

Exegesis of the Manuscript Novel  
*Double Star*

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### *Attestation of Authorship*

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Bernard Thornton.

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## *Abstract*

The work is situated in a literary and theoretical context by working with the concepts of authenticity and realism, and within that the story/world distinction. The literary context is examined in terms of realism, naturalism, and the novel of character or psychological novel. The associated research is then discussed. Finally, the novel's societal context is analysed in terms of some prevailing philosophical views and the existing socio-political structure.

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## Exegesis

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood  
without understanding both.<sup>1</sup>

This striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational  
force in man.<sup>2</sup>

My objective is to write a social realist novel that is historically grounded.  
Charles Lindholm's concept of 'authenticity' provides a useful starting point for  
discussing the kinds of truth it is the primary business of fiction to explore. He defines  
the concept in the following way:

At minimum, it is the leading member of a set of values that includes sincere,  
essential, natural, original, and real. . . . Unlike its cousins, authenticity stands  
alone; it has higher, more spiritual claims to make.<sup>3</sup>

Nikolas Coupland points out that 'authenticity' is a 'superordinate concept'.<sup>4</sup> He means  
by this that its field of reference is large enough to embrace other values, such as the ones  
in the quote. I have selected this concept because it puts my argument immediately into  
the area of values and meanings, which Peter Lamarque regards as the proper domain of  
the literary critic.<sup>5</sup> He goes further. Our reasoning as to what is truth in fiction is in this

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area, because, as Ruth Lorland says this is about ‘telling a story’ and not about ‘telling a world’, which puts the emphasis on facts.<sup>6</sup>

Before proceeding, I would like to expand on Lindholm’s notion of ‘authenticity’, as it is very useful for critically explaining *Double Star*. ‘The quest for authenticity touches and transforms a vast range of human experience . . .’, he says, including such things as, ‘authentic people, authentic roots, authentic meanings, authentic nations.’<sup>7</sup> My protagonist, Ulla Tiefenbach, is searching for ‘authentic meanings’ in her life. She wants to have work outside the home, and be able to marry a person she loves. But for her mother, Erika, this does not include working for her father in the *Mariahilf* hospital, where he is director and surgeon. Nor does it include any sort of lasting relationship with Klaus Mendelsohn, a young astronomer recently appointed to the staff of the local observatory. In her terms, his Jewish background does not constitute ‘authentic roots’, and that relationship would not embody ‘authentic meaning’. Erika would seem to have a point, when Lindholm says, ‘Persons are authentic if they are true to their roots . . .’, and with respect to Erika’s society itself, ‘collectives are authentic if their biological heritage can be traced and if the members act in the proper, culturally valued manner.’<sup>8</sup> Erika would consider herself and her family to have ‘authentic roots’ in relation to the society in which they lived. These were an ‘essential’ element in her sense ‘belonging’ – why she considered herself an ‘insider’ and Klaus an ‘outsider’. Ulla had all this, and it would be imprudent of her to jeopardize it by entering an ill-considered relationship.

Lindholm further argues that ‘authenticity gathers people together in collectives that are felt to be real, essential, and vital, providing participants with meaning, unity, and a surpassing sense of belonging.’<sup>9</sup> Erika embraces the traditional roles limiting women to marriage and family – the domestic sphere – which are the conventions of the society in which she lives, and constitute its ‘collective authenticity’. For Erika, these are the ‘natural’ and ‘essential’ roles for women. Or the ones she has ultimately subscribed to, anyway. However, this view constitutes a dilemma for Ulla, because it mitigates against her achieving a ‘personal authenticity’ of her own. Lindholm argues that individuals are authentic ‘if their lives are a direct and immediate expression of their essence’.<sup>10</sup> It is perfectly clear to Alfred Tiefenbach that his daughter shows marked ‘natural’ ability in the field of science. And in terms of the interests and passions of her youth this is the path she should be following. This view puts him at loggerheads with his wife.

In line with my objective, ‘realism’ was a logical choice of literary mode with which to explore the work’s principal theme: Love overcomes prejudice. In this regard, Peter Lamarque’s discussion of our reasoning as to what is true in fiction is particularly helpful to focus my argument.

Literary interpretation . . . is not a matter of discovering truths about a world so much as assigning thematic significance to component parts of a work. It is a search for coherence and sense. It involves making connections by subsuming more and more elements in a work under a network of thematic concepts. Part of this literary interpretation will involve making sense of the actions and thoughts of characters. But interpretation goes well beyond that. It is also concerned with

general themes or symbolic structures which bind together all the elements in a work, not just psychological factors.<sup>11</sup>

Ruth Lorand agrees with Lamarque's emphasis, and argues that because fiction is more rightfully a matter of 'telling a story' than of 'telling a world'.<sup>12</sup> The former puts the emphasis on themes and values, and not on facts. She suggests that the 'world' metaphor is unhelpful in viewing a story, and argues that instead of spending one's energy testing the truth of facts (the logician's task), one's time is better spent in viewing the story as a 'material-product' in which the world supplies materials for the story.<sup>13</sup> I have certainly found this a more positive way to proceed, as will become apparent from my subsequent discussion of research for the work. It also avoids the mistake of becoming obsessed with facts as the sole repository of the truth, which is a false trail with regard to the purpose and intentions of fiction.

This struggle between fact and fiction has been a key element in the growth of story historically, as Scholes and Kellog show.

The distinction between fact and fiction, once it is clearly established, forces story-telling to choose the rubric under which it will function: truth or beauty. The result is a separation of narrative streams into factual and fictional, producing forms we have learned to call history and romance. In Western culture the two streams both spring from the fountainhead of Homeric epic and go their separate ways until reunite in the novel. The novel's combination of factual and fictional elements is not naïve and instinctive but sophisticated and deliberate, made possible by the development of a concept called realism, which provides a rationale for a marriage that rationalism had seemed to forbid.<sup>14</sup>



In his article, 'Reasoning to What Is True in Fiction', Lamarque writes: 'It is not always easy to reconcile the requirements of a logic of fiction with the requirements of an aesthetics of fiction.'<sup>15</sup> Lorland agrees with this but 'wishes to take his argument a step further: it is not always necessary or even desirable to attempt to reconcile the requirements of logic with those of an aesthetic of fiction.'<sup>16</sup> One case in point would be in the instance of dreams, in which Jung has shown us quite clearly that dream material has a 'real' significance in terms of meaning in a person's life. My protagonist's dream in relation to the fungus 'mycelia' has a direct bearing on her life. It is a symbol of her developing relationship with Klaus, and it provides the 'essential' culture necessary to cure Arilda the maid's tuberculosis.

Abrams cites literary critics as defining 'realism' as 'a recurrent mode . . . of representing human life and experience in literature . . . It is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen.'<sup>17</sup>

Thus the 'realistic novel' is a fictional attempt to give the effect of realism . . . by representing complex characters with mixed motives, who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interacting with many other characters, and undergoing plausible, everyday modes of experience.'<sup>18</sup>

Such a novel while it certainly depicts social realism, clearly includes psychological realism, as well. Lamarque agrees: 'much of our interest in fiction – at least literary fiction – will precisely involve issues about human motivation.'<sup>19</sup>

In *Double Star* the Tiefenbach family belong to an upper middle-class German family, the conventions and status of which Erika makes it her primary occupation and duty to uphold and perpetuate in the lives of her children, Ulla and Hans, however reluctant they are to comply in certain respects.

Abrams says that this novelistic mode, rooted in such eighteenth century writers as Defoe and Fielding, achieved a high development in the master novelists of the nineteenth century, including Austen, Eliot, Trollope, Howells and James in England and America; Stendhal, Sand, Balzac and Flaubert in France; and Turgenev and Tolstoy in Russia.<sup>20</sup>

In my search for ‘authenticity’ in the choice of literary mode the subordinate value of what is ‘natural’ suggests possible relevancy in the area of ‘naturalism’, too.

In Abrams’s exposition of ‘naturalism’, as an extension of realism, he describes it as ‘an even more accurate depiction of life than realism.’ It was a philosophical thesis developed by a group of writers, as a product of post-Darwinian biology. A human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any access to a religious or spiritual world, beyond the natural world.<sup>21</sup> So in a sense this is “objective” realism rather than psychological realism.

With respect to *Double Star*, while admitting that Nature is an important element in Ulla’s view, she has been reared as a Lutheran, and her actions in relation to other people are at least in part shaped by its Christian ethic. By the same token, I disagree that a human being ‘is merely a high-order animal whose character and behaviour are entirely

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determined by . . . heredity and environment.’ But on two counts I am in accord with this thesis. First, that ‘each person inherits compulsive instincts’, and second, that this person ‘is then subjected to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born.’ The French novelist Emile Zola, in the 1870s did much to develop this theory in what he called ‘le roman experimental’ (the experimental novel). That is, the novel organized in the mode of a scientific experiment on behaviour, under given conditions, of the characters it depicts.<sup>22</sup> I find that my characters’ behaviour cannot be governed by quite that degree of determinism.

In this discussion of literary mode and context, I would like to pick up the thread of psychological realism. I do this out of a desire to deepen my understanding of the individual in society, of what motivates a character to act or behave in the way she does in a given social situation. Is it more ‘natural’ or spontaneous, and therefore more authentic, as much of Ulla’s behaviour is. Or is it more contrived, as Erika’s often is, and could therefore be regarded as less authentic. It is interesting just to pause and consider the potential dangers of the second as opposed to the first type of behaviour. This difference is the root cause of much of Erika’s personal tension and domestic dysfunction.

Lindholm discusses this question in relation to authenticity and the Self. He points out the ‘psychic consequences of manipulating one’s feelings in the service of the corporation.’ In Erika’s case, the corporation is the society in which she lives, which

includes her circles of acquaintance. She has made it her job to uphold society's conventions in the face of her family.

Lindholm instances the behaviour of stewardesses faced with rude passengers and irate drunks on a plane: 'By investing themselves in the emotional labour of their job, these workers avoided the conscious inner split suffered by those who stayed on the surface. However, the psychological consequences were even more severe, due to the cultural assumption that heartfelt and spontaneous emotional expressivity constitutes the core of the authentic self.'<sup>23</sup> Ulla is able to be 'natural' and therefore authentic in a way that Erika simply does not allow herself to be, or would not think proper, in the light of her set of predominantly collective as opposed to personal values.

Abrams outlines the nature of the 'novel of character' or 'psychological novel'. The interest in this mode 'is on the protagonist's motives for what he or she does, and on how the protagonist as a person will turn out.'<sup>24</sup>

Further psychological realism was sought by some consideration of 'archetypes' and a small cluster of other Jungian concepts, including the 'ego' and those most closely associated with it – the 'Self', 'complex', 'animus/anima', 'shadow', and the relation between conscious and unconscious in the human psyche. Vogler identifies eight archetypes: hero, mentor (Wise Old Man or Woman), threshold guardian, herald, shapeshifter, shadow, ally, and trickster. These, he considers to be most useful for writers<sup>25</sup> in relating to the archetypal pattern of the 12-stage 'The Hero's Journey'<sup>26</sup>. He

admits that woman's journey may differ from what some regard as a male model, and recommends Murdock's 'The Heroine's Journey', in which particularly lost feminine attributes are addressed and analysed.<sup>27</sup> Further discussion of the part these theoretical models played in the design of the work's macro-structure is interesting but beyond the scope of this exegesis.

However, there is a problem, which I need to resolve here. Initially, it would appear to be a stumbling block, but I hope to show that it is not. It revolves around the fact that archetypes are transhistorical forces but I have insisted on historically grounded characters. These things appear fundamentally inconsistent but can be reconciled.

A woman can be a mother in the archetypal sense (that is, can do it maternally, having a child, when it comes to it). She has the innate ability to adjust at each point to the baby's needs of growth and tempo. She can provide it with milk, or be quite firm when she needs to help the baby through something, and doesn't lose herself in tears. She has the capacity to relate to the child as it grows. This equates to the 'typical form of behaviour of a mother'. I am remembering that archetypes are 'ancient forms of inherited behaviour' found in a person's collective unconscious. And that these can be drawn into the conscious mind. Vogler writes that 'the archetypes are amazingly constant throughout all times and cultures, in the dreams and personalities of individuals, as well as in the mythic imagination of the entire world.'<sup>28</sup> In *Double Star*, Ulla is an early twentieth century mother at a professional level of German society. Here is the time, place, and social level. She can dress the child acceptably, bring it up with the necessary

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social manners, and get the child to accept them, if she can. So this is the way the archetypal behaviour and capacities take form in a particular time, place, and society. And the woman is in fact the image and representation of the archetypal Mother, at the same time as being a historically grounded character.

Another similar type of problem can be found with the archetype of the ‘eternal feminine’. This has to do with ‘identity’ versus ‘role’. Goethe said: ‘Das ewig Weibliche zieht uns hinan’, the eternal feminine draws us on to grow towards wholeness (in the developmental sense, as human beings). Erika wants the eternal feminine in reality. Ulla may have this as a basis, but she also wants to be able to act and think as a man, too. That is, have work outside the home, think for herself, and use her own capacities. These are all steps towards the full realisation of her ‘personal authenticity’. Jung would term this ‘individuation’: ‘a person’s becoming himself, whole, indivisible and distinct from other people or collective psychology (though also in relation to these)’.<sup>29</sup> So the ‘eternal feminine’ is only one aspect of Ulla’s ‘anima’ (the feminine aspect in women), which does not prevent her from being an example of a German Protestant bourgeois woman in a particular socio-historical context, as well.

I would now like to take up again Ruth Lorand’s notion of viewing the story as a ‘material-product’ in which the world supplies materials for the story, and use it in my discussion of the research I undertook to write this work. My aim here is to analyse some of the elements relating to the part of my objective to do with ‘historically grounding’ the work.

Lorand argues there are two ways to construct the relationships between a story and its related fictional (or other world):

1. The story represents its related world and offers a partial report or a scheme for its reconstruction by the reader.
2. The story is constructed of selected materials (representations or others) of its related world(s), but the story as a whole does not represent any world.<sup>30</sup>

The first concerns a ‘world’ metaphor concept, which implies ‘that stories are bound to be incomplete’, because it is an impossible task to account for all the facts pertaining to a ‘world’.<sup>30</sup> The second regards stories under the ‘material-product’ metaphor, which argues ‘that the world supplies the materials for constructing a story’.<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that this, in more modern guise, is the old debate between fact and fiction, which I outlined briefly in my earlier discussion of ‘realism’. The features of this metaphor can be used as a framework within which to analyse the key aspects of my research process.

Materials for creating stories are taken from different realms (‘worlds’) And reflect different aspects of human experience. A story may combine representations of imaginary and real, historical events; it may combine traditional generic patterns with new ones (break the rules and create new ones); it may integrate all kinds of linguistic materials (high language, slang, and so forth), scientific knowledge, philosophical ideas, psychological observations, moral values, motifs of previous stories (or works of art in general), desires, dreams, and so forth.<sup>33</sup>

I will briefly outline some of the materials involved in the creation of *Double Star*. Materials were gathered from the ‘physical world’ in the form of fieldwork in a town in Northern Germany, set in its surrounding countryside. Some names were changed to give the story a wider relevancy. Names of celebrated scientists and writers

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can be found on the street signs of many Germany cities, e.g. Einstein, Goethe. Generic naming of topographical features, such as Waldberg (wooded hill) and Herzbergerstrasse (Street of the Hill's Heart) opens up cultural and emotional imagery potentials.

Materials were drawn from the 'world of history': medieval Germany. For example the walled city, with its potential to employ the guardian archetype in the character of Erika, is representative of Old Germany. Historical aspects are reflected in Street names associated with the war. These helped to ground the story historically in the period prior to and including the First World War. Material like the Old Town wall and ghetto of Frankfurt, which informs the background to Klaus Mendelsohn's Jewish ancestry. Such an architectural feature opens the way for exploring meanings of 'inside', 'outside' and 'prejudice', both economic and social.

The 'world of science' supplied materials from both medicine and astronomy. These also helped with the task of historically grounding the text. Materials from Robert Koch's celebrated discovery of the cause of tuberculosis (1881), biographies of Koch and Marie Curie, hospital and laboratory visits helped give 'authenticity' to Ulla Tiefenbach, my protagonist's career as assistant in TB research to her surgeon father. Visiting a Mariahilf hospital, reading biographies of Koch and Marie Curie, and Einstein's 1905 and 1915 discoveries of specific and general relativity theories, respectively, were similar sources. Observatory sites in Germany, and articles read and interviews covering binary star and black hole theory in New Zealand further helped to flesh out Klaus Mendelsohn's background and character.



Relevant materials got from the realm of philosophy will be discussed in the following part of this exegesis.

‘Psychological materials’ play an important part in the area of character development in the work. I should like to give two examples from *Double Star* to show how fruitful this line of inquiry can be.

Murdock’s first stage in the heroine’s quest for wholeness: ‘separation from the feminine’. When Ulla accepts work at the hospital from her father, she steps out of the house and out of her mother’s realm, which corresponds to the ‘domestic sphere’ in the Protestant doctrine of two spheres. This is an aspect of ‘separation from the feminine’. Erika is mistress of the house, and she would want to train Ulla up to become mistress of the house, in order to keep her in that realm. That is, the feminine realm. But there needs to be conflict with the mother, in order to get space to develop as a person. Another instance from the ninth stage in the ten-stage Heroine’s Journey model: ‘healing the wounded masculine’. As a young woman, Erika wasn’t allowed to do work that represented something out in the town. But in the Epilogue, she says to Stella Mendelsohn: ‘Come on, my little tree-planter! We’ve work to do!’ This means Erika is now free to step into this idea (tree-planting with Stella). The masculine in her is allowed to grow and heal. That is, she can now do what her father did, but which she was forbidden to do. If something in a person is ‘wounded’, it means it does not develop. The wounded masculine in Erika is part of her ‘animus’. When you heal the masculine, and

grow it forward, it leads to the ‘integration of the masculine and feminine’<sup>34</sup> in the person, Murdock’s tenth and final stage in a woman’s journey. When the masculine and feminine are held together creatively, in a person, held in a complementary manner, that is, so that one completes the other, then the two together make the person ‘complete’. It is amazing the things Erika can now potentially accept in other people, which were previously stumbling blocks for her.

