

István Rudas

Alfie —
*who came
out of
the fog*



Alfie — who came out of the fog

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Foreword

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I was sitting by the pond in Vienna's Stadtpark. For an older man with a walking stick, it's a blessing to find a bench where you can rest. I was alone, but I wasn't the only one here by the pond.

Across from me, on another bench, sat a young girl. No, actually a young woman, about 35. She had a paper bag on her lap, from which she took pieces of stale bread and tossed them to the pond's inhabitants — the waterfowl. They were old acquaintances: mallards, great crested grebes, coots, and three majestic gray heron ladies.

Of course, I watched the young lady very closely, since I don't need glasses for distance vision yet. She was young, very slender, and well-proportioned — to sum it up briefly. Her long blonde hair fell over her shoulders like a wavy cascade of water. She was wearing a short, floral summer dress that revealed both her bare shoulders and the curve of her full breasts. In this sweltering heat, everyone was wearing as little as possible — only we older gentlemen were sweating in our long black jeans, with belts and suspenders, of course. The young woman with the sad look was tossing pieces of stale bread to the birds and talking to them. That was unusual; few people talk to animals — thinking, I suppose, that they'll be understood.

Her snow-white knees fascinated me. In my mind, of course, I'd been working since that morning on coming up with an idea for a new book suitable for all ages. It was getting on my nerves that everyone was making such a big deal out of the fact that I hadn't yet managed to write a book suitable for all ages. Thousands of people read my more than 40 novels because I've posted them online for free. But that wasn't the point. Could I even write anything suitable for all ages anymore, or had my old brain already rotted away so much that I couldn't pull it off? Last year, with the best of intentions, I wrote a mystery novel, and at first it really and truly was completely

suitable for young readers. But as I wrote, my pen slipped, and the mystery ended up reading much better and more fluidly with a sequel that wasn't suitable for young readers. It was exasperating; was I really incapable of it?

It all started when I turned in my German Matura essay; the topic was "Goethe and His View of Women." I, chasing after an "A" or "Excellent" and without the slightest clue what the master poet thought about women in general — let alone in particular — cheekily filled the entire booklet right down to the last page. The prompt made it clear that the young man wasn't gay, and, unwisely, they left it up to my overactive imagination to herd one woman after another into his private chamber with him — and once I got started, there was no stopping me. Of course, it earned an "A," since an "Excellent" had long since ceased to exist by then. Imagine my astonishment when the old German teacher — whose declared favorite I had been all those years — had me summoned to the teachers' lounge. I had to read my essay aloud to all my teachers, both male and female. Oh, good Lord! The gym teacher — a former Olympian, no less — shook his head and rolled his eyes, just as the Prince of Poets himself might have done. I read on, falling into a state of sacred rapture over the thoughts, life, and feelings of love of the divine Privy Councilor Wolfgang von G. — and my French teacher wept her eyes out with emotion, which, unsurprisingly, led to a full-blown fling shortly thereafter. I was confused for a moment; had I discovered a golden path that led straight to the unspeakable? — But I digress.

She had delightful knees, that young lady whose sight gave me such pleasure. My gaze followed that of the mallards, who, from a perfect, more advantageous position, traced the delicate lines of her snow-white, delightful inner thighs. Ah, Leda and the swan! I am a forever depraved old man; I will never be able to write a G-rated novel to prove that I'm capable of putting more than just dirty stuff on paper.

It must have been the god Hermes who stepped in at that moment. A young couple walked past us, by the pond. A young girl in a Ferrari-red electric wheelchair and her bald boyfriend. Holding

hands and chatting happily, the two walked and rolled along, the Ferrari humming softly. Oh, Hermes, you're the best!

An idea took root. A red wheelchair — Ferrari red — a disabled girl and her boyfriend, chatting happily and holding hands. The idea flashed through my mind. An alien — that young guy with the shiny bald head, like it's so trendy these days? An alien? No, that sounded wrong and cliché. A time traveler? Oh yeah, brilliant — that was it!

The young woman across the way, who spoke to the birds just as Saint Francis once did, looked so unspeakably sad that it really tugged at my heartstrings. She told the birds about her suffering, her sad story. Yvonne — yes, I'll call her Yvonne — had just dumped her Alessandro from Argentina, because she was a child of the 21st century and not some medieval girl who'd let herself be enslaved by a macho man. The young woman defiantly wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, and the mallards nodded approvingly. If you have backbone, you don't give in to a macho guy from South America! The young woman smiled despite her sorrow when our eyes met. I let my gaze radiate cheerfulness and encouragement. Oh, I should sit down next to her, put my arm around her, and listen to her troubles. But that's not who I am — I don't sit down next to a beautiful young woman uninvited and offer her grandfatherly comfort, even though I certainly could.

Hermes, you're a friend! I had everything I needed for a little story — maybe it'll just be a short story with family-friendly content. But wait — my time traveler was, after all, a sexologist, recently widowed, and had taken some time off to think things over. Here, in our time?

Yes, all the ingredients were there. The Ferrari and the girl, the bald boyfriend, and Yvonne. Gods and goddesses from ancient Greek mythology — and I'll even find a way to squeeze in my special friend, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, as a mischievous old man. Suitable for all ages. You can count on it.

My friend Hermes smiled. "István, I just bet Dionysus — whom you also know as Bacchus — a small barrel of schnapps that you'll make it this time. So pull yourself together and don't make me lose!"

Yes, exactly. I promised that Yvonne's snow-white inner thighs would stay out of the story — just to keep up the pretense that, surprisingly, the text would be suitable for all ages. — Because, oh gods and goddesses, it will inevitably be about — naturally, G-rated — sex, from the first chapter to the last.

Sorry, Hermes!

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István Rudas
Vienna, August 29, 2026

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Before The Kettledrum Stroke

Of course, I know that great composers like Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms were strongly warned against beginning a symphony with a Kettledrum Stroke. But I did it anyway. And of course, I'm not an idiot — I wouldn't dare compare myself to these cultural giants. I wanted readers to sit up and take notice right away and ask themselves, "What on earth is this!?" And then, once they've calmed down, they can enjoy the story.

And don't underestimate me — my reaction is usually a mix of sweet and sour, sweet and venomous, and downright sour. Of course I know what a Kettledrum Stroke is, so don't complain. Please. The otherwise unassuming gentleman in a tailcoat and bow tie raises his timpani mallet high, far behind his head, his eyes fixed on the tip of the conductor's baton. Of course he knows exactly when to strike the timpani. But the devil take him if he didn't fix his eyes on the quivering tip of the baton and wait until the maestro flicks his little stick upward. That's the signal; just a thousandth of a second later, the timpanist strikes the drumhead — which is made of plastic these days — with full force. That's exactly how the good old Haydn wanted it, back in London in 1792. "The monocles must fall from the dignitaries' faces," the maestro instructed the timpanist back in those days.

That's how — and only that way — you handle the Kettledrum Stroke. You don't just pound away like an unmusical donkey, no! The symphony surges and glides majestically up and down, lulling the well-fed dignitaries to sleep, playfully inviting them to drift off into a gentle slumber. The Nereids caress the noble gentleman with their moist, soft arms and smile as the good man gently drifts off. And then comes the moment of silence. The baton twitches, the timpanist strikes, and the monocles fall. That's how it's done. So let's begin with the symphony, and wait with bated breath for the moment of complete silence — the moment of the timpani crash.

Our protagonist's name is Julia Herrnthaler. She's 20, soon to be 21. Fascinated by the pantheon of ancient Greece, she's studying history through a distance learning program. Yes, distance learning, because she uses a wheelchair, and universities aren't really accessible. She is a quite pretty young woman, slender and well-proportioned. She usually wears her dark-blonde hair down and shoulder-length, even though that requires a lot of care and frequent washing. But it's the hairstyle she feels most comfortable with. Her symmetrical face is reminiscent of the classical faces of ancient statues of Greek goddesses; her nose is straight as a sword, yet not overpowering. Her eyes are sometimes light blue, sometimes gray-blue, depending on the weather and the color of the sky. One would be well advised to look into her eyes instead of gazing out the window to check the weather. She wears only light makeup when she goes out, and she uses only a colorless lipstick, for her lips are naturally beautiful, full, and a vibrant shade. Her body is, on the whole, beautiful, well-proportioned, and truly shapely.

She usually wears semi-transparent blouses without a bra, because she's proud of her small, firm breasts with their pointed nipples, which she likes to show off. Let them stare! Her lower body and legs are usually covered with a plaid blanket with a Scottish pattern when she's out of the house. It's safe to assume that both her lower body and her legs are shapely, although her legs probably aren't very muscular because of the wheelchair. At home, she wears computer glasses because she works at a computer a lot. She calls her electric wheelchair her "Ferrari" because of its bright red color. In her apartment, she walks freely on her own two feet because she knows exactly where to hold on; she only uses the wheelchair when she's out and about.

Strictly speaking, Julia is an orphan; but she has a wide circle of relatives, so she has plenty of "family." She knows her parents only from photos — they died in a car accident when she wasn't even 2 years old. She has a few friends, but only one "best friend," Yvonne. Yvonne is already 26 and has a series of romantic relationships, which provides plenty of conversation topics between the friends. Yvonne is working on her doctoral dissertation in philosophy; she is very cultured, well-educated, and bisexual, so she and Julia regularly

become very close. Yvonne comes to visit only once a week and spends Tuesday afternoons with Julia. No, you can't say that Julia is lonely like many other women in wheelchairs.

Almost every day, Julia drives her Ferrari to the pond in Vienna's Stadtpark and spends an hour there, whether in the sunshine or the rain. She brings along a paper bag filled with crumbled stale bread, which she tosses to the ducks and other waterfowl in the pond — and, of course, she smiles indulgently when the sparrows squabble with the larger birds over the breadcrumbs. She loves watching the birds so much, and Julia knows why. The birds are kindred spirits — they could fly away, but something keeps them tied to this pond. Birds that don't fly are, in a sense, also wheelchair users: their little legs certainly aren't designed for walking. Julia looks at the plants, beautifully tended by the city's parks department, the pond, the bushes, and the birds — her little paradise in the middle of the big city.

She only glances superficially at other people — mostly passersby or retirees. There's a reason for that, too; she used to enjoy striking up conversations, but they were usually very superficial or meaningless. Having grown older and wiser, she no longer felt the urge to strike up a conversation with everyone and anyone. She followed world events through newspapers and TV news; that was all she needed. It was hard enough as it was to tell real news from fake news. She wouldn't miss those little hours by the pond — neither the weather nor her studies nor her reading could keep her away. Even when it rained, she would throw on a cape — not even that kept her away from the pond. And the birds' behavior in the rain was particularly interesting.

It was here, by the pond, that she had also heard the pick-up line of the century. A pimply-faced boy — certainly no Adonis — had been staring at her for a long time from a park bench across the way; from behind his thick glasses, the 14-year-old or so was trying to trace the contours of her inner thighs beneath her miniskirt, since she wore neither a thong nor anything else in the summer. Now he had moved over to the park bench next to her Ferrari, cheekily placed his hand on her knee, and leaned forward curiously to look at her crotch.

Visibly disappointed that she'd quickly pressed her thighs together, he muttered, "Can you even have sex with a woman in a wheelchair!?" No one had ever come at her with such a stupid line before — for heaven's sake! She'd shot him an icy glare straight from the Arctic and muttered back, "You'll have to ask my dad about that, my dear, because he lies between my thighs night after night and obviously thinks it's perfectly possible — and that you have to water the little plant diligently." The guy felt a chill run down his spine and a flush rise to his cheeks, and he quickly took off — that insolent lout.

Her interest in the world of ancient Greek gods was sparked by her grandfather, as this was his pet subject. Grandpa and Grandma treated her with the utmost care, because little Julia suffered from brittle bone disease. Julia never suffered a broken bone while in their care — that didn't happen until later, in kindergarten and at school — but she quickly learned how to avoid such injuries. She often spent entire afternoons sitting on Grandpa's lap while he read her stories, legends, and fairy tales from thick books about ancient Greece. Since the gods were very sexually active, Grandpa had to educate her thoroughly about sexuality at a fairly early age — Julia listened with her mouth agape, for it was highly strange and interesting what the gods and goddesses got up to among themselves or with the poor human children.

Grandma, who was sitting in the other armchair knitting, coughed a little sheepishly when Grandpa answered the girl's questions about his own sexuality openly and honestly — including the part about the neighbors. Grandma coughed, but she wasn't really opposed to it. Patiently, Grandpa explained how and why boys and girls were sexually active; now Grandma's coughing grew louder, and with it she slowed the flow of her grandfather's speech. "I won't send our granddaughter out into the world with the same ignorance that our uninformed parents had to deal with!" he exclaimed indignantly, and rescheduled the sensitive topics for a time of day when Grandma was out at coffee with her friends. Grandpa lovingly made sure that "his girl" knew everything there was to know about sexuality as soon as she left the nest.

Of course, she immediately noticed the friendly man who had been coming to the pond at the same time as her for days now and sitting down on one of the empty benches. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. What struck her first was that he had no hair at all — none on his head, no eyebrows, and no facial hair. On his bald, round head he wore a small cap made of dark blue velvet, richly embroidered with gold and silver thread, which was apparently just a piece of headwear and didn't seem to have any religious or other special significance. Just like her, he watched the birds intently, and only now and then did he cast a quick glance her way, but she pretended not to notice. His clothes — a shirt with an open collar, a sleeveless doublet, and light-colored long pants — showed that he must have been slender and athletic. Unlike her, he didn't have a paper bag of stale bread with him, but when he took a sandwich out of his pocket for a snack, he tore off a few pieces of bread and tossed them to the waterfowl and sparrows. Julia smiled to herself; it seemed as though he was trying to get her attention with this little gesture. He arrived every day at about the same time as she did.

A few days later, the weather was overcast, and a light drizzle was falling. Julia took a break from her studies and got ready to go out. She grabbed her cape, a plaid shawl, a small fold-able umbrella, and the paper bag with stale bread. From her apartment on Coburgbastei, the drive in the Ferrari took exactly 7 minutes to reach the pond in City Park. The young man was already sitting on his bench; he had put on a clear raincoat, was holding a small bag of stale bread, and was generously feeding the waterfowl and sparrows. She pulled the Ferrari up to her usual spot, and when their eyes met, he gave her a brief nod in greeting. Julia remained frozen in her seat; they were the only two people in the midst of this flock of food-hungry birds. They both fed the birds without it looking like a competition.

Julia struggled with the little umbrella, whose ingenious designer had come up with the smartest folding mechanism but hadn't anticipated wind, crosswinds, or even shear winds. But now a gusty, hot southwesterly wind from the Sahara swept through Vienna's Stadtpark, trying to yank the umbrella out of Julia's hand — and in an instant, the precious canopy flew several meters across the asphalt. Quick as lightning, the man was on his feet, darted after it,

and caught the wayward umbrella just before it reached the bushes. He brought it to Julia and handed it to her.

"Thank you very much, sir!" said Julia, delighted, as she folded up the unruly cloak. "It's just a light drizzle now, so my cape will do," she added, throwing back the hood; her hair flowed down to her shoulders like a golden waterfall.

"That won't last long either; it's already getting lighter back there," he said in a beautiful, melodious voice. He held out his hand. "My name is Alfred, but everyone calls me Alfie," said Alfie.

Julia looked at his hand. "I can't shake your hand, Mr. Alfred; I have brittle bone disease, and you might break my fingers. And my name is Julia — everyone calls me Julia, just Julia." She smiled at his hand.

Alfie thought for a few seconds. "Just put your hand on mine," he said, holding out his open palm, "no bones will break, Julia — just Julia." Julia placed her hand on his open palm for just a moment. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Alfred! And please, just Julia — no ridiculous suffix, please."

Alfie smiled. "In Scandinavia, everyone is on a first-name basis — everyone, every single person — so why don't we just do the same? And just call me Alfie or Alfred; I left 'Sir' and the 'Mr.' at the coat check at the park entrance." He smiled warmly and charmingly.

Julia smiled subtly; that's how conversations usually started at the university, too, if you were open to it. "So you're not from around here — maybe from Scandinavia, Alfie? I hear a slight foreign accent."

"No, from Huntington Heights, a suburb of Chicago. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents are originally from Germany, from the Hanover area, and all of us kids had to learn flawless High German — it's an almost ironclad family tradition that comes in handy when I travel to Germany or Austria. In Switzerland, it's more of a disadvantage to be mistaken for a German, but so be it." Alfie sat

down on the nearest bench. “Brittle bone disease, you said? I read something about it once, but unfortunately I don’t remember much of it anymore.”

This wasn't the first time Julia had explained her condition. "Brittle bone disease is so named because your bones break very easily. It's a congenital genetic disorder that is primarily passed down through the female line. Thank God I have a specific variant; I don't suffer from nausea, headaches, or a reduced libido like so many others with the same condition. However, I will likely not live to see my fortieth birthday. I've known this for a long time, and I'm preparing myself for it."

Alfie leaned forward. "You've already been given a death sentence? — By God, that's unimaginable! Come on, isn't there a cure, any medication, or even some kind of hocus-pocus?"

Julia shook her head. “Yes, I take medication for all sorts of things, but I don’t take the libido suppressants. My libido is fine just the way it is.” Julia lowered her gaze; she had to put on the brakes here. No further exploration of her libido with a stranger.

Alfie shook his head. “That can’t be right; I can’t just accept that without saying anything. We fly to the moon, we manipulate genes with gene scissors — and yet we can’t do anything about brittle bone disease? Or is it just because the market is so small that it isn’t profitable for the pharmaceutical companies? Not profitable!? — ‘Only in a degenerate society does one weigh human lives in gold and silver,’ said the wise King Hammurabi of Babylon, millennia ago.” Alfie was truly deeply shaken.

Julia said nothing. Of course she knew who Hammurabi was, and the fact that this statement had likely been necessary three or four thousand years ago to starkly underscore human depravity said something about humanity. “I’m studying history at the university — with a focus on Hellenism, mind you — but I know exactly who Hammurabi was.” She didn’t even know why she said that. “You may not be studying anymore, Alfie, but the fact that you can quote Hammurabi so well is a testament to your broad humanistic

education.” Finally — just get away from this topic of medication and illness. That didn’t belong in a casual, relaxed conversation with a stranger.

Alfie nodded. "Yes, Julia, I received a really good — and, above all, thorough — education. My grandfather declared me his favorite grandson and left me a generous savings account for my education. Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Julia couldn't help but jump in. "And where are you now, Alfie? On vacation, apparently, but other than that?"

It took Alfie a few seconds to reply. "Yeah, it looks like a vacation — I took a sabbatical year. I'm a curator — sort of like a librarian, I suppose that's what they'd call it in Austria."

Julia took a small packet of sweet pastilles out of her purse. "Would you like one, too? Sugar-free, of course." She handed him a piece of candy. "A librarian? I guess my idea of a librarian is pretty old-fashioned — a little gnome plagued by gout, with thick glasses perched on his nose and constantly coughing from the dust of centuries. But you don't look like that at all, Alfie!"

Alfie smiled. "I go for a run every morning and go — or rather, used to go — to the weight training room twice a week for general training. I take care of my health; that's just the norm over in the States, so it's nothing special. And as for the dust of the ages, well, of course the National Library also preserves real paper books, but where I work, we only use microfilm, hard drives, and germanium crystal storage — whatever's modern these days. We don't have dust here, and no gout either, thank God!"

Julia smiled slightly. "I was just speaking figuratively, Alfie. I can see you're not some gout-ridden gnome — far from it. More like an athletic young man in his mid-thirties who doesn't look like a librarian on the outside."

Alfie smiled. "I'm 42, not a day younger. And the fact that I became a librarian at such a young age is really only thanks to my

thorough education. Like you, I majored in history, with a focus on the turn of the millennium, and I studied and completed seven additional minors. Geometry, cosmology, physics and chemistry, geology and mineralogy, and sexology. I think that was everything. By the time I was 34, I had finished my studies, held eight doctoral degrees, and applied directly to the National Library as a curator. I was assigned to the “1968 to 2038” department and held my own pretty well in that snake pit that the National Library happens to be.”

Julia corrected him. “You slipped up, Alfie — you said 2038, but you probably meant 2018, because it’s 2025 now, if I’m not mistaken.” Alfie blinked briefly. “Yeah, sorry, I just slipped up — of course, 2018. Fifty years. 1968 to 2018 — the era of unbridled sexuality across broad segments of society.”

Julia couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right here. Alfie tossed a breadcrumb to a black-headed bird. "An American coot," he explained. Julia smiled gently. "Zoology wasn't your thing, Alfie. No, that's a Eurasian coot; we don't have American ones here. Over there, those lovebirds are called mallards; the cute little black ones are called great crested grebes; and the three long-legged ladies way in the back are gray herons. I've known them all for years.”

A long silence. Was Alfie not keen on being lectured, or were his thoughts elsewhere? Julia broke the silence. “Sexology? That really stands out from the other natural sciences — it surprises me a bit.” Alfie looked up; his mind was clearly somewhere else entirely.

"Sexology? Yes, that was an opportunistic decision on my part. I was hoping to land the job as curator starting in 1968; the curator at the time was already on his way to retirement. 1968 marked the beginning of the sexual revolution — women's liberation thanks to the pill — and if I knew a little more than just the basics about sexuality, it would improve my chances of getting the job, and that's exactly how it turned out. It was a good decision. I owed it to my grandfather's memory to strive for something special in my career. And he would surely have been proud of my achievements — good old Grandpa Arthur.” Alfie looked over at the gray herons. Julia

realized she had to steer the conversation in a different direction, because it had become very personal indeed.

So she dropped another bombshell. “I’m 20, turning 21 soon,” she said, “as far as I know, women in America don’t like to reveal their true age. I don’t mind — I’m 20 and unmarried, a single cripple with an expiration date.” Alfie shot her a look that didn’t seem very friendly. “Cut the crap, Julia, please! Okay, you’re twenty — fine. But I don’t see you as a cripple, damn it, and that ‘expiration date’ stuff — well, we’ll see. I’m going to stay here by the pond and toast you with champagne on your 41st birthday — deal?” He looked her straight in the eyes. “I accept that you’re suffering from an illness, but I don’t accept your ‘cripple’ remark — not at all. Look me in the eyes and tell me if you understand me.”

Julia tugged at her blanket, since she’d taken off her cape minutes ago. “That was a really stupid thing to say, Alfie. I take it back. Okay, I’m not a cripple, and I’ll bite the ass of anyone who dares call me a cripple. Deal?” Alfie nodded, “Good girl!”

He arched his back. “I’m 41, turning 42 soon. I was married once; now I’m a widower, and I have two adult children, Waltraud and Heinrich; they live in downtown Chicago, right in the belly of the beast. I live alone in Huntington Heights, a mile from the City Limits, and I don’t have a steady girlfriend — I’m not in the mood for a new relationship or a meaningless fling. Is that the information you wanted to hear?”

Julia nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sorry to hear that your wife passed away, Alfie. It still seems to be painful for you. On the other hand, it's nice to hear that your children also live in Chicago, so they're not far away." She was silent for a long moment. “I’ll probably never have children of my own — I don’t want to pass my illness on to the next generation. I’ve even thought about getting a Sterilization if I ever find a real life partner.”

Alfie placed his hand on her forearm, a look of urgency in his eyes. “Sterilization these days is irreversible. And the disease is passed down through the maternal line, so the risk is only 50 percent. Think

it over carefully — maybe your future husband will want children? From what you're saying, it sounds like you don't have a steady boyfriend right now?"

Julia nodded. "Yes, that's true. At least not a male sexual partner. Who would want to be intimate with a frail, sick woman!?" Alfie scratched his bald head. "Okay, I get it. It'll probably be hard to find a sexual partner under the current circumstances. But don't give up hope — true miracles happen to people in your situation; you just have to seize the opportunity." The smartwatch on Julia's wrist beeped softly. With a tap of her finger, she turned off the alarm. "My free afternoon is coming to an end; I have to get back to work," she told Alfie. She said a quiet goodbye and drove off in her Ferrari.

She drove the seven minutes to the Coburgbastei, lost in thought. The Ferrari handled the two steps with ease, and she rolled up to the elevator. Something wasn't right — not at all — with this Alfie. He was friendly, open, and unexpectedly honest in his answers. She was surprised by her own reactions — she'd revealed personal details to him as a matter of course, without hesitating for even a second. Maybe it was his charm; maybe there was something about his manner that made it so easy for her to overcome the usual barriers, as if they didn't exist. She couldn't get the situation out of her head; she dutifully did some research online and halfheartedly typed a few lines of her thesis, but her mind was back at the pond, sitting next to this likable, mysterious guy named Alfie.

The next day, it was pouring rain. She pulled the hood of her raincoat tightly over her face, leaving her fair-weather umbrella behind with a scornful glance. As always — every day, no matter the weather — she rode to the pond in the city park. The downpour had been coming down hard for over an hour already, and there was no sign that it was going to let up anytime soon. She thought briefly of Alfie; in this lousy weather, he probably wouldn't come. She was all the more surprised as she rolled toward the pond. Alfie sat unflinchingly on the bench next to her usual spot. His flimsy raincoat — which wasn't designed for a truly miserable downpour — hung uselessly around his shoulders. The poor guy was soaked from head to toe, like a drenched poodle.

Julia rolled over to her seat and greeted him loudly, drowning out the sound of the rain. He greeted her warmly and ran a hand over his bald head. "I guess I'll have to blow-dry my hair for a long time today, Julia," he joked. She smiled back, but the rain was so loud that she could barely hear him. Determined, she asked, "Wouldn't you rather go home and dry off? You'll catch pneumonia!" Alfie shook his head. "I live on Pálffygasse — it's a bit of a walk from here," he muttered. Julia pulled herself together. "Alfie, I'm not going to stand by and watch you catch pneumonia. Besides, with this lousy weather and the rain pounding down so loudly, it's not really possible to have a conversation — even though I would have really looked forward to chatting with you, my friend." She glanced at the waterfowl, every last one of which had scurried into the bushes. "I'll give them my stale bread, then we'll go to my place; you can dry off and warm up there. Period. No arguments," she said resolutely. "We'd better toss the stale bread under the bushes," she said, and Alfie stood up, took the paper bag from her hand, and emptied it — along with his own — under the bushes. She drove ahead in the Ferrari, and he followed her curiously. "You live in a posh neighborhood," he remarked as she unlocked the iron front door.

Alfie stopped at the apartment door. "I can't just mess up your beautiful apartment," he said pitifully. She had already slipped off her cape and was looking at him. "Okay, all right, Inspector. Alfie, take off your wet clothes and hang them over the radiator over there. And don't be shy — I've seen more than one guy naked, even a few made of real marble, so." She turned the Ferrari around and turned her back to him. Alfie stood there for a few moments, indecisive, then stripped naked. He closed the apartment door and placed his wet clothes on the radiators beneath the windowsills. He turned around, and she looked him over from head to toe. A handsome man, in his early forties, though she thought he looked more like he was in his mid-thirties. "You can sit on the couch or my bed — I don't have any other places to sit," she said, without blushing in the least, since, of course, she hadn't mentioned her office chair. Alfie sat down on her bed and looked at her openly. "Thank you very much, Julia, for offering this to me, a stranger. I know how to behave, but weren't you afraid to sit across from a naked stranger?"

Julia shook her head. "What do I have to fear? Just broken bones — that's all I'm afraid of. And if he attacks me, *So what?* "That doesn't bother me much. Sex is just an everyday thing, even if it isn't for a girl in my situation." She looked at his body without hesitation. "If you're embarrassed to be naked, I can take my clothes off too, if that makes you feel better, Alfie."

Alfie shook his head. "No, that really isn't necessary. I'm a grown man; I'm not at all embarrassed by nudity — it's something completely natural." They were silent for a while longer, then Julia drove the Ferrari into its "garage" with the wireless charging station and stood up. She knew where to steady herself in her apartment and walked over to the kitchenette. "How about a cup of hot Indian tea — Darjeeling?" Alfie nodded gratefully. "That would be nice, Julia. A cup of tea would warm me up from the inside." Julia continued chatting, "On Wollzeile, just a few minutes from here, there's an Indian shop that imports Darjeeling directly, without any middlemen." While the water for the tea was boiling, she fetched a large bath towel from the bathroom and draped it over his shoulders. "Wrap this around yourself — it'll warm you up a bit, too." She sat down next to him and didn't get up again until the teakettle whistled.

She brought the teapot, dainty cups made of thin Chinese porcelain, and the matching sugar bowl on a tray. She moved the coffee table closer to the bed and placed the tray on it, then poured two cups of tea. They sipped the hot tea in small sips. "My grandpa bought this one-room apartment in case he became a widower," she said, a touch of melancholy in her voice. "Now it's my student pad, and Grandpa is resting in peace, right next to Grandma." She absentmindedly dropped three sugar cubes into her teacup.

"Alfie, I lay awake half the night. There's something mysterious about you; somehow I can't shake the feeling that behind the librarian's facade there's a completely different person." Alfie was silent for a long time, holding the teacup in his hand as if to warm his fingers. "I'm afraid I can't help you there, Julia. I really am a librarian, even though over there they *curator* says. I am indeed a widower, and I have two children who live in downtown Chicago and lead decent, orderly lives. I have no dog, cat, or parrot; I live alone in

my house. I really don't have a steady girlfriend or partner, because I'm not yet interested in entering into a new relationship or a romance. — None of this is mysterious, unusual, or even in the slightest bit special. I can't understand what's bothering you.

And I really don't want to worry you, Julia — I just wanted to get to know you better, that's all. I first saw you rolling out of the university in your wheelchair, and your face captivated me instantly — it's as simple as that. It was easy to figure out that you sit here by the pond every day at lunchtime. And I don't have any sinister intentions whatsoever. Yes, I'm curious to get to know you and learn as much as possible about you — everything you're able and willing to share. That's all, Julia; I'd have to be an open book to you — no enigma, no Similacron, no hocus-pocus.”

Julia sighed. “Yes, that's exactly what my thoughts have been revolving around at night. I know all that, and yet it still makes my hair stand on end, and I'm going crazy because I can't figure out what's bothering me — or rather, what it is that seems so mysterious to me. I just can't figure it out. I know you're a widower and you don't have — and don't want to have — any sexual affairs, okay. But how do you deal with your sexual urges, Alfie?” Alfie had straightened his back; he had to be very careful not to let a slip of the tongue happen here. “Well, that's a very direct and very private question. I think you know how people generally deal with sexual tension when they have neither a wife nor a lover.” Julia squirmed with discomfort. “Sorry for barging into your private garden with my big mouth. But that was part of what was keeping me up at night.”

Alfie looked down at the floor. “I suppose you're right, Julia. It's not as simple as you might think. Like everyone else over there in the States, I use a little machine that helps me relax sexually. That's the truth, but I don't really like talking about it.” Julia nodded, letting out a sigh of relief. “So that's one of your secrets. Okay, if you'd like, I'll apologize for prying, and I certainly didn't mean to ask anything inappropriate.” Alfie looked up. “And what about you — how do you feel about it?”

Julia blushed. “Me? Well, I’m no different from ‘normal’ girls — I use my finger and plenty of lube. My grandpa showed me how to do it. My grandpa, because my parents died in an accident when I was a little kid. I grew up with my grandparents, you know.” Alfie nodded. “I read a little about your condition online. It mentions ‘frequent loss of libido.’” Julia shook her head. “It all depends on which variant you have — there are at least 18 different variants of my condition. I have a strong, overflowing libido, but I don’t take any pills meant to curb it, as my doctor suggested. I don’t think you have to tinker with every little thing if it’s not necessary. I’m perfectly happy with my libido as it is right now. Period.” She paused for a moment. “Is that a problem for you?” she asked quietly. Alfie shook his head. “No, Julia, why would it be a problem for me? I’m trying to picture it, and I’m sort of getting the idea. You’ll have to explain that ‘overflowing’ part to me someday.”

Julia poured more tea. “I tossed and turned all night because I just couldn’t get it out of my head. When you talked about the year 2038, it sounded completely normal to you. It startled me, because it’s only 2025 — and it seemed strange to me that the National Archives would be planning that far ahead; but it’s not impossible, of course. But then you said you’d misspoken — well, when I see a big fly or a big lie, I can tell the difference between the two. “We shouldn’t pave the way for getting to know each other with lies, Alfie!” He nodded. “No, lies can destroy everything, even though there are always situations in life where you have no choice but to lie. I’m sure you’ll agree with me on that. And yes, in hindsight, I’ve also been thinking about my slip of the tongue. I’m expected to retire in 2038; I just recently spoke with the director about it. That sneaky slip probably came from that direction — maybe it was just the so-called ‘cognitive cross-talk effect.’” Julia nodded understandingly. “Okay, I’m familiar with that effect. It happens to me sometimes, too — a thought from one conversation sneaks its way into another conversation.” Julia’s smartwatch beeped softly.

Alfie got up and went to get his clothes. “I know, Julia, you have to get back to work. We’ll see each other again tomorrow at the pond, right?”

Julia continued to work diligently on her thesis, doing research online and reading through articles that seemed important; she even copied some of them into a work folder so she could possibly include them in the footnotes later. Her thoughts kept returning to Alfie. No, she hadn't known that people in America used "little machines" for masturbation. She browsed the internet a bit, and sure enough, there they were — some for men and others for women. In the pictures, they looked unremarkable, and she couldn't immediately picture how they worked. But with a little imagination, she understood the mechanisms. No, that probably wasn't for her. On the other hand, Alfie had said they were very widespread. Her finger hovered over the "Order" button, but then she decisively dismissed the idea.

Alfie would retire in 2038, by which time she herself would be 34. She thought long and hard about whether that little, fat lie might actually be trying to hide a completely different secret — a really big secret. It didn't sound implausible — after all, he'd recently spoken with his boss about retirement. But how plausible was it that a 42-year-old was already making plans for retirement? And then take a sabbatical year? That didn't make any sense. She would ask him. Because if there was one thing she really couldn't stand, it was loose ends dangling from the ceiling without answers — like electrical wires to which the electrician hadn't yet attached any light bulbs. But now she turned her attention back to her thesis — she was behind schedule for this semester, but she planned to work on it over the summer and then submit it at the start of the winter semester in September or October.

The next day, the next downpour hit a quarter of an hour before she set off for the pond. It was pouring buckets, and she was almost certain Alfie had been caught off guard by it. It would surely take him more than half an hour to get from Pálffygasse to the pond. Maybe he didn't even have his flimsy raincoat with him. Well wrapped up in her cape, she drove the Ferrari to the pond. Alfie was already sitting on the bench; he'd slipped on that irresponsible, useless raincoat and was grinning broadly as she drove closer. He greeted her, shouting loudly over the pattering rain, and she shouted her greeting back.

She parked the Ferrari in its spot, and he called out, “I bet that if I buy myself a nice cape like yours right now, there won’t be a downpour for the next two thousand days, right!?” Julia shook her head. “You’ll end up with webbed toes, you unreasonable stubborn fool! We’ll scatter the stale bread in the bushes again, and then we’ll go to my place to warm you up and have some hot tea. Period. No arguments.” Alfie scattered the stale bread among the bushes, patted a completely surprised male mallard on its green little head, then trotted alongside the Ferrari in the rain, toward Julia’s house.

Alfie took off his wet clothes and laid them on the radiators. He grabbed a bath towel from the bathroom and wrapped it around his hips. He stood next to Julia in the kitchen and gave her a hand. He carried the tray with the teapot, two small porcelain cups, and the sugar bowl into the room and set it on the coffee table; then they both sat down on her bed, which was covered with a blanket. They sipped the hot tea in small sips, and Alfie asked how her morning had gone.

Julia set down her cup. “Even though my grandparents left me not only this apartment but also a sizeable bank account and securities, I work from home in the mornings in customer service for a furniture store chain — IKEA. I used to spend about four hours in the mornings answering customer questions, but now I have an AI — Google’s Gemini — help me with that. Now I barely need two hours to do the work; the AI’s suggestions and response texts are usually perfect and error-free. And — I’m still paid as a part-time employee, and I have social security and health insurance. As I said, I wouldn’t have to work alongside my studies, but it’s good practice for interacting with real people — and also, to some extent, for earning my own money. That’s very important to me, Alfie — I don’t want to just rely on Grandpa’s bank account; I want to be active and creative. My studies don’t suffer in the slightest; I’m constantly working on my thesis, and that’s exciting and challenging enough.”

Alfie nodded. “Yes, I understand that whole ‘own’ money thing quite well. My children, Waltraud and Heinrich, also started taking on jobs very early on to supplement their allowance. No, Hilda — my wife — was certainly not stingy with their allowance, but we could tell

how important it was for our children to earn their own money on the side. Looking back now, I think this also helped ensure that they never joined a street gang or turned to drugs.” Julia nodded; it felt good to be on the same wavelength as someone.

“And this morning I also went to see my doctor. Thank goodness all my test results are within the normal range; she’s also satisfied with the lab results. She shook her head because my genital area is a little chafed. Her recommendation to use lubricant is very sound; but it goes against spontaneity. Consequently, we had a long discussion about my libido, because she thinks it needs to be reined in, but I don’t agree with her. I don’t want to tinker with it unnecessarily as long as my libido doesn’t seem unpleasant or pathological to me. She understands that very well, but she’s not really satisfied — I can tell, even if she doesn’t say it out loud.” Alfie tilted his head. “Of course, I don’t have an opinion on your libido yet, Julia — how would I even know how you define an ‘exuberant libido’!? But I agree with you on this point: if you’re comfortable with things the way they are right now, then there’s no need to tweak anything — why bother!?” They were silent for a long time, lost in thought.

