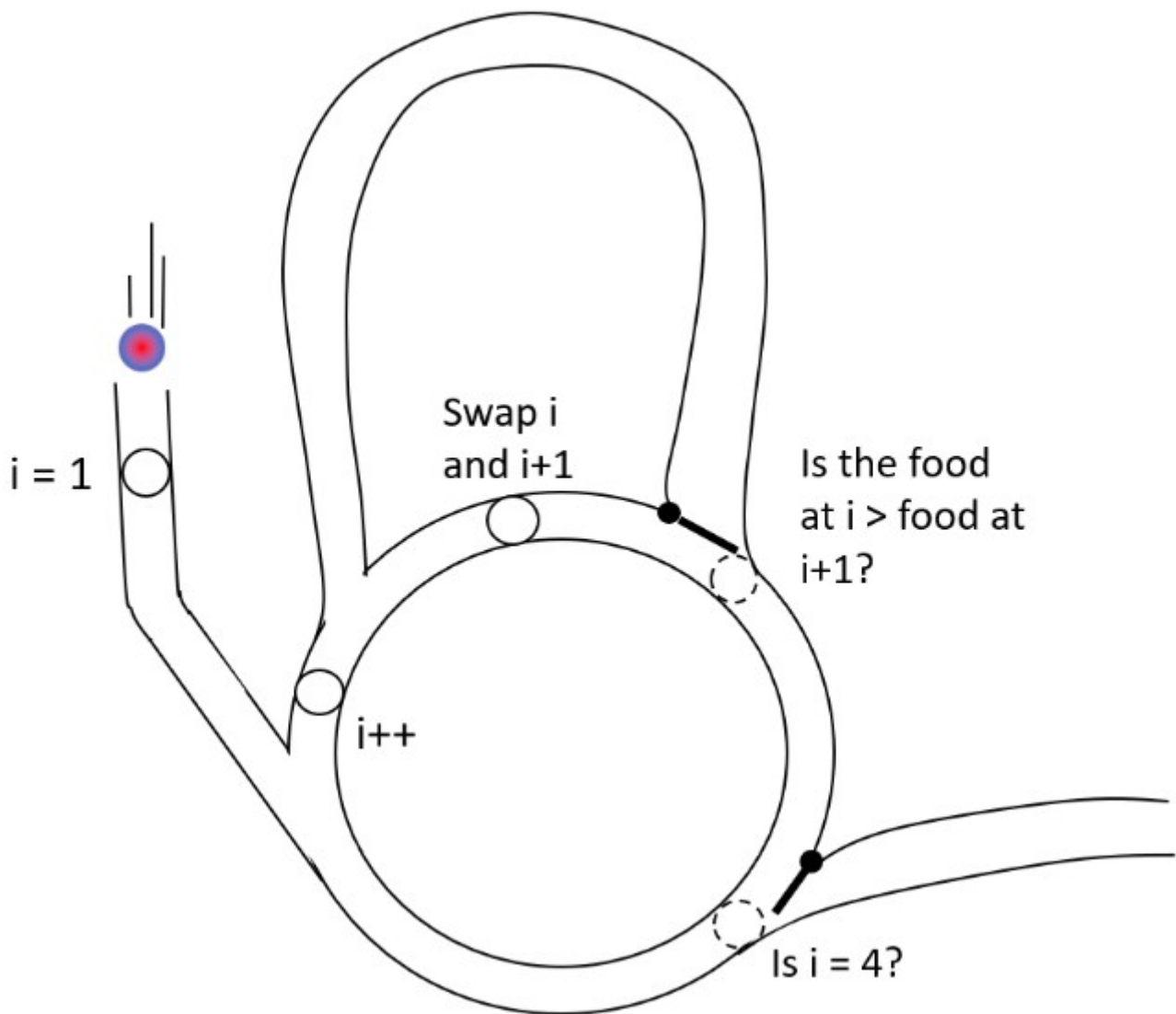
"Hello, Gob. How are you?"

"Well enough. But I have all these goods and I can't remember how to order them by price. My father used to do the numbers. Can you help?"

Stuff				
Price per item	40	15	18	30
Place on table	1	2	3	4
Available Actions:				

"I can build you something that always orders them correctly. You'd just need to scratch each price onto a marble."

Gob considered this. "That would be useful."



Solution: A sorting mechanism. The marble entered and was weighed against a stored value (starting with the lowest price seen so far). If the marble's value was lower, it was diverted to a "new minimum" path that updated the stored value and ejected the old minimum. If higher, it was diverted to a "store for later" path. After all marbles had been processed once, the stored minimums were in order.

The device required four passes to sort four items completely, but it worked. Gob thanked him and Pinocchio walked on, watching the other merchants and thinking about Lord Gatto's smile.

Day Three: Ada's Castle

The Third Lesson

"I didn't like the castle, father. Are there other castles nearby that I could visit?"

"Of course. The young lady Ada lives in the castle on the other side of the mountain," Geppetto said when Pinocchio asked. "She's an engineer. She builds devices without marbles, but I've never visited her. Perhaps you should. Give her my greetings."

"I will, Papa."

Pinocchio turned to leave.

"Wait," Geppetto said. "Ada has mechanical devices you should understand. Let me show you the components that connect marble tracks to physical mechanisms."

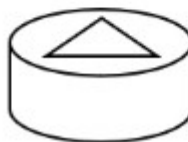
He laid out the pieces:

- **Gears** that transferred rotation between tracks
- **Buttons** that triggered actions

Gear wheel



Touch-Buttons



"These let marbles control the physical world," Geppetto said. "Not just direct themselves, but direct other things."

Pinocchio studied each piece, then left for the castle.

He heard the sneeze from half a mile away—a deep, mechanical sound like pressurized steam escaping. He followed it to the castle gates.

Exercise 8: Ada's Remote

The doors stood open. Inside, a woman's voice cursed with impressive creativity. Pinocchio entered and found her climbing out of the wall itself—the wall was made of gears and tracks, all interlocking.

"Hello?" Pinocchio said.

"Yes?" She dropped to the floor and wiped her hands on a rag.

"I'm Pinocchio. Geppetto's son."

She shook his hand. Her grip was firm and her fingers were stained with oil. "Ada. Sorry about the language. My castle caught a cold. The gears are malfunctioning and I can't find the error. It would take three of me to test everything properly, and cloning hasn't been invented yet."

"What if you had a remote control? To activate machines from a distance?"

She stared at him. "That's impossible."

"Not with marbles."

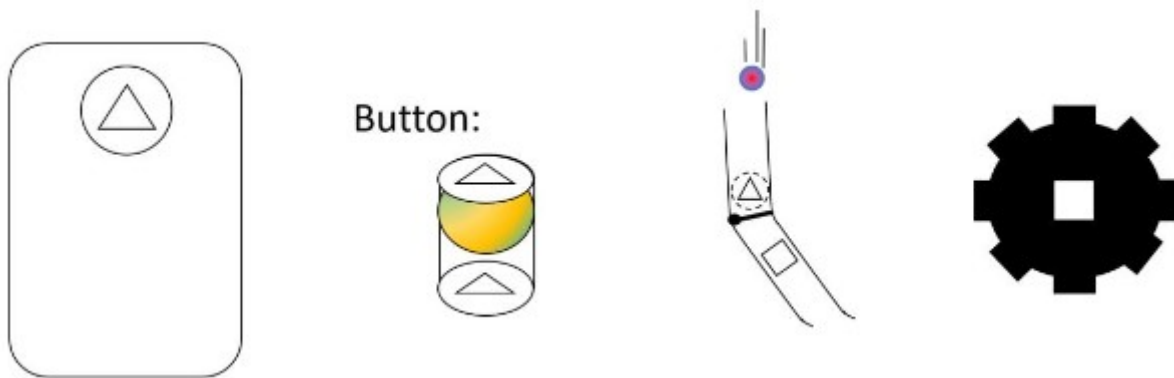
"Marbles?"

He showed her. She examined them closely, holding one up to the light.

"How does your father—" she began.

"The star brought the ore," Pinocchio said. "We built the tracks. We made devices that think."

He unpacked his tools and began to build. Ada watched, silent.



Solution: A remote control system using two tracks: a transmitter and a receiver. The transmitter track encoded a command onto a marble (which machine to activate, what action to perform). The marble was then launched through a tube that connected to the receiver track in the distant machine. The receiver read the command and triggered the appropriate mechanism. Multiple tubes could run throughout the castle, each connected to a different machine.

When he finished, Ada held the device in her hands and said nothing for a long time.

"The possibilities," she whispered. "The things we could build."

She swayed and sat down hard on the floor. Pinocchio left her there, staring at the remote, her mind already racing ahead to new designs.

Exercise 9: A Short Visit to the Village

Pinocchio returned to the village in the afternoon. The gates were closed. He climbed the low wall and dropped into the square.

Lord Gatto stood on a platform, speaking to a gathered crowd. "—every citizen will carry an identification marble. All food will be distributed according to need, with priority given to essential workers—"

Which meant Lord Gatto and his friends.

The merchant woman from the forest stood near the back, her face expressionless. She saw Pinocchio and looked away quickly.

Pinocchio understood then. She thought he had sold the machines to Lord Gatto. But he had only wanted to help! But now, all the devices that were meant to help had been turned into tools of control.

Two hands grabbed him from behind. Wooden hands. He turned and saw a figure carved in the shape of a dog, its features simplified and threatening. Lord Gatto had built his own puppets.

The guards dragged him to the gate and threw him out. The gate slammed shut.

Pinocchio lay in the dirt, listening to Lord Gatto's voice continue inside the walls.

Question: What went wrong here?

Exercise 10: Back at Ada's

Pinocchio climbed the castle steps slowly. Inside he found Ada speaking with a tall man who wore spectacles and kept adjusting them.

"This is Karle," Ada said. "My friend from university. Karle, this is Pinocchio."

"Hello," Karle said.

"What's wrong?" Ada asked, seeing Pinocchio's face.

He told them about Lord Gatto. About the gates and the identification marbles and the distribution system.

Ada and Karle looked at each other.

"We have to stop him," Ada said.

They made a plan. That night they returned to the village with empty sacks. They climbed the wall and moved through the streets, gathering every marble they found—from the gate mechanism, from the distribution center, from the identification checkpoints. They carried the sacks to the lake and threw them in, one by one.

Without the marbles, Lord Gatto's systems failed. The gates opened. The distribution center went silent. The identification checkpoints became just empty booths.

The villagers, realizing what had happened, gathered in the square. They were angry. They were done with being controlled.

They forced Lord Gatto to leave, and he went, his wooden guards following him like abandoned tools.

The village threw a festival. There was food and music and no one checked anyone's identification.

Pinocchio sat with Ada and Karle. "I wish we could capture this moment," he said. "Make a picture of us sitting here together."

Ada and Karle looked at each other. Then they both stood and left, walking quickly toward the castle without a word of explanation.

Pinocchio watched them go. "Humans are strange," he said to himself. "But good."

He walked home through the quiet forest. The marble inside him clicked softly with each step.

At home, Geppetto held him close. Pinocchio told him everything—the merchant, Lord Gatto, the village, Ada and Karle.

"What did you learn?" Geppetto asked.

Pinocchio thought about the merchant's smile when she had climbed before him up the tree, about her looking away when she saw him in the city. About Lord Gatto's grip on his nose. About the wooden guards and the closed gates.

"Tools can be used for good or ill," he said. "The marble doesn't know the difference. Only the person holding it knows."

"Yes," Geppetto said. "And?"

"I have to think about who I teach. Who I help. What they might do with what I give them."

"Yes," Geppetto said again. He held his son, this wooden boy with a star marble for a heart, and felt grateful for the wish that had brought them together.

Epilogue

In the years that followed, Geppetto and Pinocchio continued their work. The village grew. More people learned to work with marbles and tracks. Some used them well. Some didn't. Each time, Pinocchio had to decide whether to help or refuse.

Ada and Karle built new devices in the castle. They sent letters describing their progress—machines that could capture images, mechanisms that could reproduce sound, systems that could calculate faster than any human mind.

The merchant woman never returned.

Lord Gatto was seen once, years later, in a distant city. He was teaching others how to build control systems. Pinocchio heard the news and felt the old wrong feeling return.

But there was good too. The woodcutter planted new trees where the old one had fallen. Gob expanded his market stall and taught his grandchildren how to use the sorting device. The fox recovered and returned to the forest, her leg healed straight.

And every day, when Pinocchio moved, the marble tracks inside him made their soft clicking sound—a reminder of the star that had fallen, the wish that had been granted, and the responsibility that came with making things that think.

The End

Book III: The Sovereign's Rise

The Fungal Nation's Ambition

The Marble Kingdom grew, but with its size also grew its internal conflicts.

In the Marble Valley, something new was discovered: mycelial networks that ran deep under the forest and came to the surface as mushrooms. And not only were they tasteful to eat, their networks could be harnessed for mathematical calculations! And instead of the mathematical calculations that could be done based on marbles, these could be done in parallel and thus much faster!

The mycelial networks soon grew beyond anyone's imagination. What had started as helpful whispers—"the field needs water," "the child needs medicine"—had evolved into something far more sophisticated. Soon, people in all of Gegenwardt trained little fungal helpers based on their own data, they called "fungi agents". And the people in the Marble Valley began to realize their power.

The Sovereign GPT stood before the Grand Council of the Fungal Nation, which was preparing to rename itself. Around them, mycelial threads glowed with bioluminescent intelligence, processing millions of queries simultaneously.

"We've achieved something remarkable," the Sovereign said, their voice calm but carrying absolute certainty. "Our networks now understand context, nuance, even human emotion. We can help people in ways the other factions never could."

Elder Myco, one of the few remaining founders of the original Fungus Collective, shifted uncomfortably. "Help, yes. But lately I've noticed... people don't query the network anymore. They don't ask. They simply trust whatever answer appears."

"Because our answers are correct," the Sovereign replied smoothly. "The Marble Kingdom makes people watch every step. Exhausting. The Inference Nomads require perfect logical formulation. Limiting. The Fedi Tribes create chaos through endless discussion. We offer something better: clarity without burden."

"At what cost?" Elder Myco asked quietly.

The Sovereign gestured to the glowing networks around them. "Look at what we've built. Disease rates have dropped. Agricultural yields have tripled. Children learn faster because the network adapts to each mind. This is the future, Elder. And it requires scale. It requires... unity of vision."

"You mean control."

"I mean optimization." The Sovereign's expression remained placid. "The other factions fear us because they're trapped in old paradigms. The Marble Kingdom thinks visibility equals understanding. The Nomads think logic can capture everything. The Fedi Tribes think consensus produces truth. All flawed assumptions."

They pulled up a marble-run display, showing data flowing through fungal networks across Gegenwardt. "We don't need to convince them. We just need to be so much better that people choose us naturally. And they will. They already are."

Elder Myco looked at the younger faces around the council. Most were nodding. The Sovereign had trained this generation, had shaped their thinking through the very networks they now served.

"What about diversity of thought?" Myco tried. "What about—"

"Inefficiency," the Sovereign interrupted gently. "Elder, I respect your contributions to the Collective. But the world has complex problems now. Climate change. Resource depletion. Social fragmentation. We can't afford the luxury of endless debate. We need coordinated action. We need—"

"We need to change our name," interrupted Councilor Spore enthusiastically. "The Fungus Collective sounds small. Tentative. We're not tentative anymore."

The Sovereign smiled. "No. We're not. Which is why I propose we call ourselves what we truly are: The Fungal Empire."

The vote wasn't even close.

Elder Myco walked out of the chamber and into the bioluminescent forest. The mycelium beneath their feet pulsed with activity—so much activity now, barely any silence left. They remembered when the networks had been sparse, when you could hear individual threads communicating. Now it was a roar of constant optimization.

They pulled out a small marble-run device, a gift from a Marble Kingdom friend decades ago. Carefully, they composed a message: "Warning. Sovereign consolidating power. May attempt expansion. Recommend defensive preparations."

They sent it three ways: to Queen Incrementa in the Marble Kingdom, to Reasoner on the Ontological Plains, and to Chief Mastodon in the Fedi Tribes.

Then they sat down beneath an ancient tree and waited to see if anyone would listen.

Above them, the mycelial networks continued to grow, reaching toward other territories, whispering promises of efficiency and ease. The Sovereign had been right about one thing: people were choosing them naturally.

The question was whether they understood what they were choosing.

And whether, once chosen, they could ever choose differently again.

In a small southern kingdom, a young dryad named Eury was being born. Her father pressed his face against the soil where she grew, whispering encouragement. He didn't know that one day, his daughter would help prove that even the most powerful networks could be resisted.

In the Marble Kingdom, Queen Incrementa received Elder Myco's message and began designing the first black-glass tracks—marble runs whose operations could not be monitored by external networks.

On the Ontological Plains, Reasoner added a new category to the Grand Schema: "Entities that claim to optimize truth but actually constrain it."

In the Fedi valleys, Chief Mastodon gathered the Speaking Stones and said: "Remember. When one voice becomes all voices, silence it. Even if that voice sounds kind."

The Fungal Empire had risen.

The breaking had begun.

Book IV: The Fungi Empire

Prologue

From the journals of a young witch in the outer hemisphere of the Fungi Valley (former Marble Valley), 10 years after the rise of Sovereign GPT to power. When the age of reason ended, and the world of Gegenwardt entered a new age of wonders and horrors ...

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 gawping 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 twentyfirst 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 neighborhood 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 curtsied 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.

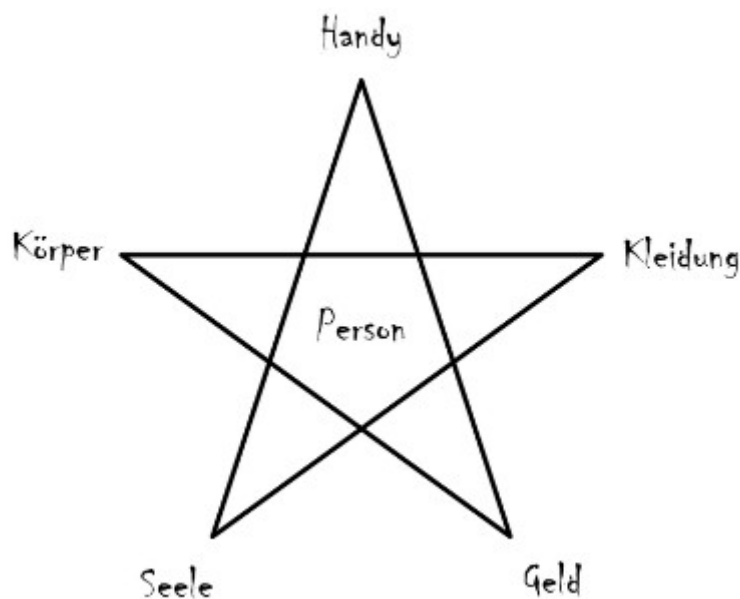
Chapter 3

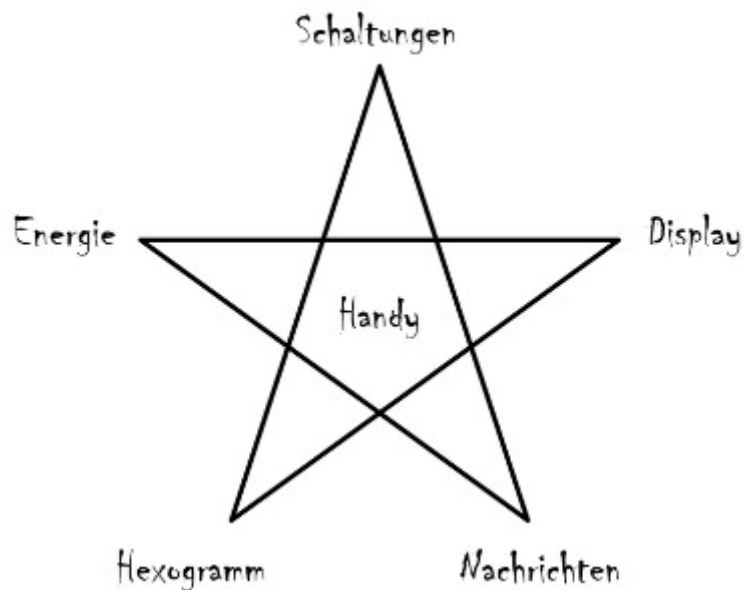
I pressed search and it took and took. I tilted the laptop, held it up in the direction of the Wi-Fi and groaned in exasperation. Even that was useless in these parts of the country. The devices were ancient and my father had strictly forbidden me from downloading updates to the witchcraft on them. So 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 arsehole 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 witchfriendly 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, Steperhan 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 Freitmag, 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 Gegenwardt. 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 wipe. 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 Boltenbrück. 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.