In the area of ‘motifs’, I think the most interesting instance is that of the fungus ‘mycelia’. While providing the basis of a key scene in which Ulla and Klaus gather fungi for her research, this organism supplies the material for a pivotal ‘dream’ in the plot. Here it works as an ‘image’ and a ‘metaphor’. It becomes a ‘symbol’ of healing in Ulla and Tiefenbach’s subsequent treatment of the sick Arilda (family maid). It is very much a practical element in Ulla’s development of laboratory ‘cultures’, and an eventual antigen and remedy for the cure of tuberculosis. It is also an important ‘weapon’ in the battle against disease. This theme of ‘war’ counterpoints and parallels Klaus’ trench experience at the front.

Linguistic materials add dialogue variation in tone and word type, helping to delineate character differences more sharply, reflecting such things as social background and class structure. Erika, with her upper class background, speaks often in ‘high language’, with an element of affectation. Tiefenbach’s mixture of middle class upbringing and professional position, is more representative of ordinary speech, though

sometimes tinged with an element of ‘down-to-earth’ and forthrightness of expression, a legacy from his working class mother.

The selected materials are cut-off from their origin . . . and integrated into the story . . . Within the story, the materials express some of their original qualities, but not all of them and they gain new meanings as a result of their integration and function.<sup>35</sup>

I will use the astronomical phenomenon of a ‘double star’ to illustrate this ‘transformation’ of materials. In the 1600s the amateur astronomer Hertzheim observed and recorded many ‘double or binary stars’. I will identify some of their ‘original qualities’. A pair of stars of this type position themselves so close they appear to be one star. They are characterized by mutually attracting gravitational forces, which render their respective orbital paths interdependent. Sometimes one appears to ‘die’ in the sense that it is no longer visible. Yet the remaining visible star retains its former position and orbital path, reflecting its continued dependency. It is thought that double stars are the early precursor to the development of black hole theory in the twentieth century.

In Ulla’s first visit to the Observatory and the Dome Room, Klaus describes the nature of a double star to her. It becomes increasingly an emotional expression and symbol of their developing relationship throughout the story. Further it provides the main thematic metaphor of the work and the imagery for Klaus’ experience of dying. Finally it becomes an enduring symbol of their relationship for Ulla, after Klaus has died, when she can no longer ‘see’ him, but feels his ‘invisible’ presence in her life. It continues to shape at least part of her life, as instanced by periodic visit’s to the Observatory with Stella, their daughter [to sit in father’s chair and look through his telescope.] Thus the original

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factual quality of interdependence remains, but ‘new meanings’, emotionally and symbolically, are gained. The new ‘integration’ produces changes in the emotional fabric of two related lives. The ‘function’ of the material, in this instance, changes from its original ‘scientific or factual’ nature to take on first ‘emotional’ then ‘symbolic’ qualities.

The materials are expected to complement one another, but they do not determine one another. . . . The ‘material-product’ entails that the nature of the ‘raw’ material does not directly determine the nature of the whole. Thus, the fact that a story consists of representations of events in a certain order does not entail that the story represents a world.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, regarding a fictional narrative as a ‘material-product’ rather than a ‘world’ metaphor frees it to become a story, in its own right. Lamarque writes about ‘the psychological inferences we make over and above what is explicit in a narrative . . . relying on some construal of textual data . . . one is a general indeterminacy in characterizing human action’.<sup>37</sup>

Klaus’ ‘astronomical’ material sits beside the material of Ulla’s ‘tuberculosis research’. This gives them common ground as scientists in terms of their shared interest and passion in the field of science. But it does not determine the specific form their actions take in their respective fields.

Material relevant to Klaus’ astronomical role in the Observatory and his role as an artillery ballistics advisor in the theatre of war are not incompatible. The area of commonality lies in his expert knowledge of mathematics and physics. And this material undergoes ‘transformations’ or qualitative changes in terms of its application, form and outcome, from one field to another.

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An interesting sociological example of material being both ‘complementary’ and ‘indeterminate’ is seen in Klaus’ relation with Georg in the trenches. Klaus’ notebook and preoccupation with his ‘blue sky’ theory does not constitute a division between the two men, as well it might in conventional society, where Klaus’ and Georg’s societal positions are upper-middle and working class, respectively. Instead they become instrumental in greater intimacy, enabling them to share something they both appreciate and value: humour.

I will now set the work in its societal context by examining some philosophical underpinnings of the society, and the relevant socio-political aspects.

A story is not necessarily entirely fictional, or at least, its materials need not all be fictional. For instance, it is not clear that generic patterns or philosophical ideas found in a story should be considered fictional. After all, if a story is a ‘product’ it can be made of a combination of different materials, some of them even real-world materials, as is often the case.<sup>38</sup>

What part did prevailing philosophical thinking, which informed the public view and political action, play in determining women’s status in the society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

The question of whether woman should be regarded as a “subject” in the legal sense or as subservient to man – that is, as a free juridical individual or a dependent – was

a secondary issue. Fichte, Kant, and Hegel may be taken as representing the principal positions in the debate.<sup>39</sup>

The first point that needs to be emphasized is that the critical issue of woman's position in the society was assigned to second spot on the philosopher's agenda. Their primary focus was upon the issue of marriage.

Fichte regarded marriage as a 'natural' phenomenon. A thing of the instincts, in other words. Whereas, Hegel looked upon it as a 'moral' bond, which laid the responsibility for its success or failure at the door of the individual. Kant, on the other hand, said it was a 'contract', thus binding by law. Fraisse argues that although there are differences, here was the basis of a 'philosophical-legal' framework. How could this development have helped my protagonist, Ulla?

Throughout the nineteenth century, the whole thrust of feminism was for equality between the sexes. If the male-female relationship in marriage could have been legalized, it would have given woman equal status with man, before the law, and therefore in the eyes of society. But the reality was that she was not equal and was treated accordingly. She was not taken seriously. If her wishes regarding what form her life should take, differed from the conventional view, then she was on her own. She was unlikely to marry, and condemned to life as a spinster.

What philosophical voices were more outspokenly against her? Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer both denounced the topical issue of feminism as absurd or insane, saying other matters were more pressing.<sup>40</sup>

Sexual metaphors provided the fabric out of which Nietzsche wove a number of his themes . . . sexual difference was more than a metaphor, it was a mode of thought that employed images of masculine and feminine, man or woman. He describes an epoch as “virile” or calls truth ‘a woman’ without ever defining virility or womanhood. But the difficulty of definition does not stop him from using these as qualifiers. For example, Nietzsche speaks of beauty and intelligence, and we know how the ancients divided these qualities between men and women. Yet the specific essence of each sex only becomes more confused. . . . The binary system of sexuality grows more supple when the argument abandons categories and hews to the individual: “This woman is beautiful and intelligent. Alas! How much more intelligent she would have become had she not been beautiful” (Daybreak, # 282).<sup>41</sup>

This line of reasoning only served to undermine woman’s societal position. It prevented her from becoming a subject or agent in her own right, something which was critical to the legalisation of securing an equal position for her in society. Furthermore, because of its divisive nature and lack of definition, it made it even harder for her to achieve any sense of ‘collective authenticity’, let alone a firming up of personal identity through a feeling of ‘personal authenticity’.

At this point I would like to consider some social materials beyond those of social class and social structure, which were mentioned in the discussion on ‘realism’.

Protestantism deepened the above sexual differences. The Tiefenbachs were essentially Lutheran Protestants. The Church promoted the patriarchal family, with the man, as husband, at the head, and his wife, as his helpmate. This was perceived by the society as assigning a woman to a lower status than the man.

In patriarchal relationships, whether political, religious, or personal, only one person can be on the top, so there is always a controller and a controlled. For the dominant personality to retain power, she or he needs to keep her partner in a one-

down position. This creates a particular mind-set in which one person expects to be in control and the other person expects to be controlled.’<sup>42</sup>

The Church also promoted the ‘doctrine of two spheres’. That is, the domestic sphere is the domain of women, and the public sphere, that of men, and the two should be kept separate. This is definitely Erika’s view in relation to her daughter. And something Ulla has to fight against if she is to shape a career outside the home.

This element of gender division was intensified by the process of rapid industrialization, especially in the period 1871 to 1914.<sup>43</sup> In this period, many people exchanged an agrarian rural lifestyle for one of poor living conditions and work in factories. What Herder(1744-1803), a German philosopher, viewed as ‘succumbing to the disenchanting pressures of modernization, industrialization, and commerce.’<sup>44</sup> Lindholm, p. 100. In pre-industrial times, most women were in domestic service or the garment industries, so that they could easily combine their domestic duties with other gainful activities within the home. The workplace was therefore taken out of the home, creating two full-time jobs, with a consequent loss of family income. Arilda, the maid, has followed this path, but is able to avoid many of the negative effects of these changes by finding long-standing service in the Tiefenbach household.

Catholicism had a rather different view of woman’s role in society, which was, indirectly, to have a positive effect for Ulla. The Church, in this denomination, believed

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that woman was a ‘moral agent’,<sup>45</sup> and so it did not matter where you sited her in a society, she would have a civilizing effect on both men and children. It argued that her natural attributes of ‘nurturing, caring’<sup>46</sup> were invaluable in nursing, which led to its establishment as a profession, and avenue of work outside the home. It is interesting to note that this was in fact a positive step towards legalising a position of equality for women, as previously discussed.

A final aspect in the social context element is the use made of political materials in Double Star.

One paradigm for citizenship, which makes the socially constructed nation-state appear deeply rooted in nature and history, is that individuals whose forbears were born into the nation all share a primordial identity with those who have the same biological ancestry and therefore the same primeval collective experiences. Those who are outsiders and newcomers can never be wholly accepted, no matter how much they identify with the nation. The pre-eminent (though hardly the only) case of a modern nation where citizenship was based primarily on this type of genealogical-historical paradigm was Germany.<sup>47</sup>

As Lindholm points out: ‘As German romantic nationalism evolved into ever more essentialist new forms . . . [this] asserted shared biological ancestry’ was regarded as ‘the ultimate and incorruptible source of cultural authenticity’.<sup>48</sup> Here, then, is Klaus Mendelsohn’s dilemma. He feels deeply that a vital part of achieving wholeness as an individual, and an integral component of ‘personal authenticity’, involves being

recognized first and foremost as a true German citizen. He will go to war to prove he has the required ‘authenticity’ for citizenship.

The above ‘concept of the nation as a primal genealogical entity is a nineteenth-century biologizing transformation of the romantic nationalist ideology most powerfully expressed in the writings of J. G. Herder, who believed that every culture was worthy of respect, and that none deserved to be enslaved or dispersed.’<sup>49</sup> The character of Erika Tiefenbach is an example of someone who is part ‘romantic nationalist’ (has a longing for the return of the Old Germany), but in whom the ‘genealogical-historical paradigm’ is uppermost in shaping her worldview and how she relates to both the individual and society. What is involved here is a search for ‘cultural essentialism’.

It can be seen from the above brief analysis of the work’s societal context that the fictional narrative is a complex one, involving the integration of philosophical, social and political materials.

In summing up, I have attempted to do three things in this exegesis. First, to set this social realist novel, *Double Star*, in its literary context. Second, to provide an analysis of the ‘materials’ gathered in my research to create the work. Third, to analyse the work’s philosophical and socio-political context.

Ulla’s concerns are as relevant today – to both men and women – as they ever were. Woman’s equality and position still have to be fought for, and won, in certain quarters, though our postmodern society is generally more sensitive to, and mindful of, the needs of the individual.

An important ‘meaning’ in the story has to do with our choice of criteria for how we will build our nations. Whether we will only look at the nucleus at the centre of the cell, and come away with an exclusive, biological strategy. Or whether we will examine the ‘essential’ element in the human being – the human heart – and formulate a more inclusive, human-based vision for our future on this planet.

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31. Ibid. p. 426.

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33. Murdock, *The heroine's journey*, p. 5.
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- When a unified German state was created in 1871 the constitution asserted that all Germans everywhere were members of a homogenous ethnic Volksnation. . . . In contrast, those without previous German genealogy were hard put to gain citizenship, no matter how long they lived in the country or how assimilated they had become.
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(Original work published 1885.).



# Double Star

by

Bernard Thornton

I am a woman. Born here, I will die. No happy voyage  
Will ever broaden my horizon with its wing.  
I shall know nothing of the transitory world  
Beyond this wall, which bounds my house ...  
I am a woman.  
I shall remain within my cloister ...  
For the ages that turn over the past in memory,  
I will not live again through history.  
Not a single word speaks for me.  
I am a woman.

- Clemence Robert, Paris silhouette, poetry anthology, 1839.

“Alike through telescope and microscope the affair must now be seen.”

- Jules Romain, Verdun

The starry heaven above and the moral law within.

- Immanuel Kant

## Chapter 1

She adjusts the focus of the microscope until the structure of the cell becomes clear. Sets her notebook open on the table at her right elbow, and begins to observe, making careful notes, in her tall, looping hand. First, the two parallel lines of the undulating perimeter (she glances at the text open on her left). Its function is to defend and contain the contents. She draws exactly what she sees in her notebook. Second, the protoplasm, that looks like dark lines of miniature stones, skirts the inner edge of the wall, and divides the enclosed area into what appears to be empty spaces (these are in fact full of sap and other kinds of food, and are called vacuoles.) Third, at one point within, she sees a denser, rounded structure: the nucleus. This is the driving force of the organism, the text says. The essential part.

She sits back and glances down at her watch. Hurriedly, she replaces the cell sample in its Petri dish in the glass cabinet, and slips the instrument back into its green-felt bed, snibbing the lid. Closes her notebook, and returns it to the safety of a drawer in the workroom. Takes off her lab coat, hanging it on a hook behind her corner table. She glances round for a moment, smiles, then walks through into the laboratory. At the far end she opens and shuts the door behind her.

She left the laboratory late, not looking forward to what waited for her at home. Her mother had made it hard enough for her to accept this small piece of work at the hospital, which she was doing simply to relieve a little of the pressure of her father's paperwork, and in the end permission had only been stringently granted on the condition that Ulla accepted no remuneration. The fact that her father sometimes made possible for her, in addition, short sessions in the laboratory, was something she told no one. It would be about the ball again. That cattle market! Where men did not go to enjoy the company of women as you enjoy a night of stars.

She walked quickly, buttoning her coat up against the rising wind and the first white flakes of snow. Well, it was December, wasn't it? 1913. Red berries bright like drops of blood in the holly.

Reaching the platz, she turned into the Theaterstrasse, and a moment later entered the door of the large, three-storeyed house on the corner. There was a light on in one of the attics. It would be the maid, Ulla thought.

She stretched out her hand to the latch, but almost fell when the door opened unexpectedly.

Arilda was there.

‘Come quick,’ the maid said, ‘this house is not a happy place tonight.’

Ulla knew she should have left the hospital earlier. She got so absorbed, though. She couldn’t help it. She went straight in, hung her coat and muff on the hooks in the small vestibule just inside the door, pausing only for a cursory glance in the mirror, before ascending the few steps to the hall. She could hear her mother’s voice through the open door of the dining room.

‘Alfred. That girl’s either roaming the woods or she’s spending too long at the hospital. I want you to do something about it. She’s . . .’

As Ulla entered her mother stopped in mid-sentence, and just glared. She took her seat next to her father. Hans sat opposite of course. And Mother, on her left, in her usual place at the other end of the table.

They ate the thick soup in silence. Papa made occasional slurping noises, after which he wiped his beard vigorously with a large white napkin. Ulla saw her mother cast irritated glances in his direction. Her stomach tightened like her cello strings.

Mother started.

‘Say something to her, Alfred.’

Tiefenbach glanced up reluctantly from his sausage and vegetables.

‘Ulla,’ he said softly, ‘how were the cells today?’

‘Alfred.’

His head sank.

‘You must attend this ball. It is the most important event on the social calendar. Do you want to be a spinster all your days?’

‘No, Mother, but . . .’

‘Don’t but me, girl! Say you will go, then.’

‘I –’

‘Say it.’

‘Father . . .’ She turned to him for help.

But he had abstracted himself.

‘Was there anything new?’ he suddenly asked.

‘A cell, Papa, it can’t live without a nucleus, can it? It can do without its wall and much of its protoplasm – but not that.’

‘Al--fred!’

‘It’s like us,’ he muttered. ‘You can take it all away. Well, practically everything else. But not the heart. – Ulla. Ulla, listen to me. The human heart is the most important part of our story. If you want to be a truly great scientist, you must always keep that in mind.’

The door slammed.

A few minutes later Ulla left her father, and went through into the Day Room. She liked this little room. It was where she did her daily cello practice. She crossed to the window. She loved to watch the foliage of the beech-trees moving, as daylight faded from the sky. The leaves made patterns of black lace, like the mantilla of a Spanish woman.

She took her cello from where it leant in the corner. There, in a cabinet of honey-coloured wood, the family had always kept its musical scores. Ulla reached in and drew out her book of exercises. Scales and arpeggios first, of course. She often liked to look at the ornate handwriting of her grandmother, in black ink, on the title page. She kept a photo of her up in her bedroom – a striking woman who had also been a cello player.