Then Alfie said, “When I was still in college, I had a part-time job as a tattoo artist for five years. I liked the work because, even with the stencils, you still had to have a sense of shapes, colors, and creativity. I took the job more by chance, since I don’t have any tattoos myself. But it was always nice to get up close and personal with other people, to touch every centimeter of their skin, to touch their limbs or their genitals — I think this job also shaped me, not just the desire to become a curator, that is, a librarian. As a tattoo artist, you develop a unique sense of the human body, of skin, and, of course, of female genitalia. Society is absolutely crazy about genital tattoos, and I became a sought-after specialist. One thing, however, set me apart from many other tattoo artists: back then, I never initiated anything sexual, unlike so many others. My attitude toward sexuality was shaped mainly by my grandparents, Arthur and Katharina, and by my mother, Isolde.”

Julia chimed in. “My grandfather, in particular, shaped my understanding of sexuality, because he believed that young people —

that is, children and grandchildren — shouldn't be sent out into the world ignorant or half-informed. Looking back, I agree with him and am very grateful that he patiently and lovingly guided me through my sexuality, even though now, in my current state, I can't even think about having a sexual partner. How did it go for you? Can you tell me about it, if you're not embarrassed?"

Alfie looked down at the floor. "No, I'm not embarrassed — it's just that I rarely talk to others about it. My grandparents, Arthur and Katharina, basically laid the foundation for me: respect, listening, and discussion — the three pillars of a good relationship. My mother taught me the practical side of things. I was her only son, and I was the only one of her children allowed to sleep naked next to her. I came to understand that nudity is something natural. And that you can — and should — have trust and closeness with another person. And that it's completely natural to use the little machine without shame when you're close, like a mother and son. That was extraordinary even for an open and enlightened society like America's. But all of this enabled me to have a good, trusting, and truly heartfelt marriage with my wife — heartfelt in the sense of coming from the heart."

Julia smiled and took his hand. "Once again, we're getting into topics I usually avoid — like my libido or our sexual history. I guess it's because I feel like I've known you for ages and that you've been my friend for just as long. We've known each other for maybe a week or ten days — and yet you've never felt like a stranger to me. Until now, I've only ever had that feeling with my friend Yvonne, my best friend and only sexual partner. And I have to admit, Alfie, I really like that feeling." Alfie didn't pull his hand away from hers. "It's strange, the two of us," he said. "I saw you roll out of the university building, and your face — your expression — captivated me instantly, in a fraction of a second. I did everything I could to get closer to you and get to know you, as if I had to, without becoming an intrusive stalker. I don't usually do that — there are enough people within my circle with whom I have or need to have contact, professionally speaking."

They sat side by side in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Then Julia asked, “I’ve been wanting to ask for days now — what do your kids do for a living?” Alfie’s face lit up. “Heinrich is a surgeon specializing in the human hand. He’s launched a major project to program surgical robots to perform very complex hand surgeries. And Waltraud — she works for the State of Michigan’s health care system; she studied psychology and mainly supervises school psychologists throughout the state. You can probably imagine how proud I am of my children. And one day they’ll settle down somewhere and start a family — I have no doubt about that. “And, of course, they’ll make me a grandpa — an old, very old grandpa, of course.” They both smiled because he’d said it with a broad grin. Julia thought to herself that she would never have children or grandchildren.

The smartwatch on Julia’s wrist beeped softly; she turned off the alarm with a wave of her hand. Alfie got up and got dressed. “Alfie, I’ll give you my phone number so we can get in touch when the next downpour drives us to the Teapot. Okay? But please don’t pass the number on to just any Hinz or Kunz, as we say in Vienna, claro?” Alfie typed the number into his cell phone. “I don’t know your ‘Hinz’ or your ‘Kunz’ — especially not the latter — but those two won’t get your number; only everyone else will,” he grinned, laughter lines forming around his eyes. He dialed the number right away, and Julia’s smartphone rang softly. “Now you’ve got my number saved, too,” he explained. He kissed Julia on the cheek, then slipped out quietly.

Julia glanced out the window only now and then; outside, the once-in-a-century downpour was raging. There was already flooding in the city, and the U2 and U4 subway lines had been suspended because parts of the track system were already submerged. The Wien River, usually a leisurely trickle with no particularly striking features, had turned into a raging torrent and damaged large sections of the U4 subway infrastructure. She turned her attention to her thesis, which compared German and French legends and myths concerning the ancient Greek gods. She spoke French fluently; her grandmother was from France, after all, so Julia had learned French playfully from a young age. Julia had copied hundreds of articles and stories from

the internet and was now reading a German and a French parable or legend side by side in two browser windows. It was a very productive afternoon; she had added a good 8 pages to her manuscript, mainly in the form of keyword-style notes, which she would later turn into complete sentences, paragraphs, or footnotes.

She jolted awake from a wild dream. She sat upright in bed for a few moments, then glanced at her wristwatch. 5:20 — way too early to get up. What had she been dreaming about? Scenes flashed before her mind's eye like wisps of fog. Leaning on a ski pole, she had been making her way through deep snow toward the isolated house; with every step, she sank up to her hips, and the storm — perhaps a blizzard — whipped snowflakes into her face and into her eyes. Finally, she reached the house and stepped inside. She walked down a long hallway and entered a bedroom. On the double bed lay a naked woman and a naked boy. It was Alfie and his mother. They were holding hands and both smiled blissfully, lost in their own world. A small box rested on each of their abdomens. She wanted to rush over and warn them, but just then the weight of the snow crashed through the ceiling, and she felt as if she were suffocating in the snow. As she was suffocating, she woke up, drenched in sweat and distraught. Relieved, she took in her living room-bedroom in the dim light of the breaking dawn. It was just a dream. A silly dream. Nothing but a silly dream. She fell back asleep moments later.

All morning long, she worked through a double batch of customer correspondence for IKEA while looking out the window with concern. The torrential downpour paused for no more than five minutes here and there, giving way to a typical summer drizzle — only to rudely push the poor drizzle aside after a few minutes and unleash the downpour on the city once again. She heard the news reports about the flooding in the city. Around noon, Alfie called. He said with a smirk that he'd finally bought himself a proper cape, one just like hers. Julia said she hadn't sat by the pond with her birds for two days in a row, but she'd love to head out there again despite the downpour. After a second, Alfie said, "Okay, I'm heading out; I'll be at the pond in about 40 minutes. With the new cape, of course," he added.

Julia was the first to reach the pond. The waterfowl clearly liked the wet, muddy ground. Julia had bought an extra half loaf of bread at the bakery and was now tearing off small pieces and tossing them to the birds. She had actually expected the pond to have overflowed, but there was no sign of it. Maybe the water level was a centimeter higher than usual, but there was no sign of overflowing. Twenty minutes later, Alfie arrived in his new cape — it was dark green but made of sturdy material. He'd bought it at a military and hunting shop on Mariahilfstraße. Julia nodded approvingly when he added that not a drop of rain would get through — guaranteed. Julia backed the Ferrari up a little so she could park right next to the bench where Alfie was sitting. That way, they could talk in hushed tones — because of the loud rain. Julia said that yesterday afternoon she'd managed to write a full 8 pages of notes for her thesis, which was quite a lot. And despite a stupid dream that had rudely jolted her awake that morning, she'd worked four hours for IKEA that morning and caught up on her backlog. Alfie asked, "What stupid dream?"

Julia recounted what she could still remember. Alfie tilted his head. "Well, of course there are blizzards in Chicago, but they're rare. And there's a stone-paved path leading from the street to my house — your struggle with deep snow comes from your subconscious. And even if the weight of the snow were to break through the roof — there are three children's rooms and a bathroom in the attic, since we've always wanted three children. And the bed scene — your poetic, romantic streak got the better of you there, my love, because Mom and I never held hands like that. There were never any indecent advances between Mom and me. And the machines don't bounce around to simulate intercourse either."

When my little machine had calmed me down, I'd rest my cheek against Mom's chest and sometimes cry, because I always felt so sad afterward. I listened to the gallop of her heartbeat and watched, fascinated, as the piston of her little machine thrust rhythmically into her bush, her fingers buried deep within it. But it's interesting how much these things preoccupy you, even in your dreams." Alfie tilted his head, and raindrops now rolled down his face. "You've painted a picture in your mind because it seems special to you to see Mom and me lying naked side by side. And because you've never seen those

little machines before. But you sense so keenly that sexuality bound Mom and me intimately together. That's interesting — very interesting. And it's true, ..." He was about to say something, but then he fell silent, lost in thought. Julia turned off the Ferrari's heated seats. "We don't need to talk about it, Alfie; maybe it's not the right time." She lowered her head — she didn't really want to pry into his sex life with his mom right now. She knew instinctively that was the case.

"Tell me, Alfie, what do you do all day long? You're practically on vacation — on a sabbatical. That's when you go visit a guru in India, climb an eight-thousander in Tibet, or learn Catalan love songs. For example." Alfie laughed into his nonexistent beard. "Catalan love songs? Tibetan eight-thousanders? An overweight, smelly guru in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu? You read too many Agatha Christie mysteries, girl. "No, on my sabbatical I can devote myself to a main task without having to worry about my day-to-day duties as a curator," Julia immediately pressed. "And what important task have you set for yourself, dear Alfie? Following a pimply girl from the university and pretending it's not stalking?" They both laughed out loud, and the relentless, miserable rain couldn't dampen their lighthearted, friendly, and cheerful conversation.

Alfie grew serious again. "No, it's okay that you asked. Six months ago, some rowdy teenagers — or young hooligans — set fire to part of our library during a drinking binge. Of course, the sprinkler system and the fire department did their best, but all the documents in my department — covering media reports and publications from Europe from 1968 to 1985 — were burned. Two neighboring departments also suffered heavy losses, but other curators are handling that. Officially, I'm on a sabbatical, but I've agreed with the director to spend a year in Europe — on full pay — collecting whatever I can so it can be archived again.

I've rented two adjacent apartments on Pálffygasse — the smaller one for myself, and I had the larger one cleared out, which I'm now filling with the treasures I've collected. I sit at the computer for 8 to 12 hours a day and order everything I can still get my hands on. I've rented a post office box where I pick up my treasures every day with

a little shopping cart. At first, I needed a cargo taxi, back when I was still getting a lot of deliveries. The chubby postmaster always gives me a funny look, even though I think she's the funny one with her unsightly, unkempt lady's mustache. Once a week, I take the cargo taxi to the recycling center. That, in a nutshell, is my current task. And I'm grateful for every minute I get to spend in your company. That more than makes up for all the eight-thousanders, Catalan love songs, and disgusting Indian gurus. I'm very hardworking and want to restore the old data sets — it's kind of my duty. Although the director thinks it's a commendable extra task; other curators would just shrug and say, "It's fire damage, period!" But that's just not how I'm wired."

Julia leaned forward. "I have a much better picture of you now, Alfie. Until now, I just thought you were a tourist, which in itself wouldn't be so bad. But now I see that you're working hard here and throwing the National Library's dollars out the window on a rescue mission. That commands a respect I didn't have for you before. Yes, you're still a man shrouded in mystery to me, but you've lifted the veil over one secret and let me peek beneath it, revealing a glimpse of the Callipyge. I see you a little more clearly now than before. Thank you for that!" She squeezed his forearm beneath the sturdy cape. "Somehow I'm glad that you're not just some stray American like the others, but that you're working hard here, in the service of Her Majesty!" He grinned. "Yeah, like James Bond, but without the Beretta." She grew pensive. "If there's anything you need me to look up or research for you, just say the word — I'll do it!" Alfie shook his head, "No, thanks. I'm pretty quick at doing research myself, believe me. And of course, I use every AI there is on God's green earth. They already know me like the back of their hand."

He grinned. "By the way, you're right — the National Library has deep pockets, and I get every dollar I ask for. The books, tomes, and old magazines cost a staggering fortune, and right from the start I set up four scanners that run fully automatically around the clock. The director doesn't even bat an eye when I ask for another sack of dollars. She knows I'm not spending it on wine, women, and song. Without her support, I'd have been sitting on the banks of the Seine

in Paris long ago, feeding the swans with my tears and stale bread.” Julia had to laugh — what a quirky guy this Alfie was!

“Tell me, Alfie, I’ve been meaning to ask you this for ages: you don’t have any hair on your head or any eyebrows — is that the result of chemotherapy?” Alfie looked up, puzzled. “Chemotherapy? — Oh, you mean cancer treatment? No, not at all — I’ve been spared from cancer so far. No, my parents had all of my hair and my two sisters’ hair removed when we were kids because they followed a very controversial medical opinion. They don’t do that anymore these days; hair growth is a natural process, and the controversy has died down. My sisters draw on their eyebrows, wear false eyelashes, and wear wigs of all different colors and styles. Irmgard, my youngest sister, once said half-jokingly that there’s a silver lining — you don’t have to wash your hair every day, and you can wear a different hairstyle every day. It doesn’t bother me personally; in the U.S., many men are bald, and it no longer carries any negative connotations — it doesn’t automatically mean you’re a gangster.” Julia understood. “Here, too, there are many men who shave their heads, and it certainly doesn’t carry any criminal connotations. But I know some people who lost their hair and eyebrows during chemotherapy — that’s why I asked.”

The downpour stopped as abruptly as if Saint Peter had flipped a switch. They slipped out of their raincoats as the sky quickly cleared and the July sun came crashing down again. “It’s going to be a hot summer,” Julia said, “I’ve been listening to the radio with half an ear while I work.” Alfie nodded and muttered that he’d already heard it on the evening news. He shrugged. “Julia, I won’t be coming here for the next two days — I’m going on a trip, maybe even a quick trip to the States. But I’ll be back in two days, right on time.” Julia smiled, “You’re a free man, after all, and you do as you please — or as your boss demands. I’ll bring the birds enough stale bread — you don’t need to worry about them.” Julia’s smartwatch beeped softly — the bird feeding was over. Alfie stood up and held out his open palm to her. She placed her hand on it, and he said, “Goodbye, Julia, see you in three days!” Then he turned and walked away. Julia watched him go for a long time. She turned the Ferrari around and drove off. What was it she was feeling? Was it just a sense of longing at not being able

to see her companion for the next two days, and was Alfie really just a companion — or already a friend who had grown dear to her heart? Oh well, Yvonne was coming over this afternoon; she'd discuss this question with her best friend — maybe that would bring some clarity?

Of course, Yvonne couldn't shed any light on the matter either, even though they both turned Alfie over and over in their minds, chewing him over and examining him from every angle. Alfie was an extraordinary but also complicated man — the two friends agreed on that. Yvonne sighed, "Julia, when it comes to a boy or a man, you have to listen to your heart more than your head. Your heart is much smarter than your head. Your head has already ruled out the usual suspects — the seducer, the sex-obsessed guy, the gold digger, or the financial fraudster — so now sit back and listen to your heart. Maybe he's the first serious boyfriend of your life, girl! I really hope that's the case — it would make you even happier. The way you describe it — how he was captivated the moment he saw you as you rolled out of the university building — that's not cheesy; that's just how life works. I've experienced this, too — it only takes a split second to fall for a guy. And most of the time, you're right, even if problems later pile up like dust under a dresser and destroy that dazzling fascination. That's real life; that's the real world we live in and fall in love in." "Yeah, Yvonne — she was a real friend." Julia smiled; she was still miles away from being in love, but no sooner had she said it out loud than a nagging doubt took root in her heart. You know, one of those ugly doubts with bad teeth, sneaky little eyes, a crooked grin, and dressed in rags. The kind that's haughty and arrogant, absolutely certain it knows better than you do. Half in a panic, she asked herself if she was in love with Alfie — could that even be possible?

Alfie arrived at the pond right on time on the third day. He kissed Julia on the cheek as they greeted each other joyfully. He didn't mention his trip at all; instead, he asked how her work with the IKEA customers and her thesis were coming along. Julia reported that she had discovered a modest, unassuming website in a hidden corner of the internet that linked to a very old book from the 19th century. Back then, during the height of Neoclassicism around 1870, an eccentric writer named François Anatole Thibault had collected and

written down ancient myths and legends from ancient Greece — most of which had been passed down orally — that fit perfectly into her thesis. Legends in which Hera didn't yet have a halo and Zeus was busily cuckolding. She was certain that hardly anyone thought of this old eccentric anymore these days; this discovery would be a little gem, something special in her thesis.

Alfie had been listening intently; he liked her passion and enthusiasm for the subject. For a while, they watched in silence as the birds shared the breadcrumbs, following a very specific hierarchy. First, the female gray herons took their share, and last were the great crested grebes. And all this without any screeching, threatening flapping of wings, or snapping of beaks. "Well-behaved dinosaurs," Julia murmured.

Alfie reached into his pocket and pulled out a dark brown glass jar. It was octagonal and about 15 cm tall. It could hold a quarter of a kilo or 300 ml. "Julia, I couldn't stop thinking about your brittle bone disease and the unbearable hopelessness of it all. I've brought you a powder — it doesn't just dull the pain or provide relief; no, it will completely cure your disease within 90 days. This medication isn't experimental — it's approved. And it's very hard to come by because it's ridiculously expensive, even by American standards. But the National Library has deep pockets, so I took the liberty. Of course, I explained the purpose in detail to the director, and she just smiled mischievously as she approved it: "Just don't lose your heart in Europe, my dear!" she admonished me, half in earnest. But there's no danger of that. I just wanted to help you because I can help you and the others can't."

Julia's heart leaped so hard it took her breath away. "But — how can that be? Don't we Europeans know what you Americans are researching and manufacturing?" She stared at the glass jar. Alfie opened it and poured a white powder — about half a teaspoon — into the palm of his hand. He licked it up and swallowed it. "It's not poisonous; otherwise, I'd be dropping dead right now. The pharmacist explained to me that it stimulates the genes responsible for the formation of Type I collagen — whatever exactly those may be. That's why you have the disease. In the States, no one has this

disease anymore; toddlers are treated with this 90-day therapy as early as their second year of life and are cured. Period. That's why I knew so little about your disease. So, please take one level teaspoon of this powder every morning 20 minutes before breakfast, and you can drink tea with it if you like. They just added a sweet orange flavor for the kids. If your body still isn't producing collagen after 90 days, I'll get a whole barrel of this powder, damn it! I want to see you healthy, and above all, I don't want you to be joining your ancestors at 40, girl!" Alfie handed her the container. "Get well, Julia!"

Julia felt both hot and cold at the same time as she placed the vessel on her lap. "I — I'm completely overwhelmed, Alfie. I don't know how to put it into words. That you made such a long trip to the States just to get me a cure. That you even gave my illness a second thought, even though I'd already been written off, according to the medical knowledge here. That you find the time, on top of your actual job, to still think about me and my illness. You're a truly extraordinary man, the kind of friend you don't find every day. Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart! To lead a normal, healthy life without fear of broken bones — that's like the Holy Grail, unattainable and unreal." Julia fell silent. "I'll have to bring a sample to my doctor, because she'll want to examine it. We have a relationship of trust when it comes to my health, so I have to tell her about this." Alfie nodded. "Of course I know that — this doctor takes very good care of you, my dear. Bring her a small sample — not too much — because the contents are meant for a 90-day healing regimen. Your body will need every single grain."

Suddenly, tears streamed down Julia's cheeks. "Yvonne and I have been going back and forth about whether you're a friend to me or not. And I told her that, to me, you're a friend whom heaven has unexpectedly sent my way. And now I know it, with complete clarity: you're my best friend, a man who asks for nothing but generously gives to me. I'll do everything I can to be just as good a friend to you, Alfie, my friend!" She gently placed a hand on his forearm — a physical gesture of trust and friendship that sealed their bond. Alfie looked her straight in the eye, his eyes deep and unfathomable like a mountain lake a thousand meters deep. "I want to be your friend, Julia, and it would be an honor for me to be able to call myself your

friend. You're my only friend — he paused briefly — my only friend here in Europe."

Julia's smartwatch beeped, rudely interrupting the intimate moment. Annoyed, she silenced the alarm. "Alfie, just four or five days ago, it was a downpour that drove us to take shelter in my apartment. Now the July sun is scorching our brains right out of our skulls. Would you come with me to my apartment and maybe have a cold lemonade? I'd love to have you all to myself right now — completely selfishly." She paused briefly. "I feel as brittle as glass and as fragile as paper-thin Chinese porcelain. I'm afraid I might shatter at any moment. Even my 'overflowing' libido brought me only seconds of oblivion; then that feeling came crashing down on me again, like a hostile glass bell jar placed over my soul."

Alfie nodded and stood up. "But of course, Julia — that's what friends are for — when you want someone by your side, when you want to escape the hustle and bustle of public life together. When you feel as fragile as thin Chinese porcelain and even your 'exuberant' libido doesn't really help." She drove off in the Ferrari, and he trotted alongside her. Once they arrived at the apartment, she set the glass container with the remedy on the kitchen counter and placed the Ferrari on its charging station. She stood up and held onto a shelf for support.

"Please don't get me wrong, Alfie, but I feel the need to lie naked next to you on the bed, skin to skin, and to caress your body, to get to know it. No, I don't want sex — that's not even remotely on my mind. I just want closeness — nothing but intimate closeness." Alfie nodded in agreement. Julia took two bottles out of the fridge. "Unfiltered elderberry juice, straight from the farmers' market — mixed with mineral water, it's the best refreshment in this sweltering heat." She poured the drinks and set the glasses on the nightstand, along with an ashtray and cigarettes. She began to undress, and so did Alfie. They lay down on the bed, and Alfie said, "I used to smoke as a teenager thirty years ago, but I haven't since. I'm not addicted to nicotine. But if we think of it as a shared campfire, then it's okay with me." His eyes drifted over the slender, delicate body of his beautiful girlfriend. "You're a very beautiful girl, Julia — inside and out!"

Alfie's fingertips traced the two tattooed snakes winding their way up her inner thighs. "Really, first-rate work!" he said. She looked at him with wide eyes. "There's one more — the big snake!" she whispered, spreading her thighs. Alfie's eyes sparkled. A huge snake's head adorned her pubic area, with its jaws wide open and fangs bared. "Go ahead and take a look, Alfie," Julia breathed. His hands reached out to explore. Her labia were artfully incorporated into its throat; her clit formed the uvula. The small labia ran as sharp as a knife's edge from her clit all the way down, guarding her sanctuary from indecent gazes. He examined her clit very closely; it was reddened and badly chafed. He said nothing about it and reached for her knees to gently close them again. "I used to tattoo snakes like that myself; most of the time, the girls wanted to scare their lovers away before the act. What a foolish idea! That won't stop anyone."

Julia placed her hand on the back of his hand. "I had it done at Brad's Tattoo Shop because he knew how to avoid breaking my bones. First, the two snakes — I'm liking them more and more; they seem to get even more erotic by the day. And I love the bewildered looks passersby give the two snakes — I'm such a naughty girl! Two weeks later, the big snake went in — Brad understood exactly what I expected of him. But when he insisted that I had to relax on my own while getting tattooed, I almost ran away.

That's how his assistant, Leila — a perverted woman — treated me. She did it to me over and over again with a smirk, because she took pleasure in the fact that I wanted to die of shame every single time. Brad didn't care; he cleaned his equipment carefully and barely looked over. I don't know why I was so prissy, Alfie — I'm probably just a dumb cow, that's all. Brad didn't ask for anything other than to do it to me right there in the studio, carefully, right in front of the jealous Leila. I felt a certain satisfaction because her jealous eyes nearly popped out of her head." Alfie placed his hand on hers, reassuringly and silently.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked into her eyes. "You mentioned Yvonne earlier. You once said she is your best friend and only sexual partner. Am I to understand that you're a virgin,

Julia?” Julia’s fingertips, which had been gently and curiously tracing his chest and the insides of his thighs, paused in their movement. “No, Alfie, I haven’t been a virgin for many years — not since I was 16. I gave my virginity to my grandpa when I was 16; he deserved it, and he alone. It was a sublime, sacred act, and I cried with joy back then in Venice. Since then, I’ve had sex time and again; I just had to make sure my bones stayed in one piece. And just recently, I had wonderful sex with a cute boy; at the beginning of this year. I hosted Reginald for two weeks — a third-cousin my own age who lives in New Zealand and came to visit us, his relatives in Vienna. Me and my three unchaste cousins — the flighty trio.” Alfie smiled; she’d told him about the sinful, unchaste roller-coaster rides of the naughty triplets.

"He slept here, where you're lying now. He lives in Stratford, a small town at the foot of Mount Taranaki. And he's having an affair with his older aunt Jamie, who also suffers from brittle bone disease, just like me. He's a trained physical therapist and first met Jamie as a patient. She opened her heart to him; she'd had a lot of sex in her youth, but ever since osteogenesis imperfecta had mercilessly struck at age 22, she'd avoided men and sex. She cried about how much she missed physical intimacy and sex. He took the crying 32-year-old in his arms, and they became lovers. That's why he knows exactly how to have sex with a woman like that without breaking every bone in her body.

I liked him, I trusted him, and I let him have sex with me, even though I knew, of course, that during the day he worked my cousins' fields, plowing the furrows and diligently sowing seeds, all morning and all afternoon. “I have very fond memories of those ten days of sex with him; he’s a gentle and tender man, that Reginald. And just as exuberant as I am — because he wouldn’t settle for less than three rounds, that devil of a man — I couldn’t fall asleep until well past midnight,” Julia said, blushing slightly. “So no, Alfie, I haven’t been a virgin for a long time.”

She fell silent and looked at him searchingly. Alfie took two cigarettes and lit them. “Thank you for confiding something so intimate in me, Julia. I was expecting more of a yes-or-no answer.

But it's reassuring to know that you're having sex and that you'll be able to continue doing so without hesitation after your recovery — perhaps a little more relaxed and fearless.” Julia’s finger paused on his chest. “Is that a pacemaker?” she asked, feeling the barely visible device that could be felt beneath his muscles. Alfie shook his head. “No,” he said, and then he thought for a long time. A very long time.

The baton in the conductor’s raised hand trembled; its tip quivered as if it were shivering. Only the timpanist knew that he was about to strike the timpani with his mallet with all his might, in a thousandth of a second, snatching the audience from the cozy, gentle embrace of the Nereids and the rising and falling of the symphony’s long Atlantic waves.

This — this was the silence before the drum roll.

The Kettledrum Stroke

The tip of the baton trembled as if it were shivering. The timpanist watched the trembling with keen eyes. Then the tip of the baton shot decisively upward, and the timpanist struck the B-flat timpani — the timpani with its deep, melodic sound in B major — with all his might. The audience gasped.

Alfie pulled Julia close into his embrace. He had to hold her tight, because the The Kettledrum Stroke would sweep over her like a blizzard.

"Julia, I have to confide my biggest secret to you, because we don't want our friendship to be built on big lies and omissions — which are really lies, too. This is very difficult for me, because I've sworn an oath never to reveal this secret. Do you understand my dilemma?" Julia's fingertips traced circles on the non-pacemaker. "No, actually, I'm completely lost. You want to confide a secret to me, but you've sworn never to reveal it. If I'm understanding this correctly, I have no right to want to know your secret, and it would probably be better if you kept it to yourself. But you know Sophocles' dilemma: 'Once you've lifted a corner of the veil, you have to find out which Callipyge is hidden beneath it' — in other words, which beautiful ass is hiding underneath. "There's no 'undo' button," the old peeping Tom should have added; once you've peeked under the corner of the veil, you can't undo it or make it as if you'd never seen it. I know now that you have another secret — perhaps bigger than any of the others. I can no longer pretend I don't know." Her fingertips glided down from his chest to his navel and stopped there; they were not allowed to go any further. She let her flat hand rest on his navel and held her fingertips back, just millimeters from the proud head of Bacchus, despite the temptation.

Alfie sighed deeply, just like Atlas, who had to carry the globe on his shoulders.

"Julia, please listen to me carefully and let me finish what I have to say. My secret is that I'm a time traveler. I set out from the year 2932 to track down the historical documents destroyed in the fire — you already know the rest. My name really is Alfred von dem Steine, born in 2,891. I really am from Huntington Heights near Chicago, and I really am a curator at the National Library. You already know everything else; every single detail I've revealed to you so far is true. And yes, as curator, I'm responsible for the period from 1968 to 2038. And this device isn't a pacemaker — it's a monitoring device used by a committee to oversee every move a time traveler makes, and it's, so to speak, the counterpart to the machine that lets me travel back and forth — or be recalled in a tenth of a second if I screw up. Time travel is incredibly risky; only a very few are granted this privilege, and only when absolutely necessary. Time travel is kept secret from the public. In return, I can use the monitoring device to establish contact with, for example, an artificial intelligence. The powder — your cure — comes from the year 2932, and in 2025, it's still a long way from being discovered. — That's the gist of it, Julia." Alfie stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray.

That — yes, that — was the big, smashing drum roll.

Julia had stared at him in disbelief and punched him in the chest. "Yuck, Alfie, we promised each other we wouldn't pave our way with lies!" Alfie looked at her calmly and seriously. "Every word is true, every single one," he said with absolute conviction, "everything I've told you so far is true. Every single one. I've kept a lot from you because a lot of it embarrasses me — mostly sexual stuff — and because you might then think I'm some kind of pervert. And I didn't want that. I'm much more sexually experienced than you, and those are exactly the embarrassing situations I wanted to spare myself and us. Getting straight to the point would have driven a wedge between us, so I kept my mouth shut to avoid lying to you, dear Julia." He gently wrapped his arm around Julia's shoulders and pulled her very carefully toward him. "Every word is true, Julia. I'm not lying to you; I'm just breaking my oath, and I think the committee is going to rein me in, demote me, and drag me before a court of law any second now." Julia looked at him in horror.

"Time travel is physically impossible at all — thousands of brilliant minds have already figured that out," Julia snorted angrily and fell silent, tears rolling down her cheeks. "And I thought we could be friends — real, true friends. But not in a loony bin. Not if you think I'm some completely dim-witted chick you can pull a story like that on, spout such nonsense." She pulled away from him. Alfie remained dead serious. "Every word is true, Julia — no madhouse, no tall tales, and certainly no psychedelic mushrooms I might have smoked. It's all true, but it's hard to believe the truth when you're in the wrong time continuum. Galileo would have stared at you in disbelief if you'd shown him your cell phone, which lets you talk to your cousin in Stratford, Australia — 12,000 kilometers from here. Think about it — are you as skeptical as Galileo?"

Julia's mind slowly began to race. "And how do you overcome the space-time paradox, Alfie?" Alfie said very calmly, "I honestly have no idea how this works technically — not even the theory. I have no idea how our scientists are able to create the Einstein-Rosen bridge, but it's what made intergalactic space travel possible for us. That's how we were able to make contact with a dying galactic race — the originators of the UFO phenomena. Time travel emerged, so to speak, as a byproduct — the best-kept secret in my world. Perhaps only a handful of scientists and engineers understand how it all works. But I'm here — proof to me that time travel is possible. I traveled to the year 2932 in one-tenth of a second to obtain the cure for you that my AI there knew about. Although it took me several days there to acquire it, I returned in the very same second I had left. No magic, no hocus-pocus — just time travel."

Julia rested her head on his chest. "My head is spinning, Alfie. Have I gone crazy, believing such a tall tale? I have no idea what the Einstein-Rosen bridge is supposed to be — we haven't heard a word about it in class. But whatever it is, you seem to believe it exists." Alfie said, "The way this bridge is explained to us is that it's like a worm biting and boring a straight tunnel through an apple — the shortest distance from A to B — hence the colloquial term 'wormhole.'" Julia looked up at him skeptically. "Tell me everything you know about Marie Antoinette!" Alfie seemed to think for a tenth of a second.

"Maria Marie-Antoinette, born Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna of Austria-Lorraine, was born in Vienna on November 2, 1755, as the 15th child of Empress Maria Theresa. She was executed by the revolutionaries in Paris on October 16, 1793, nine months after her husband, Louis Capet, who had also been executed by guillotine. Even while strapped to the execution block, she was completely stripped of her clothes by the executioner's assistants and sexually abused by them multiple times in front of the jeering mob — the worst form of dishonor, yet ordered by the Revolutionary Council. As the wife of Louis XVI, she was Queen of France and Navarre from May 10, 1774, to August 10, 1792; since September 4, 1791, she had held the title "Queen of the French." Contrary to popular belief, she had numerous secret love affairs, which today would be described as "quickies." Toward the end of her short life, she had only one serious and noteworthy affair with the Swedish diplomat and military officer Hans Axel von Fersen, who attempted to free her from captivity in September 1793, but the attempt failed miserably...."

Julia interrupted him. "And you got all that from your AI in the future?" Alfie nodded. "Yes, using the communicator. But I don't keep a constant connection, because the AI has to report all my requests to the committee." Julia said that two years ago, during her senior year of high school, she'd written a term paper on the queen that included that information, "but I couldn't have quoted it off the top of my head like that. That was an impressive demonstration, Alfie. No, I don't think you or I are crazy, so no mental hospital for now. But encountering a flesh-and-blood time traveler — that's some pretty wild stuff. Yvonne is going to be absolutely thrilled!"

Alfie stared at her. "You mustn't talk to anyone about this, not even Yvonne. That would be the end of me — or at least the end of my mission. You hold my life — or at least my time here with you — in your hands. Be smart and keep quiet, even if it's very hard. The committee would send me back immediately and put me on trial. Please don't do that to me. It's actually surprising that they haven't intervened yet — there must be a reason for it. Maybe they're taking their time, or maybe they've been keeping a close eye on you and trust you. Unlikely, but possible. But that must be the case, since they haven't transferred me back yet. So let's continue to act as

naturally and inconspicuously as possible.” Julia’s fingertips twitched curiously and inappropriately. “The committee — they’re not your friends, are they, Alfie?” He shook his head. “Good heavens, no. They scrutinize my every move with a critical and sullen eye. No, by God, they’re no friends, but they hold the thread of my life in their hands. They can let me be, or transfer me back in a thousandth of a second, or simply strand me here and throw away the key.”

Julia's eyes remained fixed on Bacchus's little head. "And everything you told me about sex — is it all true?" Alfie smiled subtly. "I haven't told you a single lie about that, though I did keep some embarrassing details to myself; but I actually did keep the most important thing from you. For nearly half a century, an insidious virus has been rampant among us. It infects almost exclusively the female body — apparently because it needs their hormonal balance to survive — and is transmitted only through sexual intercourse, or sometimes to female embryos or through blood donations. Women are therefore not allowed to donate blood. And the virus is absolutely fatal to men; its symptoms resemble those of the Ebola virus. Every possible — and even impossible — measure has been taken, but the virus is a master of camouflage, so that while a serum is effective in the short term, it really only lasts a short time — not even 24 hours. So now we stand on the brink; sexual intercourse means certain death for men.

Children are conceived exclusively in fertility clinics, under the strictest hygiene precautions, using Mom's egg and Dad's semen. A humiliating, shameful procedure — at least it was for me. While the mom's gynecologist carefully retrieves a few eggs, you lie next to her and the young nursing assistant collects your semen with her gloved hand. These are usually Asian girls, because American ones aren't willing to do handjobs to strangers. She takes a break and waits with a cheeky grin until Mom has gotten you ready again. Then she keeps going, stopping only when you have not a single drop of semen left. And your wife watches in disbelief, right until the end. I've died a thousand deaths. So my sisters and I were conceived in a clinical vial, just like my children. I've never been physically intimate with a girl or a woman — not even with my wife." Alfie swallowed; he'd stayed as close to the truth as he possibly could.

Julia's eyes widened. "Good heavens! That must have terrible consequences for society. I know what life is like without sex; I think you become peculiar and eccentric — at least, that's how I see myself a little bit. Although, of course, I have experienced physical intimacy and continue to do so. On the other hand, I'm gradually beginning to understand how and why your mom took you into her bed — to prevent you from becoming a godless fellow, a bizarrely twisted oddball. And now your little machines make sense, too, because you're not allowed to have real sex."

Julia rolled her eyes. "I can't believe it. Here I am lying in bed next to a real time traveler, casually chatting about sex and non-sex, instead of trying to fathom the incomprehensible nature of the wormhole. You must think very little of me, Alfie. Although I assure you that, after Yvonne, you're only the second person with whom I've ever chatted so casually about sex."

Julia ignored the beeping of her smartwatch; work and school were the last things on her mind right now. Her thoughts revolved around Alfie, the time traveler, and the incomprehensible. "I understand your main task better now. You're collecting all the documents here from the period starting in 1968, and you've set up 4 scanners at Pálffygasse that tirelessly scan everything day and night. When you're done, you'll set off on your journey home with perhaps a dozen hard drives in your backpack and then set them up again at the National Library just as they were before — or perhaps a little improved. "What madness, all of this!" she exclaimed, burying her face in his armpit, for tears were streaming from her eyes once again.

Julia opened her eyes. She had to get her bearings; she was lying in the crook of Alfie's arm, and he had been watching her sleep. She must have dozed off, and that showed just how comfortable she already felt with him — even though they hadn't gotten any closer physically than simply lying skin-to-skin. Yes, she admitted to herself, she'd been hoping a little bit before that she'd have sex with Alfie. But then came the bombshell — Alfie wasn't just any American on a tour of Europe; no, he was from the future. 2932. Julia's eyes wandered over his body, lingering on the sleeping Bacchus, on the sleeping Dionysus, who hid his little head under the hood. No girl, no

woman had ever had sex with him. He lived in an abstruse, confusing time, where people didn't have direct sex, where children were created in fertility clinics after the man had been milked dry like a dairy cow, and where sexual release was provided by "little machines."