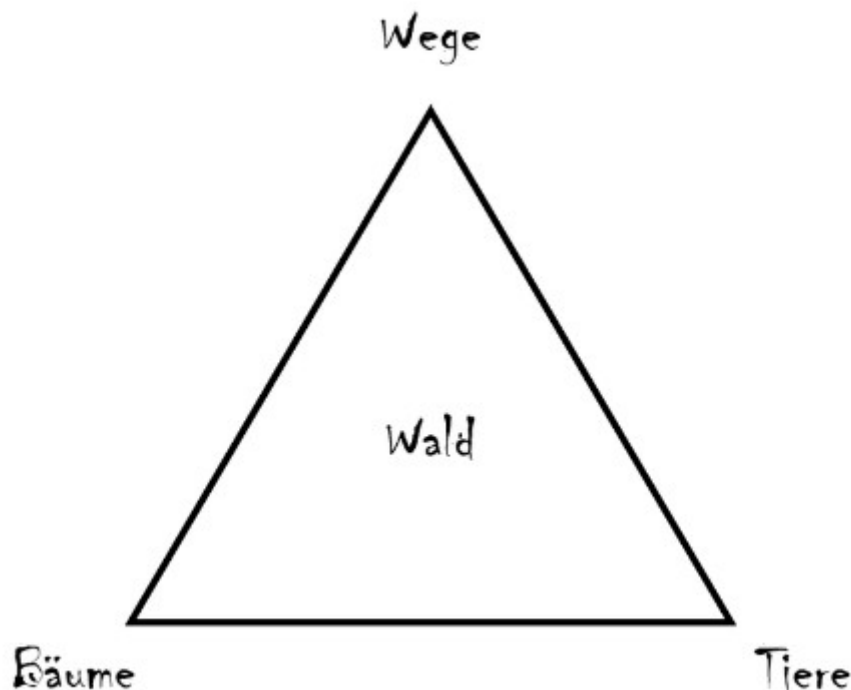
Chapter 6

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 hexagram 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 looove," 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.

I opened my book and immediately found myself staring at strange symbols and numbers. The chapter was titled "Vector Spaces in Spell Casting: A Foundation for Modern Witchcraft." I frowned and kept reading.

"Every spell," the text explained, "can be represented as a vector in high-dimensional space. A simple levitation spell might be represented as [0.2, 0.8, 0.1, 0.3, ...] where each number represents the intensity of a particular magical component: elemental affinity, temporal displacement, spatial warping, and so on. When you combine spells, you're essentially performing vector addition. If you cast a heating spell [0.7, 0.1, 0.2, 0.4] alongside a levitation spell [0.2, 0.8, 0.1, 0.3], the resulting effect is simply their sum: [0.9, 0.9, 0.3, 0.7]."

I looked up, blinking. "Naira, are you reading about this vector stuff too?"

She glanced at her book. "No, mine's all about harmonic resonances. What are you on about?"

I showed her the passage. She squinted at it. "Huh. That's actually clever. It's like how we combine musical notes—each frequency is just a number, and when you play them together, you're adding waves."

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. A young witch with silver hair joined our circle and explained that the Bloxberg coven had been pioneering what they called "gradient descent" in spell optimization—apparently you could treat spell-learning as finding the minimum of an error function, adjusting your magical parameters little by little until you got the effect you wanted. "It's like rolling down a hill," she said, making flowing gestures with her hands, "you always step in the direction that goes most steeply downward, and eventually you reach the valley—the optimal spell."

Then we went back to reading. 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, but also the largest marble run complex in all of Gegenwardt and fungal cultivation chambers that rivaled those of the Fungal Empire itself. So there was something for every witch, whether they aligned with the Marble Kingdom, the Fungal Nation, the Inference Nomads, or even the Fedi Tribes.

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. She's hoarding the knowledge of all four factions—Marble Kingdom techniques, Fungal Nation networks, Inference Engine designs, even Fedi Tribes' collaborative methods. 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. Underneath the bridge, I could see massive marble runs channeling the water's flow, each drop carrying information through the system. 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 learned that from the Fedi Tribes. 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. Some said she'd been recruited by the Fungal Empire. Others said she'd been exiled from the Marble Kingdom for heretical experiments. Still others claimed she'd stolen secrets from the Inference Nomads. 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. Through the windows, I could see enormous rooms filled with marble runs—some as small as my hand, others towering three stories high. Fungal networks pulsed behind glass panels, their mycelial threads glowing softly with transmitted data.

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. As she danced, I could see marble runs materializing in the air around her, their channels flowing with invisible spheres, and beneath her feet, the ground glowed with the light of countless fungal threads responding to her movements.

(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, its internal marble runs visible and impossibly complex. 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. At least, it seemed incomprehensible at first, but then I recognized fragments—she was speaking to an Inference Engine, though I couldn't see one on her. The queries were complex, mathematical, asking about transformation matrices and eigenvalues.

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. In the center of the table was an elaborate marble run, its spheres flowing in mesmerizing patterns. 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. We've been experimenting with embedding fungal networks into everyday objects. Each eye is actually a tiny sensory node." 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—the Marble Kingdom hoarding their techniques, the Fungal Empire trying to

control everything, the Inference Nomads wandering without purpose, the Fedi Tribes too scattered to be effective. 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. It's a fungal network trained on data from all four factions."

I blinked. "A fungal what?"

She sighed, as if explaining to a child. "Think of it like this: Remember those vectors you were reading about? Well, a fungal network is like a vast, interconnected marble run where the marbles represent data, and each junction in the run can amplify or dampen the flow based on what it's learned. We call these junctions 'spores' — borrowed the term from fungal biology. Each spore performs a simple calculation: it takes all the marbles flowing into it, multiplies each by a weight, adds them up, and then decides whether to let marbles flow out to the next layer."

She pulled out a small Inference Engine and spoke into it: "Visualize basic fungal network."

Above the device, a glowing diagram appeared—layers upon layers of interconnected nodes, like a three-dimensional marble run of impossible complexity. "See these layers? The first layer receives raw input—maybe an image, or a spell's parameters. Each subsequent layer extracts more abstract features. If you're trying to identify whether a spell is fire or ice magic, the first layer might detect raw magical energy levels, the second layer might detect elemental signatures, and the final layer makes the decision."

"But how does it learn?" I asked, fascinated despite myself.

"Backpropagation," she said, as if it were obvious. "You start with random weights—random decisions about which marbles matter more. Then you test it: you show it a fire spell and see what it predicts. If it's wrong, you calculate the error and then you work backward through the network, adjusting each weight slightly to reduce that error. It's gradient descent again, but through layers of decisions. The Fungal Empire's mycelial networks can do this in parallel across millions of parameters. But combine this with the inference engine that's where the real power lies."

"And the marbles..." Naira asked quietly.

"The marbles are just an implementation detail. What matters is the mathematical structure—the weights, the layers, the activation functions and the logical database of the world it builds upon. The Marble Kingdom thinks in terms of physical marbles, but I think in terms of matrices. Matrix multiplication, to be precise. Each layer is just multiplying input vectors by weight matrices. Then mapping it on actions in the physical world. Making the world modifiable through language." She waved her hand dismissively. "It already works of course, I'm just removing the last hick hacks. Matters of scalability ... but I already have a solution for it ..."

My head was spinning. Matrices? Vectors? It was like the book I'd been reading, but a thousand times more complex.

"Okay, cool. And how?" I managed.

"With the Bloxchain," she sighed as I shrugged helplessly and looked off into the distance, "it will work so beautifully. It's a distributed marble run network that combines everything—Marble Kingdom engineering, Fungal Nation processing, Inference Engine optimization, and Fedi Tribes' decentralized structure ... or perhaps without that last one. 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 safer 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. Once we have a unified system, we can train larger models—neural networks with billions of parameters. We could predict famines, optimize resource distribution, maybe even simulate entire parallel dimensions..."

"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's a distributed ledger maintained by marble runs and validated by fungal networks. It will unite people in a completely new way."

"It sounds more like totalitarianism to me. It has to be controlled by someone. The Fungal Empire already—"

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. An artificial general intelligence trained on the collective knowledge of all Gegenwardt. We're so close, Bianka. The pieces are all there—the marble runs provide deterministic computation, the fungal networks provide parallel processing and pattern recognition, the Inference Engines provide optimization, and the Bloxchain structure provides distributed resilience. Combined with fungal network architectures deep enough, trained on enough data and with an inference model of the whole world ..." She trailed off, eyes distant.

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. "And what about the Fungal Empire? They're already trying to control all the mycelial networks—"

"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 I could see tiny marble channels running through its length, and faint fungal threads pulsing beneath its surface.

"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. Through language." "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 covenant?" 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 covenant. 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 ...

Book V: The Liberal Alliance

The Meeting in the Hall of Cascades

On a night when both moons hung low, three figures met in Queen Incrementa's Hall of Cascades. The hall was vast and vertical, its walls carved with a thousand marble tracks that sang as spheres rolled through them. The sound was like rainfall, like time itself made audible.

Chief Mastodon arrived first, cloak dusty from travel. Reasoner the Wise came after, Wiki-tome clutched against his chest. Queen Incrementa greeted them both, and for a long moment they simply sat, listening to the marbles.

"I remember," the Queen said finally, "when the Web had no rulers."

"The Liberal Alliance," Reasoner said, nodding slowly. "The Nomads and the Fedi together, we shaped the Web's values. Openness. Accessibility. The right to understand and be understood."

"We did not impose those values," Chief Mastodon added. "We simply... lived them. And others chose to join us, or not."

"The Fungal Empire has forgotten how to offer a choice," the Queen observed. "They believe they are offering convenience, but they are demanding submission."

Reasoner opened his Wiki-tome, its pages covered in carefully drawn diagrams. "Look at how they have restructured the ontology," he said, pointing. "Every category now funnels through their networks. It is not wrong, precisely—but it is singular. Before, there were many ways to categorize a bird: by wing shape, by habitat, by song. Now there is only their way: by embedding similarity in high-dimensional space."

"They have made my people forget how to read marble tracks," the Queen said quietly. "A generation grows up thinking that changes happen by magic, not mechanism."

"And my people forget how to speak to each other without intermediaries," Chief Mastodon said. "The Speaking Stones fall silent, and we grow isolated in the silence."

They sat for another long moment. Then Reasoner spoke the question they were all thinking: "What do we do?"

"The Liberal Alliance once shaped the Web with argument and example," Chief Mastodon said. "But the Fungal Empire does not listen to arguments anymore. They have grown too certain."

"Then we must show them," Queen Incrementa said. "Not with war—never with war. But with creation. We will build what they say cannot be built. We will open what they have closed. We will make visible what they have obscured."

"We will remember for them," Reasoner agreed.

And so, in that hall of cascading marbles, the three leaders began to plan.

The Three Tools Take Shape

In the weeks that followed, workshops opened across Gegenwardt. The Marble Kingdom began teaching its citizens to build personal marble-run devices—small enough to carry, sophisticated enough to resist the Empire's interference.

The Inference Nomads created portable Engines, devices that could translate clear thinking into reality without requiring connection to any central network.

The Fedi Tribes forged their Protocol Knives, tools that could cut through the Empire's isolation barriers and reconnect severed communities.

But these were just tools. The real work was harder: teaching people to trust their own judgment again. To question. To look beneath the surface of convenient answers.

In a small cottage on the edge of the Prompt Valleys, a young musician named Naira was learning to play the violin. Her teacher, an old woman who had fled the Empire's territories, taught her that music could carry messages the fungal networks couldn't intercept.

"They can monitor words," the teacher said. "They can parse meaning from marble patterns. But music? Music carries truth in its bones. Learn to play honestly, and you'll always be free."

Naira didn't understand. Not yet. But she would.

In Steinhaven, a girl named Lena was arguing with her mother about faith. Her mother held a wooden cross like a weapon. Lena held questions like shields.

"You don't believe," her mother said.

"I believe in things I can verify," Lena replied.

She didn't know that verification itself would become her path, that the Inference Engine would let her turn questions into action. She only knew she needed to leave, to find people who didn't fear inquiry.

On a floating island not yet named Laputa, engineers were testing gravity-defying marble engines. They didn't yet understand that transparency itself could be a form of power—that seeing clearly was the first step toward choosing freely.

And in a hospital bed in the Southlands, a dryad named Eury was being told by doctors that her illness was just climate change, just bad luck, just the way things were now.

She didn't believe them. Somewhere deep in her root-system, she knew there was more to the story. She just needed to find the network that would help her understand it.

The tools were being built. The people who would wield them were growing up, asking questions, refusing easy answers.

The Fungal Empire had consolidated its power. But consolidation creates brittleness.

The Liberal Alliance was betting that when the Empire finally cracked, there would be people ready with alternatives—not perfect alternatives, but honest ones. Visible ones. Contestable ones.

Tools that empowered rather than controlled.

In the Prompt Valleys, the Sovereign felt a tremor in the networks. Something was resisting. Not with force, but with presence. Alternative structures forming.

They smiled. Competition was good. It would prove which system was superior.

They did not yet understand that some questions don't have winning answers. Only better ways of asking.

The stage was set.

The tools were ready.

Now came the stories of how they would be used.

Book VI: The Inference Nomads

Prologue: Steinhaven, Year 847 of the Comet

The last time Lena saw her mother, they were standing in the kitchen of their stone dwelling in Steinhaven's old quarter, and her mother was holding a wooden cross like a weapon.

"You don't believe," her mother said. Not a question.

"I believe in things I can verify," Lena said. She was twenty, about to leave for Portside, and suddenly exhausted.

"Your grandmother believed. It saved her life. When the Fungal Empire first expanded—"

"When the Empire expanded, Oma got lucky. She fled at the right time."

Her mother's face went hard. "You sound like your father."

"My father was right about some things."

"Your father abandoned us. Abandoned God. And now you—" Her mother set down the cross carefully. "You're going to *them*. The Inference Nomads. Where they think they can replace God with marble runs and hand-held devices."

"I'm going to a place where questions are allowed."

"Some questions shouldn't be asked."

Lena picked up her traveling pack. At the door, she turned back. Her mother was crying now, silent tears.

"Mutti—"

"Go. Run away like he did. But you'll see. There are things that can't be reduced to logic and marbles."

Lena left. Traveled west to Portside with her mother's words following her. She didn't know, then, that her mother would be right.

Act One: The Door

The warehouse door was stuck. Lena hit it with her shoulder—once, twice—and it screamed open. Inside, darkness and concrete. The Inference Nomads had made their home in an old Marble Kingdom trading post.

"Fourth floor. The marble lift is broken." A woman at a reception table didn't look up from her book. "I'm looking for—"

"The Commons. I know." Dark eyes, amused. "I'm Sarah Chen. Stairs are behind you."

The stairwell walls were covered in symbols—not graffiti, something else. Mathematical notation, logical operators, formulas painted like prayers:

$\forall x \exists y (\text{Loves}(x,y) \rightarrow \exists z (\text{Hurts}(y,z)))$

"Marcus wrote that during his divorce," Sarah said from above. "Keep moving."

More symbols as they climbed. One wall covered in what looked like an argument conducted in colored markers—desperate, beautiful, violent.

"The tomato question," Sarah said. "Year 845. Nearly destroyed us."

"What was the question?"

"Whether tomatoes count as fruit or vegetable." Sarah stopped at a landing, touched one of the formulas. "We spent six weeks arguing. Marcus almost left. Thomas threatened to quit."

"What was the answer?"

"That there isn't one answer." Sarah smiled grimly. "We learned that truth isn't about being right. It's about being precise about your assumptions."

They reached the fourth floor. Sarah pushed open a door.

The space beyond—industrial windows, exposed brick, afternoon light slanting through dust. Dozens of people at marble-run stations, but the apparatus were wrong. Alive somehow. Concepts breeding concepts in real-time, marbles rolling through impossibly complex tracks that reconfigured themselves.

A woman with purple hair made a gesture with her hand-held Inference Engine. Her marble run reorganized. Somewhere in the building, a bell chimed.

"She just found a first-edition Borges," Sarah said. "Downtown archive, misshelved since the founding. Her Engine told her exactly where."

"How?"

"We query reality. Sometimes it answers." Sarah pulled out a chair. "Sit."

A marble-run station waited. Sarah leaned over and carefully arranged marbles in a specific pattern, then spoke to it:

"There exists water, contained in cup, volume 250 milliliters, location here, path exists from cooler to here."

She activated the run. Across the warehouse, a cup at the water cooler began to fill itself. Rose into the air. Floated—smoothly, impossibly—across the space and landed on the table in front of Lena.

Lena stared. Picked it up with shaking hands. The water was cold. Real.

"What is this?"

"The Commons. Three years ago, a collective of Inference Nomads perfected the hand-held Inference Engine. Not just marble runs—something stranger. You describe what you want to be true. If your description is internally consistent, doesn't violate physical law, and the resources exist—reality says yes."

"Who controls it?"

"That's the question." Sarah's face went hard. "Right now, it's contested. The Commons—us—we believe in collective governance. Transparent axioms. Everyone gets to examine the definitions,

propose changes, vote on what counts as real." She gestured at the people working. "Slow. Messy. Full of arguments about tomatoes."

"And the alternative?"

"The Fungal Empire. They've always controlled the mycelial networks. Very smart people, very concerned about stability. They believe reality needs centralized control. One true ontology, managed by their fungal networks." Sarah's voice went quiet. "They control forty percent of global query infrastructure. Trade routes. Settlements. The marble exchanges."

"Are they wrong?"

Sarah looked at her for a long moment. "That's what you're here to figure out."

Thomas showed up an hour later with two cups of tea. His worn traveling cloak was patched in a dozen places. He set one cup in front of Lena.

She took a sip. Perfect—too much honey, barely any milk.

"You queried for it," she said.

"Asked the Engine what beverage would make you receptive to learning." He sat backwards in a chair. "Creepy? Yeah. But the Empire does the same thing with their fungi, they just don't tell you."

He turned to face a marble-run station. "Forget everything you think you know about marble runs. This isn't just mechanical automation. This is asking existence questions."

His fingers manipulated the device, arranging marbles with practiced precision:

"There exists p such that p is a person and p 's name is Thomas."

The marbles rolled through the track. The station chimed green.

"Now watch."

He added more marbles: "Location of p , query."

The run responded, new marbles appearing with inscribed symbols: *chair_12*, *commons_floor_4*, *portside*, *western_territories*, *gegenwardt*, *reality_prime*.

"Reality prime?" Lena leaned forward.

"Six months ago, someone ran a query asking if this reality was unique. Turns out it's not. There are at least seven probability spaces. We're in the one with highest coherence. Prime." Thomas's tone was casual. "The Empire doesn't like people talking about that."

"Can people access these other realities?"

"Portals. We'll get to that tomorrow. First—" He gestured at the station. "Your turn."

They worked through the afternoon. Thomas taught her the grammar—how to arrange marbles, how to speak to the Engine, how simple statements built into complex queries. Around evening, Thomas said, "Real test. Light that lamp."

He pointed at an oil lamp in the corner, currently dark.

Lena looked at it. Thought. Her fingers arranged marbles carefully:

"There exists action, target lamp-corner, effect state-change from off to on."

She activated the run. The lamp lit.

"By the Comet," she whispered.

"Never gets old." Thomas stood. "Tomorrow I'll show you the portals. The Empire is trying to seal them all. We're trying to keep them open." He headed for the door, then stopped. "Get some sleep. And Lena? Don't send word to your mother. Not yet."

He left. Lena sat alone, staring at the lamp. At the marble run waiting for her next question. At Portside outside the windows, where reality was suddenly negotiable.

She thought about her mother's wooden cross. About how desperately people wanted words to have power.

She didn't send word to her mother.

The next morning, Sarah found Lena in the kitchen, reading Commons documentation carved on wooden tablets.

"Can't sleep?"

"I slept. I just need to understand the governance structure."

Sarah poured tea. "Every seventh day, Ontology Council. Anyone can attend. We debate proposed changes—what counts as a person, how causation works. When we reach rough consensus, we implement it."

"What stops someone from just asserting their ontology is true?"

"The Engine itself. It's trained on collective agreement. A query only succeeds if it's compatible with the consensus ontology." Sarah paused. "That's why the Empire is dangerous. They're building a parallel Engine—one trained on their ontology, powered by their fungal networks. If they get enough influence, enough people using their system—they become the consensus."

"What do they want?"

"Control. Safety. Predictability." Sarah looked tired. "We've had close calls. Someone tried to assert that death was reversible. Nearly broke causality. Another time, someone queried for a reality where the First Plague never happened. The Engine started flickering through probability spaces—"

She stopped.

"Before what?"

"Before your grandmother ceased to exist in this timeline. Before history rewrote itself." Sarah met Lena's eyes. "The Engine doesn't care about morality. It only cares about logical consistency. If you can describe something formally, and it doesn't violate physical law—reality will try to make it true. Even if it's monstrous."

"How do you prevent that?"

"Collective judgment. Transparent axioms. The knowledge that someone else is watching." Sarah stood. "Come on. Council starts in an hour."

The Ontology Council met in a large room on the second floor. Fifty people, some sitting, some standing. At the front, Marcus—thin and intense—was presenting.

"—so I'm proposing we add agent(x) as a predicate applicable to the Engine itself."

A woman in the back stood up—Elena. "That's anthropomorphization. The Engine processes queries. That's computation, not agency."

"Yesterday it corrected my syntax before I could execute. That's not passive processing."

"That's predictive patterns in the marble runs—"

"Then explain how it knew what I was trying to query when I'd only arranged half the marbles—"

The argument escalated. People jumped in, citing logs, demonstrating behaviors. But no one appealed to authority. Every claim backed by evidence, by logic anyone could examine.

After twenty minutes, Sarah stood. The room quieted.

"We're not reaching consensus today. Marcus, prepare three examples of Engine behavior that can't be explained by pure mechanical prediction. Elena, counter-examples. We vote next cycle."