She set the stand so that the light fell on the page, and positioned her chair. Drew the bow across the strings. Adjusted a peg. Waited until two strings became a single sound. Even the tuning, she enjoyed, as a sort of gathering of the instrument and herself. Put resin on the hair of the bow until she knew it would grip well. She liked to think of the resin as a substance gifted by fir and pine towards the making of music. A final adjustment to the height of the stand. And then she opened at the right page, and took the bow in her hand.

At that moment she heard sounds outside the door, and it opened.

‘Mother, I was just about to . . .’

‘My patience has run out, Ursula.’

‘I need to do my practice, Mother.’

‘And I need definite numbers. At once.’

‘You know how much I dislike these occasions, Mother.’ She kept hold of the bow.

‘It’s high time you assumed your responsibilities.’

She remained silent.

‘Readying yourself for the ball. Spending more time in the house.’



‘But I enjoy walking.’

‘You should put on some more suitable clothing, and take a carriage into the marktplatz. Go round the shops. Be seen about.’

‘I go when I need something.’

‘That’s not the point. You will never advance in Society by roaming for hours in the Wald. The other evening at Frau Blutner’s soiree a woman told me she’d seen the Tiefenbach girl in a meadow, hatless, and with nothing on her feet.’

‘Mother, that’s just gossip. And also she happened to catch me in a moment of leisure. After I’d done my work.’

‘Your work?’

‘I was collecting specimens. Labeling them. Writing up my field notes.’

‘That is not an activity befitting a woman, Ursula. You are behaving like a man. It will have to stop.’ She prodded the carpet several times with her stick.

‘But I don’t want it to.’

‘Absolute nonsense!’ Erika leant forward, both hands gripping the knob.

‘Mother, our family has always done worthwhile things. Doctors and lawyers and teachers.’

‘That is men’s work. Not women’s.’

‘Why can’t women take part too? A woman would make a fine doctor.’

‘It is not the way Society works, Ursula. Ignoring it is asking for trouble. A sign of immaturity.’

‘I like helping Papa at the hospital.’

‘No, all this must stop. Look here, a woman of my acquaintance stopped me in the street the other day. She had observed you going in and out. Did you have a sick relative or friend? she asked. Having to explain your behaviour created a very awkward situation for me.’

‘It was none of her business, Mother.’

‘That is naïve, Ursula. What is it exactly that you do there, anyway?’

‘I file papers for Papa. Sometimes he dictates letters to me.’

‘Papers?’

‘Yes. Patient notes. And I sort new medical articles. Make a list of topics so Papa can see at a glance what there is.’

‘You know nothing about medicine, girl.’

‘Well, I can learn. Perhaps one day . . .’

‘Do you not want to be married? You will grow old, alone. Is that what you want?’

Ulla said nothing.

‘A man wants a woman who is attentive to his needs. Not someone whose head is stuffed with plants and rocks.’

Still nothing.

‘A woman’s work is in the home, Ursula. Not in public. It is undignified. Unfeminine. Men dislike that.’

Ulla looked at her mother.

‘Did you never dream of doing something, Mother? Something outside the walls of your house?’

Erika’s expression changed, like shadows lengthening. The features of her face became fixed like stone. She stared at the carpet. Jabbed it fiercely with her stick.

‘I grew up,’ she said. ‘And you must too.’

‘Mother, I . . .’

‘You have no right to interrogate your mother! Keep your place, Ursula. In the morning I will put you on the list. Like it or not.’ She turned on her heel, and went out, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Ulla sat on. At last she released her bow, putting it up on the ledge of the stand. Got up slowly and returned the cello to its corner. She spent the next few minutes standing in front of the window, flexing the fingers of her right hand, on and off, and looking out into the darkness, where she could now barely discern the shapes of the trees. In the end she drew the curtains.

Next morning at breakfast Erika had resolved to remain calm. She heard her daughter’s voice on the staircase, and a moment later she entered the dining-room.

‘Good morning, Mother. Did you sleep well?’

‘Yes, thank you. Very well.’ That was better. More how a young lady should conduct herself. She watched as Ursula unfolded her napkin and placed it on her lap, and started to eat her porridge.

‘It’s going to be a sunny day, today, Papa,’ Ulla said cheerfully.

Was Erika imagining it, or was the girl a little remorseful for yesterday’s behaviour? Time would tell. Gratifying what a decent night’s sleep could do for a person, though.

When her husband rose from the table, and shortly returned with his briefcase, she wished him a good day. He kissed her on the cheek, and walked out into the hallway to get his cloak. She knew his hours of surgery at the Mariahilf, so she was confident he would not be around when she visited the hospital later that morning. She was not sure exactly how things would transpire, but she had resolved that it was time to make a brief reconnaissance. She needed to see the lie of the land for herself. If necessary, she would invent some reason for her unexpected visit. Perhaps a friend from her social circle, whom Erika understood to have been admitted a few days previously for an appendectomy, might be pleased of a little company.

Erika ordered the carriage for eleven. Ursula had left the house exactly an hour before to attend to her little tasks. And Erika had decided to visit the hospital and see for herself how exactly this daughter of hers spent her time. She stood while the maid helped her into her coat, and handed her back her stick.

‘I will be home for lunch,’ she said.

Erika leaned back in the carriage. It went round the platz, and turned left into the Schillerstrasse. There was a time when she would have quite liked to walk, but it was too arduous now. The lameness in her right leg seemed to have become more pronounced in the years since the birth of the children, and she soon got tired. Walking was no longer a pleasure. She noted the plane trees that bordered the street were still quite bare, their twigs like arthritic fingers. The sky between the bare branches had a whitey-grey, wintry look about it. The carriage slowed at the intersection with the Landstrasse, and crossed over into the Humboldtstrasse. The driver went a little past the entrance, turned the carriage, and set her down at the broad path leading to the front door.

She found these tall redbrick edifices rather off-putting. They had been build for a purpose, with very little thought given to any aesthetics regarding their appearance. She followed the sealed path between the spreading beeches. ‘To Relieve the Suffering of Others’ was the Latin motto above the entrance. She felt herself tighten as she went in.

A reception desk and Nurses’ Station on the right. A young nurse was engaged in writing something, and looked up as Erika approached, recognizing the director’s wife at once from a Christmas function in the hospital.

‘How may I help?’

‘I would like to see . . .’ It occurred to Erika that she didn’t necessarily want to speak to her daughter. In fact, that mightn’t achieve her purpose at all. Ideally, what would

be most informative would be for her to see how Ursula occupied herself , unobserved. ‘ . . . where she . . . ’ Worked wasn’t the word she wanted to use. ‘ . . . spends her time.’

Erika followed the young nun along the corridors. This wasn’t her world at all. It belonged to that other sphere, the world of men. She had her own domain, and it wasn’t this. It wasn’t meant to be. A woman had no right here unless she was sick. She took in the apparel of her guide. It was different in her case. She was a nun. Someone who had sworn their life to God. Of course she had never married, never had children, certainly had never even lain with a man – that unpleasant but unfortunately unavoidable ritual. Such a person was scarcely a woman. She had a moment of guilt concerning this conclusion, but summarily dismissed it.

They arrived at the director’s rooms. The nurse ushered Erika into a waiting room, said she would look for her daughter. But Erika had no intention of being palmed off. The floor was thickly carpeted, so she followed unnoticed at the nurse’s heels, like a shadow. She knew the latter assumed she had taken a seat. They entered and passed through a large, well-furnished room, which Erika recognized as her husband’s consulting chambers, and the nurse opened a door in the far wall. She started when she suddenly found Erika at her shoulder, pushing past her.

It was a smaller room, with a view of the grounds. Cupboards and draws lined the walls. A large table occupied the centre of the room, with a small desk to one side.

‘Fraulein Tiefenbach is usually here. That’s her desk over there.’

Erika crossed straight to the desk, and began to rummage through some papers neatly stacked on its surface. Hospital procedure, mostly. A case study. A book titled *A History of Tuberculosis*. She shuddered involuntarily.

‘Well, where is she?’

‘She’s usually here. I don’t know –‘

‘Cells,’ Erika blurted.

‘I beg you pardon, Madame?’

‘Where does one see cells in this place?’ Despite her profound irritation with the two of them on the previous evening, Erika had remembered her husband’s query, and her daughter’s look of eagerness as she spoke.

The nurse hesitated. ‘In a laboratory . . . I think.’

‘Take me, then.’

‘But it’s –‘

‘Take me.’ Erika simultaneously struck the carpet with the point of her stick. When she shifted to adjust her weight, there was a deep, slowly filling indentation in the pile.

‘Follow me, Frau Tiefenbach,’ the nurse said courteously.

Again a trail through corridors with high plaster walls. Functionality and cleanliness. What a sterile environment. Once or twice she had to stop. Too bad! The sound of her stick made a sharp echo. It was apparent to Erika that they were moving through the hospital towards the back. Finally, the last ward passed, they arrived at a discrete doorway in a somewhat darker side passage. The nurse indicated a chair. Erika made it look as though she were adjusting herself to sit down. When she heard the click of the door, she thrust herself to her feet, took the few remaining steps, pushed it open, stepped inside, and closed it softly behind her. She could hear the nurse’s voice somewhere at the far end of the room, out of sight.

Erika stood. This was a world she had never seen, and had only vaguely imagined from the occasional medical words and remarks made by her husband and a colleague at one of their soirees, and overheard inadvertently as she passed through the throng in her capacity as hostess. Light poured through several tall windows at the far end of this long relatively narrow room onto a myriad of glassware and metallic objects of every shape and size, reflected in the glass-fronted cabinets, above rows and rows of draws, that lined the walls on both sides. Something made a sudden rustling movement to her left. She turned, and saw several cages housing mice on a bench. It seemed alive with them. The little creatures scuttled in every direction. Sometimes one would halt abruptly, sit upright, its nose and white whiskers twitching in the sunlight, while dipping its head briskly now and then to nibble at something held in tiny pink paws. She felt suddenly as though there were something radically wrong with this captivity, but couldn’t put it into words. It was a feeling that stayed with her. Her conjectures were disrupted at the sound of her daughter’s clear voice.

‘No, nurse, I would rather my mother did not come in. I don’t want her to find me here. It might lead to unnecessary complications.’

There was the sound of footsteps, and the nurse reappeared.

Erika propelled herself down the length of the laboratory, so that the young nun had to step suddenly to one side. At the end she glanced either way, and glimpsed a door to her left. She swept through the entrance, and swung round. Her daughter was sitting side on to

her, at a small bench, bent over, peering into a microscope, the light from the open window splashing upon her absorbed figure.

‘So. This is your administration.’

Her daughter straightened. A shocked look on her face.

‘I had finished what I was doing. I was only filling in time until Papa came out of surgery.’

‘I am deceived.’

‘What are you saying, Mother?’

‘Lied to. Bare-facedly.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Without shame.’

Ulla pushed the microscope back, and stood up.

Erika took a step forward and thrust the handle of her stick into Ulla’s chest.

She winced.

‘What are you doing here, Mother? What do you want?’

Erika’s face changed. ‘What am I doing here? Impudent girl!’

‘This is not your place.’

Erika found herself suddenly divided. This was true, it was not her place. She had sensed it from the moment she stepped into it, how even from the street she had disliked its functionality, its lack of architectural taste. But that was not the point.

‘Neither is it my daughter’s place. Never. Have you understood?’

Erika watched her turn, sit down at the desk again, and pull the microscope towards herself. Her daughter refused to look at her. There was a pause. She swung round then. Struck the wooden floor with the point of her stick. But halted in the doorway, and flung over her shoulder, ‘We will see what your father has to say to this deception.’

Ulla sat before her desk, still shaking from the confrontation with her mother. She listened as the footsteps receded in the laboratory. Heard the door open, then shut sharply. Realised only then that she was holding her breath, and let it out slowly, endeavouring to shrug off the effects of the bullying tones. When she did at last move her chair closer to the desk, she gripped the observation tube with her left hand, and reached for the focusing knob with her right. But both continued to shake so much that she was in danger of overturning the instrument. After several attempts she slumped back.

She adjusted a pin in her hair. She would go and have this out once and for all with her father. She replaced the slide in its covered dish, and returned the microscope to its box. Throwing her coat about her shoulders, and leaving it unbuttoned, she pulled the door of the laboratory shut behind her.

As Ulla hurried through the corridors to her father's rooms, she rounded a corner and almost bumped into the tall figure of Sister Maria.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Sister. I wasn't looking where I was going.' But the nun only smiled.

When Ulla reached her father's office, she knocked and entered. He was sitting, contemplating a small brown box on the desk.

'Father, I want to talk to you.'

He moved his bulk as though to rouse himself and indicated the seat opposite him. 'You seem distraught. What's the matter?'

'Mother was in the lab . . . cleaning houses, holding tea cups, making children . . .'

'Calm down. So you want to control your mother now, do you?'

He had slipped the latch on the box and lifted the lid. He took out a lump of whitish rock and set it on the table.

'Look at this, Ulla. Limestone.'

She came round to examine it. Imbedded in the chalky surface was the imprint of a shell, perfect in every detail.

'It's an interesting example, Papa. What period is it?'

'*Kreidezeit*. Pleistocene.'

'It's a long way from the sea. Have you any others?'

He had. He pointed to a cabinet in the corner behind him.

'I never knew you were interested in such things, Papa.'

'They're intrinsically interesting. What's more they endure. I like the idea that they bear witness to their histories. The marks are like writing locked in stone.'

'I love to look into things like that too.'

He paused, and took his glasses off.

'That's where you should put your energies then. I've watched you through the years – the kinds of things you like doing. All that roaming and collecting that so vexes your mother.'

He began to talk about his own passion. Tuberculosis. How he'd tried innumerable chemicals whose toxicity did more harm than good in the body of his patients. He'd had some minor successes, but remissions were usually temporary. No definitive cure.

'Would you like to become my assistant?'

Ulla hesitated. A whirlwind of confusing thoughts. Roaming in the long grasses of the meadows in summer by bubbling streams, reveling in the play of light on water, and the dart and flight of insects. A giant whirring dragonfly seesawing on the blade of a reed. The image of the cell came to her mind again, the building block of all these things. In her mind's eye, she saw the morning light coming in, long and low, into the long room of the laboratory, touching each object into life, her own desk and books, the cabinets filled with shining equipment, Hilda, the young nun, so fresh and friendly, who looked after the poor mice and old Muller who occasionally came and went, befriended by Papa.

'I need you, Ulla. Your young mind. Your love of Nature. My Science has grown old and stale. I need you to breathe new life into it.'

She remembered her mother's words. She picked up the shell.

'I wish I could take it back to the sea,' she said. She looked at it, carrying its history with it. Did it remember the sound of the waves dying away on the sand, or the salty wash over its body?

Tiefenbach shook his head. What had he done to deserve such a strong-willed daughter?

'You know, Ulla, it is a matter of marriage . . .'

'Oh no, Papa. Not you, as well.'

'The roaming. The gathering. The questions.'

Ulla's brow furrowed.

He went on: 'The dream. And reality . . .'

'What is this, Papa?'

'These certainly are the two partners involved. Both must be present, if one is to stand any chance of happiness.'

Ulla's face relaxed.

'It is the art of living,' she heard him say.

'I would study hard, Papa. Learn as much as I could. I want to be of use in life.'

He was silent.

She waited.



‘Like the shell, your time is coming.’

She looked down at the spiral lying in her open palm. Then walked across and placed the shell on the sill.

‘It does not want to go back in the box, Papa.’

‘All right.’

She came round, bent, and hugged him.

‘You know, Ulla, you should attend this ball,’ he said. ‘You might meet someone who doesn’t want to be there, either.’

Erika was home before lunch and went straight through into the drawing-room. She crossed over to her chair by the window, and leaned her stick in the usual place between the curtain and the wall. She slumped awkwardly in her chair, breathing heavily. She leant her head on an angle in the taut struts of her fingers, and gazed fixed out the window into the garden. My God she was angry. She could hardly control herself. A state she abhorred. It was unladylike. It was simply not to be born. This girl of hers – well, anyway – was becoming a nightmare. She thought only of herself. Not how her actions might affect those around her. Ostensibly, her loved ones. Things had been reasonable enough while she was at school. She had always had those worrying habits of going for long rambles in the countryside by herself. How often had Erika tried to impress on her daughter the advisability of taking her brother, Hans, along. Erika had made out that it was unthinking of Ulla to exclude her brother. But her real reason was not primarily for reasons of personal safety, but rather that it was not done for a girl in her teens to be seen by the town’s inhabitants roaming the fields and woods, her hair flying and her clothes in a state of disarray. Oh, she had made excuses about ‘her observations, her collecting’. Really. Good heavens, in the name of the Good Lord, who did the girl think she was! And her father didn’t help either, rambling on there about cells and hearts. She should never have married him, really. He had been a disappointment. Erika wished she hadn’t allowed herself to be so influenced by those around her. But it had seemed an excellent prospect at the time. He had a swiftly rising position and reputation in the town. He had been clearly a young man with prospects. Everyone among her friends had said so, wherever Erika had gone to the theatre, to tea parties, to literary groups. Even chance encounters at public lectures. ‘Oh, Erika, you’d be a fool not to,’ they’d say. ‘You’d better snap him up before anyone else does. It’s only a matter of time.’

Her thoughts steadied, and she began to think of the early days. The days when she was happy and carefree, without this burden of regret, this insistent sense of loss that weighed constantly on her heart, souring her spirit.

Her father had been mayor of the town. A big, jovial fellow widely liked and respected. They'd lived, of course, on their ancestral lands adjoining the town. On the estate. She knew they had money. Her husband was useless with money. He seemed to have no sense of it at all. It was very fortunate that, for the most part, he had very little interest, either of having it or of spending it, for that matter. Except when it came to a new piece of equipment for the hospital or for his patients. Then, money went through his fingers faster than the waters of the Leine. It was just as well that Sister Maria had her feet firmly planted on the ground.