A shiver ran down Julia's spine. No, she didn't want to live in an era like that. It would be a time when her grandfather wouldn't awaken her sexuality, when gods and goddesses would stare into the yawning void of the universe and not waste a single thought on seducing and ruining even a single human child. She wouldn't be writing her thesis on the unbridled sex lives of the ancient gods, but perhaps a treatise on the proper care of exotic houseplants or the mating croaks of toads at full moon. No, it would be an absolute, absurd catastrophe — really!

Alfie's hand glided lightly, like a feather, from her shoulder down her upper arm, along her forearm, and all the way to her fingertips. "You're a beautiful girl, Julia, a beautiful young woman. Brittle bone disease hasn't disfigured your body; you can't see any traces of those old fractures at all anymore. I see your beautiful, proud body and hardly think about your illness — not in this intimate moment." Had she been thinking out loud? "You're writing your thesis on the ancient gods because you're exploring their sexuality — and your own — in it; am I right, or am I mistaken?" Alfie looked at her with a smile; he clearly really wanted to know.

"Yes, you may be right, at least in part," she said thoughtfully. "Even back when my grandfather used to read me the legends from those thick books and gently introduced me to my sexuality, it became clear to me that the gods had emerged from a bewildering tangle of incest, patricide, and infanticide — that it was a wild jumble of bodies, heads, genitals, and limbs, enough to make one dizzy. But my grandfather had it all figured out, and he patiently guided me to that era when the gods inhabited Mount Olympus and when incest, intrigues, and deceit went hand in hand, without much murder. This was the golden age, when sex took place mainly between gods and goddesses. When the goddesses were pushed into a secluded corner like ordinary maids.

But then came the era of decline, when the gods discovered the small, mortal humans who left the theater stage after no more than 60 or 70 years and crumbled to dust. The dams burst; girls, young men, and respectable wives became pawns in this hellish tournament. The end? Gods and goddesses killed one another and vanished behind the scenes. Humans took the stage; screaming wildly, they chased girls and women and bashed each other's heads in, and they roared at the sun or the moon that they were now the gods! — Yes, from the moment my grandfather guided me with a knowing hand into my sexuality, I began to draft my thesis, and I've been shaping it ever since, right up to today, when I must put it down on paper. You're absolutely right; without that starting point, I wouldn't be who I am today, and I'd probably be writing a completely different thesis — about exotic plants or the love-crazed croaking of toads during a new moon."

Alfie said he'd love to read the manuscript — after all, it was her work and her world of ideas. Julia said there was only a rough draft with lots of blank spaces and notes on what still needed to be added; she'd be embarrassed. Nevertheless, she later gave him a USB drive with her manuscript. Two days later, he brought her a sheet with corrections — pointing out mistakes or major errors she'd made — as well as suggestions on which notes still needed to be added. Yes, he had read through everything right away and then used his AI to help, but that was okay, Julia said. "I had originally agreed with Yvonne that she would proofread my work. But now I'm glad you're reading it — you're great at it." Alfie smiled. "I've written a total of eight dissertations for my doctoral programs, and I've proofread my own children's papers. And as a faculty advisor, I read my students' papers week after week. So I have quite a bit of experience in this area."

July and August blanketed the city with a scorching heat wave from the Sahara. Every day at noon, they drove to the pond to see their little flock of birds. By then, it had already become a routine for them to lie naked on the bed in Julia's apartment afterward, skin-to-skin, and discuss everything under the sun. Julia didn't want to know what wars would be fought in the future or how the political powers of nations and continents would develop; she simply wasn't

interested in any of that. She was far more interested in everyday life — how people lived, worked, and made love under the yoke of the virus. How, specifically, they dealt with sexuality. And whether they remembered the ancient gods of Olympus.

Julia's specialist had sent a sample of her healing powder to a renowned laboratory. The lab director was tearing his hair out. Yes, it was clearly recognizable as being mRNA-based, but that was all. Sequencing yielded no useful results; they couldn't decipher what genetic code was being carried, the lab director lamented, calling it gibberish of a completely incomprehensible composition. A mixture of Chinese and Romani. The doctor could only confirm to Julia that it wasn't toxic and did indeed contain a highly complex genetic code carried by an mRNA strand. Julia dutifully took the healing powder every day, just as instructed. And after 25–30 days, the doctor was able to confirm that her body was indeed producing that special collagen again — in tiny amounts, but still.

So Julia regained hope that one day she might overcome brittle bone disease, just as Alfie had said.

Julia, lying alone on her bed, smiled as she ran her hand over the gentle curves that led from her firm breasts down to her stomach, to her belly button, and then on. Hope gave her a sense of purpose, a good reason to enjoy her life, her daydreams about Alfie, and her overflowing libido to the fullest.

In the Clutches of the Law

July and August were sweltering. The flood damage had been cleared away, and now people and animals alike were gasping for air in the scorching summer heat. Julia's windows faced east, so she had morning sun, but during the day her apartment was in the shade, allowing her to work — sitting on her office chair in just a negligee — without breaking out in a sweat. When she rolled over to the pond, she wore a sleeveless T-shirt whose fabric let the sunlight through and gently tanned her skin, but also allowed her breasts and nipples to show through — because that's how she wanted it. She loved that her body, that her skin, was sun-tanned. Sometimes she took a day off work and drove the arduous route to the New Danube, where there was a nudist beach. There she let the sun tan her, just as Alfie did — it was his first time at a nude beach. Of course, he'd read about it, but in Chicago, such a thing hadn't existed for a long time. He had to slather himself thickly with sunscreen because he was afraid of getting sunburned. Julia never used sunscreen, because her skin was used to the sun; it would turn a little red at first and then tan quickly. She was used to the curious and lustful glances from men, but thankfully, hitting on girls was frowned upon at the nude beach.

She had her tablet with her and read her documents when she wasn't chatting with Alfie or when Alfie was dozing. Alfie covered his face with his T-shirt and dozed in the sun; he was often working through the night these days, so he could afford this luxury — spending time with Julia here on the beach or at her apartment — with a clear conscience. Julia always brought her cooler bag, so they could drink their own lemonade and didn't have to rely on the overpriced drinks from the beach vendors. They both loved these sunny vacation days and didn't go to the pond.

On other days, Alfie would come to her apartment; she'd stop working and lie skin-to-skin with him on the bed. Unlike her, Alfie was groaning from the heat, so she took a damp washcloth and washed his body from head to toe, letting the evaporating moisture cool his skin. She knew every inch of his body; she hadn't blushed

while washing him in a long time. He dozed off, and she sat down at the computer to continue working on her thesis.

The myths and legends she read came mainly from the second half of the 19th century, the heyday of Neoclassicism. How different the German and French legends were! The French texts were cheerful, cheeky, and tongue-in-cheek — they called a hammer a hammer and an anvil an anvil without any hesitation or beating around the bush. The German texts, on the other hand, were already heavily self-censored; after all, you couldn't call a hammer a hammer — or even mention it at all! The poets and writers were aware of society's repressive pressure, so they either hid the hammer and anvil entirely or modestly concealed them behind a rosebush. Julia smiled knowingly and diligently noted down the offending passages. Sometimes she read the passages aloud to Alfie, and they discussed the differences.

Later, Julia wouldn't have been able to say exactly when she'd started touching him intimately. It had happened completely naturally, because when she washed him with the cool, damp cloth, she touched him there too, claro. His body reacted to the harmless touch; Bacchus poked his little head out and looked around curiously. Smiling, she reached out and did what her grandfather had taught her. Moaning and groaning with pleasure, Alfie relaxed, and she continued to wash him with the cool, damp cloth, smiling contentedly. It became second nature, and Alfie just looked at her with wide eyes. "You do it far better than any little machine, Julia." She nodded knowingly, for he hadn't brought a little machine from the future with him. "Grandpa patiently taught me, and now I can put it into practice." There wasn't much more to say about it.

Just as naturally, she would rest her head on his broad chest whenever her desire threatened to overflow, murmuring that she, too, wanted to relax now. Her finger blindly followed the familiar path. A butterfly spread its wings, fluttered back and forth, and settled on a small hillock, on a flower's calyx, only to spread its wings again moments later and flutter on, from hillock to hillock, alighting on a flower and plunging its proboscis deep into the flower's pistil. Oh, there were so many little hillocks there, so many blossoms that

opened their pistils to the butterfly's proboscis. And then the butterfly gradually transformed into a hawk, which now circled widely in the sky. These circles grew smaller and smaller until the hawk locked onto its target and dove toward it like a rocket, driving its talons into the flesh. Julia buried her face, trembling, in Alfie's armpit as her body twitched in the hawk's talons, and her lips kissed the delicate skin. When she looked up, Alfie was smiling. "So that's your definition of 'exuberant,' sweetheart." Julia nodded wearily, "Yes, that's me — exuberantly happy and wonderfully relaxed." She no longer hid this secret from him.

A text message from Alfie alarmed Julia. "They're arresting me..." she read the incomplete message. She suppressed her panic and called Yvonne. Yvonne was wide awake immediately. "Arrest is the key word here, Julia. You have to go to the police station and have them look for him there." Julia picked the nearest one, the police station on Juchgasse next to the 'Wien Mitte' train station. She grabbed her purse and rolled her Ferrari for 15 minutes, past the Stadtpark. The reception area was completely empty; she rolled up to the counter, but could barely see over the edge of the desk. The young officer in uniform motioned for her to roll around the counter and she looked at her curiously. Julia explained that her boyfriend had recently been arrested.

The clerk frowned. "I'm not allowed to give you that information," she said. "Well, what's your boyfriend's name?" she asked, typing in "Alfred Von dem Steine, American citizen." "Yes, dear young lady, he's listed here, but that's all I can tell you." Julia's shoulders slumped. "Wait," said the clerk, "I'm going to take a smoke break right outside the door." Julia got the hint and rolled out onto the street. Moments later, the clerk came out and awkwardly lit a cigarette. "In the Gray House, pretrial detention," she muttered into the flame of her lighter. "No, unfortunately I can't tell you anything more specific — that's all it says." Julia mumbled her thanks and rolled away. She called Yvonne. Yvonne thought for a moment. "You can only go in there with a lawyer, sweetie. But he's American — just call the embassy; they'll send someone."

Julia called the American Embassy in broken, school-level English. She was transferred, transferred again, and after five or six transfers, she got a young man on the line who, thank goodness, spoke German. He wrote down Alfie's name and his address in Huntington Heights, Chicago. That was all Julia knew. She had told him she had limited mobility and was in a wheelchair. He said he could be at the Landl — the Gray House — in two hours, at 1:00 p.m., and asked if she could make it there too. Of course, Julia said, breathing a sigh of relief. She called a taxi that could accommodate a wheelchair user and had herself driven to the Landl, the downtown prison. She waited patiently, and at a quarter past one, a young man approached her and held out his hand.

She touched his hand with her fingertips and said, "I have brittle bone disease, so I can only use my fingertips, Mr. ...?" "Andrews, Frederick Desmond Andrews," he said. "I work at the U.S. Embassy. I just checked our records and found seven people with the last name "Von dem Steine" in downtown Chicago, but not a single Alfred and no one in Huntington Heights either. "Well, we'll see." Good Lord, was she dragging the nonexistent Alfie even deeper into the shit!?

Andrews led the way, showed his ID, and they were escorted to a burly correctional officer who was more nibbling than puffing on his cigarillo. "Smoking is strictly prohibited here, just like everywhere else. Here, help yourself," he said, pushing the overflowing ashtray across the table with a crooked grin. He motioned for them to sit down and picked up a thick folder. "Yes, he's here, in pretrial detention. Unfortunately, that's all I can tell you, Mr. Andrews. And it goes without saying that we treat him like a gentleman — after all, he might be innocent. I'm just following my instructions, Mr. Andrews, and I'm not authorized to provide any information about prisoners in the political section."

Andrews nodded. "I see. But could you tell me who I should contact and which department I can reach out to for more information?" The officer looked at the file. "A Captain F. Münzinger, extension 1423, is the officer in charge. Wait, I'll give you the phone number." Andrews wrote it down and stood up. "Thank you very much," he said and walked out into the hallway with Julia. "I'll have

to discuss this with my superior; I can't just ride 'Yippie-Yeah' into the Corral like that — you understand, don't you, Ms. Herrnthaler?" Julia nodded. Andrews promised to call her in two hours at the latest; after all, he had her cell phone number. He left quickly.

She had told Yvonne everything. Yvonne said that if she couldn't make any headway with the embassy, she could consult a lawyer, but that would be expensive. Julia waited anxiously for Andrews's call. He actually called, even before the two hours were up. "Well, we spoke with Münzinger on the phone. He was pretty annoyed that the embassy had gotten involved so early on. Yes, there had been an anonymous tip, and the American had been arrested on suspicion of espionage. He acknowledged that the man would, of course, receive legal counsel, and tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. he would visit the prisoner at the Gray House with Andrews so that Andrews could see for himself. With the prisoner's consent, a search of the two apartments on Pálffygassee had been arranged; his colleagues were already on site. In any case, Münzinger concluded, if this were indeed a case of espionage against the Republic, they would contact the ambassador through official channels, as required." Andrews waited to see if Julia had anything to say about it.

"We've known each other for a few weeks — maybe two and a half months — Mr. Andrews," said Julia. "Of course, I can't vouch for Alfred; I don't know him that well. But I'm absolutely astonished that he's supposed to be a spy. That strikes me as very strange; I surely would have noticed something. A spy? No, Mr. Andrews. It must be a case of mistaken identity or a misunderstanding — Alfie is absolutely, positively not a spy!" Andrews seemed to nod over the phone. "Keep in mind that a girlfriend is often the best cover for a clever spy, and very few girls notice his double life. But I'm certainly not implying that your friend could be a spy. At least he's not one of our spies — I can assure you of that!" he chuckled. Turning serious again, he said, "I'll bring a colleague with me tomorrow who will meticulously examine Mr. von dem Steine's documents and passport. Then we'll see."

Julia hung up after Andrews promised to call her back tomorrow around 3:00 p.m. Julia talked for a while longer with Yvonne, who

was quite pleased with how things were going. “Don’t worry, Julia, everything’s on track now. That’s all you can do right now.” Julia drove out to the pond that very afternoon to feed the birds. Then she threw herself into her work and immersed herself in the myths of ancient Greece.

At night, she tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. What if they discovered that Alfie didn’t even exist? He would never reveal his time travel — they’d lock him up in the loony bin on the spot. What if they thought his passport was a forgery? After all, his passport didn’t bear the likeness of President Donald J. Trump, but most Americans still had passports featuring the American bald eagle. That couldn’t be his undoing. But what about the house search? Would they buy his explanation that he was collecting and scanning lost documents? What if they investigated whether and when there had been a fire at the National Library? And whether an Alfred von dem Steine even worked for the National Library at all? Question after question to which she had no answer. Loose wires dangling from the ceiling. She fell asleep restlessly, dreaming wild, frightening, and violent dreams, but when the alarm clock woke her at seven, she couldn’t remember any of them.

She was sitting by the pond feeding the birds, but she drove home as early as 1:00 p.m. and waited for Andrews’ call. He called at a quarter to three. “I was just with Münzinger at Mr. Von dem Steine’s. I can reassure you, Mrs. Herrnthaler, he’s well taken care of; he’s dressed in civilian clothes and is being treated courteously. Münzinger and I spoke with him for 20 minutes. My colleague thoroughly examined the passport — it’s definitely genuine, thank God. He is definitely an American, and I’ve sunk my teeth into this case — I have every right to do so. Münzinger asked him questions about the house search. The answers were quite satisfactory. Mr. Von dem Steine works for a patron, searching for and scanning documents, books, and newspaper articles from the last century. Münzinger was able to confirm this information; nothing else had been found. He remained silent about the patron’s name — there was no obligation to disclose it. If a patron wished to remain anonymous, he was entitled to do so.”

Andrews paused. “There isn’t the slightest indication that he’s spying for a foreign power — and certainly not for our country; I’ve checked it twice and three times. Münzinger said that without concrete evidence, they wouldn’t even be able to present the case to a magistrate and would have to drop it. Münzinger seemed relieved to me, because catching a real spy was something truly extraordinary and would drag a whole trail of red tape in its wake. No, he would close the case immediately and release Mr. von dem Steine. Münzinger shrugged; he had to investigate every suspicion, even if it ended up being a dead end, like this case.” Andrews hung up.

The next morning, around a quarter past nine, Alfie called; he was already downstairs at the front gate. Julia pressed the door opener and waited for him. Without a word, and in tears, she threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, how wonderful to have you back, my little spy!” she sobbed, overjoyed. She invited him to sit down and made some tea. She served croissants and a cold platter for breakfast. She watched him silently as he tucked heartily into his breakfast. “In prison, I got a cup of brown sludge at 5 a.m. that wouldn’t even pass for coffee in wartime,” he grinned. “It was an interesting experience, 48 hours in pretrial detention. I’ve checked that off my tourist to-do list — I don’t plan on visiting again.” He lit a cigarette. “That was really nice of you to get the embassy involved — it sped up the process considerably.” Julia said it had been Yvonne’s advice, and she was absolutely right.

Julia said there might be a problem with his passport. Andrews had written down the passport number and would surely figure out that he was a U-boat, an underground operative. Alfie wasn’t fazed. “I’m confident, Julia, don’t worry. I’ll just blame it on the passport office’s sloppiness, of course — it won’t be a problem.” (And that’s exactly how it turned out; they never heard from Andrews again.) Alfie set off quickly; his scanners had surely been waiting for new input for 24 hours or even longer.

Julia had gotten her hands on the pill. She was absolutely determined to have sex with Alfie, but she didn’t want to take any risks. She was just waiting for the right moment, because now, after the espionage scandal, Alfie had to focus on his main task. No, she

would wait until everything was back to normal, just like before the espionage incident. At noon, she strolled over to the pond and fed her birds. She had also bought birdseed, grains, and dried berries from a pet store so the birds would have something other than stale bread to eat. The man at the pet store had agreed with her — the birds needed supplements like minerals, salts, flaxseed, and hempseed for natural fats. “I’ve learned something important again,” she thought to herself. From now on, she would buy birdseed so the birds wouldn’t just get stale bread.

A few hours later, she was lying on Alfie's bare chest again. She asked him for the hundredth time what it was like to be intimate with his mom.

Alfie patiently described it for the hundredth time. “We lay still and silent next to each other, not touching one another; each of us was focused on ourselves. Our little machines were running, humming quietly. My little machine is easy to describe; really, it was just a primitive contraption, and it was done after only a few minutes, whereas Mom’s always took a very long time. But how Mom used her machine — I never figured that out for sure in my earliest youth; I never asked her and only rarely spied on her. That was the boundary of her privacy. Presumably, there was some kind of tongue that Mom used, but I didn’t know that for sure back then. There was a vibrating plunger — I knew that for certain, because I could usually see it in action. I always assumed that Mom first let that hidden tongue do its work, and when she was already panting loudly, she’d switch on and activate the piston. But maybe I was wrong, and my imagination was running wild like a crazy bronco.” Julia nodded thoughtfully. “It seems plausible to me — the wet tongue first, and then the dildo at the end. That way, it makes sense. At least that’s how we humans do it.”

"Once my little machine had relaxed me, I rested my face on Mama’s beautiful chest and listened to her heart pounding and racing. Mama, born Isolde von Hohenheim, had been the most fieriest mare at the Hohenheim horse stud farm in her youth. I mainly watched Mom’s facial expressions as they shifted from a soft smile to focused, introspective attention and finally to a relaxed,

blissful smile. When I lifted my head, I could see the vibrating plunger tirelessly thrusting into her bush. Her fingers were always in her bush; she'd adjust the plunger's movements, and her finger would circle a little. My sisters had shown me long before how girls do it. Mom tensed up toward the end and set the plunger to top speed — that fascinated me a lot back then. When she reached the end of the stroke, she pushed it out, looked at me happily and relaxed, and little stars twinkled in her eyes. Mom knew for sure that I was watching the plunger pistoning, but she didn't say a word; she probably wanted me to see it. We never talked specifically about how I or she used the little machine. She surely thought I could have seen everything."

He thought for a moment. "Just once, back when I was still a little kid, she showed me exactly where this wet tongue was licking and how she shoved the plunger deep into her bush so the guy could really pound her. But I forgot all about it right away — it was really boring, and I was just a little kid back then. Sex was boring; I categorically rejected that stupid little machine, and Mom should keep doing it for me herself by hand." "How old do you think you were back then?" Julia asked. "I think 7 or 8 — that's when I hit puberty and my little guy became fully functional."

Julia always closed her eyes when he told her about it. Yes, she could picture it — the boy's face against Mom's breasts and his gaze fixed on the pestle as it pounded. Yes, she could easily imagine that. "I think your mom was smart and wise. Introducing you to sexuality — yours as well as hers — in this way was exactly the right thing to do under the circumstances." Alfie nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, she was — a very good and conscientious mother who didn't let me go astray during puberty and my teenage years."

Julia asked if he'd ever been able to see the plunger directly, like... well, inside? Alfie thought for a moment, formulating his words in his head before speaking. "I was in middle school — probably 15 or maybe even 16 — when Mom let me see it, all of it. From the front, not just from above, down from her chest. No, she let me kneel between her thighs and gaze in wonder. Filled with awe and a sacred shiver, not with greedy lust as I would be now. How she stretched out

her little mound toward the wet tongue to be licked, while her finger circled lightly and tirelessly. How that kindled her fire, and she finally pressed the button. Now the piston began to thrust, and I was allowed to see it very clearly as it drove into her bush and then into her body. My whole body trembled; my mother had never given birth to a child, and everything looked as delicate as it had with my sisters.

The plunger dug its way through drilling a hole and dutifully pounded its way in and around inside. Of course, I knew in theory how the girls did it with their fingers, but now I saw it up close, because Mom didn't just guide the plunger with her finger — she made her finger dance and jump busily. And I understood that she was only revving the plunger to full throttle to intensify her climax. From then on, she let me watch whenever I wanted. Mom's glances were always shy and full of shame, because she was letting me see her sinful thoughts and her best-kept secrets. And she had gotten into the habit of reaching out to me just before her final ecstasy and letting Genghis Khan's blessing rain down on the piston and her most sacred part. I think she longed for closeness, for union. As a fiery mare at the Hohenheim stud farm, she'd never lacked for that." Alfie closed his eyes. He'd come so close to the truth that it made him dizzy. He didn't dare take the final step — the most painful one — not yet.

Julia put off the topic of Genghis Khan for later and interjected, "Your sisters!?" Alfie didn't want to leave her hanging and found a way to skirt the truth. "Mom once asked me what she could get the girls for their — I think it was their fifteenth — birthday? I suggested little relaxing machines — they made them for young girls, too. Same functions, but everything a tad smaller. That's how my sisters, the twins, got their first little machines. And I think that was just the right thing to do, and it came at just the right time." Julia sensed that a big fat fly and a big fat lie were lurking in the undergrowth here, but she pushed the thought aside. She had no right to pry. She could guess as much.

She told Alfie about the dream she'd had that night: once again, she had floated into his mom's bedroom and seen her and Alfie lying there, with the little machines on her lower abdomen. They were

holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, and smiling. She floated around the two of them and spotted the dildo thrusting into her bush, and she heard Alfie's mother's panting sighs. But it wasn't a nightmare; instead, she rose high into the air and landed in a meadow full of flowers, their blossoms turning hungrily toward the sun. Alfie smiled, because he liked it when someone experienced something beautiful in a dream.

Julia asked where his father had gone? Alfie's face expression darkened. "Dad fell madly in love with Almut, Mom's youngest sister — she was 15 or 16 at the time. They committed the sin of the flesh for months right under Mom's nose, and Dad died a miserable death from the virus." Julia paused in her movements. "Oh, I'm so sorry — how terrible!" But Alfie waved it off. "Almut didn't take the testing very seriously, and that ice-cold vixen let Dad walk right into his doom with his eyes wide open — it was his decision, after all."

Julia could tell this was eating away at him. So she changed the subject. She wanted to know how society as a whole was reacting to the virus. "It's a bloodbath," Alfie said, "there are far too few men for far too many women. Some of the smarter ones live without sex, just like me. Others rely on condoms and tear into the lambs and sheep like wolves; unscrupulously, they stop at neither virgins nor shy wives. — I dare say that my great-grandchildren, freed from the yoke of the virus, will reintroduce polygamy out of necessity so that, like the Bedouins of old, they won't die out as a people." Julia nodded thoughtfully; he might be right.

Alfie, just like Julia, had found his rhythm between work, feeding the birds, and lying on her bed. He worked late into the night and made sure his scanners ran tirelessly day and night. He was glad he'd bought the most expensive models; the devices could easily distinguish between books, newspapers, and magazines. They retrieved the next item from the stack and turned the pages on their own, one by one. Where appropriate, they scanned two pages at a time. They slid the finished item into the tray and picked up the next one from the input conveyor belt. Each scanned item was given a descriptive folder name that included at least the title, type of item,

and date of release. This allowed him later — 900 years later — to have them neatly cataloged.

Damn, it was Tuesday — and Yvonne's afternoon! And Alfie was lying naked on her bed, sleeping soundly. "Can I...?" Yvonne asked Julia, and took off her clothes as she usually did, so all three of them were naked on that sweltering afternoon. Yvonne lay down next to the sleeping Alfie and looked him over from head to toe, taking a very close look at the naked guy and the sleeping Dionysus. Julia wasn't sure if it was right to lie down next to Yvonne, but then she decided to go for it — Tuesdays always meant girl-on-girl sex, every damn Tuesday afternoon. And Yvonne should stop staring at Alfie's thing, that sex-crazed slut!

Alfie woke up a little later, held out his hand to Yvonne, and told her his name. "Yvonne Pospischil," she said, and they shook hands. The "Von dem Steine" fascinated Yvonne, but Alfie said with a smile that in the U.S. there was no nobility and no "Von" as in Germany. Julia reached for a cigarette and offered one to Alfie and Yvonne as well. She found the situation very embarrassing — first, the girls having sex next to the sleeping Alfie, and now they had to pretend nothing had happened. Yvonne's fingers brushed against Alfie's inner thigh, and she stared at the head of Bacchus, which had risen and was looking around curiously. "May I...?" Yvonne asked Julia, but she just shook her head, firmly refusing. "No, don't — Yvonne, behave yourself!" Could she have said yes? No, of course not; girlfriends shared everything, absolutely everything, but there were limits, too. "Alfie is mine, please respect that!" Julia said, giving Yvonne a slap on the buttocks. "You've got five on every finger, so please leave him to me — he's my one and only!" Yvonne reluctantly took her fingers off the shaft and head of Bacchus and turned to Julia: "So this is your spy?" All three of them laughed freely.

Of course, everything revolved around Alfie's arrest. He thanked Yvonne again for advising Julia to enlist the embassy's help. That led directly — and unspectacularly — to his swift release. He and Julia proceeded with great caution. Not even the slightest hint was to be made about time travel. Alfie blamed the mess with his passport on the sloppy negligence of the passport office, and Yvonne nodded in

agreement. “Here, too, there’s far too much sloppiness on the part of the authorities; with my French first name, I know a thing or two about that.” Julia and Alfie took turns telling Yvonne everything worth knowing about Alfie, since she wanted to learn all about Julia’s new boyfriend. Without having coordinated their stories, they stuck as closely as possible to the facts and the truth — that caused the fewest complications. The afternoon flew by in the blink of an eye. Alfie couldn’t take his eyes off Yvonne’s breasts; they were what one would call ‘massive’. Not a gram of silicone — all raw, feisty nature. They then discussed Julia’s thesis and Yvonne’s current lover. “He’s useless and certainly no stud,” Yvonne sighed. She glanced at her watch and got dressed slowly, lasciviously, and frivolously. Let Alfie stare all he wanted — she knew full well just how beautiful she was. She gave them both a little kiss on the cheek and left.

Julia pressed herself against Alfie. “While you were sleeping, we were having girl-on-girl sex. I would have been so embarrassed if you’d woken up right in the middle of it, Alfie.” He ran his flat hand over her back; she was so slim that he could have counted her ribs. “It’s really none of my business — she’s your partner, Julia, not mine.” Julia teased him: “But you’d probably like her, wouldn’t you?” Alfie didn’t pick up on her playful tone and replied in all seriousness: “She’s probably a beautiful and desirable young woman in your world. She really is very shapely, but next to you she pales in comparison. To me, she seemed dominant — almost domineering — and I can’t stand that. Besides, first of all, I don’t want to be her two hundred and seventy-ninth conquest after the two hundred and seventy-eighth — and to know that tomorrow the two hundred and eightieth will already be in bed with her. Besides, and secondly — my first physical encounter with the female sex should be with someone very special, not with a slut, if you’ll forgive me for using that vulgar term.” Julia punched him in the ribs. “Yvonne isn’t a slut — she’s promiscuous, yes. But not a slut!”

She picked up the breadcrumb again. “So you want your first time to be with someone very special?” He remained silent and didn’t pick up on the hint. Julia waited in vain.

"I saw my doctor this morning. She did a bone density test: a 17% increase! Alfie, your healing powder is working — the improvement is phenomenal! I've been on a high all day and have been dying to tell you how overjoyed I am! 17%, and that's after about 50 days!" Alfie purred contentedly. "That's good news — damn good news!" Julia gave him a squeeze from the side. "So, what do you think — am I special enough to be your first?" Alfie held his breath. "That's exactly what I was trying to say earlier: you and no one else!"

Her overflowing libido felt like a lump in her throat. She wanted — no, she had to — feel him, the gentle lapping of the waves as well as the surf thundering powerfully against the rocks. Julia murmured in a husky voice, "You can hold me gently by the hips while we have sex now." And she turned on her side, presenting her ass to him. Alfie gently placed a hand on her hip, and they had sex for the first time. Julia rejoiced almost silently, letting the butterfly flutter busily from blossom to blossom and, finally, letting the hawk swoop down with a cry of joy.

They lay there, tightly entwined, letting their heartbeats slow to a rhythm. Julia kissed him for the first time — a deep, sincere, and heartfelt French kiss. "Alfred von dem Steine, I want to be your girlfriend, your sexual partner, your wife — as long as you're here in my time!" Alfie gently pulled her close. "Julia Herrnthaler, I take you as my girlfriend, my one and only sexual partner, and my wife, for as long as I'm allowed to stay in your time!"

Yeah, that really was a damn profound change.

Alfie muttered about how liberating it was not to have to think about the deadly virus. Julia smiled, "Of course, my doctor tests me regularly — I might have caught something from Yvonne — but all the tests have come back negative so far. So yes: you don't need to be afraid when you have sex with me, Alfie, my husband!" Julia let the words melt on her tongue: my husband!

Julia didn't think about sterilization anymore, because she was on the pill, and that was fine. Her daily life hardly changed, except for the sex, of course. Julia admired his sexual stamina. "Your little

machine did a great job getting things started, Alfie. You're way more potent than any of my previous lovers — and even most of Yvonne's lovers. And that makes me damn happy to finally be having sex; in a way, you're giving me back a bit of normalcy, Alfie, my dear husband!"

Oh, she could say it out loud over and over again, shout it out to the world: Alfie, my husband!

The Hottest August

This August was the hottest on record. The polar ice caps melted, and polar bears wandered confusedly through the dirty-gray landscape. Meteorologists couldn't warn humanity often enough: "The climate is getting warmer — much too fast. And we have only ourselves to blame; we're sawing off the branch we're sitting on."

And we fools just stand there looking completely dumbfounded and confused: What? Who? Why!?

Julia looked down at herself in surprise. Her breasts were getting bigger — no doubt about it. The doctor had smiled, "...that's because of the pill, Mrs. Herrnthaler. Stop taking the pill if that guy isn't worth it!" Julia smiled back and said nothing. Alfie — Alfie was her husband, and he was worth everything, absolutely everything. She would keep taking the pill, she told the doctor. The now-routine bone density test showed a steep upward trend. "I've never seen anything like this before, Mrs. Herrnthaler. Those little pills you're taking are having a surprising effect. Keep it up, and you'll be the first person to defeat brittle bone disease. I'd be overjoyed!" said the doctor.

Julia continued to drive the Ferrari outside the house. At home, she now dared to stand or walk freely more often without stopping herself. It was an exhilarating feeling. She let a little more hope creep in. Maybe — just maybe — she would overcome the illness. She had read a lot about mRNA technology. It was like a vaccination at the genetic level. The genes were essentially reprogrammed and passed the information on to their neighboring genes on either side. This was the discovery that had been used to successfully vaccinate people against the coronavirus since 2020. A medical breakthrough — a step whose full significance could not yet be fully grasped. People cautiously compared it to the discovery of penicillin.

Alfie looked up at her as they were getting ready to leave. Julia was wearing a semi-sheer blouse that beautifully outlined her breasts, a black leather miniskirt, and Roman sandals — and nothing

else. No bra, no panties, no thong. Alfie clicked his tongue. “From her toes to her navel, from her neck to her navel — all natural, my hat’s off to her!” Two snakes wound their way up from her ankles along the insides of her thighs and met above her sacred spot. “That dim-witted Parsifal should be scared to death and never dare to cross this threshold, right!?” Alfie joked. Julia’s expression was a mystery. “I just want to let the snakes get some fresh air after the long, gloomy winter,” Julia said. Alfie grinned cheekily. “Let them get some fresh air, huh!” She pulled her miniskirt down a little lower. “I’m proud to have something to show off,” she said defiantly. “Oh, come on, you’re an exhibitionist — a damn hot one at that!” said Alfie, and that was that.

Julia smiled when she sat by the pond with Alfie and passersby stared at her T-shirt — the girl in the red wheelchair had quite the cleavage! Oh yes, she was still as proud of her breasts as a peacock — she admitted that to herself. Alfie, too, now bought half-loaves of bread for the birds; they went to the pet store together and bought birdseed so the birds would have everything they needed. Julia wiped a tear from the corner of her eye when a pair of mallards appeared, with eight little ducklings in tow. She felt a sense of pride, as if she herself had become a mom. Alfie smiled, too; after all, he had often stroked the drake’s little green-feathered head to encourage him to mate with his mate — and voilà, there were the ducklings, all without a fertility clinic.

Alfie was standing next to her in the kitchen; he had bought an Italian coffee maker — the kind where you pour the coffee beans in from the top, which finely grinds the beans before brewing and can make two cups of coffee at once. He had been looking for a machine like that — 900 years later — but it simply didn’t exist, any more than unground Arabia coffee beans did. His eyes sparkled; coffee like this was far superior to anything sold as “coffee” in Chicago in the 2930s. His nostrils quivered as he let the first caffè made from real Arabica beans run through the machine. Julia had always been more of a tea drinker, but she didn’t turn down a delicately scented, fragrant espresso. Alfie’s hand rested on her asscheeks, his eyes gleaming. “This is something that won’t exist in 900 years, my love. Coffee made from beans freshly ground right before your eyes, flowing

straight into the cup. Just one of millions of sins, just one of the wonderful ‘old’ things we’ve lost along the way to the new future.” For her, neither coffee beans nor a coffee maker were anything special, but she could sense Alfie’s excitement and joy — and somehow understand it, too. In the future, people will know only the standardized food products manufactured in factories. The senses of smell and taste had become insignificant; the profits of the food monopolists were far more important.

Alfie drank his first cup of coffee with his eyes closed, without taking his hand off Julia’s back. “Stay a while, you are so beautiful,” he quoted from Goethe’s ‘Faust’. Julia looked at his face; it seemed to glow from within. Alfie was neither pretentious nor self-important. He could enjoy a cup of coffee as if it were a Texas steak from a charcoal grill or a luxury yacht from Ferretti. She smiled; “We should stay like children more often,” she said softly, “children whose eyes can grow wide and round at the sight of a waffle cone with five scoops of ice cream. We forget how to love the little things and appreciate their value — that’s just the way it is.”

Alfie opened his eyes and set down the empty cup. “Do you know what the first thing I did was when I came to your time? I drove straight to downtown Chicago and tracked down my great-great-grandparents. Yeah, almost like a stalker, but they were easy to find in the phone book. I just watched my ancestors’ family for 10 days. I couldn’t talk to them without jeopardizing my mission. But they mean something very special to me. And watching the girls and young moms on their morning runs — those beautiful bodies in skin-tight leggings — it really warmed my heart.” Julia nudged him in the ribs. “You were just staring at their ass butts, you little pig!” Alfie laughed. “You bet! I’m not speaking as a biased family member, but they all have really shapely parts in those leggings, no question about it.” They both laughed, and that was just fine.

Julia looked up from her screen and took off her glasses. “I’m always delighted by how French writers deal with the behavior of the gods — with a smile and without hesitation. In German sources, Zeus’s union with Leda in the form of a swan is “mentioned” in a sober and dry manner, like a weather report. The French, on the

other hand, describe the incredulous gazes of those who witnessed the unusual event. Of course, for only the Spartan queen Leda could recognize the father of the gods and surrender herself to him. Yet the French descriptions do not shy away from the impropriety of the situation and depict the indecency directly and with many lighthearted flourishes, without making it read like filth. That would never even occur to a German. I'm dedicating an entire chapter to Leda, Zeus, and the swan because it best illustrates the differences. I'm curious to see how this will go over with my advisor. I have a feeling she's already sharpening her red pen." Alfie raised his head; he'd been dozing a bit, catching up on some sleep. "Don't lose sight of your goal, Julia. Your task is to earn your degree, not to be a champion of truth-seeking. You can always write a detailed book later, once you've got your academic degree in your pocket and framed on the wall." It was good that Alfie had this clear perspective, that he didn't mix one thing with the other. He was encouraging her to stay focused on her goal — that was all.