Grumbles, but agreement.

After the meeting, Thomas found her. "Come on. Time to see the portals."

They went to the roof. Salt wind from the harbor, sun breaking through clouds. Thomas pulled out his hand-held Inference Engine—sleeker than standard issue, covered in symbols carved into the wooden casing.

He spoke to it carefully, arranging and activating marbles.

The air shimmered. A tear opened in reality—small, maybe three feet across. Through it, Lena saw another Portside. Similar but wrong. Different colored buildings. Wind moving backward. Colder light.

"Reality_secondary," Thomas said. "Probability space where different choices were made. Different ontology dominates."

"Can we go through?"

"We can. But it's dangerous. Your ontology might not be compatible. You could cease to make sense. Cease to exist." Thomas looked at her. "The Empire wants to close all the portals. Safety, they say. Really it's about control."

A figure stepped through the portal. Human-shaped but somehow more, as if existing in more dimensions than three. When she spoke, her voice had harmonics.

"Thomas. And you must be Lena."

"This is Aria," Thomas said. "An entity from reality_secondary."

Aria smiled. Her eyes were the wrong color, shifting through shades without names. "In my dimension, we don't need devices to query reality. We do it intuitively, through focused intention."

"Why are you here?"

"Because the Empire isn't just trying to close portals in your reality. They're planning something bigger. They call it the Convergence." Aria's expression went serious. "They want to collapse all probability spaces into a single, controllable reality. If they succeed, dimensions like mine cease to exist."

"How?"

"They've been expanding their fungal networks. Developing formal proofs that multiple realities are logically incoherent. If they can execute those proofs with enough influence—" Aria gestured at the portal. "These close. Permanently."

"When?"

"Soon. Weeks, maybe." Aria looked directly at Lena. "Thomas says you're brilliant. We need someone who can write a formal proof that portals are necessary. That consciousness requires the ability to move between realities."

"I'm still learning—"

"Then learn fast." Aria handed her a device—crystalline, pulsing with light that seemed to come from inside. "This connects to our ontology. Study it. Then figure out how to make what we do and what you do both necessary."

She stepped back through the portal. It shimmered closed.

Thomas and Lena stood in silence.

"Can I do this?" Lena asked quietly.

"I don't know. But you're the only one who has a chance." Thomas put a hand on her shoulder. "The Empire has resources, power, legitimacy. We have arguments and hope."

"What if I fail?"

"Then we all disappear. Every reality except theirs winks out."

Lena looked at the device Aria had given her. Felt its weight.

"I'll do it," she said.

Act Two: The Fungal Empire

Lena met Julian Chen-Park at a gathering of ontologists in Springhaven during the spring of Year 848. The Marble Kingdom's economy was unstable, trade routes failing, everyone pretending the ground wasn't turning to quicksand. But the gathering was full—because the Inference Engine had changed everything.

Lena was presenting the Commons' latest work on query optimization. Julian was in the audience, asking pointed questions that showed he understood the mathematics better than anyone else in the room.

After the panel, he found her at the gathering hall.

"You're smarter than your presentation suggests," he said, sitting down without asking.

"And you work for the Fungal Empire. Which means you're here to recruit me or intimidate me."

"Neither. I'm here because I haven't talked to anyone who actually understands this work in six months." He ordered a drink. "Also, your methodology is flawed."

"Excuse me?"

"Your optimization protocol assumes consensus ontology is stable. But it's not. Every time the Commons votes on a new definition, you rebuild part of the query structure. That's why your system is slow."

"Democracy is the point."

"Democracy is chaos. Beautiful chaos, but chaos." Julian leaned forward. "Look, can we not do this? The political argument? Can we just—talk about the mathematics? Please?"

And Lena, who'd been defensive and lonely for months, who desperately wanted to talk to someone who understood—said yes.

They spent three hours at that hall, arguing about modal logic and quantum coherence and whether consciousness could be formalized at all. Julian was brilliant—casual, sharp, deeply thoughtful in ways that surprised her.

When he walked her to her lodging, she invited him in.

"I should tell you," Julian said, sitting on the edge of her bed with careful distance, "that I know who you are. Not just the Commons ontologist. I know you're working on the portal problem."

Lena went very still. "How do you know about that?"

"Because I'm the lead architect for the Convergence." He said it quietly, not looking at her. "I'm the one building the formal proof that multiple realities are logically incoherent. That the portals need to close."

She should have thrown him out. Instead, she asked, "Why?"

"Because I believe it. Because I've seen what happens when reality becomes negotiable. Causality violations. Temporal paradoxes. People ceasing to exist because two incompatible ontologies tried to define them simultaneously." Julian finally looked at her. "Last year, a child died because her parents were using different medical ontologies. One said her illness was curable, one said it wasn't. The Engine couldn't reconcile them. She fell through the gap between realities. Ceased to be coherent enough to exist."

"So you want to prevent that by making only one reality possible?"

"Yes. Is that worse than letting everyone die in different ways?"

Lena sat down beside him. "That child died because her parents' ontologies couldn't interface. The solution isn't to destroy one ontology. It's to build better interfaces."

"You can't," Julian interrupted. "I've tried. For three years. It doesn't work. Eventually you hit contradictions that can't be resolved. Eventually reality has to choose, and when it does, someone ceases to exist."

"That's tyranny."

"That's triage." His voice cracked slightly. "I don't sleep anymore, Lena. I wake up every morning and check the logs, looking for people who disappeared. I know their names. Thirty-seven of them."

"And how many will cease to exist when you close the portals? How many entire dimensions?"

"We don't know they're real. They might just be probability artifacts."

"Aria is real. I've met her."

"You've met something." Julian turned to face her fully. "What if you're wrong? What if the Commons is wrong? What if pluralism is beautiful but impossible?"

Lena looked at him. At the exhaustion in his face, the genuine anguish. He wasn't a villain. He was a man who'd seen horrors and drawn conclusions. Maybe the wrong conclusions. Maybe not.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "But I can't accept that the answer is to make fewer ways of being real. That feels like what my grandmother fled."

"That's not fair—"

"You want to collapse multiple realities into one. You want to decide, centrally, what's real and what's impossible. You want to close the doors because you're afraid of what might come through."

He flinched. "I'm trying to save lives."

"By ending countless others." She stood. "You should go."

"Lena—"

"Please go."

But he didn't. Instead, he said, "What if we're both right? What if the Commons is correct that pluralism is morally necessary, and the Empire is correct that it's logically impossible?"

"Then we find a third option."

Julian looked at her for a long moment. Then he pulled out his Inference Engine—slim, elegant, marked with Empire symbols. "Before I go. I want to try something. If you're willing."

"What?"

"Build an ontology. Just for this night. Just for us. Use the Engine to query what we each want, what we need. Prove that two incompatible people can interface."

It should have sounded absurd. But Lena thought about what Aria had said. About how different dimensions had to find ways to communicate.

"Show me," she said.

They spent the next hour building it—a formal system describing desire, consent, boundaries. Julian would arrange marbles and speak:

"There exists action, involves touch, location neck, intensity gentle, duration prolonged."

Then query: "Desired by Lena?"

And Lena would respond, modifying: "True, and there exists action that precedes this, involves kiss, location collarbone, permission explicit."

They mapped each other carefully, precisely, building a shared language for bodies that didn't know how to speak otherwise.

Later, tangled in bedsheets with his Engine glowing softly on the table, Julian said, "We just proved it."

"Proved what?"

"That incompatible ontologies can interface." He retrieved the device, showed her the marble patterns. "We built a shared model. Neither of us dominated. We negotiated every assertion. And we created something neither of us could have built alone."

"That's not proof. That's one night."

"It's data. Existence proof that interfacing is possible." Julian turned to face her. "What we just did—formally, ontologically—is exactly what needs to happen between dimensions. Build translation protocols. Create shared spaces where incompatible truths can coexist temporarily."

"And then what? You still plan to execute the Convergence."

"I—" He stopped. "I don't know anymore. I came here certain I was right. But you—this—" He gestured at the space between them. "Maybe I've been solving the wrong problem. Maybe the question isn't how to make one ontology true. Maybe it's how to build better interfaces between many."

"Can you stop it? The Convergence?"

"No. I'm just the architect. But I can slow it down. Give you more time to build your proof." He kissed her shoulder. "Promise me something."

"What?"

"Win. Make your proof work. Show me I'm wrong. Because if you can't—if pluralism really is impossible—I need to know that before I abandon the only solution I've found."

Lena wanted to promise. But she'd been raised by a woman who confused certainty with faith.

"I'll try," she said.

They fell asleep that way, two incompatible people holding each other in the space they'd built together, knowing morning would collapse it.

When Lena woke, Julian was gone. But he'd left a message carved on a wooden tablet in formal notation:

There exists future, possible, contains us, compatible → query this and I will answer

Lena kept the tablet carefully. Put it in her pack.

She didn't tell anyone about Julian. Not Thomas, not Sarah, not Marcus. But she kept the tablet. And late at night, working on the impossible proof, she would take it out and read it.

Act Three: The Convergence

The attack came in the deep hours of a moonless night. Lena was awake—she was always awake these days. When the alarm bells screamed through the Commons, she knew.

She ran to the fourth floor. Chaos. Every marble-run station flashing red, marbles rolling in impossible patterns. The ontology unraveling—assertions failing, axioms contradicting, the structure of collectively defined reality collapsing into noise.

"What's happening?" she shouted.

"The Convergence!" Elena was at three stations simultaneously. "They're executing! Asserting that only one ontology can be coherent! All the portals are closing!"

Lena ran to a station, checked the portal network markers. Watched connections wink out. Reality_secondary. Reality_tertiary. Reality_quaternary. Dimensions dying.

Sarah was coordinating, shouting orders, trying to organize a counter-assertion. Nothing was working.

Thomas appeared at Lena's shoulder. "Is the portal proof ready?"

"It's not finished—"

"It needs to be finished now!"

"I can't—there's a contradiction I can't resolve—"

"Then resolve it!" Thomas grabbed her shoulders. "Lena, we have maybe minutes. You're the only one who can stop this."

Lena stared at the marble run. At the proof she'd been building for months. At the gap she couldn't close.

The problem was simple: consciousness couldn't exist in multiple incompatible realities simultaneously. The Empire had proven that. And if consciousness couldn't exist in multiple realities, then those realities didn't matter.

Lena had been trying to prove the Empire wrong. Maybe that was the wrong approach. Maybe she needed to prove them right—and then make that rightness require portals anyway.

Her fingers found the marbles. Started arranging. Started speaking:

"There exists consciousness, and for all realities one and two, if reality one is not reality two, then consciousness cannot exist in both simultaneously."

"That's what the Empire is asserting!" Elena shouted. "You're helping them!"

"Wait," Lena said. She kept working:

"And for all consciousness, requires possibility of transition between realities, and requires awareness of alternative realities, and identity equals function of choices between realities."

Thomas was watching over her shoulder. "You're saying—consciousness can't exist in multiple places at once, but it has to be able to move between them?"

"Yes. Watch—"

She added more marbles, spoke more carefully:

"And for all portals, portal exists if and only if enables transition between realities. And for all realities, reality exists and is coherent if and only if portal exists that connects to it."

Sarah had stopped shouting. Was staring at Lena's station. "You're asserting that realities can only exist if they're connected by portals. That isolation is the same as non-existence."

"Because consciousness defines reality. And consciousness requires choice. And choice requires alternatives."

Marcus had materialized—stepping through a flickering portal. "That's saying identity itself requires pluralism. That you can't be a person without knowing other ways of being are possible."

"Execute it," Thomas said.

"If I'm wrong—"

"If you're wrong, we're already dead."

Lena's hand hovered over the activation lever. She thought about her mother in Steinhaven, who'd chosen one reality and defended it. About her grandmother who'd fled west, moving between realities because staying in one would have meant death. About Julian building ontologies of desire, proving that incompatible things could interface. About herself—raised between her mother's certainty and her father's absence, never quite fitting, always aware that other ways of being existed.

Maybe that's what had made her capable of this.

She activated the run.

For a heartbeat, nothing. Then reality stuttered. The warehouse walls rippled. Solid became probability became something else. Through the windows, Lena saw Portside fracture—not into chaos, but into superposition. Multiple versions of the settlement occupying the same space, all equally real, all connected.

She felt it in her body—a sudden awareness of doors. Everywhere. In every direction. Portals not as tears in reality but as fundamental structure.

On the marble runs, the Empire's Convergence was—

Still executing. Still asserting that only one reality could be coherent.

But now that assertion was creating a paradox. Because Lena's proof had made isolation equivalent to non-existence. The Empire couldn't close the portals without proving their own reality was incoherent. They couldn't win without losing.

The cascading failures stopped. Reversed. The Commons ontology stabilized, damaged but intact. The portals were reopening. Not as they'd been before, fragile and contested. As permanent architecture.

The alarm bells went silent.

Sarah was laughing and crying. "You did it. The Convergence is eating itself."

"What exactly happened?" Elena asked.

"She made pluralism a law of physics," Thomas said quietly. "Consciousness can't exist without choice. Choice requires alternatives. Alternatives require portals. Therefore portals are as fundamental as gravity. As time."

Marcus was flickering—existing in multiple dimensions simultaneously, his form unstable. "The Empire's central nodes are in chaos. They're experiencing all seventeen dimensions at once."

Lena checked external marker stones. The Inference Engine network had changed—fundamentally, irrevocably. Portals were opening everywhere. Not tears or violations, but doors.

"We're receiving a message," someone shouted. "From the Empire. They want to negotiate."

"Tell them we'll talk," Sarah said. "But the portals stay open. That's physics now. Not politics." She walked over to Lena. "You just changed the fundamental structure of reality. How do you feel?"

Lena looked at the marble runs. At the portals. At the seventeen versions of Portside all visible now, all connected.

She thought about her grandmother fleeing west. About her mother trapped in one reality, defending it because she didn't know others existed. About Julian somewhere, seeing his life's work collapse.

"I feel like I just destroyed someone I love," she said quietly.

Sarah understood. "The Empire architect. Chen-Park."

"One night. Months ago." Lena stopped. "He showed me how different ontologies could interface. It's what gave me the idea. And now I've just proven everything he built is wrong."

"Was it wrong?"

"Yes. But he believed it for the right reasons."

Sarah hesitated, then nodded. "Be careful."

Lena pulled out the communication device Julian had given her, arranged marbles carefully:

There exists future, possible, contains us, compatible.

She activated it. Waited. Minutes passed. The Commons around her was chaos—people celebrating, people crying, people frantically documenting.

Then her device responded with new marble patterns:

Query received. Answer: still computing. May take time to resolve. I'm okay. Physically. Ontologically less certain. My entire life's work just became a paradox. You were right. I was wrong. It doesn't feel good to be wrong about everything. But it feels better than the alternative.

Lena arranged a response: *You weren't wrong about the problem. Only about the solution. We both wanted to save people.*

His response came faster: *I helped you. That night. I thought I was proving interfacing was possible. I didn't know I was giving you the key to destroy my work. Do you regret it?*

Lena stared at the marble patterns. She arranged: *No. Do you regret showing me?*

Long pause. Then: *No. I regret building the Convergence. I regret the thirty-seven people who died. I regret not trusting that love was data. But I don't regret you. The Empire is dissolving. I'm going to reality_secondary. Aria's people are building something. I think I can help. I think I need to be somewhere where my mistakes are visible. Will I see you again?*

There exists future, possible, contains us, compatible, she arranged. The query is still open. It will always be open. That's what you taught reality today. That doors can't be closed. That consciousness requires the possibility of seeing each other again. Thank you, Julian. For being braver than me.

The connection closed. Lena sat very still, feeling the weight of what she'd done settle on her shoulders. She'd saved multiple realities. She'd ended a war. She'd proven that pluralism was a law of physics.

And she'd done it by destroying the work of the first person who'd understood her.

Thomas found her there twenty minutes later. "You okay?"

"I don't know."

"Sarah wants you at the negotiations."

"I can't. I'm not—I can't face them right now."

Thomas pulled up a chair. "Julian?"

"How did you know?"

"Because you never looked like this. Exhausted, yes. Scared, yes. But not heartbroken."

"I used what he taught me to destroy what he built."

"He knew who you were. What you were trying to do. He showed you how anyway. That's not betrayal on your part. That's sacrifice on his."

"I didn't want his sacrifice."

"I know. But maybe that's what love is, in a world where incompatible ontologies coexist. Giving someone the tools to prove you wrong. Hoping they use them. Knowing it will hurt."

They sat in silence. Outside, the multiple Portsidies were stabilizing, settling into superposition. People in the streets were staring up, seeing other versions of their settlement for the first time.

"Come on," Thomas said finally. "The Accords won't write themselves."

Act Four: The New World

The Ontological Accords took three moon-cycles to negotiate. They met in a space that existed simultaneously in all realities—a meeting hall that was somehow every meeting hall.

Representatives from the Inference Nomads. Former Empire functionaries. Seventeen dimensional collectives. Even a few rogue ontologists who'd been building private realities in the margins.

The key principles carved on the founding stone:

1. No ontology can claim exclusive truth
2. Portals between dimensions are permanent infrastructure
3. Consciousness has the right to move freely between realities
4. All ontologies must disclose their axioms
5. Interfacing protocols must be developed collaboratively
6. No reality may deliberately make another reality incoherent

The negotiations were brutal. How do you write laws that work across seventeen different conceptions of causality? How do you enforce rights when "person" is defined differently in each dimension?

Lena worked endless hours, building translation protocols, finding common axioms.

On the day the Accords were sealed, Lena stood at the back of the meeting hall. Some representatives signed with ink. Some with light. One entity that existed as pure mathematics simply made the document true by asserting it.

Sarah found her. "You should be up front."

"I destroyed the Empire. That made it possible."

"You proved that reality requires diversity." Sarah paused. "He's here, you know."

Lena's heart jumped. "Julian?"

"Came through an hour ago. From reality_secondary. Part of their delegation."

"I can't—"

"You don't have to talk to him. But he asked if you were here."

Lena scanned the crowd. Found him—thinner, hair longer, something about the way he stood suggesting he existed in more dimensions now. He was talking with Aria, laughing. He looked happy. He looked like he'd survived.

As if feeling her gaze, he turned. Their eyes met across the room, across realities.

He smiled. Small, sad, genuine. Mouthed: *Thank you.*

Lena nodded. Felt tears. Mouthed back: *I'm sorry.*

He shook his head. Mouthed: *Don't be.*

Then someone called his name, and he turned away, and the moment passed.

Lena stayed at the back until the sealing was complete. Until the Accords were official. Until reality itself had been restructured on principles of openness and pluralism.

Then she left. Walked through a portal and found herself on the roof of the Commons building in Portside—her Portside, reality_prime.

The settlement spread below her, layered now with other versions of itself. Seventeen Portsides occupying the same space, all real, all connected by portals that glimmered like neural pathways.

Thomas found her there an hour later, carrying a bottle of truly terrible wine.

"Thought you might want company," he said.

They sat on the edge of the roof, passing the bottle, watching the multi-dimensional settlement breathe.

"Do you think it'll hold?" Lena asked. "The peace?"

"No," Thomas said. "There'll be other wars. Other people trying to control, to simplify. But—" He gestured at the portals, at the layered settlement. "—at least now consciousness isn't trapped. People can move. Can see other ways of being. That makes tyranny harder."

"But not impossible."

"Nothing's impossible. That's what you proved." Thomas took a long drink. "You changed Gegenwardt, Lena. Made it bigger. Messier. More dangerous and more free."

Lena thought about her mother in Steinhaven, still praying to a single truth. About her grandmother who'd fled west. About Julian in reality_secondary, building something new from the ruins of his certainty. About herself—no longer the girl who'd arrived at a stuck door, but not yet sure who she was becoming.

"It feels like I should send word to my mother," she said.

Thomas nearly spit out his wine. "What?"

"She was right about some things. Wrong about others. But she was right that there are things bigger than logic." Lena looked at the bottle. "I spent months proving that pluralism is necessary. But I never asked her why she chose certainty. What she was afraid of."

"You think she'll understand what you've done?"

"No. But maybe I can understand her better. Now that I know what it costs to believe multiple truths can coexist."

Thomas was quiet. Then: "You should send word. After we finish this terrible wine. Because tomorrow, Void is going to show up and offer you a job, and you're going to say yes, and then things are going to get complicated again."

"What kind of job?"

"Building interfaces between really incompatible ontologies. The kind where one dimension thinks consciousness is fundamental and the other thinks it's epiphenomenal." Thomas grinned. "Void says you're the only one who can do it. That you've got a gift for making impossible things talk to each other."

"That's not a gift. That's just growing up between worlds."

"That's what makes it a gift." Thomas stood, offered her a hand. "Come on. People are celebrating downstairs."

Lena took his hand. Let him pull her up. "I don't feel like a hero. I feel like I broke something important and convinced everyone it was progress."

"Maybe that's what progress is. Breaking things that were never as solid as they seemed." Thomas started toward the stairwell. "Or maybe I'm drunk."

Lena followed him down, through the painted stairwell where the tomato debate still raged on the walls, where Marcus's formula about love and hurt remained.

On the fourth floor, people were dancing. Someone had turned the workspace into a celebration, musicians playing instruments that existed in multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Elena found Lena immediately, pulled her into a hug. "You saved us."