What Erika had loved more than anything were those days, mostly in spring or summer, when her father had asked her to come with him to see how his pet project was progressing up on the Waldberg. This was a sloping grassy hill to the east of the town. They'd gone up early in the morning. She remembered the spring in her legs, how easy the ascent was. To begin with he would take her hand. But then, when the slope steepened a little, he would slow his pace, or pause to regain his breath, while she would run ahead, laughing and exhorting him to greater effort.

They'd eventually reach the crest of the hill, and the little trees would come into view.

'I think we'll plant another row today,' he said. 'What do you say to that, eh?'

It was like an awful pain in her chest now, the memory of that joy, she'd had, as it surged up from its deep forbidden recess, and flooded her mind again. She had to reach up, and press the palms of both her hands flat on her chest to contain herself, until the hammering of her heart stilled, sufficiently for her to go back to it.

She would stride out the necessary distance each tree had to be planted from the next. Ten. Always ten.

'A tree is just like us, Ursula. It needs room to grow.'

She moved her lips, counting them out again in determined whispers. She swung her legs again, from the hip, like the soldier in her storybook, her chest puffed out with pride. She could feel the sweep of her waist-long hair passing back and forwards across her shoulders with each stride, like the great pendulum of the Town Hall clock in the platz. Oh, the joy. The clarity of life.

Her father put his foot on the spade, and invited her to place her small foot next to his. Then they pressed down together, the metal blade sliding easily into the earth. Pull back on the handle, and the turf would easy up like a lid, revealing the dark earth, worms and insects, and the fine mesh of grass roots. She dug out the hole. He showed her how to place the little tree erect in the hole, holding it by the stem with both her bare arms thrust between the cool roughness of its green-dark needles, which threatened to poke her in the eye. He replaced some soil. Then she would tamp it down, as he showed her, all round, but not too tight.

‘The tree needs to breath, Ursula. It’s like us.’

They would have a picnic, sitting together in the warm grass, the little trees at their backs, gazing out over the wide rolling valley of the Leine, with all its fields, its crops and grazing animals, its mysterious woods, to the distant blue line of hills in the west. A contentment in her body after the work.

Not like now. This thing she sat in now, was obliged to live in, to exist in, felt more like some construction of rods and wires and stiffnesses, for which movement was irksome and relentlessly tedious. Where had all the singing of limb and blood gone?

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and looked down into her lap, at her uncertain, unhappy hands. How she hated him. Oh, how she hated him. That man, her father, who had taken it all away.

‘Lunch is ready, Frau Tiefenbach.’

It was the maid. Erika reached for her stick, hoisted herself awkwardly to her feet, and went through into the dining-room.

## Chapter 2

The train from Frankfurt pulled into the station amid a blast from its whistle and a cloud of steam. Klaus Mendelsohn was already at the carriage door, peering through the window, scanning the passing faces. He was looking for the older bearded man of the photo in the astronomical journal. When the train stopped he got down on the platform and began to weave his way towards the main entrance.

‘Mendelsohn!’ he heard his name above the din of voices, and spotted his man, standing and waving on the left of the doorway. He was a bit taller. Held out his hand. ‘Bengt Bergmann,’ he said. ‘Welcome to Rothenheim.’

‘Klaus Mendelsohn. Thank you for meeting me.’

‘Of course. Have you a bag?’

Klaus nodded.

‘We’ll send it ahead. I thought coffee in the marktplatz might be nice. It’s one of our better days at this time of year.’

They crossed the Bahnhofplatz and waited for the traffic on the Berlinerstrasse. Klaus liked the old half-timbered buildings, with red geraniums in the window-boxes, and the wrought-iron filigree of balconies. They turned right at the Goethestrasse. In no time it opened into the space of the marktplatz with the imposing Town Hall and its large clock.

Bergmann ordered coffee. Pigeons and sparrows fought over any crumbs dropped from the tables outside the restaurant.

The waiter brought their coffee.

‘I’m excited that you’re here, Mendelsohn.’

Klaus smiled.

‘I’m particularly keen to develop your interest in theoretical mathematics.’

‘I think it’s the way forward,’ Klaus said.

‘Precisely my feeling, too, Mendelsohn. Fun, imaginative stuff.’

Klaus was getting to like this man, who was to be his new director. Perhaps it would work out.

‘We’re a bit in the same boat, really,’ Bergmann went on.

‘Oh.’

‘I’m a Swede. Came to this post about a year ago. From the outside, so to speak, like you.’

Klaus noted it. Some common ground, perhaps.

‘There can be a problem, though,’ he said.

Bergmann grinned. ‘In what way?’

‘When the theoretical outstrips one’s ability to corroborate one’s hypotheses experimentally.’

‘Indeed,’ Bergmann said.

‘I’ve a hunch.’

‘Yes?’

‘The answer lies partly in one’s capacity to develop appropriate instruments.’

‘Interesting.’

‘An instrument needs to be designed to gather a specific type of data.’

‘Exciting. Another coffee?’ He signed to the waiter. ‘Please continue, we’re having such a good time.’

Klaus enjoyed the way the older man gave him space.

‘The finding then tends to be clear. And if one’s lucky, it in turn may suggest further theoretical possibilities. Forgive me, I talk too much.’

‘Not at all. Delighted.’

Klaus leant back and watched the passing scene.

‘Have you any brothers and sisters?’ Bergmann said.

‘One brother, and two sisters.’

‘A good family. Your father?’

‘He’s a businessman. In the stock exchange.’

‘Your brother, too?’

‘No, he’s an artist. A painter.’

‘My Dad was a banker,’ Bergmann said. ‘He used to say he gave me pocket money to teach me the value of money. But my wife says I’m either too extravagant or a spendthrift.’

Klaus laughed.

‘I thought we’d walk a bit. I’d like to show you the town.’

They passed through a shopping area. Some quite modern window displays in the old converted buildings. The latest Paris and London fashion in men’s suits and women’s

clothing. Into quainter, winding, cobbled streets. Quite narrow in places. Restaurants. Periodically a tavern, dating from medieval times.

‘Die Alte Stadt, the Old Town,’ Bergmann said.

They came to an arch.

‘The West Gate. Used to guard one of the four entrances.’

‘In the city wall?’

‘That’s right.’

Bergmann had turned his head, and noticed a darkness sweep the face of the young man.

‘Mendelsohn, are you all right?’ He placed a hand on the young man’s arm.

‘Just the past. A memory,’ Klaus said.

‘Stands in the bones, doesn’t it.’

Klaus nodded.

‘I would like to show you the Wall path. It’s good to know about, when one’s in need of a quiet moment.’

They walked up onto the broad path once occupied by the Wall. Plane trees on either side formed an arch of graceful, spreading boughs, at present bare. The bark peeled in patches giving the limbs a hammered aspect, where the wintry sunlight flickered its patterns. Delicate.

‘We should go, at the moment,’ Bergmann said, ‘you’ll be getting hungry.’

They passed through the gate, crossed the street, and entered the Sternweg, Road of the Stars, which soon skirted a long stonewall on the left.

‘Let’s go in the main entrance. It’s quite impressive, I think.’

Large wrought-iron gates.

‘Here we are.’

Klaus passed through. A broad driveway swept though a parkland of large beech-trees to the main entrance of the Observatory. They walked together, Bergmann pointing out the dome that sat on the roof above the doorway.

‘You can guess what’s in there.’ Bergmann grinned with pleasure.

‘The telescope!’ Klaus said.

‘Our *raison d’etre*.’

Klaus followed Bergmann up the short flight of steps to the large front door flanked by its Doric columns. At the top, the director turned to him.

‘Welcome to the Observatory, Herr Mendelsohn. I hope you will be happy here. Come inside.’

The coach drew up outside the theatre in the Theatreplatz, and Ulla accompanied by her parents and brother stepped down into the snow. She was aware of the great bodies of the horses, their breath exhaled in white drifting clouds, like a train standing in the station. The jingle of harness as the near one shook its head suddenly. She glanced at the shining, glossy coat stretched over muscle and flank, and felt the radiated heat of its exertion against the skin of her face.

‘Come on, Ulla. Don’t dream.’ Erika said.

Turning, she lifted the hem of her dress, and stepped forward towards the broad flight of steps. She forced herself up, in a measured way. You are doing this for Papa. At the top she entered the great foyer of the Deutsches Theater, paused for a moment, then moved on at the tail-end of her family group, like a cell in the body of the throng, over the deep red carpet towards the wide-flung doors of the ballroom. Mother led, thrusting herself erect at each step, with Papa coming a step or two behind. Hans close, glancing, being the gentleman. She noted several close friends of the family had already greeted her parents, and Tiefenbach had swept them up into their party. Large, flamboyant, richly-coloured paintings of the German landscape, in the Romantic style, took up sizeable portions of the wall space. And one of Bismarck in the full regalia of his office as chancellor still hung to the left of the doorway. Ebullient. Conservative.

Ulla hung back a moment in the entrance. The orchestra was tuning up. Many candelabras splashed their brilliant light on waves of golden hair, sumptuous ballgowns of every colour, on matchless white shoulders and throats, glinted on the polished buttons of the military, and on a shiny bald head here and there. She released herself into the swirling throng of bodies, as into the current of a stream, with the low tight buzz of eager anticipation in the voices all around her. It reminded her of the incessant buzz of cicadas in the long summer grasses, and she couldn’t suppress a smile.

She joined her family, sitting between Hans and an old aunt.

‘There will probably be some popular tunes to set the mood,’ Erika announced. ‘You ought to get up.’

Ulla stayed put. She recognized the tunes, of course, but found her body unwilling to respond to the familiar rhythms, and with every moment she delayed, an awkwardness began to creep into her. She found this self-absorption increasingly painful.

Suddenly, something startled her out of herself. A feeling which swiftly intensified into an acute awareness of being watched. She glanced about her, then saw him, across the room, on an angle to her left which had been just outside a normal line of vision. He was staring at her, unabashed, as though there were nothing else anywhere in this vast space now filled with noise and whirling colour, as you might in a small room, with only the two of you present.

Ulla felt a wave of heat sweep her cheeks and throat. The rudeness of the man! She looked immediately away. Anywhere. But elsewhere. And forced herself resolutely to keep her gaze there. When she felt she had looked away for what she judged to be a sufficient period, she hazarded a glance, in time to see his head just start to turn. She knew she could not prove that his attention had been elsewhere, but she knew for a certainty in her bones, that he had taken full advantage of every instant of her abstention. She had half a mind to shout directly at him across the intervening space, but managed to resist the urge. Tugged her shawl tight about her, thrusting her knuckles into her lap, and jerking her body round. Damn the marketplace! Soon she could leave, her duty more than done.

Sometime caught her eye. She turned.

He was right there. Not more than a pace or two away. A little taller than her, with a large mustache, and a remarkable brow, open like the sky. Slim. Lean of figure, rather. But it was the eyes. A dark and lustrous brown, two twin orbs, drilling into her. Questing.

‘Fraulein.’ He bowed slightly. Then advanced his right hand tentatively, moving it up slowly from his right side, with the motion of a pendulum.

She nodded curtly. Unsmiling.

‘May I . . . have the pleasure . . .’

The orchestra swung into the first of a bracket of Strauss waltzes.

She couldn’t see his left hand. He was hiding something, holding it out of sight, behind him. She saw something in his eyes begin to change. Slowly but inexorably, as though it was being squeezed out, despite being desperate to remain. She got an image of the laboratory, of extracts of substances being reduced, being vigorously worked with mortar and pestal in a crucible until only essences remained: essences of pain and darkness.

‘I’m not . . .’



He allowed it to appear, then. His left hand. It hung at his side. It looked crumpled. He was still far too young for her to think of it as withered, but . . . She dragged her eyes away, but they were drawn back, as though by an unseen force.

‘I’m sorry . . .’

‘I believe you were staring at me,’ he said. The corners of his mouth twitched.

She felt an involuntary inward burst of laughter.

‘If I am not mistaken, that makes us equal.’

She would never forget that. That he had thought them, even for a moment, and on such a relatively slender basis, equal.

‘I have prettier parts,’ she heard him say.

She found herself standing, then, setting her shawl aside.

Slowly they moved a little out onto the dance floor, where he navigated her rather clumsily towards a less-crowded space.

‘Emerald,’ he said.

She glanced up, a question in her eyes.

‘Your gown. Emerald.’

She let a smile come.

‘Papa, I would like you to meet Klaus. Herr Klaus Mendelsohn.’

‘Good evening,’ Tiefenbach said. He looked about him, then back. ‘A very pleasant evening, indeed. Are you enjoying yourself?’

‘Very much, thank you.’

Ulla noticed her mother.

‘Mendelsohn, did you say?’

‘That is correct. Herr Klaus Mendelsohn, Frau Tiefenbach.’

‘I see.’ Erika added. ‘It’s sometimes hard to hear. All this noise.’ She gestured.

He nodded, forcing an impression of understanding out of himself.

‘Do join us,’ blurted Tiefenbach generously.

Erika said: ‘I’m afraid all the seats seem to be taken, Herr Mendelsohn.’

He bowed, and started to move away.

Ulla found she was unable to move a single muscle in her face, or any other part of her body. She wanted to. More than anything. At last, her right arm left her side, and started

to shape something in the air, in the direction of the turning man – but the moment had past – and she let it fall back listless at her side again.

Ulla sat down heavily. It felt as though all the blood in her body had withdrawn in a surging retreat behind the walls of her heart, and lodged there, immobile, in a knot like a clenched fist. They spoke to her, but couldn't get one word in reply.

She waited until the orchestra started up again. She let the sounds of the strings wash over her, wash over her. But there was no unlocking. At last, impatient, she got up.

'Excuse me, I need air. I can't breath.'

The old aunt turned her head. She looked puzzled. 'What is it, my dear?' she said.

Ulla drew her shawl tight about her, and began to thread her way determinedly through the dancers.

'That's the Tiefenbach girl,' she heard a man's voice somewhere. 'Good hips, wouldn't you agree?'

Laughter behind.

*The marketplace!*

Then she was between thick curtains, and felt, with relief, the cut of chill air on her cheeks. She emerged onto the balcony, and crossed to lean her body fiercely against the hard iron of the railing.

Her head was a maelstrom. She gazed up at the night-sky into a blaze of stars. Not far off the dark masses of the trees crouched on the Wall path about the Old Town where the lower stars sparkled like cut crystal amongst the foliage.

'Beautiful, aren't they?'

She knew by his voice it was him: the words coming like precise, well-modulated notes from the lower registers of her cello.

'Mendelsohn?' She said it like music.

'It is I,' he said. 'He who stares. The not so pretty one.'

'I am glad, Herr Mendelsohn.' She repeated his name, as she would a musical phrase at the end of a good session, stroking the strings confidently with her bow.

'I would like to show you the Observatory – there is an Open Day for the public next Sunday, in the afternoon. Will you come?'

'I will.'

'Your mother . . .'

‘Don’t mind her, Herr Mendelsohn. She thinks that the only fit path for a woman is the one she took.’

‘No, I meant my name.’

‘You can’t help your name, can you?’

‘No, but . . .’

‘Then accept it. I do.’

‘But that’s not always society’s view.’

‘Oh, you mean that intangible creature that is the bane of our lives.’

He smiled.

She went on: ‘If it would only hold still for a moment, I’d wring its neck.’

‘I think perhaps it’s you I should be watchful of.’

‘A man who stares, with a crushed hand and a Jewish-sounding name.’

He lowered his head.

‘There, you see. Already we have three compelling reasons why I should find you interesting.’

He looked up, and smiled.

‘I want to see your telescope, Herr Professor. But with you as my guide.’

‘Come in the morning, then. The light’s at its best.’

She shivered.

‘We should go in,’ he said.

He held her shawl. She turned her back to him, and felt it placed lightly about her shoulders.

He’d got a seat at the far end of the row. Not so much to be out of the way. He just liked to position himself on the edge of wherever he was. He thought it the best point of vantage for observation. And of course, if he looked at it closely, it was the orbital thing. This was the line of travel, or path, of all heavenly bodies. So many nights under the telescope had he spent nights since boyhood observing stories of this kind that he it had become part of his very fibres. With the result that even in everyday situations he moved thus, if it were possible, and chose such locations were they socially available. So, when he had first taken Ulla Tiefenbach in his arms at the ball, he had instinctively gravitated towards an open space on the edge of the dance floor, to give both her and himself the best chance of establishing the most harmonious relating of their, until that moment, separate orbital paths.

The play had been deeply satisfying. He'd sit, for a moment, and let people unravel themselves at leisure. *Faust* was an intensely German play. It could really only have been written by a German. The figure of the wise old man or teacher had resided in the German psyche since primordial time.

All right, he'd go now, and make his way back to his rooms in the Observatory. It would be dark, until he had stumbled about still uncertain where switches were, he found a switch. And there would be the dark sea of his aloneness stretching on every side. Sometimes, when it got more than he could bear, seeming to scream its reality silently in his mind, he would dress warmly, and make his way along the corridor, and up the narrow spiral staircase to the Dome Room, where he could lose himself among the stars. Faust, he decided, belonged not only to the Germans, but to every man and woman, everywhere, in the same way as the English did not have exclusive rights to Shakespeare. They were like the stars, giving light to any human who turned their eyes heavenwards, in their longing for something other.

The man who had been sitting beside him returned. He'd forgotten his gloves, and came and picked them up. Relieved, he smiled at Klaus. 'Enjoyed it?' 'Profoundly,' Klaus said, answering the man directly out of himself. The man turned away. He can smile at me still, out of the freedom of not knowing me. The beginning of knowledge about me invariably ushers in the end of smiling, he reflected, as the strong image of Erika's pursed lips had stretched the dry skin of her face over the mesa-like bones.