Julia sat with her knees drawn up next to the sleeping Alfie; she had wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on them. She was crying silently but bitterly. Alfie woke up. "Oh, darling, what's wrong? What's the matter?" Julia let herself sink forward onto his chest; her tears were now streaming down his hairless chest. It took several minutes before she — listening to his heartbeat — calmed down, still sobbing softly. "I'm crying because I'm heartbroken. One day you'll have finished your work, and then you'll return to your own time. The thought of it is killing me. Knowing that we only have the blink of an eye together. That this day is drawing nearer, inevitable, and that one day you'll have to leave. No, I won't try to hold you back. When I became your wife, I knew full well that this was only a temporary marriage. That every day is a gift, that I have no claims on you whatsoever. But it makes me unspeakably sad, Alfie, my husband!" Alfie embraced her and tried to comfort her; his hand brushed over her skin, caressing her, and he murmured disjointed words of comfort. He'd rather bite his tongue off than make empty promises to her.

No, Julia didn't cry very often. She had both feet firmly on the ground; there wasn't much that brought tears to her eyes. Alfie had

said he wouldn't finish within the sabbatical year — it would take a few more months — and the director had agreed. She was glad that Alfie was such a dedicated curator — like hardly anyone else. What other curator would sacrifice a year of his life to personally oversee the collection for the National Library? Who wouldn't just shrug and settle for the fact that it was a fire accident through no fault of his own? No, the director wished there were more curators with his character on her 200-person team. Alfie wasn't artificially prolonging his stay. He kept the scanners running day and night; he emailed people all over the world to obtain documents, letters, photos, and even seemingly insignificant newspaper articles — he was like a predator that had tasted blood and couldn't be led off its trail, even though there were quite a few setbacks. But that was part of the job; you couldn't always win.

Julia had dressed up; she put on her nicest outfit, her new sturdy flats, and applied some subtle makeup. Alfie wondered what this was all about. Julia smiled and linked her arm through his. “Today we're celebrating the 90th day since I started taking your remedy. From now on, my body is taking over — the powder has done its job. I've placed the empty glass container on top of the sideboard. Then I wrote a label that says, ‘Inside here is what's left of the brittle bone disease.’ I'd like to walk to the pond on your arm today — without the Ferrari. I want my birds to see that I can walk on my own two feet, that I'm no longer disabled. Not today, anyway.” Alfie smiled. How happy she was! He took his dark blue velvet cap, embroidered with gold and silver thread, out of his backpack. “That's a curator's cap — that's how they recognize us in the library. It's the only elegant thing I have to wear.” They walked to the pond; Julia generously brought a large paper bag of stale bread and birdseed. Then they went to the Marriott Hotel on the Ring, one of the city's more upscale hotels. They sat high up in the lunchroom, drank wine, and ate steaks made from Scottish Angus beef. It was Julia's special day.

Julia drove her Ferrari to the university. She presented the draft of her thesis to her advisor, and they discussed all the details. The professor was not dissatisfied. Julia had struck the fine line between pornography and reporting on sex so precisely that no problem would arise here. “Of course,” Julia smiled, “when I quote sources

verbatim, I don't cut a single word. After all, one should read the original, not a castrated forgery." The professor pushed her chair back and pondered. "Julia, submit the final draft in September, and you'll get your Master of Science degree — guaranteed. What I keep thinking about is whether you could — and would — pursue a Ph.D. All you need to do is expand, supplement, and polish up your thesis. I think this would be just the right thing for you. You've become a true expert in your field, and you can be proud of that. And I'm retiring in less than 10 years, my dear." Julia swallowed but said nothing. She thought she'd really enjoy a career as an assistant professor under Johanna — very much so, in fact.

Julia began revising her manuscript from scratch and preparing a fair copy. After all, she had to submit four copies of her thesis, and one copy would be archived at the National Library. Neat work and precision were now essential. Still, she stuck to her daily routine. She handled the correspondence for IKEA every morning, drove to the pond at noon, and fed the birds with Alfie. The afternoon was reserved for her thesis, and she was as busy as a bee. The fair copy grew and grew. She took great care to include a footnote with the source for every citation; that was considered important. Alfie read her manuscript over and over again; he had no objections, just the occasional suggestion on how she could improve the readability flow of a particular passage.

Yvonne was going through a rough patch. She had dumped her Argentine macho. He had revealed macho, patriarchal tendencies that she couldn't handle. She was, for God's sake, a grown woman of the twenty-first century, not some wallflower from the Middle Ages whom the guy could enslave. She'd kicked him out with a symbolic kick in the ass; the relationship had absolutely no future.

The three of them were lying on Julia's bed. It was Tuesday afternoon, and they were smoking peacefully after having sex. Alfie held back from commenting, because the relationship issues of that time were very complex. Emotional intimacy, sex lived out freely and unrestrainedly, and the clash of different personalities were far more complex than he remembered. Julia, on the other hand, was engaged in a lively discussion with Yvonne, since she had witnessed the

beginnings of this relationship and the time that followed firsthand. She had warned Yvonne right from the start that the boy wasn't quite right. But Yvonne's hormones were running wild, dancing the Cha-Cha-Cha during what was, admittedly, great sex with Alessandro. Julia's Cassandra-like warnings were powerless against that. And now, now the feverish excitement had cooled off. The hot iron sizzled in the ice water and slowly cooled down.

Julia shook her head vigorously; girlfriends could even share a toothbrush, but not their husbands. No way! Yes, it was clear that Yvonne was in desperate need of sex, but Julia wasn't going to lend out her Alfie. Not in a million years! — No, it wasn't about jealousy or even resentment for Julia. It was about the fact that Alfie was her husband and not Yvonne's — not even as an exception. Yvonne should find someone who was available; Alfie certainly wasn't.

She talked to Alfie about it later, of course. Alfie shifted around on his butt. "Julia, there can't be any lies between us — they'd ruin everything. I'll admit that Yvonne is a really tempting girl sexually — maybe even a sex bomb or a sex goddess, as they say these days; I do have eyes in my head, after all. When I see the two of you having sex, it's obvious. I'd be a goddamn liar if I didn't tell you how much I love looking at Yvonne's body and watching her in action. And she doesn't hold back about wanting me — desperately wanting me. You have sex with me because we don't have to fear a deadly virus. Women in your time take the pill and control their own pregnancies. Nothing — absolutely nothing — would stand in the way of Yvonne taking me between her thighs — I've thought about it a thousand times, honestly. But despite all that, I took you as my wife, not her. I promised you that you'd be my only wife, with no exceptions. And you're the only one I love the way I haven't loved a woman in a long time." Julia snuggled up against him. "And you're my husband, my only husband, even if you're one with an expiration date." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't even want to think about the day you'll leave and never come back. I'm afraid I'll die right then and there, because without you I'm lost in this life." Alfie said nothing — what could he have said? There was no "Yvonne option"; they both knew that, and they stuck to it like glue.

Friday was Julia's graduation. The University of Vienna, the Alma Mater Rudolphina Vindobonensis, had been holding the graduation ceremony according to a festive ritual for centuries. The dean and the other professors wore medieval ceremonial robes and headdresses. Before them, arranged in a semicircle, stood the newly minted doctors and masters, all in their finest attire. The audience — mostly family members of the doctoral candidates and master's graduates — had also dressed up for the occasion. Alfie had bought an exquisite suit and a ruffled shirt complete with a glittering tie, and had put on the librarian's cap embroidered with gold and silver thread. He did it for Julia's sake; as part of her family, he simply had to look his best. Julia wore a pink one-piece dress that accentuated her beautiful figure and had her hair styled very elegantly by a hairdresser; she wore only subtle makeup. She sat in her spotless Ferrari, holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers on her lap — a gift from Alfie.

The ceremony lasted as long as it always did. The toddlers were already getting restless, but everyone hung in there. Alfie burst into frenetic applause as Magister Julia Herrnthaler rolled up in front of the dignitaries and accepted her diploma in the dark red scroll. Even the professors sitting on the panel came out from behind the podium and shook Julia's hand. She rolled back to her seat, and only then did tears of joy roll down her cheeks.

Professor Johanna Newerkla, Julia's doctoral advisor, had invited everyone to a celebratory dinner at the Kupferdachl restaurant in the city center. She was very proud; she had guided one doctoral student and five master's students to the finish line — that was quite an achievement. A lovely banquet for 12 people had been set up in the back hall of the Kupferdachl, and Professor Newerkla spared no expense — after all, this was her celebration, her Christmas and Easter rolled into one, so she wasn't about to skimp. As luck would have it, Julia's Ferrari was seated to her left and Alfie to her right. Visibly moved and close to tears of joy, the professor gave a short speech, recounting the ups and downs of each individual thesis and the courage, diligence, and efforts of her “children.”

They dined, drank, and chatted. The doctoral student and the master's student knew each other very well, of course, and jokes and

anecdotes flew back and forth across the room. Julia had a long conversation with the professor. “Hanna,” Julia said — since everyone in this circle was on a first-name basis — “Hanna, I don’t want to promise anything I can’t deliver. But I can promise you right now that I’ll enroll in a doctoral program. I want to make you proud, Hanna, because you’ve looked after us young ones, cared for us, and even given us a kick in the rear sometimes when things weren’t going well. Yes, I want to do the Ph.D., and right now I don’t see any insurmountable obstacles. Time and money aren’t an issue at all — my grandpa made sure I’d be well provided for during my studies, God rest his soul! And I know you’ll drag this stubborn donkey back into the stable, tooth and nail.” The professor beamed. “Oh, then I already have a doctoral candidate for next semester. A doctoral candidate in Hellenistic studies. We haven’t had one of those since the war. It’s going to be a blast, my dear. And I know I won’t have to cut you any slack or go easy on you. You yourself strive for perfection and academic precision, and I can count on that.” She turned to Alfie.

"And you, Mr. Alfred, are you Julia's boyfriend?" Alfie nodded. "We've been together for just under a year now; I'm her partner, so to speak. It was only through Julia that I learned more about Olympus — much more than I did in high school." The professor continued to question him. Alfie stuck to his story, which was mostly true and only omitted the part about time travel. “No, I live in Chicago and work as a curator at the National Library. I’ve been a widower for a year and took a sabbatical to think about my why, how, and where. I actually studied history and sex education over there in the States before I was hired as a curator. A curator is a cross between a librarian, a museum administrator, and a jack-of-all-trades.”

The professor was delighted that Alfie had known the late Professor Hans Strotzka, who was a world-renowned psychiatrist and a student of Sigmund Freud’s school of thought. Alfie lied, saying he had studied under Strotzka here in Vienna for two semesters, because of course he knew all about Strotzka. And the professor was even more delighted. “That must have been quite a while ago,” the professor mused, since Strotzka had been dead for years. “I think it was 1989 or 1990,” Alfie added, already regretting

his lie. A quick mental calculation — the date was complete nonsense. But he'd already gotten himself into this, and there was no turning back.

He carefully steered the conversation back to Julia. “Julia and I have discussed her doctoral studies at length. Her main concerns revolved around her energy levels. She gave it her all to produce a perfect thesis. Now, standing at the summit, she gazes proudly at the panoramic view. She sees the next highest peak and isn't sure if she still has the energy for that climb. But as long as I'm still here, I'll actively support her. You may have to get up on your own in the morning, but sometimes the other person helps you make progress on your writing. “Without my mother's help, I would never have finished my thesis or my doctoral dissertations.” Alfie fell silent and thought of his late mother, who had kept him on track with a firm hand, routine, and tenacity.

The professor turned back to Julia. “So, Julia, where are the two of you going on vacation now?” Julia's breath caught for a moment. “Alfie and I haven't even talked about it yet. I don't think I'm the best vacation companion with this wheelchair. We've never gone on a trip before.” Julia sought Alfie's eyes. He gave her a reassuring nod and replied, “We'll discuss it at home over a cup of fine Arabic coffee. I don't really feel like going on a trip right now, to be honest.” The professor smiled. “I'm flying to the island of Santorini next week for six weeks; I have excellent accommodations there and a very dear friend, Challos. He's so different from the people here in Vienna, and I love immersing myself deeply in Greek culture and the wonderful sea.” Julia grinned. “Is Challos your lover, Hanna?” The professor grinned back. “Well, if you don't tell anyone, yes, he's my summer fling — my Greek lover — and has been for years. And don't let my ex husband find out — he'd go berserk, even though we've been divorced for years. He's always been as jealous as a yellow pus-filled pimple, my Karl.”

Julia's grin grew even wider. “Hanna, as long as our legs carry us, our hips sway, and our fingertips can still touch our toes, we should follow the example of the ancient gods, bend down to the people of Earth, and seduce them thoroughly — with all due respect, of

course.” The professor glanced at Julia’s wheelchair. “You can’t be serious about the hip-swaying, my dear?” But Julia kept grinning. “Oh, don’t worry about it, Hanna. Alfie and I — we’ll do it like porcupines: carefully, veeeery, veeeery carefully.” Alfie, Julia, and the professor laughed heartily.

The doctoral student leaned forward. “What are you laughing at?” Julia wiped the tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes and said, “We’re laughing about how porcupines probably have sex.” The doctoral student looked at her, puzzled. Julia blurted out, “Very, veeeery carefully!” Now the doctoral student laughed too, though it was probably unusual for Hanna to laugh at such jokes. He had never thought of Hanna as a woman. She had supported him in his research on Greece’s path out of the financial disaster from 2009 through 2022, and it became a highly acclaimed study.

Julia was glad she’d taken the Ferrari. She hardly would have made it through the long ceremony and the banquet on her own two feet. And the Ferrari didn’t care that she was a little tipsy now. She drove through downtown hand in hand with Alfie and felt absolutely wonderful. When they got home, she admitted to Alfie that she was tipsy — just a little — but she needed his help to get out of the Ferrari. “I guess our birds will have to go hungry today,” she said regretfully. But Alfie disagreed. “When I went for my run this morning, I fed the birds because I figured we wouldn’t have time to do it later.” Julia breathed a sigh of relief.

How attentive he was, how carefully he thought through his next steps and acted on them. She didn’t know anyone else who was so clear-headed and forward-thinking. Yvonne was the exact opposite — a textbook example of chaos. Except she didn’t live with Yvonne; she lived with Alfie. Alfie, her lifesaver. The one who’d gotten her the medicine. Alfie, who’d proofread her thesis over and over again. Alfie, who’d come to her doctoral graduation as if he were family, who’d dressed up so as not to cause a stir. Alfie, who conversed brilliantly with her professor. Alfie, who was always there when she needed him. Alfie, who was the kind of attentive person she had always imagined her husband to be. Yes, she was grateful to fate, to heaven — yes, to the Greek gods — that she had met Alfie. Or rather,

that Alfie had noticed her and had immediately fallen madly in love with her. And had pursued her like a ghost, persistently and purposefully. — Julia let him undress her and immediately dozed off on the bed.

Fall

Alfie lifted Julia out of the Ferrari; she was as light as a feather and giggled a little, slightly tipsy, as he laid her gently on the bed. Slowly and deliberately, he undressed her, carefully draping her clothes over a chair, and sat down beside her. He stroked her face, her cheeks, her forehead, and her long blonde hair. She smiled at him, and he kissed her gently on the lips. Then he lay down beside her and embraced her. They snuggled up together, and Julia fell asleep instantly. Alfie watched her as she slept peacefully, and he thought about the beautiful moments they'd shared together today at the graduation party. Fall had arrived, but the summer heat had no intention of giving way to fog and morning dew. No, certainly not today, nor tomorrow — maybe the day after tomorrow. We'll see.

Julia stirred in her sleep, and Alfie leaned down toward her. She mumbled something about the banquet, and he nodded, even though he couldn't make out what she was saying. "Yes, my darling, I noticed too how Heinrich was devouring Johanna with his eyes." Julia murmured in her sleep, "Oh, don't worry about it. Johanna usually knows what she's doing, and if she invites a grad student between her sheets, that's her goddamn business. Oh, Alfie, forget about Heinrich — he's insignificant." A blond-curved angel full of childlike innocence whom Johanna had treated herself to as a pastime with a sly grin, amid all the dry statistics and lists full of numbers and Chancellor Merkel's decrees. Johanna was surely his first woman, and she certainly had a ton of fun with him."

Alfie sat in front of her computer, going through his lists, while Julia slept off her buzz. He still had a long list of contacts to work through; he probably wouldn't finish until Christmas. He'd spoken with the committee and his director; they'd nodded in agreement, since he'd be bringing back significantly more material than he'd had before the fire. Alfie was satisfied, and he was looking forward to the coming weeks, during which he'd continue his work. Fall was a time of change, and Alfie was ready to face the challenges that lay ahead.

Secretly, he was glad to be with Julia for three or four more months. She had grown dear to him — no question about it.

They drank an Arabia coffee and talked. The professor had brought up the subject of a vacation and, in doing so, stirred up more than just the question of a vacation. Alfie explained that it had always felt like a vacation to him when he flew to Arizona or Florida with his little tattoo kit. Word of mouth had made him a sought-after tattoo artist with his own unique style; wealthy women or their daughters booked him for a genital tattoo — his specialty. Julia grinned wryly, “...so, did you?” Alfie looked at her kindly. “Only the fear of the deadly virus kept me from eagerly reaching for the fruit. The only thing you might call sex was that the ladies relaxed themselves before and, of course, during the tattooing, because the genitals had to be completely relaxed for the tattooing. So no, there was absolutely no sex, my dear. None, zero, nada.”

Julia looked up at him. “Oh, I’m so sorry! The most delicious figs are dangling from the trees, and you poor thing have to go without — the fruit really was hanging too high. And you tattooed that Texas cow with the swaying udders; your greedy gaze followed her finger as she pleased herself nonstop, and you waited briefly until she stopped trembling and shaking. You tattooed her with that neutral, aloof gaze — like a Turkish eunuch in the harem, thoroughly cowed by the virus. I’m grateful that you refrained from mounting all those willing, horny cows with the jiggling silicone udders, that you’re alive, that you’re here, that you’re my husband, Alfie.” Alfie smiled. “Yeah, you nailed it, my love. I’ve seen it a thousand times and smiled encouragingly at everyone not to stop — which was certainly a problem for the younger ones at first. But her mom was on my side, supporting me as best she could, until the girl — shy and timid at first — began to go along with it, with sparkling sinful thoughts in her eyes, nonstop until I was done with the artwork.”

Julia gazed out over the tops of the sycamore trees, which towered high into the sky outside her window. The sun shone through the leaves, casting a warm light on her face. “We used to go to the Semmering regularly with Grandma and Grandpa; they had rented a little castle there. But once, when I was about 16, we took a sleeper

car to Venice; I lay on the lower berth, snuggled up in Grandpa's arms, because I didn't want to climb up to the loft bed — a highly risky climb. Grandpa was quite wealthy, so we stayed at the best hotel in the city, the Danieli. Back then, I didn't need crutches or a wheelchair — my brittle bone disease hadn't fully developed yet. I linked arms with Grandma and Grandpa on either side and walked between them through the narrow streets and squares of this wonderful city.

It was shortly after Ferragosto, the August 15 holiday that is sacred to Italians. At that time, there were hardly any tourists in Venice, and we had the city all to ourselves. With wide, round eyes, I marveled at all the wonders. Back then, in Venice, I felt very close to Grandpa, because it was he who had introduced me to the wonders of sexuality in those years, gently guiding my finger toward its destination. I was already 16, for God's sake, and I was sick and tired of those reserved, virgin-like ecstasies. Grandpa's face glowed and shone as he lay down with an earthly girl like Zeus, the Father of the Gods, and Grandma, her eyes wide, pressed her fingers to her lips as if she were startled. But it was something completely natural — all three of us knew it. That's how it happened, and I was overjoyed, Alfie, the happiest girl in the venerable Hotel Danieli. In Grandpa's arms, I experienced just how sublime and sacred the act could be when celebrated lovingly and without impurity.

The illness now broke out in full force, and Grandpa had to treat me like a raw egg. Grandma was just afraid he might get me pregnant right in front of her. But she quickly lost that fear in the time that followed, because Grandpa never got me pregnant, even though we were always as ravenous as rabbits. The Rabbit Grandpa and the Rabbit Girl. Grandma always smiled bemusedly, because although we had to maneuver carefully like a train pulling into a hangar, we didn't know how to use the handbrake and couldn't stop until the train was complete. "My libido was running wild, precisely because I 'forgot' how to walk," she giggled softly. Tears glistened in the corners of Julia's eyes. "Oh, yes — that was the vacation that made the biggest impression on me, Alfie."

Julia looked up. “Should I read you Grandpa’s farewell letter? Grandma and he chose to take their own lives about three years ago.” Alfie nodded, “Just read me the parts that are important to you — not anything too personal. No, leave that out.” Julia rummaged through the desk drawers and lay down next to him again. “I have to snuggle right up close to you, Alfie, because I’m going to cry like a baby.” Alfie nodded, wrapped his arms around her from behind, and rested her head on his chest. Julia cleared her throat and began to read:

Julia,

Yesterday was your high school graduation, and Grandma and I are proud of your achievement as the top student in your class. We send you a big hug and are so proud of how hard and well you've worked all these years!

Luzia and I have grown old — old and frail. We’ve decided to take our own lives on our own terms. We’ll take the poison and, clinging tightly to each other, step into the future, wherever it may lead. Hell, but also heaven, are easily transparent constructs invented for humanity, just like the gods of Olympus. We’ll probably wake up on a distant star, perhaps in a Garden of Eden — not a bad idea. But it’s even more likely that we’ll simply never wake up again. Lay us side by side to rest in eternal peace — our bodies, at least.

Luzia and I were happily married for 65 years; there were far more highs than lows, and for that I am very grateful to her. At the beginning of our relationship, Luzia was the one with fire in her ass — she was a highly sought-after girl the whole time. I suffered just a tiny bit from her affairs, but she was worth waiting for until the volcano stopped bubbling. Then came the golden years — decades of happiness as a couple, a time when neither affairs nor flings troubled us, and when we raised Lothar, your dad. He was the apple of our eyes, a wonderful young man. And when he spread his wings, he brought Emily into our family — your mom, Emilia. We, Zeus and Hera, looked upon the little family with pride. And at their wedding, I met Emily’s friends. That’s when the volcano within me awoke.

Luzia smiled gently as the sweet girls, one after another, offered themselves to my desire. I swear to you, I used neither the cunning nor the treachery of Zeus, the Father of the Gods, to lie with them. It was a joyful, carefree time, and Luzia's gentle, smiling consent was my sunshine.

You were 21 months old when the tragedy happened. Luzia and I really had very little time to grieve; we took you in, and after much consideration, we decided not to officially adopt you. You were and are Lothar and Emily's child, period. Back then, my emotions were still boiling over, but Grandma and I raised you in a safe and nurturing environment — you never lacked for anything.

You were 8 or 9 when I started reading to you from 'Olympus', and you were absolutely hooked. Right from the start, I had to tell you a great deal about human sexuality, because on Olympus, sex was as essential as the air we breathe. You wanted to know why, what, and for what purpose the gods and goddesses were willing to do certain things. You grasped Zeus's wickedness just as quickly as Hera's no less wicked nature. They had different strategies and methods, but the goal was to devour one another to the last drop of blood — you realized that quickly. Now I had to reveal all the secrets of sexuality to you, but Luzia wouldn't go along with it. We argued about what would be right for you, our daughter.

So that's how we did it behind Luzia's back. I gently guided your finger and taught you how a girl is supposed to do it. You were thrilled, bursting with lust, and unstoppable! I held your wrist to make sure you took a break so your little heart wouldn't burst from the exertion. You were desperate to experience the male counterpart as well, so I taught you how to do it to me — I taught you how to bring a cock to climax, how to make it empty. You were so moved, so awestruck, and filled with holy ecstasy that I knew just how right it was for you to have learned all of that back then. I didn't tell Luzia about it until many weeks later; she grumbled and complained at first, but she calmed down quickly. I didn't corrupt you — I just educated you very thoroughly.

We sent you to the best schools. You were allowed to invite all your girlfriends over for sleepovers, and neither Luzia nor I ever spied on you to see what you and the girls were secretly up to. We wanted you to explore and understand your sexuality. And when you invited boys over, Luzia had a serious talk with you: everything was allowed, except for actual sexual intercourse. She explained to you why it would be pretty stupid to get pregnant right now — besides, your illness was becoming more and more apparent. I'll admit here that I didn't quite believe everything was fine, so I spied on you. But to my relief, you only gave them hand jobs, and Luzia and I were proud of you because you showed self-control.

We're getting to the sensitive part, because I've been against incest from the very beginning — I've discussed it with Grandma hundreds of times. Luzia knew my story, after all. When Mom bathed me when I was a teenager, she'd do it at the end. She would look at me intently with her plain peasant's face and say that it wasn't incest, that all moms do it to relieve their boys, because that's what nature intended. I swallowed hard; maybe that was even true, even though Mom certainly had no idea about these things.

I was 15 and spending my vacation with Aunt Thea and Uncle Karl; they had a cabin by the lake. Aunt Thea asked me all sorts of questions, and she laughed heartily when I admitted what Mom was putting me through. Aunt Thea was a fashion model — and also a nude model — and I had to watch for hours as the photographers came for the shoots. And that's how Thea seduced me — Thea, Mom's younger sister! Uncle Karl just laughed and slapped his thighs — it probably looked very funny, the tall beauty and the skinny 15-year-old boy. But that's how Thea became my first.

And Mom clasped her hands over her head and talked on the phone with Thea for hours. Mom changed; the childlike innocence with which she had done things up until then was gone. I'm telling you this because it isn't written anywhere else, and I want you to know about our family — not just about gods, goddesses, and the seduced girls.

Mom twisted the facts — and quite drastically at that. I didn't make any moves or give any sign that I wanted to have sex with her — no, never! But now she said, in a tearful tone, how humiliating it was that her son had been seduced by his aunt and was now demanding the same from his mother! From his mother! I cringed and kept my mouth shut; I didn't understand a thing anymore. Day after day, the wailing went on and on; Mom exposed herself, filled with shame, because her son supposedly demanded it. Yeah, for crying out loud, I sat there silently in the bathwater and didn't demand a thing!

But Mom stuck her ass out at me, spread her ass cheeks, and whispered that I should just go ahead and look — that this was exactly what I'd been demanding so vehemently. I watched with great interest, but I'd never demanded anything. But Mom got carried away — after all, she was just an uneducated, neglected wife who didn't have a clue about psychology. Her mimicry of Thea was now complete; she forced me to stand up and penetrate her from behind. May the gods and goddesses forgive me, but my instinct knew what to do.

I did it, and that's how the incest with Mom began. It went on for years, even after I'd already started having girlfriends from school for sex. Mom insisted on it, even after my wedding night with Luzia. She looked down on me for how clingy I was to Mom, and so on. So one day — about six months into my marriage to Luzia and after having regular sex with both of them — I drew a firm line: Mom was only allowed to visit us if she kept her hands off me. Luzia was a huge help in getting me away from Mom.

I'm telling you this because it was the prelude to our vacation in Venice when you were 16, Julia. Luzia knew exactly that you were as fired up as a loaded gun back then. She also knew full well that you'd choose me to be your first. And she told me to just throw my past with Mom in the trash once and for all, to be man enough for our granddaughter, and not to chicken out like a coward. It was damn hard for me — I'm just not cut out for incest by nature.

But then we did it, and Luzia was just worried that I might accidentally get you pregnant. Yes, Zeus, the father of the gods, would have done exactly that, but not me. Years ago — without Luzia's knowledge or consent — I'd had a vasectomy, my vas deferens cut, back when I was chasing after Emily's willing girlfriends. That's how I took on some of the responsibility. I knew I could never get you pregnant, but I didn't dare admit it to Luzia — not even to this day.

I loved you as if you were my own daughter. I loved you as if you were my beloved affair. That's all I can say to you.

Please, understand us. I'm 86, Luzia is 82, and we're both incredibly tired. We've lived our lives; we've experienced many beautiful and many sad moments. We've had a long, good life; we've been together for over 65 years, just like Philemon and Baucis. We don't want to die miserably with sippy cups, diapers, and Alzheimer's. We want to sleep our eternal sleep side by side — perhaps you can arrange that, or make sure we get two spots next to each other? No, you don't need to plant an oak or a linden tree, though that would be a lovely gesture.

We loved you like a daughter; we gave you everything you needed or wanted, and the notary will transfer all of our property to you. Our greatest hope is that you'll either pursue a wonderful course of study or a fulfilling career — something that's wheelchair-accessible. And that you'll find a damn prince who'll discover your glass slipper and love you at least half as much as Luzia and I have, and treat you like a queen, just as we have all our lives.

Engelbert
your grandpa

Julia had bravely held back her tears, but now she rested her face on Alfie's chest and let the tears flow. Alfie held her gently in his arms and set Engelbert's letter aside so it wouldn't get wet. He sat in silence and let Julia cry against his chest; she should think of her grandpa and grandma, because they were like a mom and dad to her.

When Julia's sobbing subsided, he fished out his pack of cigarettes, lit two, and handed one to Julia. She took a tissue and blew her nose. "Of course, I wasn't allowed to cram two bodies into one coffin, but I arranged for two plots and had them buried in a shared grave, coffin next to coffin — that was permitted. And weeks later, I had an oak and a linden tree planted, because I understood Grandpa."

She had once shown Alfie a photo of the grave; they had a shared headstone made of dark red marble. Beneath their names and dates of birth, she had the following engraved: "Μαζί στη ζωή, μαζί και στον θάνατο," which roughly meant "Together in life, together in death." And below that: "Βίον ανθόσπαρτον" — "A life strewn with flowers" — which was not only a wedding wish but also a testament to the special nature of their marriage. They talked for a long time about her youth with Grandma and Grandpa, about Grandpa's "private lessons," and about how events had unfolded and played out in Venice at the Hotel Danieli.

"I always looked away when Grandpa was doing it with Grandma, but he didn't do it very often. Grandma would always laugh and give him a little tap on the head, 'The volcano's boiled over again, huh, old man!?' Grandpa explained to me that they didn't do it as often anymore because they were too old to have a baby now, but they still tried sometimes. I understood that — Grandpa was a bit like Zeus, that sly old fox.

I had been sitting on Grandpa's lap while he read melodiously from those thick tomes, and I felt his warm hand slip under my little skirt. Ever since he started reading about that rascal Zeus, he'd been doing that — for months now. Grandma coughed, but she just kept knitting. I made myself all soft so he could slip a finger under the hem. Zeus's finger. "Grandpa," I whispered in his ear, "did Zeus really get Metis pregnant?" Grandpa nodded, "Yes, he did, that sly fox!" We both grinned when Grandpa read aloud how Metis took off her veil and lay there completely naked in front of Zeus, luring him to her. Grandpa looked up from the book and described Metis to me in great detail — she had big breasts like Grandma and a tight ass, too. He loved the word "tight" and liked to use it at every opportunity. "If she weren't firm and stark naked, Zeus wouldn't

have slipped into her bed at all,” Grandpa explained, “That’s true, really!”

"It tickles so nicely," I whispered, and he nodded — after all, the whole thing with Metis wasn't over yet. "Grandpa," I whispered in his ear, "It's going to happen again any minute!" and he nodded. "That's how it has to be, little one, just don't squirm too much, or Grandma might notice something!" I nodded and clenched my teeth, because Zeus was just lying on Metis's belly and making his baby inside her — that's what Zeus always did, just like Grandpa did with Grandma. Grandpa's caresses were so exciting, but he just kept reading quietly. "And Metis really liked that," I whispered, because I'd heard the story a thousand times already, "... and then Zeus just took off, and there she is, Metis, with his baby," I concluded, because that's how it always went with Zeus — that's why he was such a sly fox. He'd make a baby with anyone, then just take off and act like it wasn't him.

"It's twitching, Grandpa," I whispered, because it always twitched before it came. Grandpa nodded, "It always twitches first, then it comes and grabs you ever so gently!" And then it came — the Metis gave birth to a demigod son, and I felt a tremendous twitch, but I bravely clenched my teeth. Grandma didn't look up and kept knitting, and my little legs were shaking as if I were cold. But my heart was pounding fast, and I felt pretty hot. After a while, he did it again, and again, until the stories were over and the fire in the fireplace had slowly burned down. Grandpa and I — we had a secret that Grandma never found out about. And I — I loved that secret."

The determination on his striking face after the shouting match with Grandma about sex, sex education, and being a child. Grandpa waited until Grandma had left for her coffee party, then he took Julia into the master bedroom, and they undressed, giggling as they got naked. She sat on his lap, and he did it to her a few times with his finger so she'd remember what lust and release felt like. He had taken her finger and guided it into her slit — serious, focused, and infinitely gentle. But she instantly succumbed to her overflowing libido, let her finger race through her slit, and exploded over and over again. She didn't want to stop at all.

Grandpa had finally stopped her wrist. “Don’t overload your heart with too many explosions,” he said worriedly. She could do it at night, of course, but then she had to stop in time. She had touched Grandpa’s powerfully stiff cock with candor and curiosity and asked him how to go about it with it. He explained the anatomy to her using the object itself and the functions in theory. She then, with a shiver running down her spine, tried to put the theory into practice and didn’t give up until she succeeded. She giggled and grinned from ear to ear. Grandpa said she had learned something important.

And this went on until she was 16. For her birthday, they took a train trip to Venice, because the illness was now advancing unstoppably. She didn’t dare climb up into the loft bed — a daring climb for a frail girl. So she snuggled into Grandpa’s arms in the lower bunk and did it in secret, from Bruck an der Mur to Villach and beyond. Venice, the most beautiful city in the world. And one evening, at the Hotel Danieli, young Helena gave herself to Zeus. She trembled, not because her hymen had broken, but because her union with Grandpa was so sublime and sacred. Grandma sat with her knees drawn up in her cotton nightgown in the far corner of the large bed, her hand to her lips, her eyes wide open. She had agreed, of course, but Zeus was not supposed to get the earthly girl pregnant.

Julia-Helena and her Zeus were just like rabbits. Grandma smiled indulgently because the two of them just couldn’t get enough of each other. They always did it right in front of Grandma; they’d never sneak off behind her back — it was a matter of honor! But her heart belonged to Grandpa, her Zeus. And for Julia, it was heaven on earth. Yes, she’d had a few little flings later on — actually, only four. Brad, the tattoo artist, was number five, Julia said with a bashful look. And after she graduated from high school, Grandma and Grandpa had left; they didn’t want to rot away like old vegetables in their old age. Julia was indescribably sad, but she understood why the two of them had chosen to leave on their own terms. They had fulfilled and completed their parental duties. Julia had to spread her wings.

She told Alfie all of this with great seriousness, because she wanted him to have a good understanding of her youth. Alfie

nodded; she really had had a wonderful, exciting, and fulfilling youth.

Alfie smiled at her. “Julia, do you feel like going on vacation? Would you like to go somewhere with me?” But Julia shook her head. “No, Alfie. For me, the best thing is to lie here with you and feel completely like your wife. I try not to think about the fact that the year is already over and that one day you’ll have to leave. I don’t need the wonders of a new setting or city to make me shudder with awe. I feel at home in your embrace — no wonder in the world could be more beautiful. I owe my recovery to you; I can walk tall and proud like any other woman and no longer fear breaking a bone. Well, I still drive my Ferrari — purely out of convenience and nostalgia. I’ve gotten used to the speed, and I love it when the wind blows through my hair. I’m glad you no longer have to treat me like a fragile child, Alfie, but as a fully-fledged woman with healthy bones.”

Alfie was quite happy that neither of them felt much like traveling. He threw himself into his research and work, while Julia took a fresh look at her thesis and was searching for a title for her dissertation. The professor wanted to hear a suggestion, since Julia was no longer a young girl and didn’t need motherly guidance.

Her daily routine hadn’t changed. Every morning, Julia worked for IKEA for about two hours and handled customer correspondence with the help of AI. At noon, she drove her Ferrari down to the pond and fed the birds stale bread and vitamin-rich birdseed. This hour was a steady anchor in her daily routine, when she sat next to Alfie and they could talk about things that had nothing to do with their day-to-day work. Matters of the heart, matters of the soul, and things that got under their skin. Alfie, who as always had worked through the night, slept in Julia’s bed throughout the morning. After lunch, she lay down next to him and then threw herself into her new project: her doctoral dissertation. In the afternoon, Alfie brewed a wonderful cup of Arabia coffee, which provided a brief break. Of course, he never failed to bring along some sweet cookies or pastries to go with the coffee.

Tuesday afternoons were still reserved for her soulmate, Yvonne, whose love life was always like a roller coaster ride. Of course, Alfie lay next to the girls as their lips, gasping with desire and lust, snapped at each other's lips; he caressed their beautiful bodies sensually and with obvious pleasure. In his entire life, Alfie had never been so closely and directly involved in such an intense female friendship, yet he felt right at home when the girls included him in their girl-on-girl sex without any unnecessary fuss.