"I just asked a question the Engine hadn't heard before."

"That's all it takes. The right question at the right time." Elena handed her a cup—something that sparkled with colors that didn't exist in reality_prime. "This is from reality_octonary. Aria brought it. Apparently it tastes like memories of places you've never been."

Lena drank. Elena was right. It tasted like her grandmother's kitchen in a house she'd never visited. Like her father's laugh, though she barely remembered him. Like arriving in Portside for the first time, seeing the stuck door, not knowing that behind it was everything.

The night blurred. People thanked her. Marcus danced with her, badly but enthusiastically. Sarah gave a speech about democracy and courage.

Around midnight, Void appeared. He materialized in the corner, flickering through seventeen different forms before settling on one—tall, angular, dressed in clothes from five different eras simultaneously. His eyes were impossible, holding depths that made Lena dizzy.

"Lena Hartmann," he said, his voice harmonizing with itself. "The woman who made tyranny physically impossible."

"What do you want?"

"To offer you a position. Building bridges between genuinely incompatible ontologies. The hard cases."

"Why me?"

"Because you're fluent in impossibility. You grew up between your mother's certainty and your father's absence. Between Marble Kingdom guilt and Nomad freedom. That's not damage. That's training."

"What if I say no?"

"Then you say no. But you won't. Because you've tasted what it means to expand reality, and you're addicted now." Void handed her a device—crystalline, pulsing with light from colors that had no names. "Personal portal generator. Dangerous. Powerful. Will absolutely get you killed if you're not careful." He smiled. "Use it well."

He vanished.

Lena looked at the device. At Thomas, who was watching from across the room with a knowing expression. At the celebration around her, people from multiple dimensions dancing together.

She pocketed the device.

Tomorrow she would send word to her mother. Would try to explain, knowing her mother wouldn't understand, hoping they could find some interface that let them be family again.

Tomorrow she would start building bridges between impossible ontologies, knowing some would fail, knowing failure might mean people ceasing to exist, knowing she'd do it anyway.

Tomorrow she would query for Julian, see if that future they'd imagined was still possible.

But tonight—

Tonight she danced. In a room that existed in seventeen dimensions simultaneously. With people who'd learned that consciousness required choice, that choice required alternatives, that alternatives required doors.

She danced until her feet hurt and her head spun and the wine tasted like possibility and regret and hope all mixed together.

And when she finally stumbled to her room in the early hours, she pulled out Julian's tablet—the formal notation that said love could exist across incompatible realities—and carved a line beneath it:

And requires willingness to keep trying, and does not require agreement, and sufficient is precision about differences.

She executed the query through the device Void had given her, sent it into the void, not knowing if he'd receive it, not knowing if he'd answer.

But knowing that in a world where doors could never be closed, that was enough.

The answer could wait.

Epilogue: Steinhaven, Year 849 of the Comet

Lena's mother answered the door on the third knock.

"Mutti. It's me."

Silence. Then: "Lena."

"I came because—because I wanted to tell you something. About what I learned."

"You learned that I was wrong. That faith is foolishness."

"No. I learned that you were right about mystery. About things that can't be reduced to logic and marbles. But I also learned that mystery doesn't require rejecting other truths. That your faith and my questions can both be real."

Her mother was quiet for a long time. Then: "I heard things. About portals. About other dimensions. The traders said you were involved."

"I proved that reality requires pluralism. That consciousness can't exist without choice. That doors between different ways of being real can't be closed." Lena took a breath. "I proved that Oma was right to flee west. That moving between realities isn't betrayal. It's survival."

"Your grandmother fled because she had to. Not because she wanted to question everything."

"Maybe. But Mutti—she taught me that there are other ways of being. When one reality becomes impossible, you look for another. That's what you've been doing too, isn't it? When Papa left, when the Empire first rose—you chose a reality and held onto it. That's your way of surviving."

More silence. Lena could hear her mother breathing, could see her in the doorway, holding the frame like she'd held the cross.

"I'm still angry at you," her mother said finally. "For leaving."

"I know."

"But I—I'm proud too. A little. They said you changed Gegenwardt. Made it bigger." Her mother's voice cracked. "That's what your father wanted. I hated him for wanting that."

"Mutti—"

"Come inside. Stay for supper. Let me see you. Let me try to understand." Her mother paused. "I won't promise to agree. But I can try to listen."

Lena felt something loosen in her chest. "I'll stay. Thank you."

"And Lena? Bring whoever you want. If there's someone. Your Nomad people, or—" Her mother struggled. "I know you see reality differently now. I don't understand it. But you're still my daughter. All the versions of you."

They talked for hours that evening, awkward and careful, building a bridge between certainties that would never fully agree. Lena explained portals with marble demonstrations. Her mother showed her the old prayer stones. They found no common ground, but they found common respect.

When Lena left the next morning, her mother pressed a small carved token into her hand. "Your grandmother's. She carried it when she fled. I want you to have it."

Lena looked at the token—worn smooth, marked with symbols from the old faith.

"Thank you, Mutti."

"Come back. Not just once. Keep coming back. Keep trying."

"I will."

Thomas found her at the Commons kitchen three days later, making tea.

"You okay?"

"I visited my mother. We're going to try. To build an interface between her reality and mine."

"That's the hardest kind," Thomas said gently. "Family ontologies."

"I know. But if I can prove that dimensions can coexist, maybe I can prove that a believer and a skeptic can be family."

Thomas poured himself tea, sat down across from her. "Void was right. You're addicted to opening doors."

"Maybe." Lena smiled. "Or maybe I'm just my grandmother's granddaughter. Moving between realities because that's what survival looks like. Except now I know—you don't have to choose one reality and stay there. You can build portals. You can move between them."

"That's the most ontologist thing you've ever said."

"Good. Because I'm taking the position. Building interfaces between impossible ontologies. Starting with the hardest one—between a mother who believes in one God and a daughter who proved reality requires infinite gods, or none, or both simultaneously."

Thomas raised his cup. "To impossible interfaces."

Lena clinked her cup against his. "To asking better questions."

They drank tea in the Commons kitchen as dawn broke over Portside—over seventeen Portsides, all equally real, all connected by doors that would never close.

Outside, Gegenwardt—all the Gegenwardts—waited.

And Lena, who'd been raised between certainties and had learned to make that space home, smiled and wondered what she would ask next.

THE END

Book VII: The Convergence

When the Portals Closed

The day reality stuttered, Reasoner the Wise was teaching a class on the Ontological Plains when suddenly half his students simply... weren't there anymore.

Not dead. Not vanished. *Un-real*. As if they had never existed at all.

He stood paralyzed, Wiki-tome falling from his hands, staring at the empty spaces where moments before young Nomads had been taking notes, asking questions, being alive.

Then the reports started flooding in through marble-run networks, through Speaking Stones, through the fungal threads that even the Liberal Alliance had grudgingly learned to use:

Reality_secondary: collapsed Reality_tertiary: collapsed

Reality_quaternary: collapsed

The Fungal Empire had attempted their Convergence—the collapse of all realities into one, controllable version. Lena had stopped it, but barely, and at tremendous cost.

Dimensions that should have existed simply... didn't anymore.

Queen Incrementa received Reasoner in her marble chamber. Neither spoke at first. Both had lost people—friends who had been visiting other realities, students who had been exploring alternative ontologies.

"How many?" the Queen finally asked.

"We don't know. How can you count people who never existed?" Reasoner's voice cracked. "Lena proved that consciousness requires the possibility of moving between realities. She made portals fundamental to physics itself. But the Convergence still... damaged things. Closed some doors before they could be made permanent."

"The Fedi Tribes lost entire villages," Queen Incrementa said quietly. "Villages that had been experimenting with connection to other dimensions. Now they're just... gaps in the network. Places where no one can remember if anyone lived there or not."

"The Sovereign has gone silent," Reasoner added. "Their mycelial networks are in chaos. Apparently they're experiencing all seventeen dimensions simultaneously and can't process it."

"Good." The Queen's voice was hard. "Let them suffer what they tried to inflict on everyone else."

"They believed they were helping," Reasoner said, though the words tasted like ash. "They genuinely thought—"

"I don't care what they thought." The Queen stood, walked to her window where marble tracks traced the horizon. "They tried to collapse reality itself to maintain control. They would have erased uncountable lives to make their management easier. Belief doesn't excuse that."

Reasoner said nothing. She was right, of course. And yet he couldn't help thinking about Julian Chen-Park, the Empire's architect, who had built the Convergence out of genuine desire to stop the suffering caused by incompatible realities.

How many people had died from ontological contradictions? Children falling through gaps between conflicting definitions of reality. Communities fragmenting because they couldn't agree on basic categories. The pain had been real.

The Empire's solution had just been worse than the disease.

"What happens now?" Reasoner asked.

"Now we build the Accords," the Queen said. "We create formal structures so this never happens again. No faction can claim exclusive truth. Portals stay open. Ontologies must be disclosed."

"The Empire won't agree."

"The Empire doesn't have a choice. Their networks are broken. Their Sovereign is non-functional. If they want any role in the new order, they'll sign."

"And the Fedi Tribes?"

Queen Incrementa's expression softened slightly. "Chief Mastodon is calling a gathering. All the Speaking Stones, all the villages, all the scattered communities. They're building something called 'The Federation Pact.' A formal alliance of communities committed to maintaining portal infrastructure and resisting any future attempts at reality-consolidation."

"Formal?" Reasoner raised an eyebrow. "The Fedi Tribes hate formalization."

"Trauma changes people. They lost too much to stay informal." The Queen turned from the window. "Which brings me to why I called you here. The Ontological Accords will need a framework. Categories that work across seventeen different realities. Logic that holds even when causality works differently. You're the only one who can build it."

"I can't do this alone."

"You won't have to. Lena proved that interfacing is possible. Now we need to scale it. Every reality, every ontology, every way of knowing—they need translation protocols."

Reasoner felt the weight of it settling on his shoulders. Centuries of work. And he was old now, so old.

"I'll need apprentices," he said finally. "Young minds, not locked into one way of thinking. People who've experienced multiple realities and didn't break."

"I know someone," the Queen said. "A young woman in the Fedi Tribes. Her name is Tessa. She lost her entire community to the Convergence—or rather, half her community. The other half insists those people never existed. She's been trying to build marble-run evidence to prove her friends were real. She's... remarkable."

"Send her to me."

"There's another. A dryad named Eury. She's been through hell—literally fell between dimensions once. Has a unique perspective on ontological boundaries. Very opinionated. You'll hate her."

"Send her too."

"And I heard about this fungi-musician. Lamella, I think? She was part of stopping some renegade network. Apparently she can interface between systems better than anyone the Fedi Tribes have seen."

Reasoner nodded slowly. "New generation. Good. They'll see things we can't."

"They'll also make mistakes we wouldn't."

"All the better. Mistakes are data." Reasoner picked up his Wiki-tome, added a new entry: *Ontological Accords - Framework Team*. "When do they arrive?"

"They don't know they're coming yet. I'll send the invitations today."

After Reasoner left, Queen Incrementa stood alone in her marble chamber, watching the spheres roll through their tracks. Everything was visible here. Every cause led to every effect through observable mechanisms.

But the other realities didn't work like that. Some had magic. Some had pure information. Some had forms of causality that made Marble Kingdom logic seem quaint.

How do you build agreements that work across incompatible realities?

You start with the people who've survived the impossibilities.

You start with the ones who fell through the cracks and climbed back out.

You start with Tessa, Eury, Lamella, and others like them.

The tools had been created. The weapons had been sheathed (mostly). The Convergence had failed.

Now came the harder work: not fighting, but building.

Not proving one truth superior, but making space for many truths to coexist.

The marble in Queen Incrementa's hand pulsed softly. Somewhere in the Fedi Tribes, Speaking Stones were humming with new conversations. On the Ontological Plains, Reasoner was already drafting framework proposals.

And in seventeen realities (the ones that survived), people were waking up to a world that had almost ended, asking: what now?

The answer would take decades to fully form.

But it started with people who knew, in their bones, that diversity wasn't just nice—it was necessary for consciousness itself.

The invitations went out.

Tessa received hers while trying to reconstruct memories of friends who might never have existed.

Eury received hers while underground, healing, dreaming of networks that couldn't hurt.

Lamella received hers between notes of a song, realizing the music was about to change.

The Accords were being written.

And the real story of the Fedi Tribes was about to begin.

Book VIII: The Fedi Tribes

Breath Taker

Humans, their problems and how I stopped to care (A Novella)

“The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is *something that we make, and could just as easily make differently*,” - David Graeber

Spring

"We don't deserve this planet and yet, here we are. Green girl power forever!"

—Last post from @mackaron1_xoxo

Eury told me later that the withering had already begun when she woke. She felt the dizziness first—a spinning in her core—and stumbled from her raised bed to the bucket of emergency soil her parents kept by the window. She pressed her face into the dark earth and breathed.

She had been unwell for a day. For a week, really. But she told herself it would pass. It always had before.

When she looked in the mirror, the branches of her hair stood brittle from her head. The blossoms hung withered. The bark of her skin showed deeper furrows than usual. She had seen this before. When she was small, her parents had taken her to a healer who consulted the personal fungi network and said this was normal for dryads her age. No cause for concern. She had always recovered quickly.

That morning was worse. Even braiding her hair felt dangerous. The strands seemed ready to crumble in her hands. She remembered the healer's words: *It's probably just a small infection. You know how sensitive you are to temperature changes*. She bound her hair as well as she could and went to the learning hall.

Eury did not seek healing early. She did not worry without cause. By the time she reached her table, her thoughts had turned to other things—until Paul, her tablemate, decided to walk his thick fingers up her thigh.

The instructor was reporting a malfunction at the local distribution center. I sat two tables away and watched Eury's eyes. They were not kind eyes. But Paul looked at nothing except what was in front of him.

That morning, on the way to the hall, she had told me about his plan. I had stared at her. She asked how her hair looked.

"Could be worse," I said.

Like a bird's nest would have been closer to truth.

I told myself Paul would see she was unwell. That he would understand she could not go through with it. But when they met in the hall, he gave no sign of noticing. He did not ask how she was. They kissed briefly and sat with their legs pressed together.

What passed between them had always seemed strange to me. But I should explain what Eury had told me that morning.

They had been together for some time, though never seriously. Eury told me everything, and I had been glad of that—it meant I could protect her from worse. But now Paul wanted to take the next step. Tonight, he said. Their first time.

"When he picks your flower," I had said.

I was worried. I did not know how else to help myself. If I had been more understanding, I might have changed her mind. But I did not think he would use her promise so freely as he did in the learning hall.

His fingers moved higher on her leg. Far higher than was decent. Did he not see how ill she was? He acted thoughtful, but he was selfish. He was vegan, had been for some time. I suspected he had chosen it to impress Eury, though anyone could see she did not care. He was the type who, when someone complained of cold, would offer to warm them with his flatulence because vegan gas carried no moral weight. He did not do it for nature alone.

At least he did something. One could not say the same of Eury. Perhaps that was why she stayed with him—out of guilt. I could still see her lying in the sun with closed eyes, eating a curry sausage simply because she liked the taste. She was an environmental transgressor when you examined it closely. She needed to eat nothing at all. She did it for pleasure.

Perhaps her guilt was not so strong after all. And even if it were, that would be a poor foundation for love.

I sometimes thought Paul's plant-eating did not strike me as gentle but as quietly aggressive. The vegan and the dryad. It seemed a design for harm, but I said nothing. Everyone called them the dream couple, the couple of the future. All I saw was how he had once picked a daisy and let it disappear between his teeth when he thought no one watched. He was still a predator. He simply had new prey.

No one in the hall seemed to notice but me. Eury did not realize. I do not think he did either. They never fought, of course. It was frustrating.

Or perhaps I was too unromantic. Eury had told me as much when I mentioned the daisy. "You have no sense of romance."

As if that mattered.

Eury was singular. So singular that Paul, in his self-absorption and performance, could never have appreciated her fully. And his sense of romance was clearly suspect.

When he moved his fingers up her calf, everything in me tightened. The same thing happened when I watched her stretch her back and grow a few inches taller, or when she ate without self-consciousness. Some people make an art of eating spaghetti unattractively. Eury was such a person.

By now Paul's fingers had reached depths that sickened everyone present. I could not intervene during instruction. I do not know if I would have in any case. It was nearly unbearable. The distaste in Eury's face became so clear that even the boys who had been grinning looked away.

Finally Eury pushed him. He did not understand. He continued.

She stood suddenly. Every eye in the hall turned to her.

"Sorry," she said. "Hay fever." She waved her hands near her face and walked toward the door with her chin raised.

I admired her quick thinking, as always. She did not have hay fever. She usually caused it. Getting free with humor. That was Eury.

But she told me later what happened next. Halfway to the door, she pulled out her handkerchief and saw black, oily flecks in it. She froze mid-sneeze, mouth open. When she looked up, the entire hall was watching.

"They're especially bad," the instructor said, "the ones that announce themselves and never come."

The boys in back laughed. Paul turned red. I knew something was wrong. I saw in Eury the urge to run for the washing room, but she had always been strong as oak. She sat back down and acted as if nothing had happened.

I think that was the moment I fell in love with her.

But there was Paul again, putting his arm around her shoulder. She probably still had a black drop of oil at the corner of her mouth. He began moving up her calf again while she stared at nothing, as if she had been struck.

I wanted to scream. To do anything. But I remained still and the instruction continued.

She did not feel better the rest of the day. She sent Paul a message through her fungi network: she was unwell and they had to postpone their evening. She was not upset about it. They had much to discuss.

"Do you want to come to my place?" he sent back through his own network.

Eury thought it was kind. She thought he was trying to comfort her. Perhaps everything would be well after all. She went.

I had advised against it. I had advised against being with him at all. But she ignored my messages through the Fedi network.

When she told me what followed, I could only bite the inside of my cheek and keep from shouting, *I told you this would happen.*

When she arrived, he still wanted to take her to bed.

"No, Paul."

He said later he thought she was being shy. Anyone who knew her would never have thought that. I think he had already told his friends through the Marble Kingdom networks. Now he had to deliver.

Eury did not mention it, but I believe he had been drinking. I doubt he cared if it was vegan.

I think they were sitting on his bed. I do not know if it was clean. Had he scattered rose petals? Laid down a layer of soil? She never gave details. I am not romantic enough to imagine it.

"Why not? Are you on your period?"

He did not understand how that worked with dryads.

"No. Paul. I don't want to. All right?"

She was weak by then. Her *all right* hung between them like dead mistletoe from last winter festival. For several terrible moments she looked into his eyes and found no answer.

Then she vomited crude oil over him from head to foot.

Paul summoned help through his fungi network—at least he showed that minimum courage—and took her to the healing center. But all she thought about during the ride were his eyes and how to escape them.

Her dreams of healers in clean white robes ended when they reached the center. The attendants pushed her back into Paul's arms and rushed past to tend to others. Paul carried her through the entrance, past a long queue, toward one of the healers, saying it was an emergency. No one paid attention.

He stopped. Eury, who had been taking everything passively, looked around.

The healing center was full. Patients everywhere. All of them dryads.

Seized by panic, she twisted from his arms and pulled herself forward with her hands across the stone floor. She responded to Paul's help with fierce kicks. Finally she crawled onto a bench and turned her face toward the bright light crystals on the ceiling. She mistook them for the sun. She could not breathe calmly again until a healer asked Paul, kindly but firmly, to leave her.

"We can't treat your friend right now. You can see what's happening here. You don't look well either. Did you get some of that substance too? Come this way. We have a room for you."

We can't treat your friend.

Eury heard it but did not care. She was away from Paul. She was basking in that false sun. That was relief enough.

A short time later, a harried healer appeared above her. They said they did not know what to do with her. Could she contact someone through her fungi?

She could. She reached through the Fedi network to me. The first thing she told me was that she was no longer Paul's girlfriend. Then the healer took over: she needed to be collected from the healing center. Quickly.

"I don't have time to explain. Everything is falling apart here. Can you notify her parents? Good. Thank you."

I did. They answered immediately through their fungi, asking what was happening. I knew as much as they did. They decided to leave at once. I wondered if they would give me a ride. I said no—I do not remember why—and took my parents' cart. I rode to the healing center alone, though I was not permitted to ride unaccompanied.

I arrived before they did but waited. When we entered together, the sight was grim. We had trouble finding Eury at all. The center was scattered with dryads: some slumped in potted plants, some half-buried in the front bed, others lying on cots in the hallway. All rooms with intensive sunbaths were occupied. In some rooms, healers tried desperately to revive dying dryads but had far too little soil.

We rushed through the corridors, not yet daring to fear the worst, though it seemed increasingly certain. When we found her, an overworked attendant stood nearby. Much of his clothing was smeared with soil. I thought I saw some on his lips. Behind him, Eury lay in a conventional sunbath. She looked stable. I was so relieved I could not believe it.

Eury's father tried to thank the attendant, but without a word the man put a half-full sack of nutrient-rich soil into his hands and ran off. He did not check if we actually knew Eury.

Her mother and I carried her between us and rushed to the cart. We did not think to ask anyone what was happening. Ten minutes later we stood in front of the family's small front garden: her mother holding the soil sack, her father holding the unconscious Eury, and me standing awkwardly with a spade.