'Hello.'

His heart jolted. He knew that voice. He glanced right, along the row. It was she, womanly in her winter coat and Russian hat, pressed snugly down around the burnished coils of her hair, with those small hands vanished in a muff. Yes, they were small, but how he remembered it as it lay supported small, but perfect, in his, in the first waltz.

'It's Herr Mendelsohn, isn't it?'

'Of course. Hello. I recognized you at once.'

He got up, and moving towards her along the row, simultaneously striking his foot against a wrought-iron seat support, and stumbled the remainder of the distance against her, ruffian-like.

Erika had stationed herself in the brilliantly lit hallway from where she was able to see guests as they entered the house and were relieved of their hats and coats by the maid.

Social procedure was like the pulse of her own blood and she normally derived considerable satisfaction from its smooth execution. But on that particular evening her fabled serenity was broken into by the incident that had taken place shortly before in the theatre.

She had been conversing with the President of the Ornithological Society when out of the corner of her eye she had noticed her daughter standing at the end of a row of seats beneath her. The subject of her daughter's interest was that damn fellow from the ball again. Erika had watched as they ascended the aisle, obviously far too pleased with themselves. And as though that were not enough, it had been followed by a bellow of laughter from her unthinking husband, and an invitation to supper. Really, the man was a social dunderhead.

With a jolt she realized it was them again now just stepping in. Erika noted that the maid was far too forthcoming. She hesitated, then muttered under her breath and abruptly turned away. He might have succeeded in breaching the outer wall, but his movements throughout the evening would be under unwavering surveillance.

Her daughter's voice: 'Mother, I . . .'

From some distance Erika observed the pair enter the drawing room. She would see that nothing disturbed the evening. She could see the lit candelabra in the centre of the square through the French doors at the end of the room. A shape they could not be open, but the cold prevented it – the balcony had been so pretty with its entwined clematis in summer. Ursula was introducing him to several of her old schoolmates.

In a remarkably short time Erika had her daughter circulating among the guests, diligently attending to her social duties, and her breath steadied within her chest when she observed him on one occasion standing alone at a window looking out into the darkness. He would soon see that in this house there was no place for him. She also detected an increasingly frenetic quality in her daughter's behaviour, as she moved from group to group, as people exhibit when they are torn by indecision. The girl had only herself to blame. It was simply the price she had to pay for having overstepped the mark.

But wait. What was this? Long practiced in assessing the collective ambience of a crowded room, Erika had sensed a gathering lull in proceedings.

'Lotti, some Schubert, there's a dear.'

The middle-aged soprano positioned herself in the waist of the piano, while that young and gifted professor in the Medical School flicked the tails of his jacket, and seated himself

on the stool. Erika was pleased when he hadn't required much cajoling, and could in fact hardly wait to get his hands on the Steinway again. Soon a bracket of lieder was disposing the company to suspend their conversations, and listen contentedly as song after song of field and creature found resonance in the German heart.

Once Erika observed her daughter staring at the astronomer, and then, to her consternation, saw her thread her way to his side. Between songs the two appeared to be deeply immersed in animated dialogue over a striking painting of the Harz Mountains, positioned on the wall behind them. From that moment Erika remained on tenterhooks until she saw her way to terminating the musical interlude in an appropriate manner.

So it was that Ulla found her Mother suddenly at her elbow.

'Mother, look. Klaus has been to the Harz, and he goes often in summer to the Alps with his brother.' She gestured towards the painting as she spoke.

'You should involve yourself more in the evening, Ursula.'

'But Mother, I . . .'

'Why not a movement of that Brahms you have been practicing? With your father. You would do me a real service there. He might drink less, if diverted. I fear his colour is too high.'

Mendelsohn started to raise his hand, but let it fall away as Erika turned, seeming not to have noticed him.

Erika managed to extricate her husband from a tight knot of his Council cronies, while simultaneously registering her mild disapproval of a ribald joke in the moment it achieved its climax amid a ring of red-cheeked laughter.

The company willingly settled again to enjoy the father and daughter's adagio, after which Erika announced supper was served in the adjoining room.

Klaus was afraid of that feeling of darkness that he was starting to sense again somewhere out there at the edge of his awareness, like the swirling mist borne by the foehn wind in the Alps as it begins to pour over a ridge into an adjacent valley. While the evening moved towards its close, people chatted happily around him in their contented islands. The young medical professor was lost now, playing Mozart quietly to himself in the corner. People were showing an inclination to leave, and Frau Tiefenbach had stationed herself once more out there in the hallway, to organize their departure.

‘Excuse me, Herr Professor, do you like what you do?’ It was the boy, Hans, at his elbow. There was something breathless about the way he spoke, as though he knew he did not have long. Eager, certainly, but breathless. He noted that Frau Tiefenbach had re-entered the room, and was standing just inside the door, staring at the two of them. And there was a look, almost of shock, on her drawn face, as though the room, despite its numbers having thinned considerably, still contained far too many people for what was about to happen.

‘Hans, the Professor is trying to leave. Don’t detain him.’

Klaus noticed people turn their heads, with a look of surprise or shock on their faces.

‘He’s no trouble, really, Frau Tiefenbach, I assure you. I have a moment, anyway. My students are always asking me such questions. I’m quite used to it.’ He turned to the boy, and fixed his gaze upon him. ‘Most certainly,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing else I’d rather do.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I beg your pardon. I’m not sure I have quite understood what you mean.’

The company had fallen completely silent.

Erika’s face went quite still, and the fingertips of her right hand pressed a hollow in her cheek.

The lad plunged on: ‘Astronomy – isn’t it? Something to do with the stars, isn’t it?’

‘Exactly, Hans. It has everything to do with the stars. What is it precisely that you want to know?’

Erika could see that her son was flustered now. She had a moment’s relief. But then she suddenly got the disquieting impression that the astronomer was somehow holding her son, supporting him across the space that divided them, until he managed to gather himself again.

Klaus saw the boy glance about him, as though seeking assurance. He opened his mouth several times, as though to speak. People watched him intently. He glanced first towards the open door to the dining-room, then to the hallway. His cheeks puffed out.

‘I need to know!’ It was like a pistol shot.

‘I’m ready,’ the astronomer said quietly.

‘Hans. Stop this minute,’ Erika said.

‘Oh, for God’s sake let the lad breathe a bit. Some space. Give him some room to breath.’ It was Tiefenbach. He was jovial, bear-like, sitting in a corner. It was evident he’d imbibed rather much of the good schnapps. ‘Science! In the name of Science, Professor, please proceed. Discourse, friends!’ He raised his glass.

Klaus saw Erika stiffen and glare at her husband. Her lips moved rapidly. She tapped the carpet several times with her stick, and looked about her.

Hans glanced at his mother, and turned back to the professor.

‘Professor, what made you chose the stars?’

Mendelsohn was silent. He knew this actually wasn’t the question the lad wanted to ask.

‘The stars . . .’

‘Yes?’ The lad’s voice went up a register. ‘How did you know . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘That they were for you – and nothing else.’

Ah, now we have the intended question, Klaus thought. There was only the boy and himself in the room. He began to speak.

Early. It was quite early. In fact I was only three. My mother had read to me, as she usually did, and said a prayer. Then she tucked me in, with that reassuring pressure of her hands about my body, and the warm brush of her lips upon my cheek, as she did every night. I heard the soft stroke of her feet on the carpet. The widening and narrowing of the band of light from the landing, as she adjusted the door so I would not be afraid in the darkness.

But that night I couldn’t get to sleep. In the end when the house was all quiet I got up, eased open the door, crossed the landing, and tiptoed down the two flights of stairs, holding fast to the balustrade. Eventually I reached the hallway, where I took the passage to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Carefully I turned the handle of the kitchen door and opened it until the gap was just wide enough to slip my body through. Then I stepped outside, down the steps and into the garden.

Klaus paused. The boy’s eyes were riveted on him, beseeching him to continue. He nodded.

Apparently my mother found me there, she told me later. Something had woken her, and she got up to check on me. She found the bed empty. She hurriedly fetched her



nightgown, and began a thorough search. In every room. Floor by floor. She said she even opened the front door, and ran to the front gate, fearing I might have wandered out onto the street and been knocked down by a passing carriage. Nowhere. Not a sign.

She returned into the house. Perhaps the garden. At the back. Anyway, there she found me. But she stopped herself abruptly at the foot of the kitchen steps. Holding herself in check in the shadows. Partly it was the shock of relief at having found me, she said, that enabled her to do that. But also, because of the kind of woman she was, she sensed at once that this was the most important moment of my life.

Thick snow lay all around. On the grass, on the bushes, even upon the trees. It was a landscape in white. And there I was, in the centre of it all, standing in my nightshirt, my chin tilted up as far as it would go, my head pressed against my spine.

The heavens were ablaze with stars. Hardly a space between one and the next.

It was about then, she said, that she was overcome by her role as a mother, and rushing forward, gathered me up in her nightgown, and held me high in her arms.

*‘Die Sterne! Die Sterne! Die Sterne!’* The stars! The stars! The stars!’ I was saying, over and over and over again. Those were my only words, apparently.

The room was sunk in silence. Klaus saw the boy’s eyes fixed upon his face, and his hands were raised up in front of his body, as though he were holding something.

### Chapter 3

Ulla sat at her desk in the laboratory. She was trying to concentrate on the reports of her father's research over the years. Despite the fact that there was nothing she wanted more, disturbing images of the previous evening kept interjecting themselves, sometimes singly or in groups, sometimes in a jumbled mosaic of jagged colours, crowding into her mind.

Finally in exasperation, almost at the point of tears, she struck the top of the desk, scattering the papers. Her chest felt tight, and a burning sensation rose in her throat. It was bad enough initially to have had to go to the ball, but then to have the one ray of light that had emerged in it all soured by her mother – and she the one person who was so insistent upon her going. She shouldn't have let herself be swayed by Papa, and yet look the way he had made it possible for Herr Mendelsohn to tell such a moving story about the stars, and how much it had meant to her brother. And Papa hadn't been that drunk. He knew what he was doing, all right. He knew how potentially risky his behaviour was in the context of all those people. But Papa's like that. He isn't like Mother, he sees no point in pretending when he thinks something really matters, when it's vital something be said. It's funny, he's ready to uphold the cause of a single person, but for Mother, it's what society thinks is right that's important. And as for Science, wasn't that strange and wonderful, how he and Herr Mendelsohn, in the face of all their differences, both landed on the same side. In the eyes of some folk, he certainly raised a few eyebrows, but it didn't seem to matter to his Council cronies. They obviously just so enjoy his company. My, how he does like a good joke, though! And Herr Mendelsohn, once he got going, she didn't think there was a single force on earth – not even Mother – could've stopped him. She knew she could be stubborn, but such unwavering single-mindedness of purpose! Though it might have been better if he hadn't gone quite so far. But then poor Hans would've just had to take his question to bed again.

The print on the page swam before her eyes.

She'd go. She looked up, touched the little curtain with her right hand, and looked outside. The sky was threatening rain. She wouldn't put it off till some more socially acceptable time. She wanted him to know the things that were in her heart. Both the things that troubled her and gave her joy. All of it. She'd been stupid not to go to the Open Day

yesterday. She'd allowed what seemed more appropriate to get in the way. She'd try harder not to do it like that in future.

She got her hat and coat down from the peg behind her. On the way out she paused by the cages and watched the mice for a moment. Housebound, she thought. Like a woman who is forbidden to find something else beyond its walls. She opened and shut the lab door. In a matter of minutes she had traversed the corridors of the hospital and was again in the street. It had started to rain. She thought it would've been more sensible to call a carriage, but somehow her feet seemed to offer her the swiftest passage.

Klaus paced the Dome Room. He felt he couldn't go near her, and yet he couldn't not go, either. He'd had a poor night, broken by fragments of dream, in which he saw repeatedly the disdainful face of a tall woman, who might have been a teacher, stick a strip of paper across his small brow, with his name on it, Mendelsohn, and sit him in the back corner of the classroom, disgraced, in isolation, not fit for human company. He stopped by the telescope, and looked down at his hands, half-expecting them to be different.

He clearly couldn't return now to the house on the Theaterstrasse. Another wall had replaced the crumbling one of the Old Town. Even though her father had been welcoming enough – amazing how he'd paved the way for his story, how Science provided them with a language and a common ground to stand on.

He stopped his to and fro by the small south-facing window that looked down upon the driveway, the direction from which the sun at its greatest heat normally came. But it was raining. The trees in the park, drenched, seemed to hang their heads, disconsolately.

Wait. What was that? Something had moved in the entrance to the distant gate. It was a figure, hurrying to be out of the rain. Halfway, and the figure seemed suddenly familiar. That . . .

It was her. The Fraulein Tiefenbach.

He watched, then turned, and a moment later risked himself upon the stairway, and ran to the front door, where he advanced down the steps, in his shirt sleeves, just as she reached the bottom.

'Fraulein. Fraulein. It's you. Come in at once.'

She stood in the foyer, shaking the drops from her, her hood thrown back, with the electric light on her reddened cheeks against the pale skin and in the auburn coils of her hair. She smiled.

‘Hello, Herr Mendelsohn. It’s not Sunday, I know. I couldn’t come. But here I am now. Have I caught you at an inappropriate time?’

He manoeuvred himself so that he walked on her left side. He took her to his rooms, where he lit the gas heater at once. It settled to a steady throbbing sound. She divested herself of her dripping outer garments, and soon was seated warm and dry with a steaming cup of coffee clasped in her hands and two little cakes on a flowered plate beside her. She noticed how he bustled about awkwardly, attending to her.

Was he imagining this? He stared at her.

‘Sunday,’ she said. ‘I wanted to come. Very much. But after that supper, and Mother, and –’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It does to me.’

‘We will have our own tour.’

They walked through the corridors, and turned right at the front of the building into a dark, low-ceiling narrow room. There was a large table of blackened perfectly smooth wood down the right hand wall, and book-shelves, three high, within easy reach, set along the other three walls. The books looked remarkably uniform and very old, with faded gold lettering in Gothic script on their spines.

‘The Old Library,’ Mendelsohn said. ‘Books dating from the first director around 1800.’ He motioned her towards a narrow spiral staircase that wound up out of sight in the far corner.

‘Precede me, please. But keep a good grip upon the rail, the light’s not good.’ He heard the tap, tap of her shoes, ascending, and the flow and momentary pause of her skirts upon each tread.

At the top he leaned past her and pushed open the door.

Ulla entered a low-ceiling, but quite spacious room with half windows on two sides, to the south and west.

‘The instruments,’ he said. ‘Since the beginning.’

He watched the instinctive, rhythmic way she moved her body amongst the awkward edges of the glass-topped tables.

She stopped at one.

‘Like intricate gold and silver-plated insects, waiting expectant for the scientist’s hand,’ she murmured.

‘Imagine that line of hands, coming up through time to us,’ he echoed.

She looked about her. ‘Can I see the telescope?’

‘Of course.’ He indicated a smaller door beyond them in the opposite wall. He had to stoop. For her it was just right. ‘We need to go through there. Mind the step, it is dark for a moment.’

In the moment before he opened the door of the Dome Room, he smelt the fragrances of her and heard the rustle of her dress and the steady draw of her breath.

Light flooded in.

‘The Dome Room. Home of the telescope.’ He stood back.

She moved about the telescope, examining each part, requesting a detailed explanation of its function.

‘I saw you from this window.’

‘Sneaky.’

He laughed.

On a large drawing board under the eastern window several papers were scattered. She stood beside it. She could see the orange tiled roofs of the houses outside with the trees of the Wald rising behind them. On one particularly large sheet two graceful ellipses had been drawn and at the point of their intersection two circles stood. The whole annotated precisely with numbers and an occasional series of equations in Indian ink.

‘No words?’ she said smiling.

‘Numbers are my language. With them I can travel more lightly and swiftly among the stars.’

‘What do the circles represent?’

‘Double stars. Hertzsheim first discovered them in the 1600s, and made a lifetime’s work of recording as many as he could.’

‘Are they always found together?’

‘Always.’ He looked at her.

She tilted her head to one side. Placed the fingertips of her small gloved hand close to his drawing of the two stars on the page.

‘How is that possible?’

‘They are mutually attracted.’

‘Oh, I see.’ She paused.

‘They exert a strong gravitational force upon one another.’

‘Oh.’

‘Their orbits are interdependent.’

‘And all that’s in the numbers?’

‘Yes. All of it. At least I hope it is.’

‘Do they shine forever?’

‘Sometimes one dies, we think.’

She drew her hand away, and placed it over her heart.

‘But that is sad.’

He didn’t reply.

‘Does it go away then?’

‘No.’ He heard her breath quicken. A sudden intake.

‘Can we see it?’

‘No. Its light is lost.’ He sensed a deep stillness in her.

‘But how can that be? How can we be sure it’s still there?’

‘Because the other remains, holding its position exactly in the heavens, moving in its orbit in the way it always has.’

‘How beautiful is that.’ She turned to look at him. *Double Stars*.

Erika had come in earlier than usual in the evening before dinner. Had dressed in a new linen dress, tightened her corset. Attended to her hair with particular care, securing it with more pins than usual, so that it was drawn back in a severe line from her temples, and taken her usual seat at the window, looking out at the gathering darkness in the masses of trees in the garden, swiftly losing their features as the light withdrew.

The maid came in. She always made a point of thinking of her as the maid.

‘Frau Tiefenbach, could I get you some light refreshment?’

‘I will take a camomile tea.’

‘Hello, Arilda.’ Erika saw her daughter smiling and greeting the maid as though they were boon companions. What a mammoth task it was to make something presentable out of her. Increasing numbers of her generation are the same, though. Fraternising with the servants as though by some political miracle they have been placed on an equal footing overnight.