Julia's firm rejection of Yvonne's relentless advances surprisingly softened because Yvonne drew him in irresistibly, like a magnet. Julia and he never spoke again about her previous refusal of Yvonne; Yvonne's advances had become the norm. Bacchus kissed both girls passionately, and he was as happy as a child with two waffle cones and two servings of five scoops of ice cream each. He participated enthusiastically in the discussions, for he had spent enough time with Yvonne to find his way through the labyrinth of her soul. Alfie smiled cheerfully, for the two girls truly loved each other with all their hearts, like sisters, like twins. Their personalities might be as different as gold and platinum, but each was a precious metal. Truly.

The two girls woke up and stretched comfortably, like purring kittens. Alfie kissed Yvonne's lips and asked how she had come to be a man-devouring hetaera. Yvonne smiled, "A man-devouring hetaera!?" She shook her head with a smile, "You'll be easily disappointed, my darling boy. The short answer is that I'm my mother's daughter, because she was a true man-devouring hetaera, if you'd like to call it that. For a detailed answer, I'll need a cigarette to keep my fingers busy." Alfie lit a cigarette for her and Julia. Julia snuggled into her girlfriend's lap and looked up at her. "Well, my mom was the very embodiment of what you'd call a man-devouring hetaera. Consequently, one day she disappeared, leaving Dad a meaningless farewell note, never to be seen again. My dad, the unwaveringly loyal police commander Pospischil, crumbled like a sandcastle. He took early retirement, started drinking, and sought out this or that neighbor's shy wife or underage daughter for sex."

But I, a rebellious 15-year-old, spied on him and found out just how loose and listless these neighbors were — rotten, spoiled apples

without a shred of spark, nothing more than willing sluts. So I decided to seduce him, to trap him between my thighs, and to show him what his girl is capable of — far more than those wet, filthy neighbor women. Bearing in mind what I'd picked up from Mom, I snatched the poor guy and forced him to become my first and only. For a short time he blossomed; for about three years he plowed my furrow with enthusiasm and sowed his seed. He loved my breasts and quit drinking from one day to the next. Mom had always stared strangely at the blossoming and sprouting of my young body. Oh, how proud I was of my boobs! I withheld them from Dad until he was willing to give up drinking. It was pure blackmail, nothing else. When I turned 18, he pressed five savings books, stuffed to bursting, into my hands. "All my stashed-away money, Yvonne. Use it wisely and make something of your life — don't waste it like your mom did!" He walked away and never came back.

I began my studies, worked hard at them, and earned my first doctorate at age 24. I hardly touched Dad's savings — after all, I was receiving a pension in his name because he was presumed dead. When he left, I felt a void in my soul — a yawning void. I then set my sights on boys — young, unspoiled little flowers — and devoured them greedily to fill the void. There must have been hundreds of little angels with curly heads and untouched bodies, yet they could not fill the void — only toil diligently in the furrow — but that was still very unsatisfying.

My lovers grew older and more numerous, though each one was more stupid than the last. One *doctor* sleep around? Yeah, they sure could. But they wouldn't even have been able to spell the word "doctor." I started studying philosophy, and a petite woman in a wheelchair crossed my path. We weren't lesbians, but we both loved making love to each other because I could be sensitive to her illness. Both of our libidos are equally exuberant, and that more than makes up for the illness. Finally, a partner who could spell every foreign word. That's why I'm overjoyed with Julia, and I can, with a clear conscience, let one or another dim-witted guy plow my furrow night after night — because I love plowing very much, too. — That was the long version, Alfie. — And yes, the fact that you're good at spelling, too, is a real stroke of luck." Alfie took her in his arms and caressed

her large breasts. “Thank you for telling me that; it completes the picture I have of you.”

Alfie didn’t let it get him down or make him lose heart. No, you couldn’t win all the time. Some leads turned out to be fruitless, went unanswered, or were meaningless. Sometimes he did find the source material that had been offered, but either he already had it or it wasn’t suitable for his collection. Then he would gaze grimly at the portraits of his children, Waltraud and Heinrich. “Keep at it, don’t give up. Keep revising and resubmitting your dissertation until it’s accepted.” He had told them this time and again; he was their father, not just some uninvolved janitor. His children’s smiles always lifted his spirits. He tackled the next piece — a Vasco da Gama braving the storms of the Indian Ocean. And the thought of finding peace and sleep in Julia’s bed the next morning was comforting.

Julia, on the other hand, struggled with the subject matter, with the gods of Olympus. “Leda and the Swan” had already been discussed at length and in great detail in her thesis; she neither wanted nor was able to expand on it further. She read the myths and legends over and over again. Hera, the sister and wife of Zeus, the father of the gods, and Zeus himself remained the central thread running through it all.

Julia leaned back, stretching her hunched back to relieve the tension. She wanted to give her dissertation a title: “The Olympic Empire,” “The Empire of Olympus,” or something along those lines. She had scribbled “The Sex-Obsessed Zeus and His No Less Lustful Hera” on a piece of paper and written underneath it: “How the Sex-Obsessed Gods Willfully Destroyed Mount Olympus Itself.” But then the note ended up in the trash bin.

She had gathered material, organized it carefully, and there was quite a lot of it:

Hera watched his escapades jealously, her face contorted, as her husband Zeus undaunted pursued all the young, beautiful goddesses

and mingled with mortals to possess and ruin their daughters and wives:

Metis, the Titaness of Wisdom: Zeus's first lover. Because it had been prophesied that her son would overthrow Zeus, he devoured the pregnant Metis. Their daughter, Athena, later sprang directly from Zeus's forehead amid excruciating headaches.

Leto, another Titaness: Zeus impregnated her before or during his marriage to Hera. Hera relentlessly pursued Leto and forbade any solid ground from offering her a place to give birth. On the floating island of Delos, Leto finally gave birth to the twins Apollo and Artemis.

Demeter, the goddess of agriculture: Zeus mated with his sister, according to some later myths, in the form of a snake. From this union came Persephone, who later became the queen of the underworld.

Mnemosyne, the Titaness of Memory: Zeus visited her in the guise of a shepherd. They slept together for nine nights in a row and fathered the nine Muses, the patron goddesses of the arts.

When it came to mortal women, Zeus used his powers of transformation in particularly creative ways to remain unnoticed or to seduce, impregnate, and get them pregnant:

Europe, a Phoenician princess: Zeus transformed himself into a beautiful, gentle white bull. When Europa climbed onto his back, he carried her across the sea to Crete. Our continent bears her name today.

Leda, the Queen of Sparta: Zeus approached her in the form of a majestic swan seeking refuge from an eagle. Leda then gave birth to two eggs, from which, among others, the beautiful Helen (the catalyst for the Trojan War) hatched.

Danaë, a princess of Argos: Her father locked her in an underground bronze tower because an oracle had foretold that her son would kill him. Zeus nevertheless reached her — as golden rain that fell into her womb. She gave birth to the hero Perseus.

Alcmene, the mother of Heracles: Zeus took on the exact form of her husband Amphitryon, who was away at war. He made the night last three times as long as usual so he could savor the time with her. The result of that night was the most famous hero of antiquity: **Heracles**

Semele, a princess of Thebes: Zeus loved her while in human form. However, the jealous Hera persuaded the pregnant Semele to ask Zeus to reveal himself in his true, divine splendor. Since no mortal could survive this, Semele was consumed by a bolt of lightning. Zeus saved

the unborn child, sewed it into his own thigh, and later gave birth to **Dionysus**, the god of wine.

Zeus's desire knew no bounds when it came to gender. He fell in love with the Trojan prince **Ganymede**, the most beautiful of all mortals. Taking the form of a giant eagle, Zeus carried the young man off to Mount Olympus, where he served as the cupbearer to the gods and became Zeus's lover.

Julia snuggled up against Alfie's raised knee and continued reading to him from her notes:

Zeus, that lecherous fellow, was far from finished with his escapades between the thighs of gods and mortals,

Eurynome, an Oceanid, a sea goddess: Zeus seduced this daughter of Oceanus. From this union came the three Charites (known in Roman mythology as the Three Graces), who are the embodiment of grace, beauty, and joy in Aphrodite's retinue.

Nemesis, the goddess of righteous wrath: Nemesis was determined to escape Zeus and, while fleeing, transformed herself into a goose. Zeus saw through the ruse, transformed himself into a swan, and overpowered her. Nemesis then laid an egg, which was found by shepherds and given to Leda — and from this egg, the famous Helen hatched.

Asteria, the Titaness of the Stars: To escape Zeus's relentless pursuit, Asteria transformed herself into a quail and plunged into the sea. There she transformed into a floating island called Asteria, which later became known as Delos — the very place where her sister Leto found refuge to give birth to Apollo and Artemis.

Antiope, another princess of Thebes: Zeus approached her in the bizarre form of a wild, drunken satyr (a lustful mythical creature with goat's feet). Antiope became pregnant and gave birth to the twins Amphion and Zethos, who later built the city walls of Thebes.

Aegina, a river nymph: Zeus abducted her, taking the form of a blazing fire or a mighty eagle, and carried her off to an uninhabited island. Her father, the river god Asopos, pursued Zeus in a rage but was struck down by his lightning bolts. The island was named Aegina after her; their son, Aiakos, became the grandfather of the hero Achilles.

Elara, a mortal princess: Fearing Hera's merciless revenge, Zeus hid the pregnant Elara deep underground in the darkest caves. There she gave birth to the giant Tityos. Since Tityos grew to such gigantic proportions, he tore open his mother's womb at birth, which is why he is often considered the son of the Earth (Gaia).

Callisto, a nymph from Artemis's retinue: Callisto had taken a vow of chastity. To gain her trust, Zeus promptly transformed himself into his own daughter, the goddess Artemis. When Callisto became pregnant, the deception was exposed. An enraged Hera transformed her into a bear. Zeus later saved her from being hunted by placing her in the sky as the constellation Ursa Major.

Julia's voice trembled as she read all of this aloud to her Alfie. She was in the middle of her topic — in the midst of the intrigues, the deceptions, and the sexual escapades of Olympus — because, of course, Zeus wasn't the only one who was getting intimate with the goddesses and mortal women.

It's just that the other gods were much better at hiding their misdeeds and dirty deeds from the whole world. The storytellers and mythographers took their cue from Zeus and lacked the patience to tell us how these other fellows cornered the goddesses and mortal maidens in a secluded spot and there brazenly reached for the untouchable — their undergarments. The “untouchable” — for if anyone touched it, it was always rape. Quietly, secretly, and unnoticed by all, they followed the Father of the Gods' example and tore the “untouchable” off the girls. Saliva dripped from the corners of their mouths as they got aroused by the girls' nakedness, these guys. And so they defiled, had sex with, and ruined the girls, who trembled with shame, disgust, and fear.

Julia defiantly wiped an angry tear from the corner of her eye. How many stories, tales, and legends have never been written down about these schemes!?

Zeus's escapades to get his hands on the undergarments of the most unattainable women often ended badly:
The Beautiful Queen **Lamia**. Zeus loved her, which provoked Hera's

most extreme wrath. Hera killed all of Lamia's children and robbed her of sleep. Driven mad by grief, Lamia transformed into a child-devouring monster. Zeus, moved by compassion, at least granted her the ability to pluck out her own eyes so that, free from those terrible visions, she might finally sleep.

Yet Hera, Zeus's wife, was considered the epitome of marital fidelity and chastity, even though she likely engaged in quite a few secret affairs, without anyone daring to record them in writing. Or perhaps they did? Julia dug out the legends of old Thibault and appended them to the end of her summary about Hera. But now she was going through Hesiod's records and fragments. Wasn't there, after all, someone who squeezed his way under Hera's underwear, who, brazen and frenzied with lust, thrust himself between her divine, oh-so-chaste motherly thighs?

The Secret Lover: **Endymion** This is probably the strongest evidence of a real affair: According to the writings of the ancient poet Epimenides (and ancient fragments by Hesiod), the beautiful mortal Endymion was a secret lover of Hera — and presumably not the only one. She freely allowed this handsome mortal to slip beneath her undergarments as well as between her snow-white thighs, so that she might be warmed by his passion.

When Zeus discovered the affair, he was beside himself with jealousy. As punishment, Zeus condemned Endymion to an eternal, endless sleep. (In better-known myths, this story is attributed to the moon goddess Selene, but in the oldest accounts, it features a vivid description of Hera's insatiable, divine lust.)

Conception on one's own: **Hephaestus** When it comes to infidelity in the broadest sense, one must consider Hera's pregnancy with the god of smiths, Hephaestus. The Immaculate Conception: Out of anger that Zeus had fathered Athena alone (from his own head), Hera decided to conceive a child entirely without Zeus as well. The Secret Version: In a few very rare, divergent legends, however, it is rumored that Hera did not conceive Hephaestus solely through the power of her will, but rather that she cheerfully mated with the giant Parthenios — one of Zeus's most vehement opponents — in order to get back at him.

Sought After and Attacked: **Ixion** and the giants. There were men who loved Hera so passionately that they tried to seduce her in secret and force her to have sex with them.

Ixion, the mortal king was so obsessed with Hera that he tried to

secretly approach her during a feast on Mount Olympus. Hera seemed to play along, but placed a cloud (Nephele) in his bed that looked exactly like her. Ixion did not notice — and Zeus banished him to an eternally burning wheel in the underworld for this attempted adultery.

Porphyryon, the king of the Giants, was filled by the gods of love with such a frenzied longing for the secret between Hera's thighs that, in the midst of the battle (the Gigantomachy), he tore off her clothes, and was just about to mount her when Zeus stopped him with a bolt of lightning.

Before she was incorporated into Greek mythology as the "wife of Zeus," Hera was a powerful, independent **Mother Goddess of Prehistory**, not averse to the carnal. In these ancient, local cults (especially in Argos), she likely had her own partners — both mortal and divine — who were later systematically erased from the stories by the priests of Zeus in order to secure the supremacy of the Father of the Gods.

But who were these fearless men who tried to seduce Hera, slip under her undergarments, and cheekily squeeze themselves between her divine thighs?

Ixion, King of the Lapiths: He was a guest on Mount Olympus and attempted to seduce Hera. Zeus saw through his scheme and formed a cloud in Hera's likeness (the lovely Nephele). Ixion mated with this cloud (giving rise to the centaurs). As punishment for his attempted adultery with the queen of the gods, Zeus had Ixion chained to an eternally burning wheel in the underworld.

Endymion: In a few rare legends, a mortal youth managed to lie with Hera. Zeus then punished him with an eternal, endless sleep.

Io When Zeus seduced Io, Hera caught them in the act. Zeus quickly transformed Io into a white cow to hide her. Her revenge: Hera pretended to be unaware, demanded the cow as a gift, and appointed the hundred-eyed giant Argus as her guardian so that Zeus could no longer approach her. After Hermes killed Argus on Zeus's orders, Hera sent a giant hornet that stung the cow — Io — relentlessly, driving her mad and chasing her across the entire earth. In memory of Argus, Hera placed his hundred eyes in the feathers of her favorite animal, the peacock.

Semele When the mortal Semele was pregnant with Zeus's child, Hera transformed herself into an old wet nurse and sowed doubt in Semele's heart as to whether her lover was truly the father of the gods. She persuaded Semele to demand an irrevocable oath from Zeus: that he

reveal himself to her in his true, divine form. Zeus had to obey — and since no mortal can survive the sight of pure lightning and thunder, Semele was instantly consumed by fire.

Leto When the Titaness Leto was pregnant with the twins Apollo and Artemis, Hera imposed a universal ban. She swore that no spot on earth where the sun had ever shone would grant Leto a place to give birth. She also sent the Python snake to hunt Leto. Leto finally found refuge on the floating island of Delos, which was not considered solid ground.

Callisto After the nymph Callisto had been impregnated by Zeus, Hera's jealousy struck again. She transformed the beautiful girl into a shaggy bear. Years later, Callisto's own son, the hunter Arcas, came upon the bear and, unaware of her true identity, was about to shoot her. Zeus prevented the tragedy at the last moment and placed both of them in the sky as constellations (the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper). But even then, Hera took her revenge: she forbade the sea goddess Tethys from ever allowing the bears to bathe (sink) in her waters — which is why these constellations remain circumpolar to this day and never touch the horizon.

Heracles Hera's greatest hatred was directed at the hero Heracles, the son of Alcmena. Even when he was still an infant in his cradle, she sent two poisonous giant snakes to kill him (but little Heracles simply strangled them). Later, she caused him to suffer a temporary bout of madness, which led him to kill his own wife and children — the subsequent famous "12 Labors of Heracles" were his atonement for this act. Hera's hatred of Heracles was so deep that even his name was an irony of fate: Heracles translates to "Glory of Hera." His entire existence and all his heroic deeds were based solely on the fact that Hera's harassment forced him to rise above himself.

Even before he was born, Hera delayed his delivery so that his cousin Eurystheus would be born first and thus claim the right to the throne. When Heracles was a few months old, Hera sent two enormous, venomous snakes into his nursery. While his twin brother Iphicles ran away screaming, the divine child grabbed the reptiles with his bare hands and strangled them, laughing.

There is a bizarre myth about how Heracles came to be immortal. Zeus secretly placed the sleeping infant Heracles at the breast of the sleeping Hera so that he might drink her divine milk. When Hera awoke and noticed the strange child, she pushed him away roughly. The milk that spurted into space as a result formed the Milky Way (a galaxy, derived from the Greek word for milk: gala).

Heracles grew up, married Megara, and had children. Hera, who could not bear his success, struck him with a sudden, violent bout of

madness. In this state, he mistook his own family for enemies and killed them. When he came to his senses and realized the tragedy, he went, deeply traumatized, to the Oracle of Delphi. As atonement, he had to enter the service of King Eurystheus — with Hera pulling the strings behind the scenes to dictate the famous 12 impossible labors (such as fighting the Hydra or capturing the hellhound Cerberus). For nearly every task, Hera sent additional monsters or obstacles to ensure his failure.

When Heracles finally died from the poison of the centaur Nessus and his mortal body was cremated, Zeus raised his immortal soul to Olympus. Once there, the impossible happened: Hera made peace with him. His superhuman endurance had earned her respect. To seal the peace, Hera ritually adopted him and gave him her own daughter, Hebe (the goddess of youth), as his wife.

The Plague of Aegina. When Zeus abducted the nymph Aegina to an island and fathered a son, Aiakos, with her, Hera was unable to catch her lover directly. She sent a terrible plague of snakes and insects, as well as a toxic heat wave, to sweep across the entire island of Aegina. The water in the wells turned foul. Almost all the human inhabitants died in agony. In desperation, Aiakos prayed to Zeus, who then transformed the ants of a sacred tree into humans — the so-called Myrmidons, who later became famous as Achilles' elite warriors in the Trojan War.

Echo The nymph Echo was not actually one of Zeus's lovers at all, but merely a pawn. Zeus used Echo's incessant chatter to engage Hera in conversation while he was enjoying himself in the woods with other nymphs. When Hera saw through the deception, she condemned Echo to never be able to speak on her own again. From then on, Echo could only repeat the last words someone else had just spoken — the origin of the word "echo" as we know it today.

Ino and Athamas Ino was the sister of Semele (the mother of Dionysus). After Semele's death, Ino took in the divine infant Dionysus and secretly raised him disguised as a girl to hide him from Hera. Hera found out. She infected Ino and her husband, King Athamas, with a murderous madness. Athamas mistook his eldest son for a deer and shot him with his bow. Ino, in a state of utter madness, grabbed her other son, threw him into a boiling cauldron, and then jumped off a cliff into the sea with his body.

The Olympic gods' reaction to Hera's extreme wrath was a mixture of fear, helplessness, and passive resistance. Since Hera was the most powerful goddess of Olympus and the ruler's official consort, hardly

anyone dared to openly oppose her. When they did, it usually ended in chaos. The gods responded to Hera's campaigns of vengeance in essentially four different ways:

The Rebellion: At one point, Hera's tyranny and jealousy toward Zeus got on the other gods' nerves so much that they banded together against the couple. Hera, Poseidon, Apollo, and Athena instigated a mutiny. They surprised Zeus while he was asleep and bound him to his bed with a hundred knots. They mocked him and sought to redistribute power. The sea nymph Thetis, who was madly in love with Zeus, secretly summoned the hundred-armed giant Briares to her aid, and he freed Zeus in the blink of an eye. **The punishment:** Zeus was merciless. As punishment, he chained Hera to the sky with golden shackles around her wrists and tied anvils to her feet. She had to hang in agony above the abyss until the other gods swore never to rebel against Zeus again. Many gods felt deep compassion for the victims of Hera's wrath, but they helped only in secret so as not to become targets themselves. Zeus often enlisted the help of his son Hermes (the messenger of the gods). It was Hermes who, on Zeus's orders, lulled Io's guardian (the hundred-eyed Argus) to sleep and beheaded him. He also rescued the unborn Dionysus from the flames of the dying Semele and brought him to safety.

As **Leto**, when Hera, while pregnant with Apollo and Artemis, was chased across the entire earth and forbidden to give birth anywhere, the sea gods deliberately looked the other way when the floating island of Delos granted Leto asylum. They helped Leto circumvent the curse without directly confronting Hera.

Hera's own children had extremely mixed feelings about their mother's outbursts of rage. After his birth, Hera had cast Hephaestus from Mount Olympus because of his ugliness. In revenge, he later built a magnificent golden throne and gave it to her as a gift. When Hera sat down on it, invisible chains snapped shut around her. No god could free her. It was only when Dionysus got Hephaestus drunk and brought him back to Olympus on a donkey that he relented and agreed to release his mother in exchange for the beautiful Aphrodite as his wife.

Ares, the god of war: He was the only one who often shared Hera's wrath. During the Trojan War, Hera repeatedly sent Ares into battle to destroy the Trojans — simply out of revenge for the fact that the Trojan prince Paris had chosen Aphrodite over Hera in a beauty contest. Nymphs, river gods, and lesser deities trembled before Hera. When Zeus seduced a nymph, even her own sisters would often turn their backs on her to avoid falling into Hera's crosshairs. When the river god

Asopos tried to rescue his daughter Aegina, who had been abducted by Zeus, not a single god came to his aid — they all stood by in silence as Zeus struck him back with lightning, because no one wanted to risk Hera's subsequent vengeance on the entire region.

Hera's position was so unassailable that Mount Olympus was essentially a constant political minefield: Everyone knew about Zeus's affairs, but they all pretended not to see anything so as not to jeopardize the fragile peace among the gods.

Athena and Apollo had extremely different relationships with their stepmother, Hera. Both were illegitimate children of Zeus and thus living proof of his infidelity. But while Athena became Hera's closest ally, the relationship between Apollo and Hera was marked by deep mistrust and traumatic memories. Here's how the two prominent divine siblings dealt with the jealous queen of the gods:

Athena, the goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare, was Zeus's absolute favorite daughter. She sprang directly from his head. Since she had no biological mother in the traditional sense (Zeus had swallowed the pregnant Metis), she posed no direct threat to Hera nor served as a reminder of "another woman." Like Hera, Athena was a guardian of social order, civilization, and justice. Both abhorred brute force (as embodied by Ares). The Trojan prince Paris had chosen Aphrodite as the most beautiful in the famous contest of beauty. This deeply wounded the pride of both Hera and Athena. During the Trojan War, the two goddesses worked hand in hand to ruthlessly destroy the Trojans. They hatched plans behind the scenes and jointly manipulated the battlefield. Despite her closeness to Zeus, Athena was wise enough to recognize when her father was becoming too tyrannical. She actively participated in Hera's plot (described above) to bind Zeus. However, Zeus later forgave her for this more readily than he did the others. The relationship between **Apollo**, the god of light, music, and prophecy, and Hera had been filled with hatred for him from the very beginning. He had never forgotten Hera's brutal pursuit of his pregnant mother, Leto. Just four days after his birth on the island of Delos, the newborn Apollo took up a bow and arrow and killed the Python — the monster that Hera had sent to bring death to his mother. Apollo spent his entire life protecting his mother, Leto, from Hera's relentless harassment.

When Hera incited the giant Tityos to rape the beautiful Leto, Apollo and his twin sister Artemis didn't hesitate for a moment and

came to their mother's aid: Together, they struck down the giant with a hail of poisoned arrows.

During the Trojan War, Apollo and Hera were bitter enemies. While Hera supported the Greeks, Apollo protected the Trojans (especially Hector) and even sent a devastating plague to the camp of Hera's favorite Greek warriors.

On Mount Olympus, an icy, armed truce reigned between the two. Apollo respected Hera's power as queen, but for the most part kept his distance from her. Hera, for her part, knew how powerful and deadly Apollo's arrows were, and avoided provoking him directly.

Athena used her diplomatic wisdom and skill to coexist with Hera as equals and to fight their common enemies. Apollo, on the other hand, remained the loyal son of his mother Leto throughout his life and always treated Hera with cool, aloof wariness.

Alfie had been listening intently to Julia. Now that she looked up at the end of her notes and said that this was perhaps 10% of her material, he pulled a sheet of paper out of his backpack. "Meanwhile, I've been doing a little digging and found the following at the University of Thessaloniki: an old, orally transmitted legend. In ancient times, a wanton girl lived in the surrounding countryside — the lustful Kalkidike. She was after the taciturn, well-endowed shepherds of the region and conquered them, one after the other, shamelessly and unstoppably. She gave birth to triplets and insisted with absolute certainty that Zeus, the father of the gods himself, had impregnated her while disguised as a shepherd. No one took her seriously, except for the aging Hera, who knew full well that Zeus had nothing to do with it. She was enraged by the girl's audacity, so she transformed her into the Chalkidiki Peninsula; her children became the three headlands of Kassandra, Sithonia, and Athos." Alfie smiled. "It would be a good idea to weave the story of wayward Kalkidike into your work, wouldn't it?" Julia picked up the note. "Yes, I could very well include it in the chapter 'Charlatans, Liars, and Fake Stories.' Thanks, Alfie, for finding the time to share these little gems with me on top of your own work."

Julia's dissertation kept growing and growing; she had to start preparing a fair copy quickly, and soon she had completed the first

750 pages. She had actually pieced together the Olympian Empire based on the divine couple Zeus and Hera and produced a very comprehensive work on the divine couple and their history. Yes, there was still a lot to add, footnotes to compile, and here and there a bit of text to invent so that it read smoothly and coherently.

Alfie read through her final draft again and again, his red pen tirelessly marking purely grammatical errors or mistakes that distorted the meaning. But he was convinced that Julia's dissertation would be met with great enthusiasm and academic recognition.

Lost in thought, Julia sucked on the end of her ballpoint pen. Everyone was talking about Zeus — the guy was the most prolific seducer and sire in the history of the gods. But no one spoke of Hera. She embodied marital fidelity, the very image of the faithful and steadfast wife who had a glutton for a husband — the poor, unfortunate woman. But it was precisely this politically expedient emphasis on the pillars of marriage — which were supposed to hold social life together — that was the big lie told by the historians. A steadfastly chaste Hera was the anchor for maintaining law and order.

This was where Julia wanted to start. She researched and delved into the depths of ancient Greek mythology to shake Hera's image of purity. It didn't sit well with her at all to portray only the unrestrained Father of the Gods, while his wife had the spotless reputation on Mount Olympus. That was unfair, because while Zeus worked with the thunderous clang of his hammer, Hera operated silently with a scalpel. She kept digging until she could peel away a layer of Hera's image — just a little, but still.

Julia typed away, page after page.

This is the most consistent and psychologically profound interpretation of these secret myths. When viewed in this light, Hera — the supposedly “chaste” queen of the gods — becomes a master of subversive warfare who defeats Zeus with his own weapons. Zeus continually humiliates Hera in public through his countless affairs

with mortals, nymphs, and goddesses. Hera, who — as the ruler of Olympus — cannot simply leave him politically, chooses the ultimate, secret betrayal for her revenge: She secretly allows herself to be mated by none other than his existential archenemies — the Titans and cosmic giants. In my research, this dynamic of “sexual retaliation” can be perfectly illustrated by three points:

Choosing Partners:

A blatant provocation against Zeus’s rule! Hera does not choose insignificant demigods for her misdeeds. She turns to the beings whom Zeus fears most — and whom he has vanquished in brutal cosmic wars (the Titanomachy and the Gigantomachy):

Talos / Typhon: The Cretan sun god Talos or primordial cosmic forces represent the old order that Zeus overthrew.

Eurymedon: As a Titan, he embodies the generation of Cronus that was banished to Tartarus by Zeus. By allowing herself to be impregnated by Titans, Hera not only breaks her marriage vows but also commits high treason. She sexually allies herself with the opposition to conceive illegitimate children who have the potential to overthrow Zeus from the throne. Other ancient commentators (“enioi”), however, suggest that it was a secret and romantic love affair in which Hera voluntarily gave herself to the Titan. In either case, by becoming involved with Eurymedon (the ruler of the wild giants) and allowing him to copulate with her lustfully, she conceived a child with the most dangerous anti-Zeus faction in the universe.

The Perversion of Revenge!

The Deceived Deceiver. Zeus’s greatest weakness is his monumental pride (his ego). Hera knows this. However, a public affair on her part would destroy the institution of marriage, which secures her own power base on Earth. So she takes her revenge in secret: she gives Zeus’s enemies what he cherishes most — her untouchable, divine body — and mates with them. She forces Zeus into the humiliation of having to raise cuckolded children in his own home (Mount Olympus) — such as Hephaestus or Prometheus — while he must put on a show of a perfect marriage for the world to see. She gets back at him for his “billions of affairs” by undermining his supposed absolute control over Olympus from within.

The biological deception (parthenogenesis as a disguise).

This brings my entire investigation full circle: The “fatherless conception” (parthenogenesis) of Hephaestus, celebrated in the official

texts (Hesiod), is, from this perspective, the most ingenious cover-up in world literature. Hera presents to Olympus an act of adultery and a bastard child sired by a Titan as an “autonomous, feminist act” without a man. She uses the myth of pure virginity as a shield so that Zeus cannot publicly execute her, while in secret she knows exactly who truly fathered the god of fire.

Julia leaned back. There was a very interesting passage — a fictional dialogue between Hera and Zeus about the attempt to seduce the **Ixion**, who was absolutely convinced that he had slept with the “Iron Lady.”

In the Satires of Lucian of Samosata (“Dialogues of the Gods” from the 2nd century CE), the biting Syrian-Greek satirist wrote humorous vignettes that ruthlessly mocked the Olympian faith. In the 5th and 6th “Dialogues of the Gods,” Zeus and Hera are sitting at the table in the midst of a marital quarrel: Hera is giving Zeus a brutal dressing-down over his latest lover, the Trojan Ganymede. She accuses him of destroying the dignity of Olympus. The punchline: When Zeus arrogantly shouts back that Ganymed simply “kisses him better than she does,” Hera merely smiles contemptuously in Lucian’s subtext. Why? Because in the very next chapter (Conversation VI), the mortal Ixion appears — a man Hera has so skillfully manipulated in secret that he believes he has actually slept with her. Here, Lucian illustrates the bitter paradox: Zeus loudly boasts about his affairs, while Hera quietly castrates him — both intellectually and sexually — through the deceptions of her admirers (the “cloud adulteries”).

The philosopher Chrysippus of Soloi shocked the ancient world with his analysis of a highly erotic painting — now lost but notorious in antiquity — depicting the obscene Stoic paradox. It depicted Zeus and Hera in an explicit, intimate pose (Hera performing oral sex on Zeus). The satire behind it: Ancient critics used this image to mock the divine couple. Hera’s hidden betrayal: In the philosophical interpretation, however, this image served as proof of Hera’s true tactic. She uses the most intimate act not out of love, but to cloud Zeus’s senses. By seemingly submitting herself completely to him and catering to his desires, she robs him of his mental clarity. It is the visual embodiment of *Dios Apate* (the deception of Zeus): She silences him in bed so that she can forge her secret alliances with his enemies behind his back (such as her clandestine liaisons with the Titans or Cretan gods, or her support of the Greeks at Troy).

Nowhere do they clash more brutally than in Book 15 of the 'Iliad' — immediately after Hera, using Aphrodite's magic belt, seduces Zeus on Mount Ida and sends him into a deep sleep. Zeus's Awakening: Zeus wakes up and sees that the Greeks are turning the tide of the war because Hera has betrayed him. He rages with fury, threatens to beat her, and reminds her of how he once punished her by hanging her from the heavens with anvils attached to her feet. Hera's Masterstroke: Hera doesn't even flinch. She swears a (deliberately ambiguous) oath by the River Styx that she did not instigate the sea god Poseidon. She lies coldly to the Father of the Gods, while still reeking of their shared act. She disarms his physical wrath with a wall of clever words and feigned innocence. Zeus is powerless against this combination of sexual attraction and perfect cold-bloodedness.

Julia is considering quoting verbatim the dialogue between Zeus and Hera from Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*:

HERA

Zeus! What do you think of this Ixion?

ZEUS

Oh, my dear, I consider him a very good man and a pleasant companion. If he were unworthy of our company, he wouldn't be here.

HERA

He's unworthy! He's a scoundrel! Send him away!

ZEUS

Huh? What was he up to? I really need to know.

HERA

You absolutely have to know this; although I hardly know how to tell you. That wretch!

ZEUS

Oh, oh; if he's a "wretch," you absolutely have to tell me everything. I know what "wretch" means, thanks to your sharp tongue. What, did he sleep with you? Did he have sex with you, impregnate you?

HERA

And with me! Of all people, me! It's been going on for a long time. At first, when he kept looking at me, I had no idea... And then he sighed and groaned; and when I handed Ganymed my cup after drinking, he insisted on having it, stopped drinking to kiss it and bring it to his eyes; and then he looked at me again. And of course, that's when I knew. For a long time, I didn't want to tell you anything; I thought his fit of madness would pass. But when, during the feast, he actually had the audacity to pounce on me, I left him behind, weeping and crawling, after he was done, and covered my ears so I wouldn't have to hear his insolences, and came to tell you about it. It's up to you to decide what you'll do about this scoundrel.

ZEUS

Phew! I realize I have a rival — and one who's after my own lawful wife. There's a scoundrel who's drunk the nectar for his own purposes. Well, we have no one to blame but ourselves: We make too much of these mortals by letting them sit at our table. When they drink our nectar and behold the beauties of heaven (so different from those of Earth!), is it any wonder that they fall in love and hatch ambitious plans!? Yes, love is all-powerful; and not just toward mortals: even we gods have already fallen victim to it.

HERA

He has made himself my master; there's no doubt about it. He does whatever he wants with me — he leads my husband around by the nose. — You follow him wherever he wants, and assume any position he commands; you are his property, his plaything. I know how it will be: You'll let Ixion get away scot-free because you slept with his wife; she is the mother of Pirithous.

ZEUS

You remember my little escapades quite well, don't you! — Well, my opinion on Ixion is this: It would never be appropriate to punish him or exclude him from our table; that wouldn't look good. No; because he loves you so much, he's so deeply hurt — yes, even to the point of tears, as you tell me —

HERA

Zeus! What are you trying to say!?

ZEUS

Don't worry. Let's create a cloud figure in your likeness, and after dinner, when he's lying awake (which he will, of course, since he's in love), let's place it beside him. It will relieve him of his pain: he'll imagine that his desire has been satisfied.

HERA

Never! That presumptuous scoundrel!

ZEUS

Yeah, I know. But what harm could it do if Ixion conquers a cloud?

HERA

But he'll think I'm the cloud; he'll take his anger out on me as much as he wants.

ZEUS

Now you're talking nonsense. The cloud isn't Hera, and Hera isn't the cloud. Ixion will be deceived; that's all.

HERA

Yes, but these men are all the same — they have no tact. I suppose when he gets home, he'll brag to everyone about how much he enjoyed the embraces of Hera, Zeus's wife! Maybe he'll even tell them I'm in love with him! And they'll believe it; they won't have a clue about the cloud.

ZEUS

If he says something like that, he'll soon find himself in the underworld, going round and round there for all eternity. That'll keep him busy! And he'll get what's coming to him — not because he fell in love — I don't see much harm in that — but because he talked so much.

Alfie was less than enthusiastic. The fictional dialogue between the divine couple didn't fit the overall concept, even though here Hera purports to candidly describe her involuntary encounter with Ixios — which would certainly fit Julia's image of Hera. But it simply doesn't fit the concept. Julia remained undecided. Alfie was probably right; the fictional dialogue was and remained an anachronism. And Hera's debauchery was well documented elsewhere; she really didn't need the fictional text. Warily, she moved Lucian's dialogue into an archive folder. The legends of good old Thibault offered enough material to demonstrate Hera's licentiousness.

In the preface to her thesis, Julia had noted that she would embellish the examples and legends of the Father of the Gods' exploits poetically, at her own discretion, to make the stories more readable. Of course, she wouldn't alter the meaning of the accounts; she would simply avoid having this or that come across as dry as a weather report. Alfie thought this was a good idea — it allowed her to elegantly sidestep the most foolish criticisms. Julia had a knack for making these fictional passages flow smoothly. And, following an idea, she set all her additions in italics so that the reader would know what was original and what was added fiction.

Yvonne, too, had received a USB drive containing the draft manuscript. She read it very carefully and actually uncovered a few inconsistencies that even Alfie hadn't spotted. Julia breathed a sigh of relief; having two proofreaders who worked so meticulously was invaluable to her work. Sometimes Yvonne would discuss one passage or another during her Tuesday afternoon sessions. She thought it was a bit of a shame that Julia strictly adhered to academic rules and didn't allow herself any lapses in wording that might have made her writing a bit more risqué. She thought that publishing a book alongside or after her dissertation — one that certainly scored points for its risqué content — would be a real coup. Julia nodded in agreement, but she knew she wouldn't do it. She was aiming for an assistant professorship at the university, not a career as a porn writer.