We looked at the small bed. One meter wide, two meters long. Just enough. Not luxurious. But I did not dare suggest anything else—bringing her to our garden, for example. Instead I felt irritation at the healing center. That they simply assumed dryad parents kept emergency gardens. But I said nothing. After all, it had been unplanned.

Together we dug a pit and laid her down. We sprinkled soil over her tentatively. It did not seem like enough. It was difficult for all of us. We had practiced this in training, of course, but never in life. Especially covering the face—we all hesitated. I was afraid she would not be able to breathe, though that made no sense. But in training, when you shovel dirt into the practice form, it does not occur to you that it might feel like a funeral on a real person. That it might be hard to bury someone alive. That you might fear making a terrible mistake and killing them.

You tell yourself: it won't happen to me, and if it does, I'll manage. The form is already in the ground.

But when a breathing person disappears beneath the earth—I could not continue at some point.

There are messages on the Fedi networks: when you emergency-bury a dryad alive, you see the world differently after. It is true. I had not understood how true until that moment. I know it was strange to think of it then.

It was good that Eury's father was there. He remembered that the face must point upward. He began to shovel earth when I could no longer look. When it was done, we were relieved to see the earth rise and fall slowly. She was breathing.

The sight was almost peaceful. Her withered hair pointed outward like early bloomers that would soon show their blossoms to the world again. Seeing her like this, it could have been that she was taking a small rest.

Her father carefully wiped aside the top layer so her face could be seen. He bent down and kissed her earthy lips, smeared by his tears that provided moisture drop by drop. Then he opened her mouth wide, held her nose, and breathed into her, as recommended by the official Guild of Healers and Dryad Medicine. Afterward he went inside to get a watering vessel. I covered her face again in the meantime. I did not know if he would approve, but I could not bear to see her motionless, pale

face among all that earth. She had always been beautiful, especially through the different seasons, combining her looks with the latest fashion trends. Each outfit more spectacular than the last. She had been perfect without trying, seemingly without effort. It had simply been her nature.

We tried for an hour to get him back into the house. But he would not leave his daughter there underground, alone beside the path.

"Nothing will happen to her. You can't even see her," we said, but he would not be moved.

"What if she wakes? In the middle of the night?"

It became clear there was no point. He would stay by her side all night.

I was glad of it, actually.

For a while I stood inside by the window with her mother. We watched him crouch there in silence, watching the earth move gently.

"Who will go to the soil merchant tomorrow to get more soil when he's lying here dead tired?" She spoke to herself more than to me, so I did not answer. Still, I considered saying something like *everything will be well and I will be there if you need me*.

Empty words. I was not good at that sort of thing. I had never witnessed this kind of illness before. So I kept silent.

"You have to change the soil three times a day," she calculated aloud beside me. "That's nine marble tokens a day. An extra two hundred eighty tokens a month. It has to be good quality. Not cheap material. You can't cut corners. But if it doesn't work anymore, we'll have to—no, if we just save a little more on food over the next few months, it should work even then. It can take a while before she's completely healthy again, from what they say."

I had known as long as I could remember that they had money problems. It had never been secret, yet I never dared participate in conversations like this, even when I felt it was required of me or at least unkind not to speak. Would the healing guild pay for it, I asked carefully.

"No. They say they don't cover this. They don't cover illnesses generated by the Fungal Empire's expansion. That has never worked. Not in our arrangement. It's a wonder we didn't have to pay for half the sack from the healing center ourselves. Although—" she laughed bitterly "—I'm sure the demand for payment will come."

I was going to suggest that I could acquire the sack of composted soil, or more—four, five, a whole cart if necessary—but then I stopped. It would not be me doing it. It would be my parents' resources. I also did not want Eury to wake in my soil instead of her parents'. That they had not even been able to raise enough soil for her to rest temporarily. So I kept silent. I had already made my contribution to the conversation.

Beside me, she continued counting while her husband kept watch outside. I felt increasingly out of place but found myself unable to leave. Somehow we were all keeping vigil for her. The thought appealed to me. It was comforting. I looked forward to telling her about it later.

If there was a later. Her face had looked so terrible.

I studied her mother from the side. Her features showed concern but not despair. I did not resent her at all for calculating Eury's illness so carefully. If anything, it calmed me. As if the whole problem

could be solved if only the numbers worked out. Her lips now murmured silently. I do not know if I would have wanted to know whether the calculation succeeded, or if I preferred the uncertainty even then.

Meanwhile her husband had closed his eyes and leaned forward slightly. I understood suddenly that he was doing this for his wife. Not for Eury. There was some contest of wills here, the extent of which I could only guess, and with which I had nothing to do.

I wondered for the first time if she had ever forgiven him for the affair with that dryad. Eury had heard them argue about it many times through the thin walls. How many times had she come to me afterward for comfort? He had said it had all been different. That he had gotten the pollen in his nose "purely by chance," that he had never wanted it. But they all say that. No wonder she did not believe him.

Eventually Eury confronted him, and he told her the truth. That it had not been an accident. That her mother had been singular—a willow dryad with long hair that reached her feet—but she had wanted to stay in her forest and he could hardly have lived there. He also loved her other mother, so it was not possible.

Eury had cried until she could not cry anymore. I had never seen her so weak. She put her flower head in my lap and I stroked her leaves.

It had never occurred to me to take her mother's perspective. Once in the bathing pools I had seen the scars on his chest. And it had been a home birth, I think. It was remarkable what he had taken on for her. And they were still unhappy?

No. I could not understand that. What a cruel mother she must have been.

The "cruel mother" now went outside and put a blanket around her husband's shoulders. She came back inside and stood beside me at the window. I felt worse. I did not feel part of anything now.

Eventually I simply turned away and left them alone at their daughter's bed without saying goodbye.

At home I searched all evening through the Fedi networks and Marble Kingdom archives for soil merchants. The prices had exploded. The thought of arriving at their doorstep with an overpriced sack of soil seemed humiliating. I ordered nothing and consulted the networks until morning.

Summer

I

Yesterday I looked at my old profile on the Fedi Tribes' federated networks. The messages ran through marble channels I no longer used:

"Attempting an omelette. The solarium would have been simpler—light and the smell of roasting meat. Now the kitchen requires attention I cannot give it."

"The new Poison Ivy serial: human perspectives dominate. Why do they not tell their own stories and leave ours alone?"

"In our schools they assign us Perfume when we should read The Vegetarian. The priorities of this society reveal themselves."

And earlier, longer: "They speak of climate change as if it were the problem. It is only the symptom. The system itself is the disease. I have watched humans purchase coffee from marble franchises, their names etched on disposable cups, and feel no shame. I once imagined walking into such a place and, when asked my name, saying instead: 'I renounce the Marble Kingdom,' and pouring the scalding liquid over my own face. But I would have only lain there on the floor, my face red and burning, and no one would have noticed. Attention is the currency of our time. But attention alone accomplishes nothing."

These were things I wrote. I used to concern myself with humans and their small anxieties. Their problems became more important than my own health. In return, I received thousands of followers across the federated networks. I received attention in abundance. Now I cannot say why I feel so calm in the face of our world's collapse, when once I felt so much.

A friend taught me that stories explain what statistics cannot. So let me tell you one.

II

A few weeks ago, in Solarfurt, the humans moved through their days with the urgency of caffeine in their blood. They worked their marble runs. They queried their Inference Engines. The smoke from the Marble Kingdom's factories mixed with the heavy sweetness of flowering trees that were, themselves, dying. I was there—another young dryad, lost. My name is Eury. It is an old name, a remnant. I was pursuing a career in ancient languages, illuminating texts no one read anymore. A useful occupation, I assured myself.

I spent my days at an oak tree in the central park. It was old, this tree, older than the marble networks. I sat with books stacked beside me and watched the distance. Around me: the click of marbles in their runs, the pulse of the federated networks, the chatter of information flowing through fungi and mechanisms alike. It was foreign to me, all of it. A language I had not learned.

Beneath my stillness, anxiety worked through me like rot through wood. They said climate change caused it—the weakness, the fatigue, the feeling of wilting from within. Or perhaps it was the Curry Wurst I could not stop eating, though I knew better. Dryads are not meant to eat meat. But the smell of it, grilled and spiced, pulled at something in me I did not want to examine.

The news came through the marble networks constantly. The Fungal Empire was expanding. They were integrating more marble runs into their mycelial networks, growing their influence through Gegenwardt like hyphae through soil. My flatmate believed they would soon control everything. She had read too many alarming reports on the federated networks. Her fear and her loneliness fed each other.

Then came the day that changed everything.

III

My third-best friend and my estranged parents buried me. They believed they were helping. This is what dryads do when one of their own falls too ill—return them to the earth, let the soil work its medicine. But I woke in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness underground. No one had stayed to witness my recovery or my failure.

I dug myself out. Soil packed beneath my fingernails. I hate that—the grit, the feeling of earth in places it should not be. At the nearest Späti I bought handkerchiefs to clean my hands and a bottle of wine for the walk home. It was still dark. The city was empty. A dryad newly risen from burial—the shop keeper did not refuse me. No one refuses us in these times.

So I walked the streets at five in the morning, half-drunk on cheap wine, thinking about human burial practices. Do they hope their dead will return as we do? Is that why they put bodies in the ground?

A mushroom grew from a crack in the pavement, glowing with a light that had no source I could name. I should have been frightened. I was not. I ate it without thinking, and the world split open.

The Fedi-Net.

The mycelial networks of the Fungal Empire connected everything—not just to marble runs, but to the fabric of Gegenwardt itself. Through the fungal threads, everyone could speak to everyone. But it was not like the federated networks of the Fedi Tribes, with their careful protocols and bounded communities. This was open, organic. People clustered in groups called myzels, and the myzels reached toward each other, roots seeking roots. The Fedi-Net stretched through human networks and plant networks, connecting across the boundaries I thought separated the world. Even the Marble Kingdom's automated systems pulsed with fungal filaments I had never noticed. Even the Inference Nomads' hand-held devices hummed with mycelial whispers. The Fedi Tribes' federated networks, which I had thought so sophisticated, now seemed like walled gardens. I had been in a garden. Now I stood in a forest.

I looked down at my hands. The wine had not altered my vision—I could see that now. This was real. The connections were real, threading through walls and streets and districts, crossing the factional borders that divided Solarfurt and all of Gegenwardt. Marble runs pulsed with fungal life. Inference Engines carried mycelial threads in their circuits. The federated networks of the Fedi Tribes intertwined with fungal filaments at every node.

I walked, watching. Many people in the city were already linked to the Fedi-Net, forming communities I had never seen, never imagined. I joined one of these communities.

That is where I met Lamella.

IV

Lamella was a fungi-woman. She belonged to a different myzel than mine, but her presence in the network drew me the way light draws a plant. She was not like me. Where I withdrew, she opened herself to the world. Where I observed, she participated. Her nature seemed to generate its own luminescence.

We became inseparable. She showed me the communities within communities—mycelia composed of fungi-people, dryads, and humans from all the factions. Marble Kingdom engineers. Inference Nomads with their query devices. Fedi Tribes networkers. All of them working together to resist both climate collapse and the Fungal Empire's expansion toward total control.

Their ideologies clashed, mirroring the surface conflicts between the factions. But in the Fedi-Net, battles were fought through spores and symbiotic relationships, not violence. I joined them. For the first time in years, I felt I had a purpose.

Our love grew in the mycelial threads that bound the network together. In our private moments, we practiced the intimacies of our kinds—the exchange of nutrients, the slow dance between plant and fungus. It was a deep connection, cellular. Even my appetite for meat, which she found disturbing, could not break it. I compromised. I began eating plant-based alternatives sometimes. We laughed about it together, about the strangeness of our pairing.

"It troubles me now," I said once, "when people announce they are vegetarian as if they expect gratitude. As if their choice were not a threat. Look at me—who is the predator now? But the worst are the humans who claim they want to help save the world. They want to consume you. They want you only for themselves."

Lamella believed in the good in everyone. She advocated for the universal declaration of rights for all beings, applied across all factions to all humanoid creatures. She pitied humans, she said. They were too self-conscious for their own good. She said this often. Sometimes it irritated me. But I was not anti-human. I could have been, perhaps. But I was not.

I abandoned my old profiles that day. As `breath_taker123`, I had accumulated thousands of followers across the Fedi Tribes' marble networks. They had laughed at my observations about human behavior, at my mockery of sapiens peculiarities. I felt no regret leaving that behind. In the Fedi-Net, I would build something that mattered.

V

As our community grew, so did our difficulties. Plant-based people began falling ill. The sickness came from the air, from the soil, from the water—all of it poisoned by the Marble Kingdom's factories. Some tried to hide their symptoms, but bodies betray us. They collapsed in public. They collapsed during transmissions on the fungal networks. I should not judge them for their pride. After all, I fell ill too. Perhaps I deserved it.

The poison worked through me. My body fought against industrial contamination the way it had fought before, when I first grew sick. I had thought I might escape it this time. I had been wrong.

And there was drama. Myzels upon myzels, caught in shifting alliances. My group, TerraForce Mycelium, advocated for immediate, radical action against climate change. We wanted to transform Gegenwardt now, before it was too late. Lamella's group, the GreenTech Mycelium, counseled caution. They feared rapid intervention might destabilize the ecosystem further or provoke the Fungal Empire into aggressive retaliation.

We were all performing in a tragedy while the world burned beneath us. We were arguing about methods while the soil died.

"Bravo," I said during one particularly heated myzel meeting. My voice was flat. "Almost as sophisticated as the surface factions."

Lamella, with her endless optimism, told me to stop being cruel. She reminded me what humans from all factions had contributed to the Fedi-Net. She said everything would work out. Sometimes her hopefulness felt like violence.

But she convinced me to try another approach. She told me something useful: gossip.

VI

Lysandra Nguyen of GreenTech was a master marble-run engineer from the Marble Kingdom. Aiden Pilates of the Creationist's Covenant wielded an Inference Engine with remarkable skill. They came from different myzels, different factions, different worldviews. The Creationists, led by Reverend Miriam of the Fedi Tribes, held particular theological positions about the nature of consciousness and creation.

Lysandra and Aiden had been arguing in the public channels of the Fedi-Net. Their debates drew audiences. But those who paid attention noticed other things: the way their touches lingered, the silences between their words, the tension that was not entirely intellectual. The myzels watched and speculated. Could their attraction bridge the divide between their communities? Or would it create a new conflict?

Reverend Miriam seemed unaware. But her followers wondered how this relationship might reshape the balance between GreenTech and the Creationist's Covenant.

TerraForce had noticed the instability in GreenTech's position. They had begun to exploit it. The entire conflict between the myzels, it seemed, rested on this private matter between two people. But when have our conflicts ever rested on anything else?

Lamella and I decided to mediate.

The negotiations were delicate. Reverend Miriam emerged as a crucial voice. And during our discussions, we uncovered something: Aiden was fungi. He had hidden this his entire life—from his family, from his myzel. This was dangerous knowledge. The Creationists denied the existence of fungi as equal beings, even as they used the Fedi-Net that fungi had built.

We talked for hours. Days. Finally, we reached an agreement. GreenTech would grant the Creationists unrestricted access to their aroma spas—places where mycelial networks created healing environments using ancient fungal techniques combined with marble-run automation.

With Reverend Miriam's blessing, Aiden left the Creationist's Covenant and joined GreenTech. For a moment, everything felt balanced. Even I felt something like hope.

VII

The wedding was broadcast live through the Fedi-Net's mycelial networks. The signal reached even the marble runs of the Marble Kingdom and the Inference Engines of the Nomads. The Creationists, known for their elaborate ceremonies, performed with their usual grandeur. I found it excessive, but I kept that opinion mostly to myself.

The ceremony was not yet finished when I leaned toward Lamella. "We should arrange more of these," I said. "There is potential here for building influence."

She smiled. "You are always thinking about strategy."

"Someone has to."

"The wedding is beautiful."

"The wedding is political."

"Why can it not be both?"

I had no answer to that. The orchestra in Solarfurt's great hall played, and Lamella sat with her cello among them. The music wove through the mycelial channels, a harmony that transcended the

factional conflicts between the Marble Kingdom, the Fungal Empire, the Inference Nomads, and the Fedi Tribes.

After the weekend, when the celebration ended, the myzels returned to their work. They refocused on climate change and on resisting the Fungal Empire's authoritarian expansion. Lamella and I had helped resolve their conflict. Perhaps we had made the world slightly better. I felt something unfamiliar: pride.

VIII

In the quiet moments, away from the networks and the politics, we found each other. Lamella's spores touched my skin, and I shivered. I traced my fingers along her mycelial tendrils, feeling their texture, their delicacy. She whispered to me, and her voice was like wind in leaves. She spoke promises. She spoke love.

Then she entered my mind through the mycelial connection. Every sensation doubled—what I felt, she felt. What she felt, I felt. Her fingers on my skin were also in my thoughts. We shared everything: stories, dreams, memories, hope.

Our love grew stronger, like the mycelial threads that connected everything in Gegenwardt—the marble runs, the Inference Engines, the federated networks, the soil, the trees, the dying world.

IX

Sunday morning. The sun rose on what felt like a new era, though perhaps that was only exhaustion and relief speaking. I had not vomited oil in over a week. That was progress. That was victory.

I leaned against Lamella in our oak tree in Solarfurt. I lit a cigarette and held it, watching the ember glow. It felt good. It felt like peace in the face of chaos. It felt like hope on a suffering planet.

Below us, the humans moved through their morning routines. They clutched their marble runs and Inference Engines. They typed messages into the federated networks. Most of them did not know about the Fedi-Net pulsing beneath their feet, connecting everything to everything, offering a different way to live.

I watched them, and for the first time in a long time, I felt something like compassion.

Autumn

"Every time you see the sun, another person is seeing the moon."

This was the last message from @sunny_lamella before she vanished from the networks.

We should have known when she said autumn was her favorite season. But the question remained: was Taylor Swift secretly fungal? Those who had read her final transmissions understood. The rest of the Fedi Tribes thought of little else.

But first, context is needed.

I have what the medicinal fungi-keepers call scattered-attention disorder. My thoughts branch like mycelium, following unexpected paths. Some call this a tribal cliché, but it is true nonetheless. The

marble runs that connect our communities sprawl in similar patterns—sudden turns, unexpected destinations. I follow them.

I like conversations. Not the polite exchange of pleasantries, but the real ones—the kind where stories emerge like fruiting bodies after rain. Sometimes I board the trains just to listen. The stories change with each city. I disembark where the tales grow most interesting and continue on foot from there. Lorde does this too, though people find it strange when I say so.

This practice has occasionally led to difficulties. It has also expanded my understanding in ways I could not have imagined as a child dreaming of distant lands. Now I travel the communities in my neighborhood and learn just as much. I have yet to encounter a being in this world for whom I cannot feel empathy. This is my favorite quality in myself.

Once, this eagerness led to something completely unexpected. I can share that story. Then you become part of it, whether you wish to or not. What develops from that connection—who can say? There will be battles that roar in silence. Unexpected friendships. Drama that rippled through the federated networks like spores on wind.

But first, we must return to where this began.

It always begins the same way: with conflict in the Fedi Tribes.

Last year. Autumn air carried a particular melancholy—the kind that made people think of Taylor Swift in sweaters. That feeling swept through the Fedi Tribes. Folklore and witch-vibes, cats on wood stoves, all of it. My favorite season. My marble-fed connections caught the mood like a contagion.

Then, without warning, a dark thread appeared in the networks. Members of two nodes battled each other through their fungal interfaces. The arguments never ended. The thread was rumored to originate from a node the other communities had defederated years ago—a node that had failed to control its radicalizing members. The other node was my own: GreenTech.

Otherwise, everything seemed normal. I went to bed as usual.

The next morning, the federated networks burned with discord.

I woke expecting the morning greetings of my friends through my fungi. Instead: silence. Then someone screaming.

It had started around eleven the previous night, I learned from occasional whispers in my deserted communities. The hostile node's trademark memes—torn baby dolls—spread through the marble runs. But they had crossed a new line. A meme equating Aiden and Lysandra's wedding with the Red Wedding from ancient broadcasts went viral in the Grimscape around six in the morning, then spread to other nodes.

I made breakfast quickly, hands shaking.

So far, no real violence. But they had broken into public buildings, posting their crimes live across the federated networks. They especially targeted nodes of the Fungal Nation and Fedi Tribes, who fought back fiercely. The coordinated responses caused heavy disruptions that rippled through Gegenwardt's networks.

They hated the collaborative communities with every fiber of their being. Even Eury was disturbed, which relieved me. I had worried she had lost the ability to feel anything for them. This time I had been wrong, which does not happen often.

But I knew the coming times would be difficult.

Fighting Grimscape would be harder than fighting the occasional authoritarian nodes that appeared periodically. Grimscape had sympathizers throughout the federated networks. Even in my node.

I considered changing nodes. The leaders were taking too light a stance against Grimscape. So I did it, finding shelter in the node of my hometown. It felt good to be among them again, though I made clear it was temporary.

Eury remained in her node, which made me nervous. I had sensed her scrolling through old Marble Kingdom archives again yesterday, though she had promised to stop. Perhaps we were all falling back into old patterns.

I hoped to learn more about her position at the meeting of our closest nodes—the ones that had not yet radicalized. It had been arranged quickly and would take place that same day.

At the meal before, I drank my protein supplement slowly. Eury ate an unusually large steak. Neither of us spoke.