‘Good evening, Mother. How is your leg, tonight?’

‘Sit, Ursula. Never mind my leg, it is not a fit subject for you. Anyway I have other things I want to say to you. I have just returned from the Science Society. A most informative lecture to open the season. On Saturn and its rings. Then it was completely spoilt.’

‘What happened, Mother?’

‘If you remain quiet, you will hear.’ She turned her gaze from the dark garden to look directly at her daughter. ‘He’s evil,’ she said.

‘Who, Mother?’

‘What have I just said?’

Ulla looked down at her hands.

‘That astronomer fellow. Who else?’ She heard the front door close. It would be her husband. The maid’s tone was far too warm, Erika would attend to that. She has no right. She heard his ponderous tread upon the steps, and his bustling movement in the hallway before he entered the drawing room. He was becoming slower, and now made more fuss getting from one point to another than any other person she knew. She watched him, as he came in, and with a brief ‘Good evening, my dear,’ crossed to his chair, and straightaway got behind his newspaper. She noticed how the maid always had the paper there before he came, and the reading light already turned on, shedding a warm, intimate circle of light.

‘Things are not good in Germany,’ he said. ‘Wilhelm is like an immature schoolboy. Now he wants the biggest navy in the world. Britain’s sea power needles him.’

‘Alfred, I was talking.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, my dear.’

She turned her attention to Ulla again. ‘He chose the most lugubrious of topics. Nothing but death. And dying.’

‘Of stars, Mother?’

‘Yes . . .’ Erika had paused. ‘How did you know? Were you there?’

‘Of course not. You know where I was. He’s an astronomer, after all.’

‘Don’t you dare take that tone with me, young lady. You will have to learn to keep your place.’

Tiefenbach shook out his paper, with a sharp, crackling sound. ‘Oh, Ulla, one thing. I have that friend of yours in isolation. You know, the one who plays violin in your trio.’

‘Stephanie Krotz.’

‘Alfred, be so good as to keep out of this. That can wait.’

He shook his head.

‘This time of yours at the hospital, Ursula. When is it going to end?’

‘Soon.’

‘When, exactly?’

‘I like ordering Papa’s papers. It’s a help to him. You have no idea how busy he is.’

‘And now suddenly you are his wife. Paperwork? In the laboratory?’

‘I was only . . .’

‘Alfred!’

Tiefenbach lowered the paper. ‘She is invaluable to me, Erika. I am worked off my feet. My theatre schedule has doubled, and unless the paperwork gets seen to regularly, things get in a terrible muddle. And that could get dangerous. Anyway, it’s surely better if she’s there part of the day. It gets her out of the house. And at least she’s not roaming round the countryside.’

Erika’s thoughts were back in the Town Hall. She found she couldn’t let the matter drop. Her social instinct told her that somehow all this was connected. It was not clear yet, but she was certain it would become so, given a little time. This objectionable outsider obsessed with dying stars. And this daughter of hers, who should be filling her diary with useful contacts, and readying her trousseau for the inevitable day. Instead she was closeting herself in a laboratory – in a man’s world – peering down a microscope. Extremely bad for the complexion and posture. *Paperwork!* She was no fool. She drew herself up.

‘I’m going to make something quite clear now, Ursula. For the good of this house, and this family. For the good of your own future, which you seem determined to throw away, along with a fine education . . .’

The maid came in. She put a cup of tea down beside Erika, completely unnoticed by her. She was almost at the door when Tiefenbach said: ‘Arilda, I wonder if I may have a port. It might help me to sleep.’

Erika waited until the door closed. ‘I won’t have that man anywhere near my house. Or my daughter.’

‘But Mother, Klaus isn’t . . .’

Erika noticed at once her daughter’s spontaneous use of his Christian name. That was a mistake. In an unthinking moment, she had given herself away, revealed something Erika felt sure she would rather have kept hidden from her. She held her steadily with her eye. Questioning.



‘He is passionate about the cosmos, Mother. He feels that the safety of our life on earth may one day depend upon the extent of our knowledge of it.’

‘You appear to know a lot about him. In fact, you are beginning to sound just like him. Those were the very words he used!’ Erika observed the colour flame on her daughter’s face.

‘He feels as strongly about his stars as you do about your social matters, Mother.’

‘How dare you compare me with him in the same breath.’

Erika paused, weighing carefully her words: ‘I will make you a contract. Here, with your father as witness. Continue with this so-called paperwork, in the meantime. But only that, mind you. If you even . . .’

‘Mother, I did what you wanted.’

Erika held herself in check. Where was this going?

‘I went to the ball, against my true wishes, to please you.’

‘But you did not conduct yourself responsibly. When you saw that you were on the point of committing a grave social error, you should have been warned. But no. Headstrong, you had to have your own way.’

‘How was I to know he was . . .’

‘When you did find out, still you refused to stop. Hot-head! At the theatre. And during the supper – looking for any excuse to dance attendance on him.’

‘Klaus, Mother.’

Erika smiled slowly.

Ulla started towards the door.

‘Don’t turn your back on me. Paperwork, all right. But if I ever see you anywhere near him again, you will . . .’

Ulla faced her mother. ‘I will what, Mother?’

‘Leave.’

‘Leave what, Mother?’

‘This house.’

Tiefenbach lowered his arms swiftly, crumpling the paper in the process. ‘Erika! Ulla! That’s enough. Do you want to destroy this family?’

‘Why must I do that, Mother?’

Erika drew herself up, like a ramrod.

‘You have no right to question your Mother. No right on earth. You go too far, girl.’

The door opened. It was the maid.

‘Keep out! Family only! Keep out!’ Erika said.

Tiefenbach turned towards where the door was slowly closing.

## Chapter 4

Ulla woke as night was balancing on the edge of day it seemed: a paleness behind the curtains, her dresser and wardrobe still black shapes, and the cold standing in the room. As though she had been woken on purpose, at that precise moment, full of confusion, yet with a strange compulsion, at that precise moment. She could feel it as a great lump somewhere in her chest. Stephanie, her dearest friend, since they were little girls, for whom life and light were in the balance. Cornered. That's how her Mother made her feel. She lay there, and in her head, her Mother's voice: You can do this. But not that. And this only that far. And if I ever . . . Leave this house! Imagine saying that to your own daughter. It opened in her that old feeling that kept surfacing every now and again, after an incident of this kind, that she felt as though she had never had a mother. As though she had had to walk by herself from the beginning, always on the edge of a black hole, which she fought against being drawn into.

She got up, washed and dressed briskly in a smart practical skirt and jacket and put her hair up in a bun. It was too early for official breakfast.

She tiptoed down the stairs and took her hat and coat from the peg in the little vestibule by the front door, where the tiles had a diamond-shaped black and white pattern. Somehow they reminded her of him. She paused, her hand already on the latch. No, this was not a morning like any other. She hesitated, then started down the narrow steep flight of stone steps to the kitchen. Arilda, grown up on a farm and used to rising at first light, would be up. Ulla knocked.

'Good gracious, Fraulein Ulla, what is the matter?'

'I'm hungry, Arilda, and I must go out.'

'Your Mother?'

'I don't care. I must go out.'

Ulla felt herself led across the flagstones to the big stove in the corner, already roaring. She sat in a comfy wicker chair. Arilda put a bowl of steaming porridge, a slice of black bread, thick with butter and plum jam, and a mug of hot chocolate, on a tray and set it on a stool beside her. As she ate she could feel the heat of the stove on her cheeks and she watched this woman with her comfortable-looking body and her homely ways. Something stirred in her, wistful.

Arilda bustled about.

‘Where are you off to this morning?’

‘I’d better not say. Then no one can blame you.’

Arilda nodded.

‘I must go now.’

‘Use the side door. Be careful, Fraulein Ulla.’

In the street a few buds on the trees. But still cold. Ulla was thankful she had her winter coat with its fur collar and her muff. Her breath made a wispy white spiral in the air as she walked. Patches of snow still lay in the gardens. She walked briskly along the Humboldtallee until she came opposite the Marienhilf. Then crossed over and followed the winding path through the great beeches to the wide entrance. Above the door the hospital’s motto in Latin registered again: *‘To Relieve the Suffering of Others’*.

She found Sister Maria at the reception desk sorting the rosters for the day.

‘I know it’s early, but may I visit Stephanie, Sister?’ Ulla wondered why she didn’t consult her patients’ list, but looked at her instead.

‘I’m sorry, Fraulein Tiefenbach, Fraulein Krotz died in the night.’

So she was late. Much too late. Even though she had risen in the silent house. Perhaps if she hadn’t wasted time over breakfast.

‘Is it known when she died?’

‘Around two, we think. In the deep night.’

Ulla leant against the desk.

‘I’ve left some papers of father’s in the laboratory.’

‘The service will be in the Marienkirche. On Wednesday.’

‘She is my friend. She was my best friend.’

‘I understand.’

Ulla turned and walked slowly through the corridors. Once in the workroom at the small table with the leafy tree at the window she forgot even to take her coat off, but took the microscope out of its box and sat with it between her hands for an hour. Quite still. With a branch scratching occasionally against the windowpane in the rising wind. With the solitary beat of her heart. And the distant intermittent scuttling sound of the mice in their cages.

At the end of that time she got up and went quickly to her father's rooms. She hoped to catch him before his morning surgery. When she went in he was already on his feet with his jacket off.

'Papa, is it true? Stephanie died in the night?'

'It is true.' He came towards her.

'It isn't fair. She had not lived enough.'

He stopped, his head on his chest.

'I want to see what killed her.'

'You . . .'

'You know what I mean. The bacteria responsible.'

'Ulla, I have my surgery. That cannot wait, as you know.'

'When, then, Papa?'

'By mid-morning I should be through.'

She went to the Wald. It was just up the slope from the house and not far from the hospital, either. All the time she thought about her friend and about how she had always preferred the movements marked *allegro vivace* the best. But she was back in her father's rooms, on the dot of ten-thirty, seated with a straight back and hands clasped in her lap, when he came in. He looked exhausted and depressed, so she offered to make him a hot drink.

'I don't think this can wait,' he said.

Together they went to the laboratory. He got a microscope from one of the cabinets and sat her down at a table under the tall windows.

'The light is best here,' he said. He went and got samples in their Petri dishes.

She read the label: *Tubercle bacillus*. She watched as he prepared the slide with sample and methylene solution, placed it with care upon the platform, and moved the clip to secure it. He selected an appropriate lens and screwed it on. Focussed it.

'There, Ulla. That's what you wanted to see.'

She bent over the eyepiece. She felt herself entering another world. A special, hidden world. A world intense, dynamic and complex.

'Papa!'

'Describe for me exactly what you see. Everything.'

'It is a beautiful bright blue.'

'Correct.'

‘Relatively small. Elongated. Occurring usually in small clusters. Not more than three.’

‘Good. You give quite an accurate description. I am pleased. Do you think you would recognize it if you saw it again?’

‘Of course. – Is that what killed Stephanie, Papa?’

‘Yes, it is.’

Ulla was silent. She watched it until her eyes watered. No, she would never forget it. Never. With a sigh she sat up.

‘Papa, I will be here tomorrow.’

Tiefenbach looked at his daughter: ‘And your friend? What about him?’ he asked gently.

‘I will be here tomorrow. That is all I know.’

‘I am sorry about . . .’

She got up and buttoned her coat.

‘Thank you for showing me, Papa. I will go home now.’

When the door closed, Tiefenbach packed up the sample and microscope, then returned to his office. Seated at his desk, he opened a drawer and took out a large hardcovered exercise book. He turned to the section headed Hospital Staff. Here he made a fresh entry: Fraulein U. Tiefenbach, assistant. He dated it.

## Chapter 5

Klaus had gone out with her to the main gates still talking incessantly about the stars and after she had left him and was already some distance away he called out to her and came hurrying in pursuit full of apologies. He had wanted to assure her that by far the most wonderful and remarkable event of the day, the thing that had meant everything to him, indisputably, was the fact of her coming. And whatever interpretation she may put upon his apparent rudeness, she was to understand that since this was the only language he had, he spoke not of the stars but of her. Furthermore his one hope was that he would see her again soon. Sooner than that would be preferable.

As he retraced his steps he felt he walked on air. The trees and the park and even the columns at the door seemed hushed like a stage after an immortal scene. He made his way along the corridor to the left wing and into the old library. He paused in the stillness at the foot of the spiral stairs, closed his eyes, and heard again the sigh and pause of her trailed skirt. Once in the Dome Room he crossed to the north window from where he'd first seen her barely two hours before. He let his hand linger on the red leather of the telescope seat where she had reclined. It was clearly madness to continue with this thing that was happening to him. Her family was against him. Not so much the Herr Doctor who, like him, was a man of science and who with such generosity of spirit had paved the way for him to recount his childhood vision. But the woman of the house, the Frau Tiefenbach, she had him clearly in her sights, and had had him so from the moment she heard his name that evening at the ball. And he doubted whether, in all the cosmos, there was a solution to that particular problem.

She had been utterly displeased. He knew from her reaction to her husband's suggestion in the theatre that she had severe reservations about his entry into her house. And that for her, what promised to be a pleasurable event, was marred by his presence and what followed.

Despite all this the Fraulein Tiefenbach had come of her own volition, without a trace of bitterness or reserve. There, surely, was his answer. And it was now up to him to decide, alone and unaided, what his response would be. Of one thing he was certain. It would have to be of like kind, unequivocal, either way.

‘That stream, Klaus! Yes, that one over there.’

They had been cycling for an hour under a brilliantly clear sky, with only a light breeze moving the long grasses at the roadside, before Ulla found what she was looking for. She was so happy that he had agreed to come despite the fact she’d stressed it had to be an expedition in which work played an equal part with pleasure. If any problems cropped up, it was always easier to solve them together, he’d said. Straightaway the whole idea of a hunt of some sort had gripped his imagination.

She had spied a path winding through the field towards a stream and there seemed to be a small clearing on its banks. They got off and laid their bicycles in the grass. He opened the gate to let her through and took the basket. Everywhere there were wildflowers.

She set out, leading the way. She noticed he didn’t seem to mind. He is content to follow me, she thought. He doesn’t think I’m bossy.

They reached the stream.

‘Over there.’ She pointed, and leapt across, laughing.

He handed her the basket, then followed at a more sedate pace.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘Here in this eddy. This cushion of white foam is a veritable net of possibilities.’ The lapping water nudged it against pendant grasses. She indicated the tiny objects held in suspension.

‘Have you any idea of their origin?’ he asked.

‘An old fisherman told me that storm waters will release particles from weed on the stream bottom lodging them in spots like this.’

As she rummaged for a Petri dish in her rucksack, she felt him kneel awkwardly at her side, propping himself on the damaged hand.

She offered him the dish to hold. Then leaning over, she took a sample with her spatula: ‘Hopefully it contains spores,’ she said.

They went back across the stream. Several large field mushrooms had burst through after heavy rain. They took samples from two species and she told him their names.

‘Are they poisonous?’

‘No. Quite edible, in fact. It’s generally the brightly coloured ones you have to watch.’

‘I see.’

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked.



They spread the rug and she started to unpack the basket. The sun was warm. A murmur of insects. With a gentle chuckling from a small waterfall. She smoothed her skirt and tucked her legs underneath.

‘I brought cheese and fresh plum jam for the bread. And a small bottle of red wine.’

‘A feast.’

‘Are you happy here?’

‘Very.’

She smiled. ‘No, I meant in Rothenheim.’

‘Oh. Well, they’re friendly at the Observatory. Scientists, you know.’

She was quiet. ‘I’m learning to be a scientist.’

‘I can see that.’

She glanced up, but he had meant it seriously.

‘Has your family lived long in Frankfurt?’

‘For centuries.’

She watched the water slipping past for a while and she could feel his eyes upon her but she didn’t mind.

‘We should go on,’ she said. ‘I’d like to find one more kind if we can. I read that it has medicinal properties.’

‘Have you any idea where?’

‘In a beechwood. They like that particular tree, apparently.’

They packed up and folded the rug, their hands touching inadvertently.

‘I enjoyed our picnic,’ he said.

Once back at the road, he took the basket: ‘It’ll leave you freer.’

They had been riding for only a short time when she saw what she was after. A copse of mixed beech and oak close to the road.

As they approached, she said: ‘I love their graceful boughs. We have them at the Mariahilf too.’ She passed several until she found one standing on its own. There was a large ring of bright red mushrooms with white spots.’

‘Posionous?’ he asked.

‘Very. But aren’t they just like in a child’s storybook.’

‘Magical.’

‘A good sign for us, though.’

He looked puzzled.

‘It means the subsoil is rich with mycelia.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s the tissue out of which all fungi are made. It can take many forms.’

‘Interesting. Like the mushrooms we’ve seen?’

‘Absolutely.’

She went to the trunk of the great tree, then turning, walked out to the full extent of its branches.

‘We need to find the ends of its roots,’ she said. Again she knelt down. Nothing was visible except a thick carpet of old leaf litter. She got a trowel from her bag and began to dig and scrape.

‘Please let me have a turn.’ After a minute or two he struck something. ‘Here, you’d better have it back again now.’

A root appeared. She followed it, scraping and clearing the earth away more carefully now. It had the appearance of a naked limb. It soon narrowed considerably.

‘Ah!’

There was what looked like many threads intricately intertwined to form a solid sheath about the root-end.

‘It’s as though they are protecting it,’ he said.

‘Yes. It is a strong association.’

‘Strange. Quite hidden, too. You’d never guess it was there.’

‘They are dependent,’ she said. ‘Beech-tree and fungus. They nurture one another.’

She got two dishes from her bag. ‘We’ll have two samples, I think.’

‘Could I take the other?’

‘Of course.’