They celebrated Christmas on a Tuesday so that Yvonne could join them. Alfie had found a mini Christmas tree and decorated it

together with Julia. She said she hadn't celebrated Christmas since her grandparents took their own lives three years ago. Alfie had bought two little dolls and placed them under the Christmas tree; "These are Grandma and Grandpa," he announced. Julia's eyes welled up; now she felt at peace with the universe, since Grandma and Grandpa were celebrating with them. Yvonne had roasted a magnificent Chateaubriand, and they ate the festive meal by candlelight, with soft Christmas music playing from the speakers. Julia sighed — these were wonderful Christmases, surrounded by her family. Yvonne gave her an outrageously expensive Chinese silk scarf, and she gave Yvonne a gold-plated bracelet by the artist Frey. Alfie gave the girls a loving smile and delicate, elegant gold necklaces with a locket in which a photo of the three of them was hidden. Yvonne and Julia had pooled their money and bought him a small wooden box from Tunisia, richly decorated with mother-of-pearl inlays, where he could hide his secrets. Alfie smiled, because he had no secrets. There was no Enigma, no Similacron, and certainly no hocus-pocus surrounding him, he emphasized.

They celebrated New Year's Eve — or rather, New Year's Day — as a couple; Yvonne was out on the New Year's Eve trail in downtown Vienna, armed with a bottle of champagne. Julia was snuggled up against Alfie's chest on the sofa, and they listened to the "Cologne Concert" with Keith Jarrett — a very moving piece that went perfectly with the aged cognac Alfie had tracked down somewhere in the depths of Vienna. Only the pops of fireworks and the crackling of firecrackers disturbed the beautiful concert. It was their first New Year's Eve — and perhaps their only one. Julia had tears in her eyes. "Please stay — you're so beautiful!" she whispered those timeless words. Yes, she would have sold her soul to the devil if that beautiful moment could have lasted. Truly.

Autumn Wind

Alfie woke up and sat up abruptly. Julia had sat down next to him, and he could tell right away that she had been crying bitterly — her eyes were still red. He pulled her close, put an arm around her shoulder, and let her head rest on his broad chest. ““What’s wrong, my love,” he said softly, “what’s troubling you?” She placed a hand on his shoulder and pressed her face even deeper into the crook of his neck. “It’s nothing, Alfie, I just read an unspeakably sad story; it really moved me.” Alfie exhaled; thank God it wasn’t about his time here being limited. “Tell me about it, Julia. I’d love to hear it, because I want to understand what has touched you so deeply, my love.”

Julia nimbly stood up and took a few sheets of paper from the desk, then sat back down in his protective arms. “I’ll read it to you — I printed it out. No, it has nothing to do with the gods. I’ve been browsing a bit through Konrad, Bechstein, Schwab, and others from the last century; I just wanted to clear my head from my obsession with Hera for a while. I felt I was getting lost in the intrigues of the ancient historians, who always had to write with an eye toward politics and society. They had to describe Hera as the guardian of marriage and family; every tiny scrap of extramarital escapades was rigorously eliminated, even though I don’t think there was any shortage of them. — I found a fragment in Schwab, and it fascinated me from the very first line. “I’ll read it to you, okay?” Alfie nodded and settled into a more comfortable position. And Julia read aloud:

The Ballad of Suheddin
According to Gustav Schwab.

Suheddin, bent low over his horse’s neck, galloped along the dusty desert road, heading west, away from the sunrise. He had only a thin galabijah — a light outer garment — thrown over his bare shoulders; he had fled headlong. He patted his horse’s neck. “What kind of idiot could have called you ‘Al Eajiz,’ the Lame One? You’re flying along

like a real racehorse, my good fellow!” The horse shook his head disapprovingly. Of course he wasn’t lame, the fellow. It was just that whenever an unwelcome rider mounted him, he’d play the part of the lame oaf to get rid of the guy quickly. Suheddin nodded. “You’re a smart guy, my friend, and a good friend at that. You immediately realized I had to get out of there fast, and you carried me safely through the narrow alleys of Baghdad, past all the checkpoints and the palace henchmen. You reacted to my bare feet, since I wear neither boots nor spurs. You’re a smart fellow, Al Eajiz!”

Suheddin was lying next to Su on the sofa, his hand resting on the veil with which he had covered her hips after their lovemaking. They whispered words of love, foolish things, matters of the heart. “When the heart is full, the mouth overflows.” And suddenly, old Aya was standing there. “You must leave immediately, Lord Suheddin; Prince Mirza’s henchmen have orders to capture and imprison you. They must not find you here with the princess!” The kind old maid vanished as silently as she had appeared. Su — Princess Suleika — sat up straight as a candle. “He did it, that old swine! He claims the right to take me as his wife; he brazenly and indecently lifted my veil — that old lecher — and saliva dripped from his lips, that mangy, lecherous old goat! He must have slandered you to the Caliph, for that’s the only way he can get you or get rid of you — that cowardly dog!” Suheddin quickly draped the thin galabijah over his bare shoulders and kissed the princess on the lips. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, my love!” She nodded toward the curtain next to a door. “Take my sword, which is hidden behind the curtain, my love, and be brave!” She rummaged through the odds and ends under the sofa. “Here, a pouch with a few silver coins — that’s all I have on hand.” Seconds later, he was gone, moving silently on bare feet, the money pouch and Suleika’s dainty sword in his hand.

His horse needed neither a compass nor instructions. It trotted along the dusty road; to the southwest lay the sea, the nearest port. Its master surely wanted to reach the port of Al-Basrah, the horse thought — it made perfect sense. It was the only direction that made sense. Suheddin stared intently ahead, casting only the occasional glance back, where the sleeping city of Baghdad was slowly fading behind the sand dunes. No one was following him.

His thoughts drifted back. He had been a guard in the caliph's personal guards; he had stood in the throne room, one of 50 soldiers forming a guard of honor before the caliph's throne. The old caliph was all alone; only three of his wives sat a short distance away. Suheddin could not believe his eyes. Princess Suleika, one of the caliph's younger daughters, was staring at him. Discreetly, of course; otherwise, it would have been improper. He had known the girl for some time; after all, he was often on duty when the guards watched over the ladies and girls in the inner courtyard of the palace. Yes, they had to bring jugs of fresh water to the naked ladies, who were washing themselves in the blazing sunlight, splashing each other with the water from the jugs, and washing one another. Like all the guards, he kept his eyes downcast when he approached the ladies. A guard would have had to be blind and deaf to serve, move about, and linger among the naked ladies in the courtyard. Of course, he had looked at all the naked princesses, but Suleika was the only one who looked at him openly and with a friendly smile. He had always looked away — a guard had to. Yet her gaze burned into the back of his head. And now, in the throne room, where this and that was being discussed once again, she looked at him intently. He stood like a marble statue — that's what guardsmen do. Yet his gaze met her friendly, blushing gaze.

The horse took a quick leap; a snake lay in the middle of the dusty road. Al Eajiz knew snakes were not to be trifled with. Suheddin glanced back warily; there were still no pursuers in sight. And then, one evening, the old maid appeared in the quarters. She motioned to him with her chin, and he followed her down the hallway. "I am Aya, a servant of Princess Suleika, Lord Suheddin. The princess asks you to come up to the eastern roof at the time when the star Az-Zuhara is seen rising. Be punctual and discreet, Mr. Suheddin," said Aya, and left without saying goodbye after he had nodded in agreement. He sat rooted to the spot in the courtyard, gazing intently toward the west, and when Venus rose radiant from the horizon, he crept up onto the eastern roof. There was no one to be seen, only old Aya, who coughed briefly. He stepped silently toward her, caught sight of the princess, and bowed deeply. She held out her hand to him, and he reverently kissed her ostentatious ring. Aya whispered, "Take a seat

on that bench, Princess; I'll keep watch." That was Suheddin's first encounter with the princess, and it would not be his last.

The horse didn't slow down, even though it was already drenched in sweat. Suheddin saw the silhouette of the post station in the distance. He had to water the horse. But that was dangerous — perhaps a squad of pursuers was waiting for him there. But the post station looked deserted; the people were surely already asleep. Suheddin dismounted and hid behind a boulder. No, it wasn't really a boulder, but rather a block of sand compacted by wind and weather. He gave the horse a pat on the flank. "Go over there very slowly — I see a watering hole. Drink some water and come back, but be very, very quiet, my big guy." Al Eajiz shook his mane and trotted quietly toward the watering hole. He drank greedily, looked around cautiously, and quietly returned to Suheddin. The ride toward the southwest continued.

Suheddin, a soldier in the Caliph's personal guard, could hardly believe his good fortune. Princess Suleika was in love with him; she gave him her heart as they grew closer. Long ago, her loyal servant Aya had shown him the secret path by which he could enter the princess's chambers unseen. The good woman knew what was in her charge's heart, and the guard soldier Suheddin didn't strike her as a fool either. She faithfully stood watch so that he and Su, the princess, could spend plenty of time on her couch. Of course, Aya was getting on in years, but she still knew a thing or two about love. She didn't worry too much — the princess was clever and cunning and would surely find a way to keep her sweetheart by her side.

Suheddin's heart overflowed, and he spoke to his horse of his love. "You were there, my beloved, when my eyes searched the emptiness for you. You gave me water when I was thirsty. You gave me bread when you saw how hungry I was. You covered me with your veil when I was cold at night." The horse understood every word; after all, he knew only too well how much the wounds that love inflicts on the soul can hurt. "I held your tender, white hand, my beloved, as I stepped over the abyss; there you were beside me, guiding me. I kissed the tears from your eyes when you wept over the dead little bird on your windowsill. I kissed the nectar from your lips, for it is

sweeter than honey. I washed your alabaster-white breasts with cool water when the heat of the samum had the city in its stranglehold. I kissed your white loins every time I put your veil back on, my beloved. I ran away from you in tears when Prince Mirza's henchmen tried to seize me." The horse Al Eajiz pricked up his ears, for Suheddin's pleas of love touched him deeply. But the clever animal knew that back there, beyond the 16th post station, lay the safe haven; there they would board a ship bound for India or the land of Ophir and sail away. They would be there before dawn. He just had to pace himself wisely — that was important for a smart horse.

Suheddin's keen eyes spotted the next post station; there appeared to be several inns there as well. Perhaps he could find some feed for his horse, since they still had a long way to go. He breathed a sigh of relief — the light was still on in the stable. He could probably buy some feed for a few silver coins, provided they weren't already looking for him there. They approached the stable cautiously. He dismounted and walked the last few meters alongside his horse. "My good boy, go stand over there next to the mares — maybe they'll share some of their feed with you." A light pat on the flank, and the faithful animal trotted into the stable. A mare moved aside a little and let him get to the feed. Suheddin didn't speak the language of horses, but Al Eajiz had apparently let his masculine charm work its magic.

"Peace be with you," Suheddin greeted the old man, who was sweeping the floor with a broom. "And peace be with you too, young sir!" the man replied, setting the broom aside. "Ah, I see your stallion has found a spot next to Lakia. She's a good girl, believe me, sir." Suheddin fished a silver coin out of Suleikas money pouch. "His name is Al Eajiz," he grumbled, "and of course I'll pay for the feed, good man!" But the man waved him off. "I saw the tag on the bridle — the horse comes from the Caliph's stables. Our good ruler's horses are always welcome here. You don't need to pay anything, young man!" Suheddin took a step back. "The palace has put a bounty on my head, and you'll surely get into trouble if Prince Mirza finds out that you're helping me."

The old man spat on the ground. “Oh, him! May God forgive me, but I couldn’t care less about the prince. He’ll be our next caliph, and on the day he ascends the throne, I’ll leave the country on the first ship I can find — as surely as God helps me!” He spat on the ground again. “Prince Mirza!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. “Tell me, if you’ve come straight from Baghdad, you must be hungry and thirsty. You can have a cup of wine, a chicken drumstick, and a flatbread — I wasn’t very hungry this evening.” He walked over to a small table and made an inviting gesture. “Don’t worry, I’ll put it on the prince’s tab — he can certainly afford to pay for it!” Suheddin grinned. “You’re going to get into trouble for helping me.” But the old man waved it off. “Tell me, what kind of idiot would name such a magnificent stallion Al Eajiz, ‘the Lamé One’? I can’t see anything lame about him, young sir!” Suheddin laughed. “I’m in the Caliph’s personal guard — may he live long! And every time we see him, we grin and wonder about the complete idiot who gave him that nickname.”

Al Eajiz had eaten and drunk from the trough. He had promised the lovely Lakia a tête-à-tête when he was on his way back, and the good girl snorted, blushing. Now he stood in the doorway, waiting impatiently. Suheddin rose from the small table and drained his cup of wine. “My thanks to you, good man! And don’t bow your old back too low when the prince rides past. He doesn’t just want the Caliph’s throne — he also wants to seize my bride, defile her snow-white thighs, and dishonor her. That is why I must flee.” The old man nodded in farewell, and, refreshed, they rode on.

The last post station. When he sat up straight in the saddle, he could already see the sea. To the left was the steep mountain range, and to the right, the sea. And right in the middle, where the road ran, was a line of horsemen — perhaps a hundred of them.

The Prince's Pursuers.

Al Eajiz stopped in his tracks; he saw that there was no way forward. And then a rider broke away from the center and rode toward him. Suheddin’s heart clenched. Prince Mirza. The man who was determined to make his princess his wife. The scoundrel who had brazenly torn off her veil and ogled her flawless body as if it were

a pound of meat at the market. The man who didn't shy away from having him — his rival — murdered.

Facing off against a hundred armed men was not an option. He patted his horse's neck. "I think, my big guy, this is where our paths part. I'll fall in the sand, and they'll take you back to the stable." — No matter how hard Al Eajiz looked around, there was no escape. He would charge right through the formation and mow down those guys — he simply owed that much to Suheddin.

Tears glistened in Julia's eyes again. "The fragment ends here. Either Schwabe didn't finish writing it, or it's been lost." Alfie hated tears, especially Julia's. He took the sheets from her hand. "You have to read the backs of the pages, too, girl! The rest of the story is on there." And he flipped the printed pages over and pretended that the backs weren't just blank white pages. "Ah, there it is!" He cleared his throat briefly, composed himself, and read aloud from the blank pages:

Al Eajiz stood motionless, like a statue. He waited for Suheddin's command to charge. But Suheddin looked at the prince, who soon caught up to them. The prince reined in his horse. "Ah, there's our runaway! Your escape was completely pointless, guard — I saw this coming. I read your foolish thoughts before you'd even finished forming them. I offer you two options: You come with me and end up in the darkest dungeon, forever. But at least you'll be alive. Or I'll chop you to pieces right here on the spot and trample you like a worm. That would be the second option, and I'd prefer it. You didn't really imagine that a princess would take a mere guard as her husband, did you? No, she'll belong to me, body and soul. I'll plant my boot on the neck of that unwilling princess and mock you, you worm! But I've taken a very close look at the princess, and I tore her veil so I could see her properly. If she weren't a princess, I'd take her for a goat herder. Her body is, after all, no more beautiful than that of an ordinary goat herder, merely adorned with jewelry and precious stones. Her chest and body are hidden by jewelry because she doesn't want anyone to see her ugliness. Nevertheless, she's still

just a goat herder, and she'll open the Caliph's heart to me, whether he wants to or not!"

Suheddin spat on the ground. "Prince Mirza, you are a fool! You dare to slander the princess by calling her a goat herder, and I will not let you get away with it — I will cut you to pieces and throw your stinking corpse to the dogs, as surely as God helps me! Prince Mirza, you are a cancer in the body of Baghdad, a parasite who drips poison into the caliph's ear. You are no man of honor; you have never let your sword dance in battle — you lack the guts and the nerve for that. A man of honor would now leap from his horse and cross swords with me. Isn't that right, Captain?" he called out to the captain, who had followed the prince. Prince Mirza, carefully made up and dressed in elegant, fine clothing, cast a sidelong glance at the captain. "The Caliph has forbidden all duels, hasn't he?" The captain didn't move for a moment; the princess's insults were unworthy of an honorable man. But then he said, "If anyone were to challenge me like that, I'd hack him to pieces, Prince Mirza!" The prince's small eyes darted back and forth like sparrows trapped in a cage. "A mere foot soldier cannot insult me — I am a hundred times his superior!" Not a muscle twitched on the captain's face. "I wouldn't let a rival get away with insulting me! And even if he were a peasant or a stable boy, he'd forfeit his life! I would draw my sword, if only for my honor and the honor of the lady of my heart!" The prince was trapped. Even if he were to murder Suheddin right now, the captain would not hold back his opinion — no, he wouldn't. Slowly, he dismounted from his white horse.

Suheddin slid gracefully out of the saddle. He gave Al Eajiz a pat on the flank. "Make way, my friend — it's time to get down to business!" His horse took a few steps and then turned around. Suheddin slowly drew the small scimitar of Suleika from its sheath; it was a short but finely curved blade made of fine Damascus steel. A light sword, forged for delicate ladies' hands. Prince Mirza drew his curved sword — a large, heavy blade, also the finest work of a master blacksmith. Suheddin knew that if he lost, the prince would enslave his Suleika in a merciless captivity, rape her at his whim, hand her over to his men for their amusement, and throw her to the wolves to be devoured.

That unbearable thought gave him a strength that no one else would have had in that situation. He didn't know how good the prince was at fencing; in fact, no one really knew. No one had ever seen him with a drawn sword in his hand. He himself had been a soldier long enough to be able to assess his abilities. Of course, there were better fencers in his company, but he had always fought bravely and had returned from every battle so far without even the slightest scratch.

Prince Mirza and he circled each other. Suheddin's sword was very short, which was a disadvantage. The prince slashed and slashed at him; Suheddin could only parry the blows and move as swiftly as an antelope. The prince, a fierce fellow, struck Suheddin recklessly. He was a cowardly brawler and believed he could hit the agile, evasive guardsman with one of his wide, sweeping blows. All his fighting skills still stemmed from his youth, when he had beaten others to death with a wooden club. What stupidity lay behind all that arrogance and overinflated self-confidence!

The prince's sword hand gradually grew heavy, and he attempted a feint that was easy to see through. His leather slippers sent sand flying in Suheddin's direction, but Suheddin could only laugh it off. Dodging that was basic stuff. Twice he managed to leap right through the swirling sand, just as he had practiced a thousand times. He inflicted two deep cuts on the prince's forearm, and the prince's bleeding sword hand was now in grave danger. The prince was already gasping for breath and wiping the sweat from his eyes. Suheddin watched with satisfaction. Only a light sheen of sweat covered his forehead; agile as a gazelle, he leaped, causing the prince to strike at thin air under the force of his own blows, letting him wear himself out. Suleika's kiss touched his cheek; her lips were as light as a breath of wind. "His own heavy sword will tear his arm right off!" his beloved whispered.

Al Eajiz neighed loudly, drowning out the wind, and his neigh reached the line of men. The line began to move. Some soldiers had moved forward and were watching the duel from a distance. The captain had also dismounted, drawn his scimitar, and appointed himself the referee. Of course, he immediately recognized that the

prince was not fighting honorably, but was merely a savage brawler who wanted to crush the young man at any cost — but certainly not in an honorable duel. The captain called the prince to order as if he were a mere recruit in combat school. The prince crouched down in anger — that wasn't how it was supposed to go! The captain was his captain, and he yelled at him to stay out of it! The captain fell silent; after all, the prince was a prince, not a recruit.

Suleika's Damascus blade sang in Suheddin's hand as he swung it. A faint hum, a high, soft sound like a sigh from afar. "I am with you, my beloved!" Suleika's lips whispered amid the blade's hum. "That dishonorable man tore off my veil and exposed me before everyone's eyes! I curse his black soul!" the blade sang in his hand. Suheddin sensed that Suleika was guiding his hand, that she did not want to let the hated prince and treacherous usurper escape. That scoundrel who had brazenly torn away her veil and revelled in the sight of her naked body.

Suheddin could hear her bell-like voice as if it were a whisper in the distance. "Now, my beloved, strike quickly like a hornet!" Suleika whispered. In a flash, he lunged forward and plunged the blade deep into the prince's chest. The prince sank to his knees, a look of disbelief on his face, as the heavy sword slipped from his hand. Suheddin leaped to his side and severed his neck with a powerful stroke. The prince's head rolled into the sand, and his lifeless torso fell forward onto the sand. The captain's eyes flew open. He thrust his sword back into its sheath and wiped his sweat-drenched face with his sleeve. Suheddin stood silently before the corpse, not moving.

The captain turned to his men. "Mr. Suheddin defended the princess's honor — and his own — in a fair duel. He fought fairly and honorably, just as a guard soldier should." His men looked on indifferently, and most of them didn't even know which princess the captain was talking about — there were so many princesses. But they looked at one another and nodded. Yes, it had been a fair duel, and the soldier had emerged victorious. The captain stepped up to Suheddin and tugged at his sleeve. "Give me your sword. I have an order — an arrest warrant — Suheddin. Come with me; I'll take you

to the caliph, who will judge you.” Suheddin nodded silently and handed Suleika’s sword to the captain.

The caliph sat upright on the throne — he had been given a meticulous account of the duel. Suheddin had been led in; now he bowed low to the ground and offered his greetings to the ruler. The executioner standing beside him pushed him down by the shoulder; a criminal was supposed to kneel before the caliph. But the caliph waved the executioner away and said, “Stand up, Suheddin; a man of honor stands upright before his ruler. I have, of course, heard about the duel; you beheaded the prince and allowed yourself to be captured without resistance. Now, tell me!”

Suheddin’s voice was firm and resolute. “The prince forced me to flee; he wanted to kill me because the princess did not love him. He ambushed me outside the port city with a hundred men. He slandered the princess and dragged both her honor and mine through the mud. I wouldn’t care if some high-ranking official insulted me. But to denigrate the princess — I could not and would not let him get away with that. The prince wanted to cowardly back out of the duel, but the captain would not allow it. I defeated him and cut off his head; he will never revile the princess again. I have nothing more to say on the matter, Your Highness!”

The Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, raised an eyebrow. “You call me ‘High Lord,’ not ‘Caliph’ or ‘Commander of the Faithful’ like everyone else. Why?” Suheddin’s reply came back instantly. “Because you are not, High Lord. You are not only the Ruler of the Faithful, but you also rule over the unbelievers — those who dance around the golden calf, the fire-worshippers of Ahura Mazda, and the children of Israel. You rule over them all, and come to think of it, you even rule over the cockroaches in our granaries. You are the Ruler of All, Your Highness!” Harun al-Rashid smiled. “Cockroaches, hm?” He stroked his beard and smiled. “You have a sharp tongue, young man. Now, how is it that Princess Suleika’s honor is so close to your heart?”

Suheddin knew it was no longer about Prince Mirza; it was now a matter of his own life. Defiantly, he jutted out his chin. “Well, Your Highness, when the princess learned that Prince Mirza desired her as

his wife and insolently demanded her as if she were nothing more than a bag of silver coins, she wept bitterly on my shoulder, Your Highness, and not on the prince's shoulder. She wept on my shoulder after he had insolently torn off her veil and inspected her body as if it were a pound of meat at the market. She knew that the prince was a cancer on the body of Baghdad, a venomous snake that sang into your ear to the sound of a shawm and laid claim to your sword and your throne — demanded them, indeed, vehemently demanded them. She wept because her father, struck by blindness, failed to see through the unworthy man and nurtured the serpent at his bosom. "My Lord, ask your daughter!" Suheddin lowered his gaze. To concede any more of his love for Suleika would have been unseemly.

Caliph Harun al-Rashid looked intently at Suheddin's face. "I know you, but I can't quite place where from." Suheddin smiled. "I was one of the four who accompanied you on your forays through the city when you, disguised as a common nobleman, wanted to get a feel for the pulse of the city. Not quite twenty years ago, Your Highness." A look of recognition flashed across Harun's face. "Yes, the silent boy whom the captain recommended to me, saying he was a natural-born bodyguard. You were as silent as a fish back then, my boy, but your knife whirled through the air faster than any arrow. I remember it very well. And now I see you've learned to speak. And you don't hold back your opinion. Even though you could talk yourself into serious trouble, Mr. Suheddin." He leaned toward his vizier, Al-Bahr, who was the same age, and they whispered for a few moments. The Caliph looked up.

"You engaged in a duel, even though I have strictly forbidden duels. You beheaded an heir to the throne. These are serious offenses, and I will withdraw to deliberate on whether and how I will punish you. But my friend Al-Bahr sees himself vindicated in your words and in the princess's words; from the very first day, he warned me against committing a folly — as if a caliph could ever commit such a folly. I was smitten with the prince; he had a silver tongue and a sharp, analytical mind — no one would dispute that. But he also sent all four of my sons to their deaths — two to the wars against the Romans of Byzantium and the other two to the feud against the bloodthirsty Barmakid dynasty. I didn't listen to my wise friend Al-

Bahr, who saw through the prince's cowardly scheme to remove the four greatest obstacles on the path to my throne without getting his own hands dirty. And yes, I was foolish enough to give him my daughter as his bride. My friend, I will spend four days in introspection, remaining silent and listening only, for Prince Mirza is still very much present in my mind. Perhaps I should be grateful to my friend Al-Bahr and to you — perhaps. A caliph must be neither blind nor infatuated; justice must guide him.”

Harun al-Rashid rose with a groan, the weight of the years bearing down on his shoulders. “I shall give you an order shortly, Suheddin. My daughter Suleika disappeared on the day I promised her hand to Prince Mirza and he went to her to inspect the purity of her body, as he put it. No one has seen her since. I ask you as a grief-stricken father, not as a ruler: ride out and find her, bring her back to me. I beg you with all my heart, my son!” Now, for the first time, Suheddin bent his knees and said: “My Lord, I will mount my horse at once and search the entire city. I solemnly promise you that I will not return without your daughter. Tomorrow, at the noon audience, I will bring her to you — unharmed and safe. You have my word on it, My Lord!”

The caliph turned to leave, muttering bitterly, “...and ruler of the faithful, the infidels, and the cockroaches!” Suheddin ran off to the stable to saddle the *Lame One*. Old Aya was standing in front of the stable. “Follow me, Lord Suheddin.” She said nothing more, turned on her heel, and led the way up to the princess's chambers.

He followed her up the stairs, staring at the swaying asscheeks of the faithful servant. Aya had never before draped such a flimsy veil around her hips — or perhaps he had simply never looked closely enough. With every step, the buttocks beneath the veil swayed gracefully back and forth, so graceful and lovely. Socrates would have sung a song of joy for this magnificent Callipyge — that old womanizer! “I'll ask one of my dragoon friends to take Aya out for a nice ride, because she deserves a good ride, the good soul,” he thought to himself, and her bare butt continued to sway so gracefully beneath the gossamer-thin veil, all the way up a hundred steps. Aya's buttocks, completely bare beneath the transparent veil, moved gracefully like the flanks of a plump mare. Suheddin rubbed his eyes;

between those plump flanks, he thought he could make out her dark bush. Yes, he confirmed his thought as he gazed approvingly at her gracefully bobbing ass — Aya deserves a good ride. He had seen Aya's graceful ass a thousand times before, but had never given it a second thought, never really looked at it. He chided himself, for as a child of his time, he saw female servants only as genderless beings. Aya's eyes had always fluttered excitedly when Suleika lay with him, but he had never truly noticed her sexual arousal.

Suleika jumped up from the couch and threw her arms around his neck. She cried — cried with joy and relief. "I never left — we just spread the word that I'd run away out of fear of the prince. And I would have slit Mirza's throat on our wedding night — no doubt about it." Suheddin sat down demurely beside her, and they had so much to tell each other. The loyal Aya stood guard as always. Fifteen years ago, she had nursed Suleika as a baby at her breast, and the girl was like a daughter to her. She had pocketed the prince's bribes without batting an eye, without presenting even the slightest favor in return. She loved her daughter, the princess, and had lived through the ups and downs of love with her. Aya blushed from the roots of her hair all the way down to her nipples when Suheddin whispered to her with a wink that he would send one of his dragoon friends her way, because she probably deserved it one more time.

At the audience the following morning, Princess Suleika entered the hall wearing her most exquisite veils, with Suheddin half a step behind her. The Caliph rose with difficulty and walked toward his daughter, drawing her into his arms. His eyes rested silently on Suheddin's face. He needed men like Suheddin — men of true steel who would not be lulled by the sound of shawms. Men with a mind of their own and backbone, men who would ride off immediately and bring his daughter back to him. Suleika followed her father to the throne and sat down proudly beside him, the exalted Caliph. He reached for her hand and held it tightly.

Harun al-Rashid beckoned Suheddin closer so that he could bring his ear close to the Caliph's lips. "Suheddin, you devil of a man, my daughter is sitting next to me again. Thank you, thank you, thank you! And now listen, my son: I have bribed two of my judicial

advisors to vehemently demand your head. And likewise, two others who will just as vehemently demand your acquittal and promotion. Consequently, you will likely have to wait twenty years or more for your verdict — that is what I have decided. And in the meantime, continue to bask in the glow of my fatherly goodwill!” Suheddin straightened up, his eyes shining with deep gratitude, but he could not utter a word and stepped back again.

The audience continued. “Well, my daughter, I hear you spurned Prince Mirza, even though he lifted your veil and licked his lips in anticipation?” Suleika interrupted him. “Did you know that that sly prince tore my veil from my body in front of everyone and appraised me like a camel at the market?” The caliph shook his head; he had known nothing of it. “I was only told about it recently, and I was uncomfortable with the thought that your fiancé would inspect your body and your virginity with his own eyes in such a crude manner, like an uncouth stable boy.”

He bowed his aged head in shame. “Let’s not speak any more of the prince and his inappropriate behavior. — What will become of you, my Suleika? You’re no longer a child, but a girl at exactly the age when your father must marry you off as quickly as possible so that you don’t bring shame upon him. Look around you — here among the princes and men of honor — don’t you see a worthy husband?” Suleika looked around with a grin, as if she were considering each and every one of them. “Yes, Father, of course I see him among all these honorable princes and sweet young men. Of course I see him, and he sees me.”

Harun al-Rashid was more than happy to play along with this little farce — a bit of lighthearted entertainment amid important debates and decisions. “And now, will you reveal the secret to us?” he asked with a smile. But Suleika was enjoying the comedy. “No, Father, no. The time hasn’t come yet; I haven’t lifted my veil yet; I’ve never slept with him, because I’ve never slept with a man, dear Father.” Harun al-Rashid grinned across his entire old, wrinkled face, for Suleika had already slept with quite a few sweet boys, but none of them were yet men. Harun thought he could hear the cheeky, deceitful chatter of her mother. What cleverness his daughter displayed! His heart

swelled with pride. “But you must hurry with your choice, my daughter, for your father is gradually growing old, blind, and deaf — the ruler of the believers, the unbelievers, and the cockroaches,” he chuckled.

Suleika rose and knelt before him. “Then allow me, my Caliph, my ruler of all this, to lift my veil before him and to lie down with him. For you have taught me that one should never buy a cat in a bag.” Harun al-Rashid slapped his thighs, laughing. “Did you hear that, my friends? My daughter is asking me for permission to take the cat out of the bag to see if his virility is really any good!? — Oh, what a clever, what a cunning child! She reads my own words back to me and twists them with great cleverness and skill to make them fit her purpose!” he exclaimed, laughing heartily.

He wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes. “You are my daughter, undoubtedly born of my fiery blood, combined with your mother’s cunning and cheeky wit! You would never jump into cold water with your eyes closed; no, you’d send your maid ahead to make sure the water is only waist-deep. — But don’t send your old Aya; she’d buy that strapping young man even from a hook-nosed, hunchbacked, and lame deaf-mute — that’s how eager she is for a good ride!” The Caliph slapped his thighs with laughter, for of course he knew about the gaping emptiness in Aya’s bed. The people in the throne room smiled or laughed, some at the top of their lungs.

Suleika had taken her seat again; her gaze flattered Suheddin’s eyes in a charming way. Of course, she had slept with him many times before, but she didn’t need to rub that in her father’s face.

And as the audience turned its attention to more serious matters, the narrator quietly slipped away. A faint smile played on his lips, for now everything was in order and back on track. He did not doubt for a moment that Suheddin would soon be promoted to general and elevated to the nobility. And, and, and.

Alfie put the papers down. A mischievous gleam shone in his eyes. “See, Julia, how beautifully and nobly Schwab brought the story to a

close? Everything's going like clockwork, as they say here in Vienna. No more tears, my dearest. Suleika and her Suheddin will be together. And faithful Aya gets a strapping dragoon, on loan, of course. So, no more tears — at most, tears of joy, pleasure, or emotion." Julia's negligee had slipped from her shoulders, and she had reached for her bare breast as Aya led Suheddin up the stairs to Suleika's chamber and he thoughtfully gazed at her gracefully swaying asscheeks. No, Alfie would have felt it was wrong to portray Suheddin as a saint without a body and beyond reproach — with a wink, of course. She hung on Alfie's every word with childlike curiosity. Alfie, who stared at the blank pages and improvised the story on the spot — making it exciting, entertaining, and not without humor. Alfie, who described the old caliph Harun al-Rashid so vividly as an elderly gentleman, as if he'd been there himself. Alfie, who knew so well how to describe Suheddin's gaze on Aya's gracefully swaying ass. Oh, Alfie, what a quirky guy you are! she thought with a smile. Yes, this Alfie — he was her man. Forever and ever.

Julia was cured of brittle bone disease. The doctor nearly did a somersault when she looked at the bone density measurements from the past few months. Whatever might have been encoded in that little packet of mRNA, it did exactly what it was supposed to. Julia's bones were strong and healthy — no question about it. The fact that Julia still enjoyed taking her Ferrari out for a spin was simply a matter of habit and convenience. A wheelchair user never had to stand in line anywhere, and that was just one of the advantages. And by the pond, she sat in her own wheelchair with heated seats, while Alfie sat on the park bench without heated seats. Alfie laughed, "Heated seats? What's the point of that?" Julia, however, felt right at home. Shaking people's hands without having to worry about breaking a bone — that was something.

Julia empathized with Yvonne as she witnessed her friend's roller-coaster rides up close. Yvonne had a real talent for reeling in those guys who, while good in bed, were closer in character to amoebas than to sincere Christians. Julia still strictly refused to let Yvonne bring her latest conquest home with her. They had incorporated Alfie into their Tuesday afternoons and their girl-on-girl sex with ease and

sincerity; by now, that was just fine the way it was. Julia had sex every day, and she had absolutely no desire to get involved with Yvonne's conquests. There was one thing her grandpa had emphasized time and again: if sex became a habitual pastime, a race, or a soulless duty, then she was on the completely wrong path. Sex without love was like a fish out of water. It might squirm — because fish and sex just squirm — but both were dying. Julia never forgot her grandpa's warning words. He was a very wise man, and he didn't teach her trivialities, but only solid, joyful experiences. Getting involved with Yvonne's suitors — that would truly be the kind of trivialities Julia didn't need.

She thought long and hard about Alfie's story of Suheddin and Harun al-Rashid. One thing was clear: there were other interesting things to read as well, not just legends and myths from the ancient Greek pantheon. Time and again, she would take a break from her work on her gods and read one story or another. At first, it was just a change of pace — a mental gallop across new, different, or unknown meadows. But she soon realized how enriching it was to immerse herself in the world the author had created. Indeed, she quickly set aside boring or trite fiction if it didn't get under her skin. Her membership in the Vienna Public Library, which dated back to her high school days, experienced a new lease on life. With just a few clicks, it was so easy to borrow a book — many of them even in purely digital form.

It was probably just a coincidence that Julia met a group of people with disabilities who used wheelchairs. She had seen a brochure in the doctor's waiting room and jotted down the email address. On a whim, she attended one of their monthly meetings. Somehow, the issues raised by the women in wheelchairs seemed trivial — or even banal — to Julia. Yes, they had to write to the city council about the lack of accessible entry here and there. The city council then promptly replied, saying how well they understood the situation, but — drumroll! — there wasn't enough money, as both the female and male city council members wrote regretfully. Julia had actually already decided to wrap up this interlude and call it quits.

But then she met Rocky. His name was Robert Niehaus, the only son of a fairly well-known couple of surgeons. Somehow he'd come to be called Rocky — and certainly not because of the movie character played by Sylvester Stallone. It had just happened at some point. Rocky was in a wheelchair because of a spinal cord problem; he was 13 and a half and a pretty good student. Although he was — quite rightly — very proud of his computer skills, he had no friends, neither boys nor girls. When Julia saw him for the first time, she immediately thought of the character Dwarf Long Nose from the children's books she'd read as a child. Rocky had a prominent hooked nose, a small hump, and, like many wheelchair users, rather atrophied leg muscles. He lived just a few streets away from her, on Riemergasse, in a beautifully maintained old building from the previous century. His parents were quite successful but rarely around — doctors who gave him every luxury except one: their presence as a father and mother. From their very first meeting, Julia sensed how clingy he was, how much he longed for “someone else.”