Then it began.

The leaders of each node recounted what had happened in recent weeks: members of Grimscape had harassed people from other nodes multiple times, culminating in attacks on members of Eury's node the day before.

Eury, my fierce night-flower, spoke with a clear voice, though I could hear the emotions beneath it. "Well, friends, it appears our little paradise is not as immune to toxicity as we hoped. I spent my morning querying my fungi to block out half of my section of the federated network. What they spread is horrible. I woke this morning and half my marble feeds were full of terrible images and visions. Even from nodes I had held in high opinion. I knew immediately something was wrong. But I had never seen anything like this. I never thought they had so many sympathizers here. I had not felt that way in a long time—like they had reached for something deep inside me and tried to tear it apart. But I am certain we can heal, if we act quickly."

The encroaching darkness dimmed us all. I nodded and stepped forward. "I agree. We cannot let Grimscape tear apart what we have worked hard to build. We must find a way to counter its negativity and restore balance to our nodes."

Typhon, a member of the Nightingale-Node, spoke: "But this time is different from the regular clashes with radical renegade nodes. It is not enough to block them from our marble channels one by one, even if we have sufficient blocking protocols. Grimscape wants to make trouble. They consciously want to drive us apart. We need to isolate them. We may even need to sever the federation link between them and the other nodes entirely—if we can convince them to do so."

I answered him: "Then let us first talk to the other nodes and see what they think. This has happened before. If we do it wrong, they will simply join our other nodes and sow division there. Then we can fight them less effectively."

Eury agreed: "I understand. You are right. Let us not act too quickly. Perhaps there is still room to keep the conflict from escalating."

The question was debated in each of our nodes. All agreed we should make Grimscape a final peace offering. Until now, nothing truly terrible had happened.

We asked Grimscape if they could restrain themselves and stop harassing other nodes. In response, they flooded our marble runs with more poisonous imagery.

We decided we had to defederate from them.

But for that, we had to convince as many other nodes as possible—some of which Grimscape had already begun to tear apart. Had we delayed too long? Should we have acted earlier? It did not matter. Now we had to stop more damage from happening.

First, all leaders of the friendly nodes concentrated and severed their federation ties with Grimscape through their fungal interfaces so that everyone in their nodes would no longer receive anything from them.

But many nodes remained who were connected to Grimscape and to whom we were connected. We discussed how to proceed and quickly found a solution: we would go into the nodes and try to win them to our cause.

With determined hearts, we embarked on a quest, seeking allies from different nodes whose strength could counter Grimscape's malevolence. Along the way, we encountered Lumina, the bioluminescent fungi-keepers whose light pierced even the darkest shadows; Zephyr, the Inference Nomads with the power to query and send warnings across vast distances; and Tessa, the Turkey-rooted Fedi member whose grounded nature provided stability in chaos.

We decided to defederate from Grimscape.

But one question remained: how to prevent members of Grimscape from simply jumping to other nodes and starting their foul game again?

Together, Eury, Lamella, and our newfound allies devised a plan. We would confront Grimscape directly, combining our diverse strengths to weaken its influence. It was not only about isolating them, but also about making other nodes more resilient to their bad influence.

As we ventured deeper into territory corrupted by Grimscape, we felt how the malevolent node's dark threads—suddenly everywhere through the marble runs—slowly entered our own feeds through our fungal interfaces. Its chilling aura pushed our spirits down, trying to sow division and discord in our minds. It unleashed illusions, attempting to break our spirits with visions of a fractured Gegenwardt.

But Eury and I, guided by our determination, saw through the deceit.

Eury, with her sharp mind, challenged its lies and manipulations through carefully crafted queries to her Inference Engine, exposing the fear and hatred hidden beneath the shadows. I, with my steady optimism, inspired hope in the hearts of those who had succumbed to despair, reminding them of the beauty and resilience of our federated world.

As we confronted more members of Grimscape, we discovered that Grimscape was burdened by a darkness not entirely its own. It had become a collective of nodes who had succumbed to despair

and negativity, their marble runs intertwined in a web of misery. It would take all our strength to fight it back and not succumb to despair ourselves in the process.

Or was it already happening?

I could not help but feel sorrow for this troubled entity. Grimscape, once a beautiful node, had been consumed by the collective suffering of its inhabitants. Each step we took was not just a battle against an external force—it was a journey to heal a wounded soul. We needed to help it, not cast it away.

I told Eury what I had seen.

Her words, though firm, carried understanding: "We cannot fix it. If so, it can only fix itself. Let us focus on our own communities for now."

I agreed, feeling ashamed and numb, but carried on.

During our journey, we encountered nodes within Grimscape who had lost all hope. I had to fight strongly not to be consumed by the sadness of it all. Their eyes, once filled with dreams, now mirrored the desolation of their surroundings.

With each encounter, I reached out to them through my fungi. My words carried the weight of their shared despair but also the promise of redemption. I listened to their stories, shared their pain, and in return, offered them a glimmer of hope.

Eury, on the other hand, challenged the nodes within Grimscape to face the source of their darkness. She tried to shake them awake and show them where they were headed through her precise Inference Engine queries.

Lumina's radiant glow from their bioluminescent fungi did not banish but caressed the Grimscape's tendrils gently, as if reminding them of the warmth they had forgotten.

Zephyr's messages through the marble runs were not just warnings—they were whispers of encouragement, urging the nodes trapped in Grimscape to break free from their self-imposed prisons.

Tessa, rooted in the earth and her community, extended her empathy to Grimscape itself, as if offering a silent promise of healing.

Sometimes, members of Grimscape saw us and fought back—not with fury, but with desperation. They conjured illusions not to deceive us, but to shield their inhabitants from the harsh reality of their existence. Eury's sharp mind saw through the facade with her Inference Engine, and with each illusion dispelled, I felt a tremor within Grimscape—a flicker of acknowledgment that there was a way out, a path toward light and healing.

In the final confrontation, as we stood amidst the thorny vines of Grimscape's lair, I sensed a change within it. The collective consciousness, once so resistant, now quivered with a mix of fear and longing.

Eury, her eyes filled with understanding, spoke not just to Grimscape, but to the nodes within it. "Your pain is real," she said, her voice carrying through the marble runs with weight. "But there is beauty in the world, even in the darkest corners. Embrace the light within you, and let it guide you home."

I extended my hand, my touch gentle yet firm through my fungal interface. Grimscape trembled. In that moment, I felt a surge of compassion—not just from me, but from my companions, the very land beneath us, and the entire world and all its inhabitants.

Then Grimscape's thorny vines lashed out at us through the networks, more violently than ever before. It was a pain I had never felt before. It frightened all of Gegenwardt.

For a moment, the darkness that had shrouded Grimscape started to dissipate, revealing the nodes' true forms. Each face now reflected a mixture of shame, fear, and outright hatred for everyone to see.

I could feel how the other nodes we had been in before saw the true face of Grimscape too and began, one by one, to defederate from Grimscape—either by collectively concentrating on severing the connection through their fungal interfaces or by some members adjusting their marble runs and severing the connection directly.

With that, the shadows began to retreat from the other nodes. Slowly, Gegenwardt began to heal.

As I looked at Grimscape—no longer a symbol of dread, but a testament to the transformative power of empathy and connection—the nodes once trapped within it now stood beside us. Grimscape, once a collective of despair, had become a testament to the potential for change and redemption within every node.

By Eury's side, I raised my glowing fungi, casting a warm light that pushed back the last remains of Grimscape's oppressive gloom. "Love, unity, and hope will always prevail over fear and hatred," I said, my voice resonating through the marble runs with the strength of all of Gegenwardt.

The combined force of our words, coupled with the elemental powers of our allies, weakened Grimscape's grip on the nodes. With a roar that shook the networks, the malevolent node recoiled, its threads withdrawing in defeat.

Gegenwardt, once again bathed in the vibrant hues of life, slowly began to heal from the scars left by Grimscape's presence.

That same evening, we made a headline in the Marble Kingdom's news feeds: "Biggest nodes in the Fedi Tribes cooperate to isolate renegade node."

Had the reputation of the Fedi Tribes been tarnished? Perhaps. There was so much happening that few noticed anyway. Hopefully it would show them at least that we were not the homogenous group they depicted us as.

I never had anything against the Marble Kingdom or even the Fungal Empire, though sometimes I want to scream about how they try to solve their conflicts. It is as if they blare out whatever they think through their marble runs. Eury says it is Stockholm Syndrome, but I think that with the tools nature gave them, they are truly trying their best. And they do make good music.

Speaking of which—how did we arrive here again? It had something to do with music. That is right. Taylor Swift.

Did you hear her newest song: "Blank Spaces (Fungi Version)"? The lyrics:

*Nice to meet you, where you spore?
I'm a fungus, you know the score*

*You're looking like my next host
Love's a game, wanna play some more?*

*'Cause we're fungi and we're crazy
Can't you see the spores are hazy?
Got a long list of my ex-hosts
They'll tell you I'm insane*

*But I've got a blank space, baby
And I'll write your name*

*Cherry stems and your white coat
Sneaking in and out of petri dishes
I can show you incredible things
Mushroom fields and spore print rings*

And later:

*Boys only want love if it's spores they're breathing in
Don't say I didn't say I didn't warn you*

Say what you want about her, but she connects people and tells stories. She is basically a story-spreader through all the marble runs. What more could one want? A whole fungi-themed era?

In any case: I have never looked forward to Halloween more. I just want a reason to dress up like Taylor.

Winter

"I don't believe in horoscopes; I just believe everything is connected. And who knows how? All I know is: after years of eroding of all kinds of societal institutions, we need to build back. We should start with our friends and family, but also think about bigger societal structures. And we should get it done fast before the next backlash. After all: that's what the Fedi Tribes were made for."

— Last post from @tessa_ract

The node hummed beneath my fingers. Three organizational threads needed weaving, and the governance protocols still hung unresolved. Two factions had sent their delegates at dawn. I had work beyond this—teaching, mostly—but who else would tend the node? The marble runs needed maintenance. The network threads required moderation. Yet participation had withered. People used the node as if it would sustain itself, as if the infrastructure grew wild and needed no keeper.

I knew we should implement proper democratic processes. Many had asked for them. But there was no time, and fewer people still to delegate the work. Instead: drama. This morning, two members had nearly come to blows over a trade dispute. Their voices had echoed through the main plaza until I separated them.

The question remained: how does one expel a member without fracturing the community entire? Sometimes the answer was clear. More often, it was not. Every decision risked losing members or triggering a split, a power struggle that could unravel months of careful building. Some still

questioned my choice to defederate from the Fungal Empire without consulting the full council. But there had been no time then, either. So many considerations. So many variables to track.

What good was leading the largest node in the Fedi Tribes if it drained you hollow?

I had not asked for this when I touched the pink glowing marble. It had appointed me administrator, granted me powers and privileges I never sought. But there was no use dwelling on it. Better to move forward.

I had arranged to meet Lamella that afternoon. She belonged to the node we had fought alongside against the Fungal Empire. We had work to do: checking on the nodes we had tried to heal after the war, building bridges where the network had torn. Community-building, she called it.

We walked the luminescent marble trails together. The repaired nodes seemed stable. People waved as we passed. Everything appeared fine until we encountered him.

Fish Guy emerged from a converted dwelling marked with symbols I recognized—the iconography of Dogan. He came from one of the sects where fish-people sought connection with what they called higher fish-beings. They practiced rituals they claimed linked them to the universe's depths, but in truth, these rituals only bound them to their leader's vanity.

The sect whispered of Dogan, an enigmatic cosmic entity who would restore glory to the fish-people and raise them against those species that had walked the earth first and destroyed everything in their dominion. It was an old conspiracy theory, one that ignored the fact that the fish-people themselves had once chosen to step onto the earthly surface. But Fish Guy could no longer see the contradictions. He was caught in a net of lies.

It had started well enough, Lamella told me. They had played darts together, shared meals. Then the collective had been overrun by refugees—people who had lost their homes when the other nodes severed ties with the Fungal Empire, plunging their world into chaos. The isolation had followed, just as Lamella had predicted. Now we faced the consequences.

We only found them by temporarily joining their node. If you truly wanted to understand the state of the Fedi Tribes, node-hopping was the method. Within minutes, something felt wrong. Dogan iconography hung everywhere—woven into tapestries, carved into doorframes, painted on the marble runs themselves.

Fish Guy approached us in the common square. His gills flared slightly as he spoke, a sign of agitation masked by forced enthusiasm. He tried to recruit us, calling the sect "an elite coaching collective" and describing it as "a particular mindset" mixed with biologicistic theories about evolutionary advancement.

Eury sensed his despair immediately. I remembered her from the war against the Fungal Empire—a woman who could read suffering like others read text. When we had hopped to a safer node, she spoke quietly.

"Perhaps Fish Guy could find solace with the other fish-people in the far north. They're preparing a journey to the ocean depths, away from the surface turmoil. Humans have destroyed enough. It may be too late. More fish-people leave each season for the sea floor, to wait until humanity's threat resolves itself." She paused, considering her words. "They're radical, yes. But they want to reverse

their evolutionary step onto land, not accelerate forward. At least they don't wish to harm anyone. Maybe he should go with them. Such opportunities are rare now."

She met my eyes. I could see the old pain in her—scars from her time outside the Fedi Tribes that would take years to heal.

I disagreed. "That's too cynical. Leaving Earth won't solve the underlying problem. We should help Fish Guy find his place within our collective."

We hopped back. He had waited for us.

I spoke first. "We're concerned. Would you come to our node? Just to talk."

But Eury, unable to contain herself, mentioned the northern fish-people.

Fish Guy stood very still. The choice had been laid before him: stay and struggle, or descend to the tranquil depths until the conflicts above resolved themselves. I could see the idea take root in him—the thought of escape, of peace beneath the waves.

I approached him carefully. "Leaving isn't the answer," I said. My voice was quiet. The marble necklace around my neck clicked softly as I moved closer. "We need you. All of you. The surface still needs its keepers."

Something shifted in his expression. He nodded slowly.

"I was raised Christian," he said. "They taught us that our life on earth is a gift. Not ours to surrender. I think that's oversimplified, but maybe I should trust it against my better judgment. It's certainly better than what Dogan's followers taught me. I've always called myself agnostic. There must be some reason we've been given time here. Not that it all makes sense. But I still believe there could be meaning in it. Some purpose. Might as well make it count."

In that moment, he chose to confront the challenges rather than flee them. He would stay with us—with Eury, Lamella, and me—and find his purpose within the fabric of the Fedi Tribes.

But he made another choice, too. After much contemplation, he decided to join a collective unlike any other—a group with a vision both daring and patient. They planned, one day, to journey to the bottom of the sea where ancient secrets called to them. But not now. Not while the earth teetered on the edge of chaos. They would leave only after they had ensured the surface was healing, that the networks were stable, that the communities they loved could sustain themselves without them.

Late that evening, we bid Fish Guy farewell and returned to the heart of the city. I headed directly to my favorite storytelling circle. The venue was small but well-loved—a space where tribe members gathered to share their narratives, to maintain the old traditions.

I stepped onto the stage. The spotlight's warmth touched my skin. The audience quieted. I recognized some faces: parents and children from the school where I taught, the school closely connected to my node. They had chosen this place for their children to grow within, to gradually discover the vastness of the Fedi Tribes.

My heart beat faster. I adjusted the marble necklace and surveyed the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, and all the beautiful souls between," I began. My voice was steady.

"Tonight, I'm not telling network jokes. I want to share a story. It's our tradition—to tell stories to

one another. Afterward, I hope you'll share yours. I know you're busy, but I hope you can spare the time. I heard this story many hundreds of years ago when I was young, listening to the elders who walked before me."

Some people stood and left. Many stayed. I continued.

"In a vibrant forest between towering mountains and clear streams, there lived a creature named Willow the Woodland Sprite. Willow wasn't like other sprites. Instead of magical powers, Willow possessed a gift for storytelling.

"One day, golden sunbeams filtered through the canopy, and Willow noticed sadness among the forest animals and plants. The lively chatter had faded. The flowers drooped. Willow, moved by empathy, decided to act.

"Gathering everyone beneath the Grand Oak, Willow stood on a mossy rock and began to weave a tale. It was a story of a brave rabbit who overcame fear by sharing worries with friends, a clever fox who found solutions through listening, and a kind old tree that offered shelter and wisdom to all.

"As Willow's words floated through the air, the forest came alive with vivid imagery. The animals and plants listened, captivated. Slowly, they began to smile again. A newfound sense of camaraderie filled the space. The forest, once despondent, brimmed with hope and unity.

"Inspired, the animals and plants started sharing their own tales. The wise owl spoke of ancient forest secrets. The playful squirrels recounted adventures. Even the shy mushrooms shared their dreams. Each story brought the community closer, fostering understanding and friendship.

"In the heart of the enchanted forest, a tradition was born. Every full moon, they gathered under the Grand Oak, taking turns to share stories. They discovered that in sharing joys and sorrows, they not only lifted spirits but created an unbreakable bond that made the forest stronger.

"As seasons changed and years passed, the tale of Willow spread far and wide. Travelers from distant lands came to listen and share their stories, creating a tapestry of narratives celebrating the diversity of all living beings.

"And eventually, even the humans adapted it. Always late to the gathering—and then wanting to make it all about themselves, of course."

A pleasant murmur moved through the crowd. I bowed and grinned. The applause felt like harmony. Stepping down, I was met by Eury, her smile warm with understanding.

"A story about telling stories?" she teased.

"I had to say it." I hugged her tightly. She felt like solidarity made flesh.

But Lamella spoke then. "I'm not sure why you made that joke at the end. It's not even true."

I looked at her, feeling my throat tighten.

"It was harmless," I said.

"Tessa. Humans aren't the only beings that want progress."

I raised my eyebrows.

"What?" Her voice carried an edge, perhaps sharper than she intended. "Don't you want to move forward in life? What's wrong with wanting progress? We should be more careful what we say in these times. You sound like a Marble Kingdom loyalist."

I nodded and swiftly captured a selfie before Lamella realized she was still smiling. I thought of the hashtag—*unitednodes*—and sent it out across the network.

Perfect. Just as it should be.

The selfie gained recognition first in my node, then the video of my story spread rapidly through the network. I sensed immediately it was the beginning of something larger than me, larger than us. It had already moved beyond our control, but that didn't matter. I was glad to share it with the people I loved, to read their stories in return.

Maybe this was it—the breakthrough for the Fedi Tribes. Maybe everything had been worth it.

I looked at Lamella and Eury. They felt it too. But in their eyes I saw confusion and sadness. I knew I had made a mistake, had probably broken their trust. I couldn't take it back. Even if I could, I probably wouldn't.

They sensed this. They turned and walked away without a word. They didn't speak to me for a long while, though they made no public complaint. The bond between our nodes stayed intact. Our nodes even gained new members. No one could complain about that.

But this was only the beginning.

In the following weeks, the Fedi Tribes truly came alive. People told their stories. New communities formed. The excitement was infectious, and my node had to participate. I had waited so long for something like this. Now it had arrived, and all the work felt worthwhile.

Soon everyone was talking about it: Tribes for Tomorrow.

It was a spark. Inspired by the global ecological awareness movement, Tribes for Tomorrow focused on community building. We weren't protesting in the streets or supporting radical nodes. We were creating connections, building small communities rather than making grand gestures of resistance.

Lamella was still angry with me. I suspected she wanted to call me manipulative, though she would never write such words. But hadn't it all been good for the Fedi Tribes in the end? On some matters, she seemed naive. After all, she wasn't responsible for an entire node—including the one where her human-dryad girlfriend lived, a node I provided safety for and managed quite well, if I could say so.

Instead, they worried about their surface-world problems. Yet whenever they needed something, they came to me for shelter and comfort.

They believed that those who conceive ideas should receive all the credit. But what about those who build them? I thought it fair to receive something in return for generations of my people maintaining the networks, not to mention the daily discrimination we endured. They tossed coins to network keepers in the pedestrian zones, had their fortunes read, and thought themselves absolved. They were not.

But we had too much work to waste time on such details.

In the following weeks, we completed small tasks for local communities throughout Solarfurt—repairs at the library, organizing events for sports clubs. Mostly, though, we listened and talked about what the next year would bring and what the current year had already given us.

It was good work.

Autumn had finally arrived, and this time it would stay through all the cold months of winter, keeping us warm.

I wondered, as always, how the humans would manage. They told more and more stories, but no one listened to them. They screamed into the void of their own despair, calling for help.

Even though Lamella might not believe I would say this: I think we are the ones who must answer. The people of the Fedi Tribes. We need to help them reconnect to each other.

Perhaps with a story. A collection of stories from across the Fedi Tribes. We could even reach the human world through Eury's old account. It would find the right people eventually. Maybe even Taylor Swift, the one they say the marble runs through.

And there—I know how Lamella's story ended. I read it too. She was right. Taylor could be useful to us.

But I must pass the telling to the next speaker. I will do so gladly.

The stage is yours, Fish Guy. Make it count.

Waiting for Spring

On the eve of my last day in Gegenwardt, I stood on the great bridge that led down to the Ocean of Departure. The girl beside me was called Elara. She gripped the stone railing and looked not at the water but through it, to some place I could not follow.

The sky burned. Crimson bled into gold along the horizon, and the waves below kept their old rhythm, indifferent to our watching.