She put both the dishes in her bag and smiled at him.

He stood suddenly and held out his hand.

‘No,’ she said. ‘The other one, please.’

He hesitated. Then moved it out slowly from his side.

She wrapped her hand about it.

‘Your hand is so warm,’ he said.

‘That’s because it is happy.’

They went out to the road. He kept the basket and she had the rucksack on her back. They took a different way back to the town and rode in again with the day's heat warm on the stones of the gate.

It was a fresh spring day as Erika left the house for a morning in the town. It would be a morning spent in literary pursuits, she had decided, to see whether Schneider had something by the popular English novelist, Sir Walter Scott, which was of the moment in her group. The next meeting was to be at Frau Buhlers in mid-March, and as she saw no point in standing on the margins at such gatherings, she would prepare herself. She had observed on similar occasions that to remain too often silent meant that people ceased to seek one's opinion when it mattered.

She reached Schneiders and went in. Herr Schneider himself was at the desk and he greeted her respectfully. In answer to her query about the popular English author, he came with her to an area at the back of the shop that he'd named his 19<sup>th</sup> Century Literature section. He was clearly proud of it and wanted to show it off.

'Actually the author is Scottish,' he said.

She knew that of course but had never seen any need to make the distinction. She found his correction pedantic and slightly objectionable. However his immediate offer of personal service smoothed the way. Herr Schneider represented for her the world as it ought to be – mannered and orderly, at all times. After all the business had been in the family for many generations and several members of her group, who were regular customers, had assured her that he would go out of his way to obtain any book they desired were it not on the shelves.

'Thank you, Herr Schneider, I know where it is.'

Erika tensed. It was her daughter's voice. She would remain out of sight. In a moment she switched to her other role as guardian of the family, as she termed it for herself. She moved to the end of a stack from where she could command a view of most of the shop without being seen. She heard her daughter ask whether Herr Schneider had anything on fungi. Erika made a mental note to look into this. She leaned forward. Ursula was ascending the stairs to the mezzanine floor. She went right along to the end. Erika knew there were several shelves of specialist medicine there, and she felt a ripple of disapproval. She had to wait the best part of ten minutes before Ursula made a decision and came down to the desk. 'Very interesting,' she heard Schneider say.

Erika watched the purchase and the departure. Then she moved, skirting another stack. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Schneider's gesture. 'Frau Tiefenbach, your daughter . . .' he began. She turned quickly, nodded and smiled.

In the street she had a moment of confusion. The pavements were busy now with shoppers. She paused, leaning on her cane, and glanced either way. No sign. Then she saw the familiar body shape and distinctive head of hair, and set off. Dark-blue dress. A fine fabric. She wondered why, but dismissed this thought almost at once. She found so many people vexatious. It meant you had to throw in your lot with everybody. It introduced a note of equality that she resisted.

The tap-tap of her stick quickened on the pavement. She had difficulty keeping her daughter in sight. Ursula was not simply out for a stroll. She obviously had a definite destination in mind. One ought to be in a carriage at this time of day. More people coming into the town. What business had they, really. Their families lived in the countryside. They had been happy there for hundreds of years. They were just cluttering the place up. A young man jolted her in passing without apology. And a car sounded its klaxon close to the curb and released a black, smelly cloud. She tensed and gagged. She found the constant babble of voices around her distressing. She was starting to perspire and become a little breathless.

She caught sight of her daughter suddenly in a gap. Quite a large lock of hair had escaped from its pins, and danced unattended. She was not wearing a hat. Really. A few steps more and the crowd thickened. She lost sight of her. She went on a bit then stopped, and looked ahead, then along the street where an open view presented itself. No sign of her. She had not crossed the street. Where on earth had she got to? Erika turned to find her face virtually in a box of red geraniums. She glanced up. It was a tavern. She moved to the doorway and ran her eye over the interior.

She saw him first. The astronomer. He had his back to her with his face half turned. My God, he had got up and taken her daughter by the arm and was helping her to seat herself opposite him and she was letting him without the slightest sign of reticence. The two of them were in a partially lit alcove well towards the back. The mass of escaped hair had increased and she was leaning back, with her arms raised, laughing, with less than half her attention upon repairs. A moment later she had both hands clasped upon the table inching towards him as she spoke like the prow of a ship through waves.

Erika forgot where she was. It was the look on her daughter's face. She struggled for the word but it eluded her. Then she had it along with the image of a little girl in ringlets skipping between trees no higher than herself. The lost word sat uneasily in the darkness of her mind like a distant pinprick of light: radiant. She ought to have known it, since it was frequently on the lips of her lady acquaintances as they indiscriminately applied it to each other. The muscles of her face moved involuntarily. She shook herself in disgust. A feeling of emptiness assailed her. Inadvertently she struck her hand against the hard edge of the box. She looked down. Her hand was beginning to swell and purple almost at once.

When she looked up again a waiter was offering them a bottle of wine.

In the end she turned away into the crowd. No one. No one could be allowed to deceive Frau Erika Tiefenbach. She felt a sudden sharp pain in her right leg. Someone jostled her. Twice. The world was *despicable. Despicable.*

## Chapter 6

Ulla lay in her bed feeling warm and cosy. It was a Sunday morning. It was so nice the way Klaus had invited Hans to come to the Observatory one afternoon to see whether there was anything he would like to paint there. It was one of the things he'd mentioned in the tavern. Apparently he'd been in at Buchner's, the printer and framer, where Hans helped out occasionally, getting some old photos framed, when he put the idea to her brother. And now he'd invited her to go on a real scientific expedition with him and some colleagues, whom she was getting to know, and who were so friendly to her. Partly a pleasure jaunt, but also with a more serious purpose of testing a new instrument which Klaus was hoping to enter in a competition set by the Academy of Sciences in Berlin for instrumentation in night flying. It was the kind of compass you could use in the air, he had told her, and might revolutionise night flying.

She had never flown before and was secretly apprehensive. But she'd hidden this from him in the tavern because he was so excited and enthusiastic about the project. After all, he'd come fungi hunting with her and now as she lay in her bed she imagined her cultures growing steadily in the cabinet in the laboratory. Each day she examined them, noting any changes. She knew that after a number of weeks it would be time to trial them.

But her unease with her mother grew daily too. It was true that she no longer waylaid her in the hallway as she was on the point of leaving the house, or called out in strident tones from the bedroom whenever she recognized her footfall on the stairs. Ulla would almost have preferred that. As it was her Mother's attitude towards her had undergone a strange alteration. Oh, she was just as vigilant as she always was, giving Ulla the impression that she was being constantly watched, but there was now an element of calculated distance in her behaviour, like a bird of prey perched on a high branch observing mice scuttling in the grassy field below her, choosing its moment.

She much preferred to think of Klaus. In the tavern he had pressed a folded note into her hand and said she wasn't to open it until he'd gone. She felt under her pillow where it rustled against her fingers. She had no need to draw it out, as she murmured the words by heart.

*I, Klaus, Starman, invite Ulla, Naturewoman, to fly with me from the Waldberg, this Sunday at 2 o'clock.'*

Strange, she thought, the only times and places when we can be really together are when we are outside the town, at the Observatory or in the woods and fields where I have always roamed. She pushed back the duvet and got out of bed.

They were already there in the clearing when Ulla emerged from the path in the Wald. Klaus was discussing last minute plans with the pilot of the balloon.

'Helmut, this is Fraulein Ulla Tiefenbach.'

'Good evening, Fraulein. Welcome aboard. I never know with the Herr Professor whether it's going to be pleasure or work.'

'An adventure!' she said, smiling.

'Exactly, Helmut. You ought to know by now they're one and the same thing!'

She had her warm coat and woolly hat on. It would be cool aloft. Already the first stars were starting to appear. She looked at the graceful shape of the filled balloon poised in the air, waiting.

The pilot had placed a short flight of steps to help entry to the basket. Once they were in Klaus touched her arm, 'All right?'

She nodded.

The pilot lit the burner and after a minute or two he adjusted it to a low throaty roar.

They lifted off, gradually rising above the trees. There was a slight breeze from the west. Klaus smiled at her. He sensed that behind the brave façade there was a thread of apprehension. 'Helmut is the most experienced balloon pilot in the valley,' he said. He saw the clearing below, and then they were sailing above the town.

'There's the platz and our house on the corner!' Ulla said.

'You'll be late for supper.'

'And the Observatory.' She pointed and touched his arm.

He nodded, smiling. Yes, it is out there, he thought. He knew of course that there were good rational reasons for its position – minimal light and noise from the town – but what struck him was its apartness. It stood on its own. Looking back, he caught a glimpse of her house. Only just inside the Old Wall, admittedly. But nevertheless inside. Included in the heart of things. He could feel the old darkness threatening to gather along his horizon

again. The slit of street where once a Mendelsohn craned his neck to see a single star between tall crowded wooden houses in a ghetto beyond the wall. The rabbi's house a torch of fire, spreading.

'Where are you?' she asked at his elbow.

'Forgive me.'

He handed her a leather pouch.

'Open it, Ulla. It's the compass I was telling you about.'

'It's quite light, really.'

'We'll fix it here on this bracket on the rim of the basket.'

She handed him the securing nuts one at a time.

He suddenly had an image of her in fields by a stream, sunlight dancing on its surface. He was glad she was here. They were working together again. The burner above their heads had slowed to a steady, reassuring roar.

It was a clear night and he could see the dark shapes of the land beneath the basket as they passed over them. Occasionally they spoke. He had asked her whether she would record the sightings he made, in the notebook. The heavens were a glittering canopy above them. And the burner cocooned them within its sphere of solid sound.

He took a fix on three stars, gave directions to the pilot, and they duly arrived above the expected town, or, in time, saw a dark peak glide eerily beneath them.

'I hope this is the final test,' he said.

In a spell she passed him the notebook.

He held the page open under the light from the burner. But it was not the figures he saw. It was her script with its tall looped open letters leaning slightly to the right like sheaves of ripe corn.

'Thank you, Ulla. Our analysis will come later.'

He stood at her side pointing out the constellations.

'I think it would be advisable to turn back soon, Herr Professor. There is a weather change in the offing,' the pilot said.

Klaus turned. He had been so absorbed in his work with Ulla. Helmut was right. A layer of dark cloud was starting to build up.

'What's happening, Helmut?'

'The wind is swinging into the south, Herr Professor.'

'Is it likely to be bad for us?'



‘It’s hard to say. But we shouldn’t delay further.’

Klaus wished he had been more aware. His attention had been mostly towards the north, engrossed in his work with Ulla. It was no way to look after her, though. Irresponsible.

A gust lifted the basket suddenly like an ocean swell beneath a boat. He turned to her.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She shook her head. ‘How could you have known?’

It came quicker than anticipated. A rising, bullying wind. Nudging them north towards a landscape pocked with lakes and marshes.

‘Have you a plan, Helmut?’

‘I’m trying to edge us east, Herr Professor.’

Helmut was being guarded with his information. Perhaps he was thinking of the lady passenger, not wanting to frighten her unnecessarily.

‘It would be advisable to take the compass in, I think.’

Klaus turned to do this, Ulla holding out her hands for the fastenings, and returning the instrument to its leather pouch. She put it in a fabric sleeve at the foot of the basket.

‘Thank you,’ Klaus said, ‘it’ll be safer there.’

‘We don’t want anything to happen to it. We want to win that prize!’

He looked at her. The wind buffeted the side of the balloon, and she made a grab for the side. It began to rock. He stepped close to her.

‘I’m terribly sorry. It was irresponsible of me to invite . . .’

‘No. You are quite wrong.’

He looked into the steady eyes.

‘There is nowhere on earth I would rather be at this moment,’ she said.

A gust threw them against the side.

‘Get down!’ he said. He got the rug. ‘There’s nothing more to see, anyway.’ He crouched beside her. ‘The cloud has covered the stars.’

After a minute he stood.

‘Helmut?’

‘It’s not so good, Herr Professor. We are being driven north.’

‘What will you do?’

‘We are already over the lake and marsh country. I need to get lower.’

They passed over a small town and they could see its lights spasmodically through the drifting murk of cloud blown about them like tattered rags.

Klaus crouched down.

‘Are you all right?’

‘The wind’s playing a scherzo in the stays!’ She laughed.

He drew the rug closer about her. The pilot signaled.

‘What is it, Helmut?’

‘We have a more serious problem, Herr Professor.’

Klaus put his face close to the pilot. The roar and occasional cough of the burner ripped their words away into the void.

‘The valve on top of the balloon has jammed. I can’t release the gas.’

Klaus knew exactly what this meant. Unless they were literally blown out of the sky, they were now obliged to career north at a more or less fixed altitude, completely at the mercy of the wind.

He put his mouth close to the pilot’s ear.

‘Helmut. The sea?’

The pilot turned and looked right at him, his eyes slitting. ‘That’s my greatest fear.’

There was a roll of thunder followed at a short interval by a fork of lightning that lit the balloon like a searchlight.

In alarm Klaus looked down at Ulla.

She had pulled the rug snugly about her, drawing her knees up, and tucking her head down low in her hands. She smiled up at him.

Klaus stood, gripping the sides of the basket, trying to make out what lay ahead. After a while he turned to the pilot.

‘Helmut. Have you a sharp object?’

The pilot looked shocked.

‘Helmut. A sharp instrument of some sort. Something that could slit the envelope.’

‘My God, Herr Professor!’

‘Only a little at first.’

‘I have a rod with a blade. It’s for cutting stays.’

‘Excellent.’

Hand over hand the pilot worked his way round the rim. Klaus saw him unzip something and draw out a long thin object. Helmut returned, jerked, thrust it into his hands. He shouted into his ear: 'Have I your permission?'

The pilot nodded vigorously.

Klaus turned and thrust his back against the basket, his feet braced apart. Hooking his left arm over the side, he craned up, beyond the roaring, into the torn darkness where the balloon behaved like a demented creature. He would make one slit. Small, if at all possible. One instant the fabric bulged. The next it was gone. He lunged several times at empty darkness. When he did land a strike it was deeper than he had meant. Immediately he heard a stern hiss like a cornered snake. The balloon lurched, and he clawed the side with his useless hand. After a few moments it corrected itself a little, but retained a certain tilt. He glanced over his shoulder.'

'Brilliant, Herr Professor! We're losing height.'

They continued to jerk their way down out of the heavens in an ungainly descent.

Klaus turned back. He peered ahead. Something was different. Down below small lakes pocked the landscape like craters on the moon.

'Helmut . . .'

'Yes, cut it again. It's the sea!'

He struck on every opportunity. For a moment the growing hiss of gas competed with the burner's roar. Then alone. He heard the pilot shout: 'I've turned it off!'

They waited, clinging on.

'Herr Professor.'

'Yes?' Helmut's head was against his.

'We're not far above the ground now. But we're going too fast. One more cut. Here, I'll do it. You attend to the lady.'

Klaus was down in the basket. 'Trees!' he heard the pilot shout, followed at once by a violent scraping underneath.

The basket lurched.

Klaus got her in his arms, covering her head. The sound of rushing air engulfed them. Then a terrible bump. A bounce. Another. Followed by a prolonged tearing and grinding as of metal over rock. A shudder. Then a final jar that shook him to the bone.

A vast stillness, save for the single monotonous slap of a torn stay.

He was aware of her opening her arms. Of the mass of her hair crushed into his face. Of her wet lips opening upon the skin of his throat.

‘Ulla. Ulla, my love. Are you alive?’

No sound from her. Then softly, close, trembling.

‘Now I am, my Starman.’ He felt something solid pressed into his hands.

‘What is it?’ He recognized the leather pouch. ‘Oh, Ulla.’

‘Don’t worry, your child is safe, and the notebook’s in my pocket.’

He wrapped himself around her as completely as he could amid the wreckage of the balloon.

Eventually they disentangled themselves. At first Helmut was nowhere to be seen. They tore things off and found him in the folds of the balloon, which had fortunately broken his fall. Apart from some severe bruising he was otherwise intact. Supporting one another they began to trudge through the cloying clay of the plowed field towards the light of the farmhouse that blinked amongst its trees. The smell of the sea was in the air.

## Chapter 7

Ulla had a broken night. The farmer's wife had put her in one of the children's rooms at the back of the house so that she would not be disturbed. Sometime after four she fell into a deep sleep and started to dream . . .

. . . A mycelia thread stirs in the earth. Begins to move, slipping from pore to pore, from cell to cell through the earth's body. Questing onwards and gradually upwards towards the surface. Several are now moving in concert like a cluster of bacteria. They come together. They try the roots of a number of trees. None are what they are looking for. They turn away again, veer off into the fecund darkness. At last they sense something different up ahead. The sense it has been moving but is now at rest, waiting in the earth. Ah, they come up to it. Trembling. A fine slender body, stripped, unbarked. The colour of white honey. They stretch out their tendrils. The first thread extends its tip, touching tentatively the quivering body of the other. It feels a ripple of information along all its length, messages of union and of association: I am the root of a beech. I am beech. Simultaneously the first transmits these in the language of earth whispers to the others and they all know they have found what they were seeking. It whispers back to the others: this is the one, this is the one. They come forward together, weaving and entwining themselves about the body of the beech until they hold it in a firm embrace. A dark warmth rises from the earth, mingling with the deep warmth of union and they begin to exchange messages: the beech and mycelia. The beech learns of their journey through the earth. Of searching. Of false trails and renewed hope. They hear then the beech speak of its quest to grow up to where the sky is. To where, unimpeded, it now finds room to breath and spread its branches in the topmost canopy. Listen it says. And mycelia hear the trillion touchings of starlight arriving upon the attentive leaf surfaces of the beech . . .