She didn't mind that he insisted on parking his wheelchair right next to her Ferrari when they first met at a meeting. That he reached across the gap between their wheelchairs and held her hand, just as other children press their pink bunnies or green teddy bears to their chests. She sensed his hunger for closeness, and it was an almost maternal feeling on her part to let him hold her hand. Oh yes, she knew how much one could suffer from such feelings, even though she was privileged in that regard and fate had not treated her unfairly. She noticed how listlessly Rocky voted at the end of the meeting on the wording of the next letter to the authorities. The boy wasn't unsympathetic, that little guy Longnose. And he definitely didn't belong to that circle of pitiful disabled people.

That made his invitation to his house all the more surprising. She absolutely had to see his computer setup; he had designed it all himself and built it with his own hands — every single screw. Julia found it unusual that a boy as young as 13 would design his own computer system and build it himself, with his own two hands. Rocky grinned. “A screwdriver, tweezers, and a soldering iron — it's really no big deal,” he said in the tone of little Gyro Gearloose. Julia glanced at her watch. “For half an hour, but no longer. I'm writing

my dissertation and have a strict schedule that I always stick to, even if you wanted to show me the Pyramids of Giza, Rocky.” He nodded; half an hour, but at least 30 minutes, he said with a smile. “I won’t distract you from your work, Julia. I just want us to maybe become friends — real, good friends, perhaps. You’ve got what it takes; I knew that from the very first second. I’ve already got enough non-friends and non-girlfriends,” he said, and he was completely serious.

They rolled side by side down Riemergasse, and she gave him a rough outline of what her dissertation was about. Rocky knew quite a bit about the ancient Greek pantheon, since he read a lot and loved to read. Julia’s heart warmed; finally, someone who didn’t just know Zeus, Hera, and Aphrodite from skimming past them. Someone who got straight to the point: “You want to prove that Hera’s a pretty rotten apple, a bit of a wild slut, aren’t you? And not the saint everyone wrote her up to be.” Julia was completely amazed: a 13-year-old who hit the “bull’s-eye” in less than 15 minutes. They drove through the underground parking garage, where they took the elevator up to the penthouse. About 500 square meters of luxury, elegantly, tastefully, and expensively furnished. Rocky introduced Julia to Anni, who seemed to be the housekeeper or a jack-of-all-trades. “Would you like some elderberry lemonade? We buy it from farmers in Burgenland, and in my opinion, it’s the best for miles around.” Julia said yes and followed him. He had a small, windowless bedroom, the walls neatly covered with pictures of naked girls. There was no door between his sleeping area and his “office,” his “study.” Seventy-five square meters, meticulously tidy and very neat. “If you work with computers, you can’t be a slob or a mess-maker,” he said with a serious expression.

Julia was surprised — after all, she had a computer with a printer and a scanner, of course. But this — this was a monster of a computer. No toy — this was a real “installation” that truly deserved the name. Prominently displayed were two gray, chest-high towers bearing the names “Rocky I” and “Rocky II” in silver letters. “Those are my servers, each with 96 terabytes. That — that’s quite a lot. They’re mirrored with RAID for data redundancy. And back there, that big black behemoth — that’s the backup generator, in case of power outages. It lasts for two hours, that thing.” She spotted two

scanners that were almost identical and four printers. “Why would a sane person need four printers? Four?” Julia asked curiously. Rocky smiled, “A laser printer for text and so on. Its twin is the backup in case the sister twin breaks down. A photo printer, and over there in the back, the big color laser printer — that’s where I print out the ‘Girl of the Month’ for my bedroom. I bought the printers and scanners because building them from scratch would require a larger workspace and a lot of specialty tools. My parents do give me a lot of money for my hobby, but they don’t want to shower me with cash — that’s not their style. They want me to learn to budget and pay off my bank loan in installments, and I think that’s just the right thing to do.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Around 250,000 to 300,000 euros, give or take.”

Anni had placed two glasses and a pitcher of lemonade on a small side table. “She’s not allowed to come any further in — ever since she damaged almost everything with her cleaning obsession, she’s only allowed to go as far as the little table, not a millimeter further. We get along pretty well that way. I vacuum once a week; I also have two extra vacuums for the insides of my appliances. — Well, what do you think, Julia?” Julia took another look at the beautiful, functional office. “You’re very professional for your age — or rather, for your youth — and I like that about you, Rocky. I don’t know the first thing about computers, but I’ve gotten the impression that you take this very seriously and handle it like a true professional, Rocky. And I find that very endearing about you. I guess a toy train set would bore you.” Rocky looked her straight in the eye. “After high school, I want to study computer science at the university and then start a company where I’ll build the best computers and servers myself. That dwarf Longnose is totally unsuitable for surgery. Of course, I’m also allowed to watch Mom in the Operation Room when she reduces labia or fixes or beautifies clitorises — that’s how she makes a ton of cash. I love watching because I get to see so many different kinds of twats without Mom smacking me — if you know what I mean.” Julia rolled her eyes. “Twat isn’t a nice word for a beautiful body part, you little pig!”

Julia glanced over toward his bedroom. “Tell me, how would you describe yourself — ‘over-computerized’ or ‘over-sexed’? I’m

assuming that, as a computer specialist, you understand English.” Rocky thought about it for a long time. “Actually, both, if I’m being honest. When I’m sitting at the computer, I’m completely focused and don’t think about sex for a second. And when I’m lying on my bed, touching myself, and looking at my girls with lust, then I think only about sex, not computers.” Julia nodded; it was a good — and above all, honest — answer. “If we’re always honest with each other, we can be real friends one day, Rocky.”

He looked up expectantly. “Real friends, with sex and everything?” Julia shook her head. “No, Rocky, definitely not. I have a husband, Alfie — the best husband in the world. I wouldn’t sleep with anyone else for anything in the world, and please don’t be mad at me for that. But my love for Alfie is something special, unique, maybe even sacred. So yeah, no hookups or anything like that, even if it makes you sad, little man.”

His face lit up. “Even in kindergarten, the girls called me ‘little man’ because of my big thing. Back then, I could still walk on my own and didn’t need a wheelchair. The girls would squeal with delight when I took it out — after all, I was the only boy. They always wanted to touch and feel it again and again. That was okay; I was, after all, their dear Little Nose. When they played with it and I read them the unabridged version of ‘Dwarf Little Nose’ — which I’d written myself, of course — they’d giggle and squeal whenever Little Nose hypnotized the three princesses with his sweet talk and then had his way with them one after the other. My Dwarf Long Nose was just that kind of naughty little guy I would have loved to be myself, if I’d had legs. The attendants at the Marxist kindergarten were very open-minded and modern and rarely intervened, because the girls were allowed to touch him however they pleased. Just playfully, though, because many girls had already seen real sex, and they were supposed to process it playfully with Dwarf Long Nose. We children were supposed to learn how to deal with our childlike sexuality — and that’s exactly what we did.”

Julia smiled. “So, for you, the nickname ‘Dwarf Long Nose’ isn’t offensive at all, Rocky?” He laughed. “No, not at all! I was proud of my guy who’d grown way too big, and I was just as proud that the

girls saw me and my guy as ‘Shorty Nose’ from my made-up story and accepted us.” Julia glanced at her smartwatch. “We should do this again sometime, if you’d like, Rocky. To become friends — close friends — but not the kind who make out, okay? I’d interrogate you about your ‘Dwarf Long Nose’ and his little friend like a Gestapo officer, and in return, you can ask me anything that doesn’t directly lead to sex. Deal?”

Rocky was beaming from ear to ear. “Oh, how wonderful! You want to come back! I’d love to jump up and do a Hilly-Billy dance, but I can’t manage that anymore. Shall we set a date — a real date?” Julia thought for a moment. “I always set aside two hours on Thursday afternoons for reading; I could skip that and come over to grill you about this and that and so on. Would that be okay?” Rocky crinkled his face into deep wrinkles and pretended to be thinking very hard. “About this and that and so on?” He smiled. “Thursday, you say? Two hours? Well, let me think about it. Thursday afternoon — I’d actually have dance class then, South American and Latin dances, if I could walk instead of rolling around in a wheelchair. So yeah, deal — Thursday’s booked!”

He paused. “I’m going to take a closer look at your Ferrari — through the eyes of an engineer — because I’d like to build an electric car like that myself, one that can climb stairs like your Ferrari. That’s a challenge.” Julia’s smartwatch beeped softly. “I have to head out, Rocky — work calls, and I’ll call back. So Thursday, let’s say at three — 3:00 p.m.?” Rocky nodded. “You’ll find your way to the underground parking garage — it’s always open. I’ll be waiting for you downstairs by the elevator at exactly 3:00 p.m., not a second later. Because you can’t take the elevator without a key.” Julia stood up and got into her Ferrari. Rocky drove her down to the underground parking garage, then crowed cheerfully, “Goodbye — see you Thursday at 3:00 p.m. and zero seconds!” and Julia drove home, lost in thought.

Of course, she told Alfie every little detail about Rocky while they were relaxing in bed, smoking. Alfie’s eyes widened. “A Marxist kindergarten? Oh, we don’t have that anymore — no Marx anywhere, nowhere! And the girls played with his thing, as you say? In

kindergarten?” Julia wasn’t sure either. “That Rocky, the little runt — he was pretty precocious even back then. Maybe that played the decisive role.” Alfie nodded, but the matter was far from settled. “That kid’s oversexed, if you ask me.” He bit his lower lip. “I’m not buying your categorical ‘no’ that easily, Julia. You and Yvonne — you two dragged me into your Tuesday games, and I have sex with her, too. I get that you’re curious about this Rocky, but I’m not buying your categorical ‘no.’ Just see how things develop. Only if nothing develops does your ‘no’ really make sense — otherwise, it doesn’t.” Alfie shook his head. “Thirteen! At thirteen, I was lying next to Mom with our little machines, and we were just relaxing. I wasn’t even close to thinking about sex at that age, especially since my dad died so miserably back then.” Julia sat up straight as a board. “Having sex with a 13-year-old is considered a serious crime, my dear! Don’t lose sight of that. I could ruin my entire career. With a 13-year-old! My God!” The matter troubled Alfie more than Julia would have believed. Apparently, there was a connection to his relationship with his mother that hadn’t yet been revealed, but she wouldn’t press him for details. But to keep something from him — that would be a lie, a betrayal.

On Thursday, at exactly 2:59:30 p.m., Julia was waiting by the elevator in the underground parking garage. Rocky arrived right on the dot, but without his wheelchair — instead, he was wearing a T-shirt and boxer shorts. Her gaze immediately fell on his thin legs. “I practice walking without my wheelchair for an hour every day, on doctor’s orders,” Rocky said as they rode up. Glasses and iced lemonade were already waiting; Anni remained out of sight, and they sat down at his desk, which was made of acrylic glass. He had gotten a second swivel chair, so Julia “parked” her Ferrari and walked over to the chair. Rocky, his legs wobbly, fetched an ashtray from his parents’ apartment next door; he himself didn’t smoke, not even a joint. It was a matter of principle. “Smoking would harm my libido,” he lectured.

He looked at her expectantly as she drew the smoke from the joint deep into her lungs and, a few seconds later, exhaled it in little rings. “And now I’m curious about the Gestapo officer,” Rocky said with a smile. Julia backed off a bit. She was just curious and wanted to find

out everything — everything he could reveal. Rocky smiled. “I’m only 13 and a half; you don’t have any secrets at that age, Julia. Those come later, when you’re an adult, I think. And my little guy hasn’t seen anything of the world yet, unfortunately. But I’d be happy to make something up for you — I’ve already seen it all on the internet.” Julia spread her fingers. “No lies, nothing made up, Rocky — just the truth and only hard facts.”

He looked through his desk at Julia’s legs. “It’s a miracle that you’re completely cured of brittle bone disease, Julia. A true miracle — I looked it up online, and there’s no cure, at least not yet.” Julia felt her way through the facts. “My husband, Alfie — he’s from the Chicago area — and he bought me a treatment in the U.S. They’re already much further along there than we are here in old, slow-moving Europe. An mRNA treatment that repaired my defective genes. I’ve been able to walk on my own for about a year now, but I’m not ready to give up my Ferrari just yet. As if I hadn’t paid off the bank loan yet — okay?” Rocky smiled. “Bank loan — that rings a bell. I’m still stuttering my way through the payments too, but that’s really unimportant. Not exactly what you’d want during an interrogation by a tough Gestapo officer, Julia,” he grinned.

"I've read that the disease is often accompanied by a decreased libido, while for others, you have to tone down the libido," Rocky said. Julia grinned through the sacred smoke. “My libido is absolutely overflowing — it’s been that way since I was a kid. I’m not letting anyone tone it down, not in a million years! That’s just how it is.” Rocky laughed softly. “It doesn’t work that way. You’re the Gestapo woman — you’re supposed to be interrogating me, not the other way around.” Julia laughed. “We’re quite the pair, Rocky. I set out to interrogate you about this and that, and now you have to listen to me go on about my love life. Okay, just one more thing to complete the picture: Alfie and I have been having sex for two years — pretty much since we met. And once a week we play a mixed doubles match as a threesome with my best friend, but without a referee. Just the ball, the court, and us without tennis rackets. Simple, uncomplicated, and athletic.” Rocky pursed his lips. “Uncomplicated? Simple?” Julia took a drag on her joint; she felt as light as a butterfly.

Rocky suggested they lie down on his bed, where she could take a really good look at all his girls. They were all totally different, yet somehow similar in their beauty. Julia hesitated — it was all happening too fast for her. “How exactly am I supposed to understand this ‘and so on’ business? You said the other day that you lie on your bed, admire your hot group of girls, and enjoy yourself? Or did I miss something?” Rocky grinned crookedly. “No, you remembered it all correctly. Maybe you should add that I sometimes lie on my bed for hours on end. Maybe you’d also categorize my libido as sometimes exuberant — just for the Gestapo report, of course.”

Julia laughed her head off. Of course she’s high from the joint, but she’s picturing it all in her mind, and then she laughs. “I should call you Loki, the god of deception and trickery. I can see you longing for your mom, and her just telling you to go ask Anni. Yeah, she’s your mom, and you just don’t do that to your son — that makes sense, doesn’t it? And Anni — excuse me — she’s probably completely deaf when it comes to your brilliant ideas. “Oh, Rocky, you’re worse than the Gestapo ever imagined. You’re definitely going to hell, my boy — to the ‘overripe teenagers’ section,” she exclaimed with a laugh.

Okay, if he took the ashtray with him, then she’d lie down next to him on the bed and check out his playmates. She’d already lit up her next joint and was high as a monarch butterfly in Mariposa Monarca, Mexico. Swaying slightly, she walked over to the bed and flopped down. Rocky didn’t waste any time and pulled off his boxer shorts. “Oh — holy — Carmen!” she exclaimed as she looked at him. The boy was only 13 and a half, but his thing was bigger than Alfie’s and three times as big and massive as Grandpa’s. She averted her lecherous gaze and fixed it on the beauties on the walls. Rocky didn’t have bad taste — she had to give him that. The girls’ poses were completely natural and graceful — nothing lewd. “Rocky, please get dressed again. We agreed: no fucking, no faffing around, and no nonsense. So please be so kind! Wait until I’ve zoomed off in my Ferrari, then have fun afterward.” They lay side by side in silence, and Julia only dared to steal the occasional sideways glance at his boxer shorts, his hand inside the boxer short. But no, that was out of the question — she’d made up her mind, butterflies or not.

Rocky pressed himself close to her. “Is that okay?” She nodded. “So, you wanted to grill me about the ‘and so on,’ Ms. Gestapo Sweetheart. I’ll get started, since you obviously don’t know the first thing about a tough interrogation, Julia.” He buried his face in her armpit. “In the morning, when I take a bath, Anni sits on the edge of the tub and watches me with cold, fishy eyes as I do it underwater. ‘You’re a really dirty little rascal,’ she says, shaking her head, but she doesn’t take her eyes off me. “You’re going to the deepest, most wretched hell, because what you’re doing there is pretty gross, Robert.” But she grins crookedly when the little white worms float to the surface.”

"When Mom came to take me a bath, Anni usually stayed away. Mom sits on the edge of the tub, too, but she just smiles sweetly at the 'and so on.' 'Don't listen to that spiteful old woman,' Mom says, 'first of all, there's no hell, and second, your 'and so on' is perfectly normal and natural, Robert. — Maybe Anni's just jealous because she doesn't have a strapping young man in her bed, a strapping guy like you. So, don't let her get you down, Robert. You're a good boy and you won't go to hell — I guarantee it."

Julia slipped her arm under his head so he could rest comfortably on her shoulder. “I’m right here with Mom, Rocky. That ‘and so on’ is just fine; otherwise, I’d have to sit by your side in hell because of my own ‘and so on.’ But you don’t seem to have any respect for Anni, and I don’t think that’s right. She’s an employee, not a piece of trash. She has a twisted view of some things — that may well be true. But she’s not disrespectful toward you — she’s just voicing the concerns she has.” Rocky growled, “Voicing concerns — and at the same time watching this spectacle. That doesn’t add up, Julia. I’ve got eyes in my head, and I can tell right away when a bolt and a nut don’t fit together.”

Julia asked if his mom touched him while he was taking a bath. He rolled his eyes. “Back when I wasn’t very good at it yet, she always liked to do it so I could learn. Anni stood there watching and rolled her eyes heavenward like a toad in distress. Mom did it over and over again and didn’t stop until nothing more came out and I was completely exhausted; that’s how it’s supposed to be, she’d told me

and Anni. She swirled the little white worms in the bathwater with her hand, looked at Anni, and said she'd better take care of Dwarf Long Nose every morning, or else there'd be a proper thunderstorm. Anni rolled her eyes toward the sky and said, 'Yes, ma'am!' But Mom has stopped doing that now — and no amount of heart-wrenching begging helps anymore." Julia smiled. "Oh, I understand that perfectly. Your mom doesn't want to fall into the incest trap — she's a smart woman." Rocky asked if her mom had fallen into the incest trap. Julia shook her head. "No, my parents died in an accident; I wasn't even two yet. I grew up with my grandparents." She thought for a moment. "My grandpa didn't want to send me out into the world without knowing anything. He gently guided my finger so I'd learn the 'and so on' part correctly. My grandpa was a kind-hearted man — the best grandpa you could imagine."

Rocky shook his head. "My grandpa and grandma haven't come to see the little cripple in a long time." Julia gave him a tap on the back of the head. "You'd better cross the word 'cripple' off your list, you silly computer expert. A cripple is someone who snatches a grandma's purse or shoves her on the crosswalk. Someone who steals the coins from a beggar's cup. That's a cripple, and you're not one — you're Dwarf Long Nose, the one little girls love to grope."

Rocky rolled his eyes. "That was a hundred years ago, Julia. Nowadays, I have to thank Saint Jerome if one of the girls at the high school lets Zwerg Nase lure her curiously behind the bushes."

Her watch beeped softly. "Storytime's over, Rocky. Shall we reschedule the next interrogation about the girls from the high school for next Thursday at the same time!?" Rocky nodded and stood up unsteadily. He walked her down to the underground parking garage. "I know now that we're going to be good friends, Julia. Very good friends — no messing around, no frills, and none of that stuff. That's how you want it, right?" She nodded and drove off.

Alfie grunted and snorted as she told him everything. "We both know it's not about size. And you say, he did it inside his boxer-shorts, three times? It's interesting how he's into his mom. I know exactly what's going on in his heart — I was his age once, too. Most

guys probably have that fantasy, as long as their mom doesn't have bad breath. And, if we're to believe the statistics, for most of them it remains just a fantasy. Thank God!" Julia bit her tongue to keep from replying. She thought of the incestuous goings-on on Mount Olympus, which men had probably made up. At least in the legends and myths, it played out in such a way that the numbers would just fly right past the statisticians' ears.

Once again, Rocky picked her up in the underground parking garage; once again, he came without a wheelchair, wearing just a T-shirt and boxer shorts. "I'm practicing walking and standing every day now, without a wheelchair. I overheard Mom and the doctor talking — my spine is really shot and is deteriorating from the inside out, every day. 'He probably won't make it to 30,' the doctor said regretfully, and Mom cried like a baby. I at least want to be able to walk again before I die, Julia." When they got upstairs, two glasses and some iced lemonade were waiting for them. Rocky went straight to his sleeping area and lay down on the bed; Julia parked the Ferrari and followed him, feeling a little anxious. "No fooling around and no nonsense, Rocky, please don't! You can snuggle up to me — that's okay. I'd love to give you warmth and closeness." Rocky actually snuggled up to her and wrapped an arm around her chest, his lips right against her ear. "I've always longed for someone with whom I can discuss my interests and to whom I can snuggle up physically. Because I miss that so much!" Julia understood what he meant. His hand slipped inside his boxer-shorts.

Rocky lay next to her, enjoying the closeness and warmth of their bodies. His hand rested on her T-shirt, on her breast, but in a completely innocent way. He whispered about how Anni bathed him every morning and how she did it reluctantly, full of disgust. Anni was very upset — bathing a boy as big as him like a toddler was the absolute worst! But she did it, grumbling and reluctantly. The boss, his mom, had ordered it. Rocky told Julia about his fantasies, how he planned to seduce Anni. Yes, he described in minute detail exactly how he could manipulate her and pounce on her. How he would achieve his goal, without any violence at all. She would surely go along with it; she wouldn't put up any serious resistance, because she didn't want to lose her job.

Julia looked at him from the side. “Come on, think about it again! Isn’t it a form of violence when you force her to do your bidding so she can keep her job? This is a truly insidious form of violence, Rocky. Shame on you! And here’s another thing. You should never do that with employees or subordinates. How willingly are they getting involved with you? Not at all, believe me. There’s always dynamite in there — it can explode at any moment and blow right back in your face! And one last point: would you print out a picture of Anni and stick it on the wall right here, among your playmates?” Rocky swallowed hard. “Oh, come on, Anni doesn’t belong here — she’s no beauty, for crying out loud!” Julia smiled. “See, that’s my last point. I can see all around me that you have good taste in choosing your playmates — really good taste, in fact. Beautiful, graceful, soft-to-the-touch girls, every single one of them. So why are you chasing after Anni? I’d say she’s downright ugly, even though no one is really ugly. You only want her because she’s always within reach. A very convenient, lazy, and undignified point of view, I’d say. But what about the girls at the high school?” Rocky swallowed hard. “They only go behind the bushes with me because they’re curious about my Dwarf Nose. There’s not a trace of affection, Julia. That kind of curiosity is like a direct insult — they just want to know what it feels like with the Dwarfs Nose. I hate them for it, even though I enjoy the closeness, the nudity, and the fluids of course.”

Julia stroked his hair, his head. “Keep pursuing the girls from high school. One or two of them will realize what an enchanting, sweet prince is hidden inside Dwarf Long Nose. Always remember how popular Dwarf Long Nose used to be — back then, the girls weren’t shy around you.” Rocky buried his face in her armpit; he didn’t want her to notice how bitterly he was crying over the girls at the high school — his Dwarf Long Nose.

Another time, he brought up his mom. They had moved past the “Anni phase,” and he realized he should leave the employee alone. Now he dared to confide his most secret fantasies about his mom to his best friend. How intensely he dreamed of his mom and her body. How much he was drawn to her. Julia shook her head. “Would you put a picture of your mom up on the wall here?” Rocky nodded in agreement. “Oh yeah, she’s a real beauty and would outshine all the

girls when it comes to looks and beauty!” Julia had to change her strategy, take a detour. “But you do see her naked when she has time to give you a bath, and so on?” Rocky nodded up and down. “Yes, Julia. She’s just centimeters away and yet out of reach! She never lets me touch her skin. A long time ago, my hand strayed under her butt, directly, just as she was making it so nice for me — you know what I mean. ‘Keep your hands to yourself, son!’ she said sternly. I haven’t touched her since, Julia.”

And now he was describing to her, in vivid, explicit detail, what his mom’s body looked like. Excitedly, his fingers absentmindedly pinched Julia’s nipple through her T-shirt. She ignored it and listened intently. Oh, she knew all those details already — that wasn’t what mattered. His voice carried a longing for his mom’s touch, for her embrace, for her kisses — for child’s kisses. Julia shuddered or felt a chill as she listened to him and the tone of his voice. No, this wasn’t the sex-crazed jerk who was after incest. This wasn’t the teenager who was desperate to have sex with her, no matter what the consequences might be. No, this was a boy in dire straits, who missed his mother as a mother, not as a sexual partner. Rocky pulled himself together when he admitted to his eavesdropping. Mom was more or less just drifting through life alongside Dad, and she had some occasional affairs, mostly with men. And Rocky, that hapless little guy, sank into deep depression the more intensely and passionately Mom lay in the arms of a lover. Rocky recognized these bouts of depression very clearly and successfully shook them off. Julia pulled him close. She felt so sorry for him.

Julia blew the smoke into the air in little, playful curls. “I’m not going to lecture you on incest, Rocky — I’ve got my own story, after all. But your mom’s right — it’s a sin against God and nature, not just against human laws; we don’t give a damn about those anyway.” Rocky stared at the group of girls on the wall and nodded. “I dream about my mom, but of course they’re just dreams — nothing physical. I might be oversexed, but I’m no idiot, Julia. They’re just thoughts and longings spinning around in my head. Not my hands — I’ve got those under control.” Julia pulled him close. “I understand very well that you’re missing closeness and warmth. At the same time, I’m convinced that you’re the star in your mom’s eyes, even if she’s

currently drowning in work and barely has any time for you, my boy.”

Julia glanced at her smartwatch; she still had a few minutes before she had to leave. She sat up and cupped Rocky’s face in her hands. “Rocky, I have to tell you something that might hurt a little. I won’t be coming here to see you anymore. No, you didn’t do anything wrong. I have to stay away — for my own sake. We agreed: no frills and no hookups, and you’ve stuck to that like a man of honor, a gentleman. I’m just afraid I won’t be able to keep that agreement. I can feel how we’re both drifting further and further apart, step by step. I have to make a radical break with my past. I’m not going to seduce a 14-year-old and corrupt him. Be a good boy — keep your hands off Anni and your mom — and please focus on the girls at high school. Show them the enchanted prince hidden inside Dwarf Long Nose. Fall in love, chase after them, lift their skirts, and let them be curious — that’s how it has to be; that’s the right thing for a smart boy like you. It hurts my heart, too, but I can’t come anymore. I really can’t.” Tears ran down Rocky’s cheeks.

He understood and grasped every word, and he didn’t see anything wrong with it. Julia knew herself better than he did, and if she didn’t want to cross her line, then that was fine. But still, it hurt like hell to lose her. He wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. “Yes, losing you as a friend hurts like hell. And not because we did anything wrong or because we crossed the line. I’ll cry for a long time because you’ve grown dear to my heart. But still, you’ve given me something, Julia. You came to see me Thursday after Thursday; you listened to me patiently, just like a girlfriend; you opened my eyes to certain things and showed me the right path. Thursday after Thursday, I was able to snuggle up against your warm body and feel something like affection and a sense of belonging. I’ll frame these gifts deep in my heart and hang them on the wall. It doesn’t matter if I’m crying right now. What matters is that you’ll still be in my soul, in my heart, somehow. Yes, I’ll keep my fingers away from Anni and Mom, because it feels wrong. I’ll take better care of the girls at school, just as you said. You gave Little Nose confidence and hope that one day a Cinderella would discover the enchanted prince and willingly go behind the bushes with Little Nose. And for that, I thank

you, Julia, my best friend!” He buried his face in her bosom and wailed, crying out all his pain.

Julia lay next to Alfie, nestling her face against his chest. He listened in silence as she told him — just as she did every Thursday — how she’d let little Rocky, Dwarf Long Nose, hug her that afternoon until her smartwatch beeped. Alfie’s hand rested warmly and reassuringly on her back. He listened with a smile, clearly sensing her arousal and sexual desire. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself so much with him, my love. He may be a child by definition, but he’s also a 14-year-old with big, hungry eyes. He wanted closeness and skin-to-skin contact, and you gave it to him because you have a big, compassionate heart, Julia.” Alfie was glad that she was so at one with her maternal feelings and her social empathy. That was something that was definitely part of who she was.

“I won’t go back to him, Alfie. I said goodbye to him properly and honestly. I know myself and the devil in my body pretty well. First we’ll lie next to each other fully clothed. Then we’ll lie next to each other naked, skin to skin. And the next time, we’ll cross the line. I won’t allow myself to ruin a 14-year-old. That’s not who I am; that’s not my character. I’m far from having to give in to every impulse of my sex drive. I’m a human being; I have a mind of my own, and I want to take full responsibility for everything I do or don’t do. And what I certainly won’t do is seduce 14-year-old Robert and ruin his childhood.”

Alfie took the joint from her hand and took a deep drag. “I’m really sorry about Robert. I would have been fine with you letting loose for once. But I’m sure you’ve thought it through and are doing what you can live with.”

Julia rested her chin in her palm. “That’s something you won’t read in my dissertation: for all his power, the king of the gods had no power over his own lusts. In short, a dick-driven idiot. Yes, that’s what he was — not a man who changed the world and gave it a positive nudge, like Hammurabi or Ramses III. He was the ultimate womanizer, nothing more, and the ancient Greeks were simply foolish enough to admire it, caught up in a sort of mass psychosis. Of

course, you won't find any of that in my doctoral thesis; after all, you taught me to work with a clear objective and not to ruin things right off the bat with my obsession for the truth."

Alfie took the joint from her hand again and took a deep drag. "You said it, and I couldn't agree with you more. I ought to wonder why I haven't put it quite so clearly before. But I know the reason: Zeus and the gods vanished from our culture without a trace because we gradually realized he was just a dick-driven idiot — nothing more. His breath had an expiration date; it's as simple as that. Even if we won't read it explicitly in your dissertation." He absentmindedly slid the strap of her negligee down. "Sex is powerful. Sex is great. Sex can make us feel wonderfully happy, relaxed, in love, and drawn to one another. But sex isn't some all-singing, all-dancing cure-all that represents our be-all and end-all. There is more — so much more — in the land of Ophir waiting for us to discover and experience it. We are destined to lift the veil a little and catch a glimpse of the 'Callipyge' — those beautiful curves beneath the veil; old Sophocles knew that, the old lecher."

Julia smiled. Yes, that was her Alfie. He could phrase things so poetically that her fingers would twitch, wanting to jot it down, to quote him. And he was right. We really are destined to lift veils and peek curiously at the 'Callipyge', even though the rational mind yawns in boredom and dismisses it, having seen it all a thousand times before. She thought of Yvonne — of the moment she first saw Alfie asleep, how she had lifted the sheet quite matter-of-factly to verify that the bald guy was, in fact, a guy.

Yes, that's how we are.

Sophocles knew that.

He was a bright fellow, that Sophocles.

Swan song

Alfie worked almost day and night. He has long been on the screen from evening to morning, 14 hours a day. Wrote emails, answered emails and downloaded documents. Tireless. The four scanners in the apartment next door were humming and whirring; they had been working nonstop for a year and a half. Alfie only went to the neighboring apartment once, usually in the morning, took the documents that had already been scanned and stacked them in the corridor, where the men from the garbage collection picked them up every day and took them for paper recycling. With a handful of dollars, Alfie could delegate this activity. He filled the large input loading lanes with new food, with hundreds of books, journals and magazines. Marybel, Jezebel, Isabel and Pombel worked tirelessly and were incredibly proud that they filled the hard drives with terabytes non-stop. No, Alfie was no fool to give his machines names and to provide the three ladies with an experienced man. When he christened the Pombel, he corrupted the name of the Marquis de Pombal, who, among other things, led Lisbon to new prosperity. Well, he looked back proudly from the door, the girls and the marquis had food for the next 24 hours and would fill the hard drives page by page. He locked the door carefully.

It took him 40 minutes to get downtown to Julia's apartment. She would greet him in her negligee like every morning and hug him, the Arabia coffee would be ready in no time and then he would lie down in her bed and immediately fall asleep. She would kiss him awake at lunchtime with her warm womanly body and they would roll together for the 7 minutes to the pond, it was a fixed ritual like the sunrise. Although Julia could walk normally, she drove the Ferrari to the pond, which was as certain as the sunrise. Sitting in the Ferrari gave her the opportunity to show her beautiful breasts openly and a little bit of her pubic hair to attract the attention of passers-by. Our shy Julia is certainly a little bit cheeky, isn't she? The mallard ducklings had grown up and two guys had wandered off and were exploring the world outside the pond on their own. The six little sisters stayed together at the pond, where there was food and they

could swim in the pond as they pleased. The parents were away one day and there was duck breast in the town hall that day. The mayor of Giza was visiting from faraway Egypt, and duck was kosher, halal for the distinguished guest.

Alfie usually cooked lunch. He had never cooked before, but he couldn't see Julia eating any sandwich from any supermarket with any filling just to avoid wasting valuable time and accumulate completely unnecessary fat around her hips from the sandwiches. That shouldn't work! He skipped all the sandwiches and cooked fresh vegetables, sides and fresh meat from the butcher. Everything was fresh from the farmers market, he much preferred shopping there. In his time there was none of that, just uniform waste from the food factories. He had never learned to cook, but he could. Recipes were easy to decipher; he didn't watch a single cooking show on television, but interpreted the recipes conscientiously. They had lunch together, Julia broke away from the world of gods for these 20 minutes and let Alfie entertain her. Eat well and healthily, and the fat rolls were gone in no time.

He usually had a button in his ear and listened to the news. He was completely overwhelmed, the librarian in his chest shouted ecstatically. He followed the events up close and in real time, which he would one day exhibit in his museum. "Imagine, Julia, you were there as the boy king Tutankhamen circles in his chariot in battle against the horde of Hittites, as the wheels rattle over a boulder and he falls, shattering his knee. As he lies half-conscious on the sick bed and the murderer hired by his successor bashes his skull in. It makes a difference whether you are there live or whether you are there 4,000 years later and read about it in a glossy illustrated book."

Julia smiled. How similar their work was! She also collected everything, the smallest scraps that could still be found today, in order to immerse herself in the murderous, magical and mythical world of the gods. Her world was also a museum, so to speak; she too had to learn to discover and uncover politically and socially demanded cleansing in her legends and myths. To recount their sexual adventures, their frauds and swindles, their small and large crimes and to describe a clever analysis of the political and social

control mechanisms, yes, that was their mission. The ancient Greeks didn't create the world of gods so that those of us born later would have something to read by the bonfire. No, the legends and stories were intended to shape, educate and guide ancient Greek society. And that was Julia's job, to bring it to light, to give us a clear picture, because our society also needed to be further shaped, educated and guided.

Alfie, this jack of all trades, always brought a little sweet dessert with Arabia coffee. So they smoked a good digestive cigarette and then got back to work. Julia sank back into her lore, Alfie grabbed the wicker basket and went hunting to find the ingredients for tomorrow's lunch menu.

But sometimes in the afternoon he would sit alone by the pond and talk to the waterfowl. The mallard sisters, but also the three gray heron ladies, listened to his melodious voice. He told them about the board committee, which was becoming impatient, and about the director, who was fighting like a lioness for her Alfred. He had returned home for a jump and brought a backpack full of hard drives, more than 850 terabytes of past history. He jumped back to Julia's time as quickly as possible; he hadn't been gone for a second. But they gave him a reprieve, maybe two more months. Yes, he had been with Julia for 16 months and was grateful for every additional day.

How often did he toss and turn, half asleep, wondering whether he should return to his time in 2932 or whether he should stay with Julia forever? All he had to do was destroy or severely damage the communicator in his chest and they would no longer be able to transfer him back at the push of a button. Of course, they could send sheriffs, but that was unlikely. He had heard rumors that some time travelers never returned. No, it wasn't dinosaurs that had eaten them, it wasn't gladiators that had speared them, no, but they had found a much more useful life in another time. Just like him.

At night he now spoke almost every day with the director, Dr. Jessie Huntsman. She was about the age his mother would be today. And she took the time for her best man. She played neither a mother nor a siren, she simply felt responsible for him, for his spiritual

salvation. She was interested in his work and they discussed in detail what his new department should look like. The space required, the showcases and screen spaces, the printers and copiers for students and visitors, the storage space on the servers and how much money she had to spend for all of this.

But she also felt responsible for his soul; that was a quality of her dazzling personality. Alfie let her in on everything; she knew about Julia, her doctoral thesis, Yvonne and also little Robert. It was a shock to her right from the start that Alfie took Julia as his wife — really and seriously. Jessie Huntsman wasn't jealous in the least, she had followed the development of this relationship from the beginning, she saw how the sight of the angelic glow on Julia's face shot like lightning to Alfie's loins as she rolled out of the university building. She understood how one thing led to another. She was just afraid that Alfie would give up his assignment or even his job at the National Library. The thought was absolutely real, she saw it much earlier than Alfie himself. She just knew she wouldn't give it up without a fight. The committee would tear her head off, that was as certain as Amen in church.

Her own personal file already bore the taint of a renegade, but how could she have prevented Charles Stellarion Frenkel from being proclaimed King of Araucania and Patagonia? None of these considerations applied to the committee; they were all tough concrete heads who only clung to dots and commas, without any human emotion. Jessie Huntsman, on the other hand, was of a completely different breed. She looked after the spiritual well-being of her around 200 employees. She took the word in the truest sense: the soul had to be whole. Everything else was secondary, affairs or divorces, botched ski holidays or inheritance disputes in the family. All of this could be tackled, analyzed, solved and done. But she would never shrug off a soul hanging askew in the closet. Jessie Huntsman was not only a technically excellent manager of her department. No, she was a manager who took on more responsibility than just having proper balance sheets or budgets drawn up. This is how we have to see the relationship between the headmistress and Alfie.