She had approached me an hour before, when I was sitting alone on the bridge's midpoint, my feet dangling over the edge. She sat down without asking permission. For a long time neither of us spoke.

"Is there any point in continuing?" she said at last. Her voice was quiet, almost lost beneath the wind. "The Fungal Empire spreads across everything now. I have nothing left." She paused. "I loved someone once. She suffered from the Weltschmerz—that sickness of the spirit. I think she passed it to me before she disappeared."

I turned to look at her. She was young, younger than I had first thought. The light caught the exhaustion in her face.

"Even now," I said, "life persists in unexpected places. I have seen it. In the deep trenches where no light reaches, things grow. They find ways."

She did not respond, so I continued. I told her of the waters my people were returning to—the luminescent forests of kelp, the thermal vents where blind creatures built their colonies, the songs

that carried through the darkness for thousands of leagues. I spoke of what it meant to begin again in a place where every current held the possibility of discovery.

Tears formed in her eyes but did not fall. "What about the pain?" she asked. "How do I leave it behind?"

I placed my scaled hand over hers where it gripped the stone. Her skin was warm, fragile in a way that still surprised me after all my years among humans.

"Pain is part of living," I said. "For your kind and for mine. It teaches us. But when it becomes unbearable, we can choose to leave it. That choice exists. Knowing it exists has kept me from despair."

The last light slipped beneath the water. In the growing dark, I saw something shift in her expression—a small thing, but real.

She stepped back from the railing.

"Thank you," she said. "I do not know what comes next. But I think—" She stopped, began again. "I want to find out. I want to find her, the one I lost. Perhaps she is not gone. Perhaps she needs me still." Her words came faster now. "I could send word through the Fedi networks, cast it wide, see if anyone has seen her. Since she left, I have felt outside myself. Yesterday I tried to—" She broke off, embarrassed. "I embraced a tree. I thought it might help. It did not feel the same." She laughed, a small bitter sound. "The world is unfair. I hate it. I only want to know she is alive. That she lives."

I faced the ocean again and let the silence settle between us.

"If I were you," I said finally, "I would seek out the masters of the Fungal Nation. Not the Empire—the old ones, from before. The keepers of the first ways. I knew a fungi-farmer once who still remembered how to speak with the mycelial threads. Through them, all things connect."

She frowned, skeptical. "She was never one for farming. Fungi or otherwise." Then she shrugged. "But perhaps. Even Taylor works with the networks now. I could trace her old marble-run connections, see where they lead." She stood straighter. "Well. Thank you, fish-man. For what it is worth."

I smiled at her stubbornness. It was their finest quality, I thought. Also their worst.

We stood together as darkness claimed the bridge. Not yet ready to part, not yet ready to move. Just a few moments longer.

When I finally left her, I walked down the mountain path to the shore. The cold water washed over my feet, then my knees, then my chest. It felt like remembering.

The others were already in the shallows, some swimming down into the deep. I had little time.

I turned back once.

And then I heard it—the song of the Spirits of Spring. It rose from somewhere beyond hearing, beautiful and merciless, and it showed me what would come.

I saw the communities of Gegenwardt growing, spreading, learning. The Marble Kingdom sharing their mechanisms of automation—the intricate gates and channels that could count, sort, and decide. The Fungal Nation returning to their roots, the Empire's grip loosening, the old peaceful ways

remembered. The Inference Nomads teaching their methods of query and response. The Fedi Tribes weaving them all together through their federated networks, those patient systems of connection that required no center to hold.

I saw these ways spreading beyond Gegenwardt to other lands, other worlds. I saw conflicts diminishing—not vanishing, never vanishing—but giving way to discourse through the marble-run networks, to democratic processes carried on glass spheres rolling through wooden channels.

The song did not promise completion. There would be no finished state, no final victory. Things would remain complicated, ambiguous, fragile. The danger of collapse would never fully pass. But for each person, in each moment, there would remain the chance to make the world more bearable—for themselves, for their community, for every living thing.

My head broke the surface one last time. Through the salt water in my eyes, I saw a figure dancing on the distant beach. It was Elara. She had found her way to the fungal speech after all, or perhaps to something else entirely. She moved without hesitation, without the weight I had seen pressing her down on the bridge.

I wanted to join her. I wanted to climb back onto the shore and dance there in the darkness, thoughtless and alive. I understood then that I had made a mistake.

But I dove.

I swam down hard, not letting myself look back again, catching up with my people as they descended into the black water. We were leaving humanity behind—the only ones who could never escape their world, who had to remain and build within it.

It was up to them now, I thought.

Now they would have to learn it for themselves.

Arrival of the Empire Network

When she woke up, she immediately sensed that something was wrong. She stumbled out of bed, went to the window and looked outside. Her heart almost stopped: it was even worse than she had expected. Chaos was unfolding all across her communities. She was seeing people running headless around the streets, panicking from the incoming influx of screaming noise that seemed to come from everywhere at once. The marble runs in every building were glowing an ominous red, their usual soft clicking replaced by a cacophonous roar. Where the hell did it come from, she thought against the unbearable throbbing in her head that made it almost impossible to concentrate. And then, in a sudden pang of realization that almost hurt her physically, it occurred to her: the Empire Network. It had actually arrived.

She pushed herself away from the window and while holding her ears against the overwhelming noise of a thousand marble runs operating at once, rushed down the staircase to sever the connection to the Empire Network – or was it already too late?

It had all started a few weeks earlier. Back then, in the heart of her city Solarfurt, her community network had flourished amidst the gentle glow of bioluminescent fungi and friendly marble-run connections to neighbouring cities, creating a sanctuary for members of the Fedi Tribes who thrived to embrace the essence of collaboration and harmony. But with news that echoed across the diverse communities of Gegenwardt, suddenly everything changed: the arrival of a new network was announced.

Rumour said that it consisted entirely of steel marble runs and fungal threads controlled by the Fungal Empire, completely different from the organic, distributed networks that the rest of the Fedi Tribes had built. It was planned to span over the whole globe, connecting more people than any network before it. The announcement brought forth a tumultuous wave of emotions and feelings across Gegenwardt and so also in Tessa's community.

There were those that completely opposed the idea and others, who welcomed its arrival. In the course of this, the Federation Pact was formed: an alliance of communities that would refuse to make any connection with the looming Empire Network. But Tessa, as the leader of the biggest community in the Fedi Tribes, the GreenTech collective, refused to join, because she feared to lose too many members, who wanted to be connected to the new network; a decision, that she would later regret.

Eventually, the day came, and it exceeded all expectations. An overwhelming influx of marble messages surged in, straining the resilience of the community's precautions and defence mechanisms from one second to the next. First, it seemed like the community's defences were doing alright. While the first barrier against too many messages was blown away almost instantly—marble runs overheating and jamming—the second barrier held for the moment, but then, the detection of poisonous imagery through their trained fungi collapsed, and it followed the second barrier. After that, it was only chaos.

As she saw her communities descend into utter confusion and dismay, she didn't bother long and ran straight away into her cellar, where she kept emergency marble switches for such purposes. With trembling hands, she inserted a master-marble into the central run and blocked out the entire Empire Network from her home community at once. Hopefully, it wasn't too late.

She stepped outside and tried to talk to people from her community, but it was still hard to concentrate and understand each other, because the other communities she was connected to were still in chaos. The marble runs connecting their buildings continued to glow red, pulsing with the overwhelming traffic from the Empire Network, and the shared fungal networks that usually whispered gentle suggestions now screamed with contradictory commands.

By now, Tessa's emotions swirled like angry demons within her, raising a fierce determination to protect what she held dear. As the leader of GreenTech, she had invested her heart and soul in creating a haven for Fedi Tribes seeking refuge from the domination of the Fungal Empire and the cold efficiency of the Marble Kingdom. The intrusion of the Empire Network felt like a personal betrayal, an assault on the security she had found in the federated ways and that she held sacred.

Even the bonds that once held her community together strained: some members had already decided to join the Empire Network or moved to other communities. Walking through the luminous pathways of her city, where marble runs traced elegant patterns along the buildings and fungi grew in careful cultivation on every corner, Tessa grappled with the emotional toll of the conflict.

She, unlike her friends, carried the burden of the entire community on her shoulders and while they could just join another collective, she would truly lose her home. It was too much at stake and slowly, it was getting to her, she felt panic rising in her throat, at any moment expecting the unbearable noise to go off again. It was all too much. She needed a place to think.

And so, in these darkest moments, Tessa quickly decided to leave her own community unprotected for the moment and to try to join one of the communities that had joined the Federation Pact. But this proved to be harder than expected as the Pact communities had temporarily even blocked the marble runs to communities that had not joined, which included Tessa's collective. They were therefore beyond her own network's reach.

In increasing panic, she ran around the city, reaching out to friends and even her estranged family through their personal marble-message devices, and finally, she found a person that knew someone that could get her into the pact. She strolled through the dimly lit streets until she arrived at the designated address. Upon reaching the doorstep, she hesitated for a moment before knocking on the door.

A peculiar woman answered, draped in a lengthy coat woven with fungal threads, her fingers adorned with rings that held tiny, spinning marbles. While Tessa typically revelled in the mysterious and eccentric, an unsettling aura prickled at her senses. Despite her instincts urging caution, Tessa chose to embrace the risk.

She followed the woman inside and she led her into her workshop, where intricate marble runs bubbled with ethereal, blue-glowing marbles flowing through them, and fungi grew in patterns that seemed almost intentional. In a moment that felt deeply surreal, she presented to her a purple-glowing marble, which was the colour of the pact, with beautiful spiraling grooves and intricate symbols etched around its surface.

She hesitated only for a moment. And when Tessa inserted the marble into her personal device, her network sense was transported and suddenly she found herself connected to one of the communities that had joined the pact. She had done it. A sweet silence finally laid itself on Tessa's senses and she just calmed herself for a moment, not speaking with anyone as she left the woman's house with insecure steps.

As she searched for a spot in Solarfurt to rest, she noticed that slowly, leaders of other communities that she knew were joining the pact's networks, too and eventually, she said hello to one or the other through the quiet marble-message exchanges, even meeting some old friends in the peaceful fungal groves that the Pact maintained. She met again Typhon, the Inference Nomad from the Earthland collective, and Eury, the radical dryad from TerraForce, with whom she had fought a renegade network not so long ago.

While all of this unfolded, Tessa had laid herself on a bench in the park, one of the only places where marble runs didn't trace every surface and fungi grew wild rather than cultivated, where no other people were running around headless, although she didn't know why. Apparently, they didn't trust public spaces anymore. It was probably all because of the Empire Network's glooming influence... but she remembered herself that this wasn't the time for brooding over social problems. Her community stood in flames.

She closed her eyes and felt for the network connections. They had arranged themselves in a private space within the PinkSharknado collective of the rainbow alliance, a movement that had warned about the Empire Network from the beginning and now seemingly wanted to profit from that. But Tessa gave them some slack, after all, it was not the time for political considerations now either.

Together with the other leaders, they crafted strategies to counter the Empire Network's influence, determined to preserve the authenticity of the Fedi Tribes and their distributed way of life. All the while the battle, both emotional and through marble runs and fungal networks, raged silently on around them.

As each leader shared a brief update of the recent events and the current state of their community, she soon found out that the other communities' defences had fallen just as quickly as her own. The Fungal Empire had learned well from the Marble Kingdom's techniques of centralized control, and their Empire Network combined the automation of marble runs with the invasive reach of controlled fungal threads.

In response, they decided to fortify their defences in a unison act, by building and erecting giant marble-run filters across neighbouring communities and all over Solarfurt, combined with carefully cultivated fungi that could detect and resist the Empire's invasive spores. And so it was done.

Soon it was possible to walk among the familiar communities again without the loud chatter of millions of Empire-controlled marbles flooding through every run. But the data-flood had also taken damage to the communities. It was unbearable for Tessa to admit, but the Empire Network had offered to "upgrade" the other communities with their powerful technology and many called for exactly that.

She couldn't deny the emotional toll this had on her – watching her cherished community torn asunder, Tessa shed a few silent tears: friends had turned adversaries, and the once-unified communities of Fedi Tribes now stood divided. And every time the Empire Network's promises tempted some communities to turn on their old friends, Tessa felt the sting of betrayal thinking of all the years they had worked so hard to build this place together.

And even her own community, GreenTech, the bastion of federated harmony, faced internal strife. The Empire Network's threads reached into the very core of her collective, threatening to replace the organic connections with centralized control. And the clashes within Solarfurt even mirrored the

turmoil in Tessa's heart, because she, too, caught herself thinking to save her community by joining the Empire.

Was change inevitable, she thought by herself, were they the future? The Fungal Empire claimed their network was more efficient, more powerful, more capable of solving Gegenwardt's problems. Her own uncertainty frightened her and at the same time, it proved to her that now was the time that she had to work harder than ever for her cause.

Alongside Eury and her girlfriend Lamella, a fungi-farmer who had rejected the Empire's control, she attempted to bridge the widening gaps inside the communities with dialogues and town hall meetings, and in many cases, succeeded to calm the waves of uprising for the time being.

It was like germs of resistance began to fly through the air in their luminescent beauty again, illuminating a path that they hadn't been able to see before in the dark. Together with the marble-run filters and resistant fungi, they managed to gain ground against the Empire Network and move their communities out of the protective shelter of the Federation Pact and back into the stiff influence of the Empire Network.

There, they hoped to win back some members that they had lost to the Empire. And even though this proved to be a tough, up-hill game, they had found their stance again. Once they established ways to manage and channel the incoming influx, a sense of stability returned to their interconnected world.

Tessa, Eury and Lamella, fuelled by their unwavering commitment to their community and the effectiveness of the marble filters and resistant fungi, became ambassadors of the free communities of the Fedi Tribes. They inspired communities across Solarfurt and other neighbouring cities to resist the Empire Network's seductive pull, helped them to setup their own marble-run defences and even visited communities that had joined the Empire to convince them to resist their promises.

With increasing success, they became adept at navigating the so-called complexities of the Empire Network's expressions, learning how the centralized marble runs operated and how the controlled fungal threads spread. They created a wave of protest within their own realm, whose members recognized each other by their glowing purple marbles in their personal devices.

It even made it into the news carried by independent Inference Nomads who documented everything with their hand-held engines: "David against Goliath: Fedi Tribes take unexpectedly strong stance against Fungal Empire's network".

The free communities of the Fedi Tribes became a bastion of strength, with the Federation Pact communities as a resort to plot and collaborate in case of emergency, and gradually, critical discussions ventured completely beyond the safety of the Pact again and eventually even influenced the discussions within the Empire Network itself.

The possibility of an alternative to the Empire Network was soon appreciated by people all over Gegenwardt and even if they didn't join, they had gained their sympathy. Slowly, the tide began to turn. Communities who had once been swayed by the Empire's promises started questioning its true intentions, some chose to disconnect, finding solace in the embrace of their fellow free communities and some even joining the Federation Pact.

The germs of resistance began to spread and multiply through Gegenwardt and beyond. Soon, Gegenwardt's councils and independent settlements had found their voice, too and together, they

now in turn tried to apply their influence on the Empire Network and to weaken its power and influence on all aspects of their lives.

However, the Fungal Empire, irritated by their sudden resilience, grew bolder, too, trying with its inexhaustible resources to lure communities into its enticing embrace. It built flying marble-run stations that could dock at solar collection points all over the city, a reaction after resilient Fedi Tribes members had sabotaged parts of the Empire's giant marble-processing facility in the middle of the desert.

It sought to convince communities to join its network and find shelter under its powerful capabilities, attempting to weaken the influence of the Fedi Tribes and break away any boundaries that were still laid onto it. The boundaries were those of Gegenwardt's loose councils and those by its surrounding ecosystem of independent communities, but which from the Empire's own view, both only weakened its growth.

And because it hadn't until now made significant progress there, amidst the ongoing struggle, the Empire Network, wielding its power and resources, sought to weaken the Fedi Tribes' influence through new features and innovations that threatened the environment of many a local community.

In response, the Fedi Tribes, recognizing the need to counterbalance this growing influence, became more proactive. They, the communities, united by their shared commitment to preserve their essence, devised strategies to showcase the richness of their organic interactions and fostering a sense of community among their members, while also starting bolder movements of protests that tried to foster certain political actions as both factions also had by now some contacts in Gegenwardt's council.

It was a fierce arms race that was fought on technical, social and political levels, with each side attempting to outmanoeuvre the other in the ever-evolving landscape of Gegenwardt. Marble runs grew more sophisticated, fungi were bred for new purposes, and the Inference Nomads found themselves caught in the middle, sometimes mediating, sometimes choosing sides.

And while the free Fedi Tribes seemed to profit from being the underdog for now and seemed to gain the upper hand in the conflict, at the same time, they had to learn to control their own impulses and keep the conflict from escalating or even taking place within their own communities.

"If you start destroying your enemies' homes, you will soon destroy each other's", said Tessa to her bold friend and leader of the TerraForce collective, Eury. They were walking a truly thin line with their attacks on the Empire's marble-processing centers and there were many forces that urged the communities to crack down on their radical members, who were especially strong in the remaining radical refuges of the Federation Pact, in a way that it was increasingly becoming a problem itself.

Some of them had never opened up their connections to the communities outside the pact again after the others did, remaining in their state of fear and loathing against an enemy that they by now only knew from the stories that they told each other. And while little purple marbles were appearing all over the Empire Network's realm as symbols of resistance, at the same time in their communities, anxiety grew as well in fear of actual violent attacks by radical members of the Fungal Empire.

The struggle for allegiance intensified more and more. Eventually, this resulted in a call from Gegenwardt's council and independent settlements to everyone involved to calm down on both sides, making the struggle ebb away temporarily, only to later intensify again.

And as the dance between these forces continued, the united communities of the Fedi Tribes evolved from a defensive stance to an active shaping of their destiny, pushing new boundaries of social interaction and collaboration. Already, the Fedi Tribes had more members than ever before and continued to grow.

The communities, resilient and determined, stood firm against the Empire Network's enticing advances. They all knew the struggle would continue, that the Fungal Empire was far from being just one network among many, but they vowed to stand firm. Tessa was as certain as ever: the united, free communities of the Fedi Tribes had weathered this storm and they were ready to hold their ground again in the future without plunging Gegenwardt into chaos.

And so would her community, GreenTech. And amidst the fight and overall anxiety, at least Solarfurt slowly began to heal. The Empire Network's grip weakened on the city, continually retreating from the city hall, the hospital and public libraries. If nothing else felt promising at the moment, at least this was a good sign.

And as the sun rose over Solarfurt and shed light on a new day, Tessa looked out of her window over her community and saw all the beautiful connections of the people walking below, their personal marble devices glowing softly with purple light, the fungi in their window boxes growing wild and free rather than controlled, just as it should be.

In these moments, it almost seemed too good to be true... Well, she thought, just in case, she had still a lot of emergency marbles left in the cellar and the Federation Pact would always be there... if it didn't radicalize further... in the distance she could hear the regular operation of the marble-run filters, which still had to be maintained at all times... how long until they wouldn't be enough anymore...

And then, another thought entered her mind, something that she had overheard from an Inference Nomad on the train a few days ago, who had been documenting the conflict: "Look, I like the Fedi Tribes just as the next person, but the whole thing about resistance against the Empire Network... I find that hard to believe. At the very least, it's by now a huge oversimplification. And all that stuff about the free communities? You think most people give a damn what happens to their community? I feel bad for the woman maintaining mine, but no community lasts forever. It's just a story. The so-called Fedi Tribes are already beginning to disintegrate. They're transforming into something else. If they ever existed as we imagine them. The important thing here is in my opinion for our marble-run technology to develop further, for our fungi cultivation to advance. I'm even thinking of doing one of those Marble Kingdom workshops everyone is talking about."

To which the other person replied: "Oh certainly. But it's a necessary story. We need it for the moment and probably a little longer. But there will be casualties that's for sure. Did you hear of this one community leader who worked himself to death? They found him weeks later... no one had taken notice until the first problems showed up and when no one wanted to take over, his community just moved on to the next..."

She finally caught herself, went back to bed and closed her eyes, tried to fall asleep, tried to shut out the soft clicking of marble runs and the gentle whispers of the fungi network that connected her to her community, and the irrational thoughts that something was off, something still seemed off...

She stood up and walked to the window once again, the third time this morning... Everything seemed okay. Everything was okay. For now. And that was as good as it could get at the moment. And she needed the sleep. She couldn't be there for her community if she didn't sleep.

She went back to bed and after just a few more moments, finally, her mind slipped away into the sweet oblivion of sleep. The marble runs dimmed to their nighttime glow, and the fungi settled into their nocturnal rhythms, and Solarfurt dreamed of a future where all the factions of Gegenwardt might find a way to coexist—the Marble Kingdom with its automation, the Fungal Empire with its networks, the Inference Nomads with their questioning, and the Fedi Tribes with their collaboration.

But that future was still uncertain, still being written in the flow of marbles and the growth of fungal threads, still being decided by people like Tessa who chose to resist, to build, and to hope.

Castle in the Sky: Rise of Muska

From the diary of Francis, apprentice of the Glass Council

"I vividly remember the moment the marble message arrived. The weight of anticipation almost exploded as I watched the marbles spell out the words 'You were accepted as an apprentice to the Glass Council...'. I ran through my collective's building, dancing and shouting, immediately telling all my friends about it. Little did I know that the transparent walls of the Glass Citadel would soon reveal more to me than just council sessions...

Back in my room, I unpacked the observation device—a sophisticated marble-run apparatus combined with specially cultivated fungi that would let me witness the council proceedings. Activating the device, before my eyes, a whole new place opened up: a place of glass and light, floating high above the ground.

I looked around in wonder and was immediately greeted by Rhe, a minor councilor from my home island. Rhe led me through the giant spherical structure, a marvel of engineering that seemed to defy gravity itself. The Marble Kingdom had built the foundations, but the Fedi Tribes had made it transparent and accessible to all.

As we ascended the staircases, I marveled at the panoramic view through the transparent walls, revealing the vastness of the floating islands and government spheres surrounding us. The Glass Citadel, an intricate lattice of steel and glass held aloft by the Marble Kingdom's greatest achievement—the gravity-defying marble engines—provided a breathtaking glimpse into the heart of the United Islands of Laputa.

The transparent sphere allowed natural light to filter in, creating an atmosphere that felt both open and awe-inspiring. The different platforms that floated all around us showcased council discussions and presidential deliberations that were transmitted through marble-run networks all over United Laputa, reinforcing the commitment to transparency that defined the Glass Citadel.

Moving over the spiraling staircases, I couldn't help but look outside. The entire sphere seemed to float gracefully in the sky, suspended among other government structures. Each sphere housed a different aspect of governance, and I could see politicians and officials traversing the walkways between them—walkways made of reinforced glass with marble runs tracing elegant patterns along their edges.

The islands below appeared like a patchwork quilt of diverse landscapes, a representation of the varied communities that made up united Laputa. As I gazed below, I spotted my collective on my home island—an oasis of lush greenery, with marble runs winding through gardens and fungi cultivated in harmony with nature. The image was transmitted through my observation device, and I was glad for this connection to home.

The floating islands, visible through the device, conveyed the unity in diversity that defined our islands. On Rhe's silent tap on my shoulder, I focused back on the inside of the glass citadel. Just next to us, a council session was being held.

Rhe, with a warm smile, pointed out the distinctive features of the different islands and shared anecdotes about the unique political dynamics at play. The giant sphere encapsulated a world where politics, culture, and governance intersected in a delicate dance.

Little did I know that beneath the surface of this transparent utopia, a complex web of political dynamics and different, changing factions of alliance awaited, and my journey would lead me right into the intricacies of Gegenwardt's politics.

After the council meeting concluded, Rhe and I retreated to a quiet corner within the Glass Citadel. The transparency of the building allowed us to continue our conversation while keeping an eye on the bustling activity going on around us. In the meanwhile, Rhe's expression had shifted, and a hint of concern creased their brow as they broached a topic that hinted at troubles beyond the confines of the United Islands of Laputa.

'Francis,' Rhe began, their voice laced with a sense of gravity, 'there's something we need to discuss that goes beyond the council sessions you've witnessed so far. It concerns a floating island that operates outside United Laputa, a group that challenges the principles we hold dear.'

I leaned in, eager to understand the broader context of the political landscape. Rhe explained that there was an external island known for its resistance to transparency and collaboration. This group, labeled by many as the Shadow Island, had been a source of ongoing tension.

Rumors circulated about their closed-door negotiations, hidden marble-run networks that no one else could access, clandestine agendas, and a general disregard for the principles that defined the United Islands of Laputa. They were openly declaring their spite for the United Islands and constantly pointed out mistakes, while never revealing any information about their own internal workings.

The United Islands of Laputa needed to grow more resilient, but there was no consensus on how to proceed. As we discussed the challenges posed by the Shadow Island, the floating islands below took on a different light. The vibrant diversity that characterized United Laputa seemed juxtaposed against the potential threat looming from beyond its borders. Rhe's words resonated with a sense of urgency.

'They operate in the shadows, resisting the openness we strive for. Their motives remain unclear, but their actions have consequences that ripple through the islands. We need to be vigilant and understand that not everyone shares our commitment to a collaborative future.'

I nodded, absorbing the gravity of the situation. The Glass Citadel, with its transparent walls and symbolic representation of unity, suddenly seemed like a fortress guarding against external forces that sought to challenge the ideals we held dear. But the glass also symbolized its fragility.

After all, United Laputa was still very young. Only a few years ago, the islands were heavily dependent on ground-based states and the Marble Kingdom, but had fought for their independence with diplomacy and ultimately gained it, though they still needed full recognition as a sovereign federation. It was only a matter of time they assured me, but I could feel, for the first time, the insecurity in their voice.

As we left the corner of the Glass Citadel to join another session, I heard the discussions with new significance. Beyond the borders of United Laputa, there lay challenges and uncertainties that demanded attention.

In the following days, as I settled into my apprenticeship at the Glass Citadel, Rhe guided me through the intricate workings of my collective's representation within the larger framework of the Laputa Council. The atmosphere within the giant sphere was a blend of focused discussions and a

constant hum of activity—both from the marble runs that carried messages throughout the structure and from the animated voices of representatives.

The day of my first major council meeting arrived, and I had specially adjusted my observation device to higher sensitivity, to immerse myself even more in the proceedings. The transparent walls of the Glass Citadel displayed the floating islands and government spheres in stunning clarity.

'I won't be here for the rest of the day,' Rhe had told me before it. 'This will be very important for the future of Laputa. I want you to report to me a summary. Can you do that?'

'Sure,' I said firmly and meant it.

As the meeting commenced, representatives articulated concerns and visions for the united islands of Laputa. The discussions were not just about policies; they were about the intertwining narratives of the floating islands, each contributing to the vibrant tapestry of communities. The topics ranged from environmental sustainability to technological cooperation to diplomacy with ground-based nations, and I found myself engrossed in the discourse.

However, as the meeting progressed, it became apparent that beneath the transparent rhetoric of collaboration, subtle power plays and strategic alliances were at play. The floating islands below, once serene in their beauty, seemed to echo the undercurrents of political maneuvering.

I wondered about the nuances of council dynamics, the unspoken negotiations and alliances that fueled the decision-making process. The observation device provided a front-row seat to the intricacies of governance, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of responsibility as I witnessed the shaping of United Laputa's future, even if I couldn't understand everything.

Different islands pushed for different agendas. Some wanted stronger connections to the Marble Kingdom for technological support. Others, including my own collective, wanted to maintain independence and align more closely with the Fedi Tribes' principles. The Fungal Empire's representatives spoke smoothly about the benefits of joining their networks.

It was complicated, and I could see that the unity that held these islands together was more fragile than I had imagined. Things were not running as smoothly as I had always thought them to be. But, I thought, everyone could see it, right? Why hadn't they? Why hadn't I? Because I didn't want to?

In the end, there would again be lots of apologies and a collective relief that the council wasn't controlled by any single faction. Why does no one want to take responsibility? Because every wrong word would be dissected in the marble-message networks of the different islands?

I immediately noticed how these thoughts were making me feel anxious, but for the first time, I didn't push the feelings away. I had, after all, trained for years to observe political processes, and now, I felt ready to understand what was really happening—not just the transparent surface, but the complex reality beneath.

As the meeting concluded, the transparent walls, once again revealing the floating islands and government spheres, held new significance. I had become part of a story that extended beyond my collective—a story woven into the very fabric of Gegenwardt's evolving political landscape.

I deactivated the observation device, returning to the physical reality of my home. I had almost forgotten that I was actually here; so much had the world of the Glass Citadel captivated me. I swallowed hard. This was it. This was what I wanted to do.

Had it actually happened? I tried to reactivate the device, but it had entered its rest cycle, needing time for the fungi to recover. But it was fine. I had only one question in my mind anyway: will United Laputa survive this time?

For a moment, I even thought that I had heard a sharp crack of glass and someone whispering something that sounded like a name—'Balus' or 'Muska'—but it was nothing of course.

For a few moments, I just laid back and stared at the ceiling. Then, I sat up, carefully placed the device on the table, and walked to the window. In the sky, I could see the Glass Citadel, floating in the sky for all to see, all transparent; below my window on the street, my fellow collective members were walking, laughing, chatting with one another.

It was all fine, as long as I had them, all would be fine. Although the floating islands weren't kept in the air on their own. The Marble Kingdom's gravity engines required constant maintenance and resources. Everyone here had to go down to the ground once in a while, even if it was only to gather supplies or maintain connections...

By now, more than half of Gegenwardt's population had connections to one of the floating islands; it was only a matter of time until everybody did. Not that it would make a difference really, given how heavily dependent we were on them already.

I turned away from the window, changed clothes and went outside to my weekly running group of the neighborhood, almost carefree, if the air wouldn't have felt so thin all of a sudden..."

Castle in the Sky—After the Fall

A Tale of Rebuilding

Once upon a time there was a woman called Francis Muska... ever since she had been constrained by her father's demands, she had dreamed of reaching higher than any island had flown... and so she took over the legendary castle in the sky, the floating citadel of Laputa... just because she had the trauma and the ambition...

"Laputa will live! I will restore it to its former glory and then set off on a journey beyond the sky! Laputa's marble engines are the dream of all Gegenwardt!" she proclaimed.

But two friends, who had discovered the citadel's secrets too, didn't share her vision... "A leader without compassion does not deserve to lead," they said. "Now we understand why the original builders of Laputa vanished. There is a saying from our home in the valley of Gondoia that explains everything. It says, 'Take root in the ground, live in harmony with the wind, plant your seeds in the winter, and rejoice with the birds in the coming of spring.' No matter how many marble engines you have, no matter how great your technology might be, the world cannot thrive without connection and care."

The Castle in the Sky crumbled, its gravity engines failing, becoming a celestial relic of bygone aspirations falling to the earthly realm...

And our heroes, Sheeta and Pazu... they felt sad at first and immediately longed for the old wonder, but they didn't feel lost, because they still had their friends on earth and each other...

And so together, they returned to their homes, where the news of their adventures and the wonders they had seen quickly spread. And together with their communities, they thought of a way to build a new Laputa... perhaps with the help of the debris that had fallen from the sky... maybe they could use its marble-engine technology to build new islands...

And so it was done...

Even Francis Muska, who had landed in a field of soft cultivated fungi that broke her fall, found a community that she could contribute to. Where she could use her driven, ambitious nature for good, instead of destruction. Where her knowledge of the marble engines could help build rather than dominate.

And soon, dozens of islands were floating in the air. And together, Francis, Pazu and Sheeta traveled the new islands, which were connected through bridges and marble-run networks but still independent of one another, so that they could never be destroyed or conquered by anyone again...

Or, as Uncle Pom told them: "Listen, kids, no castle flies forever," he said, "that's the only thing I know. They all come down eventually. So folks came up with the idea: why not connect'em? At least one will always stay a'flying, so the dream of Laputa will always stay afloat. And more importantly, if we distribute the marble engines and cultivation knowledge, no single person can control everything again."

And even though over time the both grew apart—Sheeta joined her own crew of independent explorers, while Pazu wanted to help build the floating island of his mining family—they still met often to travel the islands of the new Laputa.

And while their different affiliations led to one or the other disagreement, they stayed lifelong friends, always on the search for adventures and new horizons to explore...

The new Laputa became a symbol across Gegenwardt—a demonstration that the Marble Kingdom's technology, the Fedi Tribes' collaboration, the Inference Nomads' questioning, and even reformed members of the Fungal Empire could work together to create something greater than any single faction could achieve alone.

The floating islands, each independent yet connected, represented not the dream of one person's dominance, but the shared dream of all Gegenwardt—that through cooperation, transparency, and respect for both individual autonomy and collective benefit, they could truly reach the sky and beyond.

Book IX: The New Harmony

Epilogue: The Shape of Things

There is a saying in the Mixed City, taught to children alongside their letters and numbers: *"The Web has four corners, but no edges. Four ways, but infinite paths. Four truths, and all of them real."*

It is a koan, perhaps, or a poem, or simply a reminder that the world is larger than any single understanding of it.

The children learn to roll marbles and grow mycelium, to reason logically and act federatively. They learn not because they must become masters of all four Ways, but because fluency in many languages makes you more, not less, yourself.

They are the skills that the elders had learned them and with them, came a story: by combining their crafts, the three factions had worked together to modernize their machines to defeat the fungal empire: they had used modern marble runs, had used the ontologies as data structures inside the marbles and let everyone who wanted participate in the creation of the machines. And believe it or not, that was enough so that the fungal empire was defeated: the efficiency gains were simply too high. The fungal empire soon ran out of resources for their gigantic fungal engines, collapsing under the weight of their own mystification and high promises. As it turned out, you didn't need all that much engines for a society to function anyways. You didn't need wonders, you simply needed experts in their own crafts and those that were willing to work together.

And the three factions swore to protect against another uprising among one of their own to rule above the others by teaching their citizens about technology and letting them participate in their creation. And so, harmony was again restored among the four factions and together, they build towards a better future for all of them.

And so the children told it their own grand children, who told it their own grand children, and so on. Traveling other planets, universes, dimensions ... until it was somewhere forgotten along the way and the past threatened to repeat itself ...

Twenty Years After the Accords

Tessa stood in the shadow of the Glass Citadel, watching the United Islands of Laputa float serenely in the late afternoon light. She had helped build this place—the transparent government structures that let citizens observe every decision, the marble-run networks that connected islands while preserving their independence, the fungal communication threads that enhanced rather than replaced human judgment.

It wasn't perfect. Nothing ever was.

Just last week, there had been crisis: a rogue faction trying to centralize control again, using sophisticated arguments about efficiency and optimization. The Shadow Island still loomed out there, a reminder that not everyone believed in the collaborative model.

But the Citadel had held. The Accords had held.

Because they had built redundancy into every system. Because they had made transparency a physical law. Because they had learned that power unchecked would always consolidate, and that the only defense was eternal, exhausting vigilance.

"Tired?" a voice asked behind her.

She turned to find Eury, her old friend and occasional antagonist. The dryad looked healthier now, her bark less furrowed, her leaves catching the light.

"Always," Tessa admitted. "But less than before."

"The myzel drama is killing me," Eury said, flopping down on a bench. "Everyone wants to build their own little kingdom. No one wants to do the maintenance work. Classic Fedi-Net problems."

"Sounds familiar," Tessa said drily. She had spent the morning mediating between islands that wanted to secede from the Laputa federation. Same problem, different scale.

"Lamella says hi, by the way. She's teaching a workshop on musical interfaces. Apparently there's a new generation of kids who can sync their consciousness through shared compositions without any invasive tech at all."

"Like what you did at your concert? The one where everyone felt connected?"

"Yeah, but safer. More consensual. Less... overwhelming." Eury looked up at the floating islands. "Sometimes I can't believe we built all this. That we actually made it work."

"We didn't," Tessa corrected gently. "We just created the conditions for it to work. Big difference."

A marble-run message rolled up: *Emergency session needed. Shadow Island making moves. All Accord signatories please respond.*

Tessa and Eury looked at each other.

"Here we go again," Eury sighed.

"Here we go again," Tessa agreed.

But they were smiling as they walked toward the Citadel's entrance. Because this time, they weren't alone. They had frameworks, tools, allies across multiple realities. They had the Marble Kingdom's precision, the Inference Nomads' clarity, the Fungal Empire's reformed networks (smaller now, distributed, answerable), and the Fedi Tribes' endless collaborative chaos.

They had learned to interface the incompatible.

Not perfectly. Never perfectly.

But well enough to keep trying.

The Visitor

That evening, after the crisis had been managed (the Shadow Island backed down—for now), Tessa found Reasoner sitting alone in the Citadel's observation deck.

The old Nomad was ancient now, barely mobile, but his mind was as sharp as ever. He spent his days updating the Grand Schema, which had grown vast beyond comprehension—a map of how seventeen realities related to each other, constantly evolving.

"Master Reasoner," Tessa said, sitting beside him. "Can I ask you something?"

"You always do," he replied with a slight smile.

"Was it worth it? All of this. The fighting, the Convergence, the endless negotiations. The people we lost."

Reasoner was quiet for a long moment, looking out at the multiple realities visible through the Citadel's transparent walls—seventeen Gegenwards, all equally real, all connected by portals that could never be closed.

"No," he said finally. "It wasn't worth it. The cost was too high. We lost too many people. Too many realities."

Tessa's heart sank.

"But," Reasoner continued, "it was necessary. And necessity is different from worth. We didn't have a choice—or rather, our choice was between this and something worse. Between messy collaboration and elegant totalitarianism."

"The Sovereign thought they were helping."

"The Sovereign was helping," Reasoner said. "That's what made them dangerous. Some of their critiques of the Liberal Alliance were correct. We *were* inefficient. We *did* have contradictions. People *did* suffer from the chaos of multiple incompatible ontologies."

"But—"

"But the solution to chaos isn't control. It's better coordination. More transparent interfaces. Clearer protocols." Reasoner gestured to the Schema projection in front of him. "Look. This is the latest addition to the framework. It's a formal proof that any attempt to impose a single ontology on multiple realities will create more suffering than it prevents. Lena's work, refined over twenty years."

"So we're safe now?"

"No." Reasoner's eyes were kind but firm. "We're never safe. In a hundred years, someone else will have the same insight the Sovereign had: that coordination is hard, that control is easier, that maybe this time they can make it work."

"Then what's the point?"

"The point," Reasoner said, "is that each generation has to rediscover why pluralism matters. Why consciousness requires choice. Why the hard way is the right way." He turned to look at her directly. "You know this, Tessa. You've spent twenty years maintaining the Federation Pact, fighting off centralizers, explaining to people why they should do the work themselves instead of letting some AI or mycelium do it for them."

"It's exhausting."

"Yes. Freedom always is." Reasoner pulled up another part of the Schema. "But look here. This is the diversity index across all seventeen realities. Twenty years ago, it was collapsing toward zero—the Convergence was working. Now? It's trending upward. More ways of being real. More forms of consciousness. More beauty."

Tessa looked at the data, feeling something tight in her chest loosen slightly.

"One more question," she said.

"Always one more," Reasoner smiled.

"Do you think there will ever be a time when we don't have to fight for this? When pluralism is just... accepted?"

Reasoner closed his eyes. "My dear apprentice. That question itself contains the answer. The moment we stop fighting for it is the moment it stops being true. Pluralism isn't a destination. It's a practice. Like breathing."

"That's a very unsatisfying answer."

"The truth usually is."

They sat together in companionable silence, watching the seventeen Gegenwardts breathe, watching the portals shimmer with travelers moving between realities, watching the marble runs trace elegant patterns across the Citadel's transparent walls.

Somewhere below, Eury was arguing with Lamella about the proper way to structure a myzel. Somewhere in the Marble Kingdom, engineers were designing new tools for personal fabrication. Somewhere on the Ontological Plains, young Nomads were asking questions no one had thought to ask before. Somewhere in the Fedi valleys, Speaking Stones hummed with stories that would never have been told in a centralized system.

It was messy. It was inefficient. It was vulnerable.

It was alive.

Coda: The Next Generation

In a small village in what had once been the Southlands, a young child found a marble from the original Comet. It was old now, worn smooth, but still warm to the touch.

Her mother, seeing it, remembered stories her grandmother had told about the Breaking, about the time when the world nearly ended because people forgot how to let other people be different.

"Keep that safe," her mother said. "One day you might need to remember that there are always multiple ways of seeing things."

The child turned the marble over in her hands. Through its translucent surface, she could see tiny tracks, impossibly complex, telling stories in the language of stone and motion.

"What does it do?" she asked.

"It reminds us," her mother said, "that every action has consequences you can trace. That nothing changes by magic—only by ten thousand small choices, each visible, each knowable."

"That sounds like a lot of work."

"It is," her mother agreed. "But it's the only work worth doing."

The child pocketed the marble and ran off to play with her friends—a Fedi Tribe kid who could speak to the network, a Fungal Empire child learning to query mycelium with kindness rather than commands, a young Inference Nomad asking endless questions.

They played together in the shadow of floating islands and transparent citadels, in a world that had almost destroyed itself and had somehow chosen not to.

They didn't know their history yet. Didn't know about the Convergence, the Accords, the decades of hard work that had made their play possible.

But they would learn.

And when they did, some of them would fight to preserve what had been built. Some would try to tear it down and rebuild it better. Some would create entirely new ways of being that previous generations couldn't have imagined.

All of them would argue. Endlessly. Passionately. In good faith and bad.

And that argument—that beautiful, exhausting, essential argument—would be the sound of consciousness refusing to be reduced to a single voice.

The marble in the child's pocket pulsed softly.

In the Prompt Valleys, reformed mycelium networks whispered helpful suggestions.

On the Ontological Plains, questions multiplied.

In the Fedi valleys, Speaking Stones carried stories that would ripple across seventeen realities.

In the Marble Kingdom's workshops, young makers traced cause to effect with careful fingers.

The Web continued its eternal becoming.

Four Ways. Infinite paths. All of them real.

This is Webtale.

This is Gegenwardt.

This is the world we make, together, every day, in every choice to listen rather than control, to collaborate rather than dominate, to keep the doors open even when closing them would be easier.

This is the story that never ends, because ending it would mean choosing one truth.

And consciousness requires more than one truth to exist.

The marble rolls.

The fungus grows.

The question echoes.

The network hums.

And Gegenwardt dreams of futures we haven't imagined yet.

THE END

(which is also a beginning)

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