As I said, apart from her, he could only talk to the birds. They nodded wisely because they understood everything well and because they picked up a grain while nodding. Alfie loved Julia as he had never loved any woman, not even Hilda. It would be so easy to stay with Julia. But he would betray his mission, and he would betray the kind-hearted director. This was more important to him than the betrayal of the National Library; that had no real weight. The National Library was definitely screwed. A termination — *so what?* someone else would be found quickly, no doubt. But the thought of betraying the director hurt him. He still had 6 weeks to decide. He shook himself before standing up and bidding the birds farewell.

Alfie's neighbor on Pálffygasse was Roland, a former cyclist. A taciturn but extremely friendly man. They always greeted each other and he once went over to borrow a few sugar cubes for his coffee. Roland saw Alfie's look at the 6 shiny racing bikes hanging on hooks from the ceiling. "I drive my route every morning, keeps my body fit and my mind awake," grumbled Roland Garber. They had a very friendly chat, and Roland's eyebrows twitched when Alfie confessed that he had last ridden a bike 30 years ago, when he was a teenager. Roland lifted a wheel off the hook. "It's an older piece, but just right for doing another round." All bikes were sparkling clean, oiled and the chains greased. Roland took care of his bikes; he would never let them go to waste. He handed Alfie the Cannondale and asked him to do a few laps again. Roland had lent him a helmet for the first ride. "Your life is always in danger in this city traffic, Alfred." Yes, he rang Alfie's doorbell early in the morning and cycled along "his" route with him at a leisurely pace. Trembling with awe, Alfie mounted the bike and followed the old gentleman. It was a really well thought out loop, you avoided the main traffic and used as many paths next to green spaces as if you were in the countryside. Roland told him about a specialty store that his two sons ran, where the prices were affordable and the quality was as honest as a handshake. Alfie bought his outfit, two pairs of cycling shorts, four fitted shirts, a helmet, gloves and the special shoes.

Of course he could have bought a new bike, but refusing Roland's loan would have been an unnecessary affront. And yes, now he understood why Julia had talked about the wind in her hair. The

wind glided over his bald head, brushing away the last remnants of sleep like dust and leaving him to think as he pedaled hard. It was a new, good discovery to drive Roland's route for 20 minutes before showering and having a morning coffee. His thoughts revolved around the director and Julia; there was nothing more important. He had smiled with satisfaction when the headmistress told him that she would nominate him as her successor when she retired. It would be an honor, Alfie said to the face of Jessie Huntsman on the video call across 900 years. "And Grandpa Arthur would look down proudly from his cloud," he added. "Grandpa knighted me and sent me on a quest to prove myself and make him proud. He was a good man, my grandpa," Alfie said. Jessie nodded, even though she had no idea who this grandpa was. "He raised you to be an extraordinary man. Decency and honor and backbone don't come automatically with your mother's milk."

The wind blew around his bald head and made his thoughts clear and free. He had loved his Hilda; it had been a love match — at least for his part. In the first year they made love day and night, with intimate spray and a condom of course. And Hilda was a good wife and a great mother, without a doubt. Only the devil in her loins worried him; she suffered like a dog when one of her lovers died from the virus. And when she took Orlando as her lover, a blonde-haired angel of 14, she gave him everything and took everything from him. Sweet Orlando, who was dying in her arms — like a burnt-out candle wick, his eyes went out and broke, the virus had taken him away, heartless and merciless. Hilda locked herself in her bedroom for days and took her own life. She had ruined too many men and she could no longer bear the fact that she was the one to blame for Orlando's death.

Waltraud, Heinrich and he stood at her grave, blind with tears, and witnessed the end of the world. He withdrew, apologized at all public occasions and avoided people. He had seen how Hilda had blossomed in Orlando's arms, how she had exulted and rejoiced in her happiness in the boy's arms. Hilda brought the shy Orlando into her marriage bed and let him share in her ecstasy, because he was not a stranger, but her lover, her Alfie. She held his hand and almost crushed it in her ecstasy. The beautiful Orlando gave him shy glances

as he dutifully drove Hilda to new heights, lap after lap. Hilda held Alfie's hand, just as she held his hand when she let her little machine hum on her body until late into the night and finally brought it to an end with her hand, shouting and rejoicing. Tears welled up in Alfie's eyes because he was crying for his Hilda and the shy Orlando. A 14-year-old teenager who didn't deserve to die like a dog in Hilda's arms.

Alfie turned around at Türkenschanzpark and sat on a park bench, taking a short smoke break. His eyes slid over the parked cars, because this parking lot was 'the' parking lot where businessmen and girls exchanged their juices hastily and breathlessly. No, Alfie was neither a voyeur nor a Peeping Tom, his thoughts were elsewhere as his eyes indifferently followed the undulating, rolling and rhythmic beating of waves behind the fogged car windows. No, Hilda was not an easy girl who would have had such cheap and shameless fun in a parking lot like that. The devil in her womb fell in love when the hormones followed the compass — it was that simple and merciless. And Waltraud also had this devil in her womb, he thought sadly, she too would experience the ups and downs of physical love like poor Hilda. Waltraud had tearfully assured him and Heinrich that she would live a chaste life like a nun in a monastery, but father and son knew about the power of the devil who lurked between her thighs. Alfie angrily stubbed out the cigarette butt and threw it into the trash can. Now we went back, slightly downhill, with the wind on the bald head.

Every morning Alfie did a lap around Roland's route. Today was Wednesday, yesterday he was in Julia and Yvonne's arms having sex with both girls. Alfie pedaled and increased the pace, it went slightly uphill to Türkenschanzpark — he had been lying between the thighs of both girls and now he pedaled, trampling against the thought of physical love, as if to make him forget it. Yvonne was a good, honest person, she wasn't a cheap slut. Yes, she changed her boys' like others changed their shirts, but it was always an honest thing on her part. She reminded Alfie painfully of the devil in Hilda and Waltraud's womb when he lay with her.

Not many girls surrendered to this devil without a fight, Julia for example. She had rebuffed the devil and forcefully separated from little Robert, because she knew exactly about the devil in her womb. No, Julia and Yvonne were completely different, only when it came to girl sex they were like twins, eagerly snapping at each other's lips. How did the director put it? "Keep your love for Julia like the intoxicated rush of the wedding night and the rush *honeymoon*, on honeymoon. Store that rush in your soul and come back before the rush wears off and the routine of everyday life wears you out and burns you out." Oh, she was very smart, that Jessie Huntsman, she stuck to facts and realities, but she also knew about love and falling in love.

Cigarette break at Türkenschanzpark. Yes, it was a frenzy in which he and Julia reeled. For the first time in his life, he was more in love than ever before. But in his mind there also lived a serious, critical and incorruptible Alfred. "Julia's feelings will be dulled by everyday life. The devil in her womb will really take a toll on her and there will be one Robert after the other. Today she loves you madly, today she is still in the high of your honeymoon. But her giving in and her consent when she accepted you into the girl's sex and actively included you having Sex with her girlfriend Yvonne, that should give you something to think about. She only gave in gradually and hesitantly to Yvonne's urging, but finally she gave in, "That's the crucial fact. Nothing is set in stone and for eternity. Robert after Robert, they will bounce her in ecstasy like a flat stone on the surface of the water, but in the end the stone will sink, don't forget that!" Passersby shook their heads, a professional-looking cyclist smoking!

Alfie shook his head too, remembering Julia's words about how hot she felt when the little Dwarf Long Nose exposed himself in front of her. How she struggled with the sweet temptation and the bitter renunciation. And what did he have to say to that, he, the stupid oaf? "Size isn't everything, Julia!" Oh, what a great platitude, invented by small-cocked envious men. Julia's eyes had shone feverishly as she described Robert's nakedness to him in minute detail. How would he have reacted if she had succumbed to the temptation?

He angrily put the next cigarette back in the pack, only one, not two during the smoke break! He couldn't imagine that Julia wasn't in his arms and someone else was giving her the gift of ecstasy. He shook as if shivering, the thought was absurd! Julia was in his arms, not Robert's. Julia made love with him, she renounced the great Robert. They gave each other the ecstasies, not Robert, not the Dwarf Long Nose or anyone else. And — she sought to be close to him, she lay softly in the crook of his arm so that her exuberant libido could tremble at his side. There was only her exuberant, overwhelming libido, snuggled up to her Alfie — and no Robert anywhere! But the other Alfred had driven his poison arrow into his heart, the doubts remained.

Once a week he went over to Roland to clean and oil the Cannondale and properly grease the chain. They didn't talk much. The old man smiled mildly as Alfie told him about his first bike. It may have been a pink girl's bike, but it shone and gleamed with chrome and that impressed everyone. Once Alfie had talked about his lover, Julia. Roland had looked up. "I'm married and have grown children who we raised to be good, honest Christians. The best sex is when you've conquered the Großglockner Pass, believe me." This settled the issue once and for all.

He couldn't get the thing with Yvonne and Robert out of his mind. He had ignored Yvonne's temptations for a long time. He had taken Julia as his wife, not Yvonne; he was able to align himself with these guardrails and hold on. It was Julia's hand that took his hand during girl sex and gently glided it over Yvonne's most sensitive femininity. Oh, he shouldn't sulk grumpily at the foot of the bed, he should calmly step in front of the door, stretch out his palm and feel the raindrops on his hand, feel Yvonne's nectar with his own hand! It was Julia who forcefully pushed Yvonne aside and took him right there; she broke the rules of girls' sex quite freely and shamelessly. And it was Julia who smiled in confusion as Yvonne immediately took him too, unbridled, wild and dominant. Julia, who just smiled in confusion and didn't screech in protest. He surrendered to Yvonne's octopus-armed embrace because Julia smiled and didn't scream bloody murder.

Alfie pedaled hard, it went uphill to Türkenschanzpark and his thoughts were, to put it mildly, completely confused. Julia had patiently listened to Robert's suffering, week after week. She let him hug her when they lay on his bed. She hadn't stopped Robert's hand as it slipped under her shirt and found her teats. Yes, week after week they lay naked together, little Robert and motherly Julia, his big friend. She just gently pushed him back when he wanted to rush forward. Cuddling is enough, she said. Robert pressed himself breathlessly against Julia's side, his hand inside his boxershorts and Thursday after Thursday it ran down her trembling inner thighs. Julia understood his automatically bursting wetness, because he didn't attack her, but rather his instincts had to take hold, no matter what! The poor guy.

And then the bang. Julia had shied away from taking the last step. Was it the fear of being caught with a minor? Was it fear that the scandal would destroy her academic career before it even began? What was she shying away from as she let it rain over her trembling inner thighs Thursday after Thursday? Alfie shook his head, not knowing the answer. She had just told him that she had to end it, that she didn't dare take the last step after the last step, she had said through tears. Dwarf Nose was never allowed to take her properly, she couldn't open the final gate to let the devil in her body off the leash, she sobbed. The dams would break, she had said through tears, but she simply couldn't allow that. Never ever!

Alfie had taken her tear-stained face in his hands and calmed her. The last, decisive step hadn't happened, he had murmured, she hadn't let Dwarf Nose win in the end, hadn't allowed herself to be tainted or defiled. And isn't this last step the one she wants to avoid? Alfie said, half questioning. Julia nodded through tears. She felt that Alfie largely understood her and her confusing feelings. She sobbed that she only ever let Robert whet the snake tattoos between her pressed inner thighs, a little bashful fucky-ficki without penetration, she sobbed. The snakes could easily handle a little bit of wetness. Julia tried a shy, embarrassed smile through her tears, for months the snakes were flooded without incident. It was okay, she sobbed, it was really okay!?

But the tip of Dwarf Nose's nose dipped once, somehow it captured the tip of his nose. Somehow, just a little, but really just the exploding tip of her nose, she sobbed, never the whole dwarf nose, no! She would never allow this last, very last step! Julia looked to Alfie for help through the curtain of tears. She had grabbed Robert's hips and immediately forced him back, so that he had to pull the dwarf's nose out the entire length until only the tip of his nose was submerged. No, she couldn't let him go any further, she had whispered to the heavily pounding, panting Robert, she had sworn to herself! She winced as if under a whiplash as the tip of her nose exploded inside. But she had pushed him out!? Julia's shoulders shook because she was sobbing so hard. Alfie shook his head slowly, in disbelief. "Why just a little, why only with the handbrake on?" Julia hid her face in the crook of his arm, she was completely ashamed. "Because it wasn't just a one-off slip-up, Alfie," she sobbed, crying miserably.

The loving couple made room as the cyclist sat down on the bench next to them. The girl giggled as she looked over at the cars in the secretive parking lot. Her gaze met Alfie's, a look full of sinful shame in foreboding and anticipation. Alfie flinched, because that was the look Mom gave her before she pressed the plunger button to full speed, a sinful, shameful look that had always confused him. Mom had smiled softly and closed her eyes, listening to herself and now he placed his face on her breasts to hear her galloping heartbeat.

Alfie put the cigarette back in the pack. He didn't feel like smoking today. He stood up, nodded encouragingly to the couple and cycled off. It wasn't a good start, now he had his mother and her smile in front of his eyes. A smile that he actually loved so much. This evening, during the video call with the director, he would say with determination in his voice that he wouldn't be coming back, but that he would of course fulfill his order and send her all the hard drives. But he would stay here, with Julia, with Yvonne and with Dwarf Nose. He pedaled resolutely; somehow it felt good to have finally made a decision.

Yvonne came to lunch and was totally perplexed. She couldn't understand that Julia had pulled the ripcord after 99% of the way

with Dwarf Nose. "That's so stupid, Julia," Yvonne muttered in disbelief. "You're not just missing a roof tile, you've got a lot of damage to the roof! No billowing, no sliding and no tobogganing, just letting it wiggle around in the damp throat of the Big Snake, nothing else! You pull the ripcord after 99%. You're impossible, girl! A skydiver whose feet are already touching the ground and then she pulls the ripcord and lets him crash on his ass! Julia, you're embarrassing and impossible!" Yvonne looked at Alfie for help, but he shook his head, he supported Julia's decision. OK.

Alfie watched Julia and Yvonne sleeping on the bed, completely exhausted. Yes, that was his honeymoon. The two girls with whom he had spent so many wonderful hours. He had told the director that night that he was finished. He would start packing tomorrow and be transferred back at the agreed time in six days. The director breathed a sigh of relief. "Your honeymoon is over, Alfred?" She asked and he nodded. "Yes, I notice that the honeymoon is over. It became clear to me weeks ago that everyday life now begins. I want to end it where it isn't lame, ordinary and burnt out. I will take the memory of my honeymoon with me into my time, even if the renunciation and the abrupt end hurt me like nothing." He pressed the 'disconnect' button, not wanting Jessie to see him cry.

He gave the bike back to Roland. "I'm heading off, probably to the States. Thank you Roland, you were a big help with the Cannondale. Thank you and goodbye!" Roland asked what was happening with the two apartments. Alfie said, "They now belong to my wife, Dr. Julia Herrnthaler. I have no idea whether she will re-rent or sell them." They shook hands, it was a firm, honest handshake.

Julia left her doctoral thesis behind. She spent most of her time lying on the bed crying or dozing, breathing in Alfie's scent in the sheets. He had told her that on Wednesday night at two o'clock he would return to his time, forever. He had told her very gently and considerately. The news still tore her heart, she sank into his arms and howled like a castle dog. She caught herself. "So in five days, I'll stay behind, Alfie?" He nodded and hugged her. "You always knew that I would carry out my assignment. You knew that our marriage would end like this, had to end like this. I never gave you hope for

anything else. I am an honest man, I will not betray the assignment, the director or you either. As a renegade you would have me around every day, but I would develop a fat belly, become lazy and sedate and would spend my whole life accusing you of having stolen my future. No, Julia, that would be one Endless bitterness, no happy ending." Julia nodded tearfully. "Should I cancel Yvonne for Tuesday?" she breathed tonelessly. Alfie looked at her for a long time. "No, why should you? Since I've known you, you've been in Yvonne's arms, every Tuesday, without exception. Let's celebrate our farewell with a little orgy. I'm sure Yvonne wants to say goodbye to me too." Julia nodded. "I'm going to call Johanna and say I'm going on vacation with you for a week. Period."

The men from the garbage collection picked up the last packs of books and magazines. Alfie gave everyone a generous tip, the project was over and he thanked them. Then he went to the notary to finalize the deal with the apartments.

He placed the apartment keys and the documents from the notary on the table in front of Julia. "Julia, the two apartments are now yours. And Marybel, Jezebel, Isabel and Pombel, they also belong to you, that's on the separate sheet. You can keep them, give them away or sell them. They have a resale value of around 300,000 euros. Here I have noted the contact details of interested parties for you, and you should sell them, not scrap them." Julia looked from leaf to leaf. "You didn't rent the apartments, you bought them?" Alfie smiled in confirmation. "Yes, I wanted to give it to you from the start, I bought it the day after our first conversation with this idea in mind and you can rent it out or sell it. Maybe you want to give one to Yvonne, she still lives in the dark hole where there is only the sinful double bed. Your decision, the apartments are officially yours." Julia turned the key ring in her hands uncertainly. "I gave the furniture to Caritas, I gave my clothes, etc. to the homeless charity, and they were happy to accept everything."

Alfie gently pushed the strap of her negligee off her shoulders. "I'm completely free now, my backpack is packed with hard drives. There are over 1,600 terabytes, or 1.6 petabytes, of data from the old world that I'm taking with me into my time. A medal will be

hammer-nailed to my chest because that's significantly more than there was before the fire. The director cried with joy in front of the screen last night, and that was the first time I saw the good woman cry. She closed without me informing, my salary doubled a year ago, after a juicy shouting match with the *secretary for historical matters*, a real old scumbag. Despite all the sadness, a golden future awaits me, and my grandpa Arthur is probably dancing a Hilly-Billy with joy on his cloud." Julia looked up, her smartwatch had been beeping softly. "Are we going to the pond, Alfie?" They went to the pond. They would come to the pond every day. "This peace, this majesty in the middle of the city, and the birds — yes, I'll probably miss those guys for a while."

Yvonne was blown away. "What, you're flying over tomorrow morning? And what about Julia!?" Alfie had come up with a fine and juicy story. "I didn't keep it a secret from Julia from the start that I was fleeing the States because of a bloody blind affair. Jenny, she's a treat, I have to admit that, at 36 she's still the hottest thing between Maryland and California. But she wanted to eat me up, with all my skin and hair, that's what it is, but I knew I was just a disposable item and that was out of the question. Now she has her fifth husband for his well-deserved eternal rest bed and is free to swallow me. She's not only a cannon in bed, but she's also extremely rich, a multi-billionaire, and now it's getting serious, Yvonne, we're talking about a lot of good dollars here. She's offering me a seat on the board of directors in her company that produces computer chips and that Julia would lie in my marriage bed. That was the point where she jumped in the triangle, but I insisted, bigamy or nothing, that was her choice. Julia is my wife, period! I am a good negotiator, Yvonne."

Yvonne sank back on her heels and her fingers gently traced Julia's snakes on her inner thigh. "What do you think about all this shit, love?" she asked Julia. She looked up. "Bigamy isn't new to me, Yvonne, the two of us and Alfie, you probably remember how it works. I can't throw my doctoral thesis into the trash bin, so it's my own responsibility that Alfie and I are separated for six months or so. But with your help, Yvonne, I'll probably fill the void in my bed, what do you think?" Yvonne grinned ear to ear. "With the guy out of the way, I'll finally lie with you every day, love. And while poor Alfie is

plowing between Jenny's thighs for his dollars, we'll both grab the dwarf Nose, both of us, sisterly! That's how we do it!" Julia grinned crookedly. "Will you please leave little Robert alone, you greedy bumblebee! You'll give up on the dwarf's nose, you sex-hungry glutton!" All three of them laughed and it was the most wonderful afternoon of girl sex and mixed doubles. Yvonne said goodbye to Alfie with tears.

Julia lay with her face on his chest. "Just three more hours, Alfie. What's going to happen, do you just cross the street and disappear with your bulging backpack in sulfur smoke?" Alfie laughed. "I've thought of something much simpler, Julia. I'll put my backpack on when the seconds tick down. Then a magnificent drum roll and I'll be gone, without any clouds of fog or the smell of sulfur. What do you think?" Julia drummed on his chest. "Don't talk nonsense like that, Alfie! Drum roll!? You're getting childish in your old age, my husband!" Alfie smiled. "Let's enjoy the last few hours, let's celebrate a good, honest farewell with everything that goes with it!" Julia sat up and untied the ribbon in her hair. "Drum roll! What a romantic philanderer you have become, Alfie!" And they loved each other, with all their hearts and souls.

Alfie sat up. "I'll get dressed, I'll be in front of the committee in two minutes." He put the heavy backpack over his shoulder. "I am your husband, Julia, forever and ever!" He kissed her for the last time, putting his whole heart and soul into this farewell kiss.

Julia pulled the negligee over her chest. Alfie, her Alfie, just sat there and looked at her, smiling. He wanted to leave with her face in front of his eyes. He wanted to remember her the same way.

A glow surrounded him. He smiled even more and sent her another air kiss. Now a deafening drum roll began, then he was gone. Julia was frozen in shock. She laughed, crying and laughing. "Oh, you dear childish guy, you!" she exclaimed through tears and laughter. She was blinded by tears as the drum roll slowly faded away. Her heart didn't want to break, it didn't want to stop and give up amidst all the stabbing pain. Her hand crumpled the negligee on

her breast. The heart, that damn overfull heart, should finally stop beating and let her fucking sink!

Alfie was gone.

Julia cried all night until she dozed off and got up late in the morning to make herself some coffee. Out of sheer habit, she placed two cups under the drip and laughed when it was finished. No, Alfie was gone, she would have to drink his coffee too. Yvonne came at noon to hug her and kiss her tears away. Julia was happy to only be able to mourn her Alfie a little bit during girl sex. Yvonne also noticed that someone was missing from the mixed doubles. She had no reason to cry, Alfie was on the plane to the USA and she lay with Julia, comforting her body and soul.

Yvonne didn't forget anything, she insisted. Julia dialed Robert's number with trembling fingers. Yes, something had happened, she said. "My girlfriend and I would like to visit you if you would like to have two plump, busty girlfriends, my dear dwarf nose. Yes, to read aloud of course, you stupid." Five minutes later she rolled with Yvonne at her side in the Ferrari into Riemergasse, into the underground car parking lot. Yvonne squeezed herself into the elevator with her ample breasts and assessed the boy. Rocky chased Anni away after she brought a third glass.

Julia lay trembling on Robert's bed, this would be her first time. She looked shyly and timidly at his astonished face and at his huge instrument. His eyes wide with surprise; up until now he had only seen the snakes snaking up her inner thighs, but now he saw the wide-open jaws of the Great Serpent for the first time. Her portal lay in the middle of the masterful tattoo, in the middle of the gaping jaws of the Great Serpent, but his fellow was big and strong and covetous with greed, not afraid of the monster's huge fangs. At the sight of Dwarf Long Noses's upright instrument, Grandpa, Reginald and Alfie disappeared immediately.

Robert's battering ram got to work, Julia's tears dried up in the rising intoxication, the intoxication in the arms of the dwarf Nose. She experienced for the first time what she had denied herself for

weeks and had only fantasized about in secret minutes. Finally, in the height of ecstasy, she finally looked into Alfie's eyes, small laugh lines around his kind eyes, his lips pursed for a kiss. She wanted to call out his name, but all she could manage was a pained croak, her whole body twitching and shaking in ecstasy.

Julia waved her hand, she had had enough after this first violent chapter, Rocky's battering ram had raged in the mouth of the Great Serpent like a drunken berserk. Julia had given up, trembling, preferring to think about Alfie as she watched Yvonne demand everything from the dwarf. Everything. Chapter by chapter. And I would be lying if I said that Yvonne didn't enjoy Rocky and the ballads from Dwarf Long Nose.

In the evening they rolled home. Yvonne held onto the handles of the Ferrari as if she were pushing it. No, she held on because her knees were weak as pudding. "I'm going to give up Massimo today. We'll come back to see Robert, to see Dwarf Nose, tomorrow?" Julia nodded absently, "Whatever you want, little one," she said to Yvonne.

She had to think about something depressing. Rocky hadn't been able to control his pens. Julia had asked, with a big lump in her throat: "Mom?" He nodded affirmatively, not interrupting his panting lecture. It made Julia very sad, but that was the way it was. After her wild but cathartic chapter, exhausted and sad, she left all the reading work to Yvonne; she suddenly didn't feel like it anymore. Rocky had done it to Mom.

Julia cried with happiness when she came home from the doctor. She was carrying Alfie's child under her heart. She looked up gratefully at the cloudy November sky. "Zeus, you rascal, you had a hand in it again!" She didn't tell anyone that she was pregnant. At first, with little enthusiasm, she went alongside Yvonne to Robert, who had taken a fancy to Yvonne. Absolutely sure.

But Rocky always wanted to first ram his battering ramrod into the mouth of the Great Serpent, into the shy, reserved Julia, and only then did he turn his attention to the insatiable Yvonne. He quickly

found the spot that made the silent Julia pant, gasp and tremble. Robert had matured by years and he confessed to Julia that it was Mama who had finally stripped him of his childhood. Smiling, of her own will and so full of love.

Julia was no longer angry with him, he was just the dwarf Nose, and everyone knew what kind of guy the Dwarf was. Robert scratched the back of his head. "And Anni now has to listen to Dwarf Nose's ballad every morning in the bath water. It was no different for her. She saw how I did it to my mother. And Anni is really greedy, she doesn't say any bigoted nonsense anymore. Yes, I know, the dynamite. But I pay close attention to what she finds out and what she definitely doesn't." Julia smiled weakly; it no longer seemed so strange to her to listen to the ballad of the dwarf nose. One or two chapters, yes, maybe three.

Yvonne was blown away. "From Alfie? Oh my God, how wonderful, a child of love, the purest love I've ever seen!" Julia strictly refused to be treated like a raw egg. Yvonne was only supposed to be her sexual support when they went to the Dwarf Long Noses together again and again. Yvonne was supposed to hold her and love her when Rocky really got into it and when the surf crashed violently against the rocks and made her tremble with fear and trepidation. Yvonne should hold her there and touch the shy and timid Julia with a magical finger, yes, she should do that, please. But she should keep the pregnancy to herself, Robert would eventually notice that she had a baby bump.

Julia threw herself into her doctoral thesis with all her might. She wanted to have it finished and submitted by the end of the semester. Maybe she would go to her doctorate while still heavily pregnant, which made her smile. She didn't forget about her birds; she drove the Ferrari to the pond every lunchtime. She explained to the birds that their dear Alfie, her bald man, had now traveled far away, a whole 900 years away. The birds nodded wisely, of course, because Julia had brought back tasty grains that could only be picked with a wise nod of the head. The mallard girls chatted wildly when she whispered to them her secret that she would also be getting a chick from Alfie in about nine months.

The doctoral thesis went well. The sentences flowed from the keyboard because she had now also become a knowledgeable person. She knew exactly what it was like to be impregnated by a god or a time traveler. Yvonne caught her up from her desk and energetically took her to the dwarf. Yvonne meticulously insisted that Dwarf Nose looked after Julia well and adequately, chapter by chapter, because later, there was only children crying after midnight, giving breasts and changing diapers.

Yvonne shook with horror, the baby would eat up Julia's free time and would no longer give the dwarf Nose a chance to read to her. Julia had smiled, what a nonsense! There would be no unnecessary interruption. In any case, Yvonne was not allowed to miss any of Robert's lectures and she wanted to actively participate again as soon as possible and not just watch passively. It will probably be possible to take the little one with you in the crib. Rocky's mom, who was hardly ever seen, had once held her hands with tears in the corners of her eyes: Julia heard how happy Rocky's mom was that he now had solid, intimate girlfriends, even two very beautiful girls. So far he had only imposed his will on helpless disabled girls, on disabled girls who, bewildered and crying, surrendered to his urging. Rocky's mom cried with joy, her poor boy finally seemed to be in good hands.

Julia visibly blossomed like a flower, the now daily ballads of the dwarf Nose made her cheeks turn a fine pink, she liked to laugh again and happily patted Yvonne's ass cheek with the palm of her hand when she couldn't stop finishing the last chapter. She often wrote late into the night because her escapades with Yvonne ate up the hours like hungry wolves. But she was no longer consistently sad, even though she missed Alfie very much. He would definitely have a lot on his mind, because he had described to her how he and the director wanted to redesign the entire department. She placed her hand on her little tummy, on the little miracle that was growing inside her. Rocky had looked embarrassed at first, but she reassured him that the father was her Alfie, her beloved husband, who had flown to America.

It was the first time that Yvonne didn't go upstairs when the two of them came home from Robert's lectures, worn out and exhausted.

Yvonne really wanted to go to the supermarket. Julia immediately realized that someone had been there and clutched the can of pepper spray. It smelled strongly of Arabia coffee, and the table was covered with a dark blue cloth that certainly didn't come from her household. She cautiously rolled closer, but there was no one there except her.

She drove the Ferrari to the table. There was a small and a larger case, like the ones jewelers use. Curious, she opened the smaller case — a beautiful gold signet ring. She held her breath as she opened the larger one.

It was stunning. A piece of jewelry, a necklace, exquisitely shaped, garlands of pure gold and small precious stones. She didn't know much about jewelry, but it looked very elegant and very expensive. Then there were two gold bangles decorated with blue and white enamel. And a pair of earrings, gold and precious stones, flashing and sparkling. She clutched her heart, she had a premonition. When she put the necklace back, the case slipped a few millimeters and she discovered the letter hidden underneath. Six pages on heavy parchment, densely written with dark blue glittering ink, in a very beautiful cursive handwriting that can only be written with a flat steel nib. She turned on the reading light and put on her glasses. She knew who the letter was from. She held it to her chest for a few moments, then read:

Dear Julia,
my beloved wife!

I arrived safely and started work straight away, even though I was showered with honors, adulation and champagne.

I was in wonderland when I found out you were pregnant with little Alfred. I danced in the office, probably the most awkward Hilly-Billy dance you can imagine. I'm beside myself with joy, you can't imagine it. You only know me as a level-headed and serious Parsifal in search of the Holy Grail. But I can also do something different, I spontaneously hugged the surprised director and kissed her from head to toe when she told me the good news. I rashly tore open her

blouse and kissed her breasts and her teats like a foolish idiot! She smiled and tolerated my lips on her teats for long minutes until I came back to my senses. She buttoned her blouse again with a smile and grinned crookedly, because she had never experienced such overwhelming joy at the good news she had announced to me.

We both knew that it would cause a tiny rift in the space/time continuum, but not a catastrophic one, since we are all still there unchanged. Of course, no one other than her is allowed to know about it, especially not the rigid committee, as you can probably imagine. Nevertheless, I will invite Waltraud and Heinrich to a festive dinner and tell them in person about you too. I will show them pictures of you (not the nude photos and our naughty videos of course) and tell them how much I love you. That I took you as my wife and made you the mother of their little brother, 900 years ago.

The board has only allowed me to see you from a distance every few weeks, in the visigraph, a kind of telescope through time. However, I plan to see you and Alfred from afar every day, that will be fine. I see how much Yvonne cares about your well-being and that you go to Dwarf Robert's lectures together. Knowing that the committee will perhaps read these lines one day in the future, I say to you: I am delighted with all my heart that you have overcome your initial shyness and are now hanging on Robert's lips, just like Yvonne, when he reads you the ballad of the dwarf nose, chapter by chapter, the little rogue with the big nose... I was afraid that you would completely isolate yourself and close yourself off to the worldly things. No, I wish you and Yvonne many more enjoyable lectures with Robert.

I suspect you stopped taking the pill in full consciousness as the farewell approached. I didn't know it, but my joy is even greater now. And now I have to reveal one last secret to you, although it is very embarrassing for me. My mom showed me the method by which she could physically unite with dad, but only very rarely and with a pounding heart. A virus-killing ointment, a virus-killing intimate spray and a standard condom. For her and Dad, this only happened at all holy times, because the method is not foolproof.

Mom hasn't had a virus in her womb her whole life. Maybe the virus didn't like her hormone mix, because it wasn't in the right composition until after puberty. Today I sometimes think that Mom's womb was still in puberty, letting the devil rage in her pubescent womb. Still, she tested herself every month, sent my sisters for testing every 10 days, three times a month. She was afraid the twins would infect and kill me. She smiled quietly when my sisters and I made a fuss in the girls' bedroom. That was okay, we children should explore our sexuality, explore everything.

As they grew up and housed dashing junkers, Mama took her share when she could. Mama immediately threw the little machine away and waved the Junker in; the living thing was always better than the stupid pestle. I smiled at how diligently Mom forced her daughters' playmates into breathtaking service; oh yes, thank God she wasn't a food eater or a pale prayer sister. It wasn't until the end of my twin sisters' puberty, around the age of 17, that the virus was discovered and since then I've never been in the girls' bedroom again.

Mom looked at me with that certain look when I was old enough and asked if I would please step in for the pestle? She pushed the little machine aside, when the little tongue had kindled her fire and brought her to the edge of the cliff, then I stood in for the pestle, because I wanted it so badly myself. She loved to jump from peak to peak, straight towards the highest peak, from which she could then throw herself with hurrah, down into the tender arms of her son. For years — even as *curator* and Hilda's husband — I stepped in when the tipping point had been reached well and she was just one step away from liberating ecstasy.

She died in my arms, her weak heart breaking in the moment of supreme pleasure and in the ecstasy of her fifth and highest peak of this special evening. I was 28, deeply affected and resolved never to make physical love again — never again would a girl or woman die in my arms, never again would I want to look into fading and breaking eyes. I never told you that, it was just too embarrassing and too painful at the same time. Maybe you understand that. But what I'm getting at is that my mom did it completely right and steered me in

the right direction. Hug our Alfred lovingly, motherly and undaunted. This is my wish, nothing more. It will be both a lesson and a holy trembling for him.

The board has allowed me to enter your home chained to a sheriff and deposit my gifts in person, but only if you are not present. The committee distrusts me and they are happy to do so. I know they would never allow me to see you in the flesh again. If they knew exactly what was going on with both of us, they would put me in chains, I had broken so many rules. I'm still very upset about my overtime, my darling, they originally only gave me 360 days. But I wouldn't want to miss any of the 582 days with you, not a single one.

I designed the jewelry myself and had it made by a very skilled goldsmith. But the special thing is that all of them are made of Swedish steel at their core, the legendary dragon steel, which was used in ancient times to make swords. And then the goldsmith covered everything with high-quality gold. The coat of arms on the signet ring is supposedly the coat of arms of those von dem Steine, who were reliable knights and robber barons in the service of the Hanoverian rule as early as the 13th century.

I wanted to signal to you that my love for you is as strong as the strongest steel and made of gold, like your hair above and below. And then I left another surprise where we used to keep the reserve packs of Arabia coffee. The sheriff didn't notice because we drank good coffee to distract us and I escaped the good man for an hour in a time rift.

In the thick leather pouch you will find a lot of gold coins, many Greek drachmas and some Roman aureus and solidus coins. They're really real, but they're actually just replicas that are really real. *You get my point?* Pretend you inherited them from your grandpa, just say he was a big coin collector, your grandpa. Sell them, or better yet, auction them off piece by piece on the Internet, because they are worth a fortune if you don't carelessly sell them in bulk. This will be my contribution to the education and studies of Alfred. Of course it can't replace the absent father, but it can perhaps pay for a profound

education. You will know when he is old and mature enough to tell him about his father.

Without you I will miss physical love. I can assure you, I'll probably take Mom's recipe to heart and I'll definitely be poaching through the entire city of 19 million, from flower to flower, to find someone. Someone in whose eyes I recognize you. Maybe I'll even find a direct descendant of yours, my heart. And I wanted to honestly confess that to you, because I was awakened by you and I simply can't and don't want to do without the physical anymore.

Waltraud had himself tested like every month and the virus was detected for the first time. She and Heinrich immediately moved into separate bedrooms because she doesn't want to kill her brother. When I heard that from Waltraud, a weight was lifted from my heart, because now the two of them are showing more common sense and responsibility than before. Hilda and I let them both have their way; it was their childish and adolescent sexuality and not ours. It was and is real love that connects the two, and not just sexual greed or dominance.

Otherwise everything has stayed the same, I still don't have a dog or a parrot. Well, maybe a few ladies who will try it with me, although I've already become a very strange codger, a budding lust newt, to be honest. Because I demand pleasure, physicality and ecstasies etc., hard and without scruples. Of course I stick strictly to mom's recipe, I don't want to let the virus kill me, I promise!

Greetings to the dwarf Nase and especially to Yvonne. Make up whatever it takes why I'm still in the States and not showing up. A fatal car accident, maybe a plane crash?

When I close my eyes, I see you. You and sometimes Yvonne. But you were always my wife, my only, my true wife, but she was just a girl with whom we both had a lot of joy and whom we shared. Maybe you were a girl at the beginning, but day by day you became more and more my wife, the one I adored, the one I will always adore. The muse who kissed me awake after my morning nap and rolled with me to the pond.

I see you pulling your negligee over your head and putting it away,
there should be nothing between our bodies but air and love.

I see you as you loosen your hairband, as your hair slides down to
your shoulders like dark gold and your shining eyes announce to me
the paradise of your love.

I see with flying breath how you let your snow-white thighs slide
slightly apart, unfolding the proclaimed paradise.

I see you closing your eyes and smiling because you're looking
forward to me like a snow queen.

I see you, Julia.

I see you.

You.

yours forever and ever
Alfie