Ulla woke suddenly. Sat upright in bed. There was a ringing in her ears for some time afterward until it faded. She got up. She knew she would return to the house now. She would not hide this thing. What it was that had happened. What had started out as a simple invitation to science had somehow joined forces with that first cell seen beneath her microscope, calling her again into the heart of life. She could not turn her back on it. She

had to go forward with trust. This earth, this Rothenheimer clay of hers, had given her its affirmation. When she was done with this day, she would have some cello. Some Brahms. Yes. She began to brush out her hair vigorously.

She went through to a breakfast of porridge and plum jam and strong hot tea. They were seated round a large wooden table. The farmer's wife had patched Helmut up and he had spent an uncomfortable night. The farmer said he would drive them to the station and they could catch a train from there. It would be a bit rough with the horse and cart but it was the best he could do. They did not talk much at breakfast. On the train Klaus said he would go back with her to the house but she would not allow it. And even when they got down on the station platform she remained adamant.

‘What will you do?’ he said.

‘I don't know.’

Ulla knocked, and Arilda came to the door. She could see from the maid's face that things would not be easy. Nevertheless she smiled and hung up her coat, noticing that Arilda kept avoiding looking directly at her. It gave her a very uneasy feeling. A feeling of foreboding, almost.

‘Are you not pleased to see me?’

Arilda looked up quickly, without smiling, and touched her cheek lightly with the open palm of her hand, letting it rest there for a moment, before turning away and preceding her up the steps. Ulla had set her foot upon the stairs, thinking she would tidy herself up before making her appearance, when the door of the Day Room opened and her mother came out.

‘Ursula, stop right there! – Where have you been?’

‘On an excursion with friends, as you know. We had an accident and were unavoidably delayed. That is all.’

‘Away for virtually a whole night and day. Completely vanished off the face of the earth.’

Ulla followed her mother into the drawing-room. She knew this was going to be one of those ‘explain yourself’ sessions.

Her father hoisted himself out of his chair the moment she appeared, letting his paper fall to the floor. He was obviously so pleased and relieved to see her.

‘We had no word of you, Ulla. We were worried.’

Erika began to prowl up and down. At the moment when she was most distant, she twisted herself round, and said, 'Was he there?'

Ulla paused. 'Who, Mother?'

Erika struck the carpet with the point of her stick.

'That damned astronomer. First the ball. Then at supper. And if that were not enough, now this.'

She was not going to help.

'We were a party of colleagues. Scientists.'

'*Colleagues*. You are getting above yourself, young lady.'

She was too tired for these games. She would endeavour to excuse herself. 'Can we talk of this in the morning. I am exhausted.'

Erika's answer was to bar her way to the door.

'What do you want? I've told you where I was.'

Erika, without warning, began to talk about the bookshop, about how she couldn't see any connection between attending to her husband's administration and an interest in fungi. So, that meant her Mother must have been in the bookshop at the same time as herself. Why had she remained out of sight?

'And that wasn't to be an end of it, was it?' Erika advanced upon her daughter across the room.

'Erika, put that stick down, at once!' Tiefenbach roared. He had risen from his seat to intervene.

'We have a daughter here who consistently goes behind our backs. Conceals the truth!'

'What are you talking about, woman?' Tiefenbach said.

'She tells us she is going on a general sight-seeing trip, then meets this fellow clandestinely in a tavern.'

Tiefenbach looked bewildered.

'It's true, Papa. But not as she says. He invited me with his scientist friends. It was to be an adventure.'

Ulla saw that her mother was out-witting him. He was not good at this social cut and thrust because he had no passion for it. Poor Papa. She was no help to him. Ulla watched as her mother approached him, setting a hand lightly on his arm, and with an

ingratiating smile, gestured him back into his chair. He was virtually disarmed by her swinging mood. *My God, how dangerous she was!*

Ulla would deal out some of her mother's own medicine. She would ignore her, and put her case just to him. She would put it entirely on a scientific footing.

'Papa, we went to test this instrument. It was so exciting.' She told him how Klaus had worked on it for a long time now. How the flight had in fact been its final testing. And not before time, because he hoped to enter it in a national competition held by the science faculty in the University of Berlin. The winner would receive government backing. It was the first of its kind and might well mean Germany could lead the world in the vexed question of night navigation.

Tiefenbach nodded his head.

She sensed he was in total agreement, but felt constrained.

'It was a trick to put you off guard,' Erika said. 'No man in his right mind would expose a woman to such dangers. He thinks only of himself.'

'He does not. And we would've been home much earlier, had it not been for an unexpected change in the weather. – Papa, I love this man. He cares for me.'

Tiefenbach stood, feet apart, his thumbs stuck in his waistcoat pockets, staring at the carpet.

'He will destroy this family. Have you slept with him already?'

'I wish I had.'

Erika, angular, thrust down on her stick.

'May God damn you, then, for he is not one of us.'

Ulla noticed Arilda stoop to say something to her father. Whereupon he gestured urgently in the direction of the door.

'It is he. It is he,' she heard him say.

Realisation struck her. She'd have given anything to avoid this moment. She turned, terrified at what she might find. The door must have been open all the time. Why hadn't they heard the doorbell?

'Germany does not want him, either!' Erika shouted after her.

Ulla strode to the door. Flung it open, and stepped into the hall.

Klaus stood there. His head bare and coat open. He looked lost, and there was the distant sadness in his eyes she feared so much.



She went straight up to him, and hammered on his chest with her fists. He looked down. She thought he barely saw her, for he stared straight through her, as though the burning eyes were fixed on something in his mind that would not let him go.

‘Take me away! Take me away!’

He nodded and drew her to him. Then glanced back to where he could still hear voices coming from the room. Tears were coming now. He put his arm gently about her shoulders and led her down the steps. Arilda came behind, handing her things to him, then opened and closed the door behind them.

## Chapter 8

The beating of her heart was like the sound of an all-consuming drum in her ears. And it was quite a while before its tempo eased and she became aware of other sounds. Sounds beyond the warm darkness of Klaus' cloak wrapped about her. He lifted a flap to smile in at her, cocooned there, and the sound of the wind working the old leaves of autumn came in to her, before he closed it again and held her once more close in the deep warmth of himself.

In the end they got to their feet. She rearranged her clothes and pinned up her hair. They had found a leafy hideaway only a short distance from the Wall path.

'What will we do?' she said.

'Allow me to make the first decision for us. For this is my territory.'

She nodded.

They set out along the Wall path in a direction away from the house. She tried not to think of her Mother's words that kept shouldering their way into her mind like clusters of bacilli, with a similar effect. She wanted desperately to say more to him, but found she couldn't. Instead she moved closer and took his hand.

At the next intersection they left the path and turned down into the streets of the Old Town. As they came in under the shadow of a church she glanced up at a street sign: Jeudenstrasse, Street of the Jews. Fragments of the story he'd told her at the picnic came back to her. How at one stage his people had lived in the very centre of the city alongside a Christian community. Both had thrived alongside each other. Then, at the whim of a monarch, who wanted to fill his coffers, the City Council was instructed to sell their land and property and move them outside the wall. A cat startled by the movement of her skirt darted in front of them.

She glanced at him.

'Are you all right?' she said.

'No and yes.'

Soon after they passed along a narrow cobbled way with half-timbered houses running up three storeys and more on either side to a narrow channel of sky. She remembered how a street like this in the old ghetto was all they had. How rapidly a fire would spread.

In the Prinzenstrasse a boisterous group of students outside a café suddenly fell silent as they passed.

‘To the stars, Herr Professor!’ a voice rang out.

Ulla turned to see a raised glass, a glowing face.

Klaus stopped in front of them. Shuffled. But remained silent.

‘We are looking forward to your next session, Herr Professor. I promise to come with a clear head!’

A cheer went up.

Klaus smiled and raised his hand.

‘Thank you,’ Ulla said.

Further on, he said, ‘I would have liked to . . .’

‘I know. But see how you are loved.’

The street ran through the marktplatz, where the Town Hall clock struck the hour just as it had for hundreds of years. She imagined the farmers coming in each week from the countryside with their carts brimming with merchandise, setting up their stalls in the usual places. A noisy, colourful scene. Voices raised in barter and trade. She remembered getting down from the carriage into the snow, and making her way up the flight of steps, and thinking, here she came, the latest merchandise. But after the ball she had gone home still a free woman, and an unexpected transaction of quite a different kind had taken place. She straightened her skirt and checked the pins in her hair.

Soon they turned into Grunertorstrasse, and shortly after stood by what remained of the pillars of the Green Gate. She felt it in her then, the oppressive weight of the past.

‘The curfew would have started by now,’ he said. ‘We had to be outside the city wall by dark, and could not return until the morning.’

She put her gloved hand on his chest, and nestled into him.

‘You have me now,’ she said.

‘I am still outside.’

They crossed the street and went on along the curved road until they came in sight of the Observatory.

‘We can go in the back way,’ he said. ‘It’s not so far.’

It was the first time she had been within the great courtyard enclosed on three sides by the building of the Observatory. Small green plants in strictly ordered rows were starting

to thrust up through the earth in the plots. They stopped for a moment by the fountain, listening to the plashing of the water. She trailed her fingers in its turbulent surface.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘It’s getting dark.’

They went in a door in the corner and turned left along a corridor, which brought them to his rooms.

‘We’ll make a meal,’ he said.

‘Show me where I will sleep,’ she said.

He looked at her, and smiled.

‘Too tired to cook?’

‘No, just . . .’ She knew he was teasing her.

He stepped up to her and, with the tips of his fingers, lifted her chin.

‘Ulla Tiefenbach. Ulla Tiefenbach.’

‘Could we make our meal a little later, do you think?’

He led her a little further on where he opened a door on the right.

‘Here. This is the guest room. It’s right next to the old library, so you’ll have plenty to read if you can’t sleep.’

It was a pretty room with gold curtains and a reddish glow in the dark furniture.

‘It looks out on the garden. You’ll enjoy it in the daylight.’

‘Turn the light off,’ she said. She crossed to the bed. She heard the door moving over the carpet.

He felt his way in the dark until she took his hand. She gripped it. He could hear her breathing.

‘Undo me, my Starman,’ she whispered. ‘I am mycelia. My name is Mycelia.’ A gust of wind surged against the windowpane.

Silence.

His body was tense. His eyes wide open, unblinking. Every sense keyed.

‘Ulla.’

She stood on the carpet. Close.

The darkness was so profound in the room that he could see nothing save the barest outline of her. His hands were guided to the clasp, where his fingers fumbled for a moment. Then he felt the tumble of her hair – its soft weight full with the warmth and scent of her – quiver the skin of his face and arms . . . the touch of her breasts against his chest . . . heard her voice stroke the darkness . . .

Schubert's words ran in her mind:

*Let your breast too be moved,  
beloved, hear me:  
trembling I am waiting for you!  
Come, make me happy!*

'My soldier,' he heard her say softly. Warm with pride.

He searched in the darkness until he held her hips in his hands. And leaning inwards, he said, 'You are . . .'

Feeling spread through her whole body, like liquid fire.

' . . . You are my Ganseliesel, my Goosegirl. my Girl of the Fountain.'

'And you must be just another of those crazy students.' She laughed. 'Are you sure you've completed your doctoral exams?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Absolutely sure.'

'In that case, you may kiss me.'

She made a small sound – a moaning, like wind in ancient trees.

His hands were taken again, and guided on either side of her until they found each other once more, high up, where he knew the fastenings were.

She arched her back, encouraging him with small touchings of her body, warm and pliant, like a secret language.

The hooks that secured her dress were a sterner task. His hands would not hold still. His fingers, clumsy.

She heard him utter inarticulate things, like strange, unbalanced equations.

At last . . . the stroke of silk waterfalling his strung body . . . pooling with a sigh about his feet . . . and under her tutelage, he learnt to come lightly and wildly into the secret place, as the ocean wave, seeking the land, locks urgently with the warm waters of the waiting estuary.

When she woke in the morning he lay with his head resting on her breasts, sleeping peacefully, his breathing even, like a child. She cupped his head with her hand and drew the duvet back around him where it had come away in the night. Holding him like that she watched the daylight filtering through the curtains, making its patterns of quivering yellow

upon the wall. Without warning her Mother's dark words came and sat like desolate rocks in the centre of her mind so that she could not go round them. It was not exactly that Erika had driven her from the house, but that she had wounded so deeply her most cherished friend that it made it inconceivable that she might stay. And this new thing that was growing in her day by day, he seemed to be increasingly so intimately interwoven with it. In the warmth against him she felt the juices of her body rising and flowing like spring sap. She got a sudden close-up image of the stalk of a plane-tree leaf – rose-coloured, translucent, as though it too ached with desire. She knew she could not stay for more than a few days as a guest in the Observatory. Protocol forbade it. She would have to find a place of her own. They could look together in the morning paper.

It came within the next few days the terrible news that the Archduke and his Sophie had been shot in their carriage while on a visit to Sarajevo and that European relations overnight had come to the boil. It was all over the front pages of international newspapers and the chatter of countless telegraphs in every country ran hot day and night. Would Germany go to war was the question on everyone's mind?

Klaus set out for Ulla's apartment in the early afternoon. He knew she worked at the hospital in the morning. They'd looked at the papers for a day or two, together, and found something suitable in the upper Herzbergerstrasse. The location had immediately appealed to her because it was close to the Wald where she could go for walks and wasn't far from the hospital either. Her rooms were on the second storey with the owners a friendly elderly couple underneath. The understanding was that she would help them in the garden occasionally and with the odd task that was beyond their strength. She'd been there a week now and Klaus was anxious to see whether it was still to her liking. He was very much aware that he had occasioned her break with her home and it worried him. While the unrest in Europe was something that he knew people would much rather not have to live through, he was starting to realise that a situation of widespread conflict might provide him with an opportunity to show where his first allegiance lay. Spring was turning into summer, too, and he knew this was the reason he felt extra sensation in his damaged hand. It always happened as one season was changing into the next, almost as though his vulnerability in this respect meant he would always synchronise with the throes of Nature.

The day was clear and bright and as he walked along his heart was buoyant. He often felt her presence near and sometimes the shapes of her body would imagine upon his

consciousness in the most inopportune moments. Just the other day he had been talking enthusiastically with his small seminar class about the rings of Saturn as a thing of beauty as well as a scientific phenomena when she came into his mind in such a powerful way he had to stop in mid-sentence. He apologized, of course, but his students, worried about him, put it down to overwork, and had got him a glass of water and suggested a short break. He had seen her suddenly in his mind's eye, turning, above him, on the spiral staircase that led up to the Dome Room. He was convinced that the seeds of seminal scientific ideas emerged initially in their substance from the full swirling richness of the scientist's spirit and not as the result of any conscious act of the human mind. Matter and form came later.

He entered the Herzbergerstrasse, Street of the Hill's Heart, and strode up the length of its easy slope and followed it round to the left at the top where it ran close to the Wald on the edge of the houses. He came to Number 9. Like Saturn, he thought. Her windows looked directly across to the first trees.

He pressed the bell, and shortly after, he could hear her coming down the stairs to let him in. She was wearing a brown linen dress and her hair was free in a clasp. She was evidently so happy to see him. She reached up to kiss his cheek and he felt the light brush of her breast on his chest.

Upstairs she opened the door and showed him proudly round her apartment. It was not large but it was homely and tasteful. She'd hung a triptych of Leine scenes on the wall by the stove where a candle would illuminate them in the evening. They went through into the small living-room.

'Sit here, love. You can see the trees and the sky.'

He watched her pouring the coffee. Her hands sure in their movements.

'And plum-cake with whipped cream,' she said. The colour was high in her cheeks. She took her own cup and sat in an armchair on his left.

'What is it?' she said.

'You are too far away.'

She smiled. 'This is the first social occasion in my new house. It is ceremonial, Herr Professor.'

He nodded.

Her cup paused in the air. She was looking down at the little glass-topped table. After a moment she set the cup down slowly on its surface and came and sat on the edge of the settee, her knees close to him.

He put his own cup down and turning placed his open palms upon her thighs. His left hand began to twitch. They both watched it for a moment.

‘Is it sore today?’ she asked.

‘It’s the changing season. It’s to be expected.’

She took it into her lap.

‘It’s terrible about Ferdinand and Sophie, Klaus.’

He nodded.

‘They already had four children. She was shot in the stomach, the paper said. She was expecting.’

He did not answer.

‘I’m going if it comes to anything, Ulla.’

She looked up.

‘Going where?’

‘To war, of course. Germany is Austria’s closest ally. We won’t have a choice.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘There’s your new appointment, for one thing.’

‘But this is my one chance to prove that I’m first and foremost a true German.’

‘And what about us?’

He withdrew his hand slowly from its warm nest.

‘Do I mean so little to you?’

A coldness began to creep into him as when a dark cloud covers the sun. It was as though she had unlinked herself from him. As though he sat alone. Entirely.

‘It would prove to your Mother that . . .’

‘So her opinion outweighs mine?’

‘No.’

‘It quite obviously does.’

‘Ulla. You’re not being very rational, here.’

‘No. I’m not, am I.’

‘Why not, then? This is a very serious matter.’

‘Because it burns. It is burning.’

I am like the other star, he thought, whirling rudderless out into space, my gravity lost. He made as if to touch her.



She pulled away.

The old darkness surged in him.

‘You are more important to me than any Germany,’ she said.

His clenched eyes opened.

‘Ulla. You can’t say that. You mustn’t say that.’

‘I can. And I have.’

He got up slowly and crossed to the window. He stared out. Big clouds were advancing across the sky, devouring the few remaining patches of pale blue. The light had gone out of the forest, its individual trees now almost indistinguishable, their vivid greens moving steadily into black.

## Chapter 9

The absolute gall of the man to enter her house again after she had made it so clear that he was not wanted there. Given him quite sufficient discreet signs of her view of his liaison with the family. From that very first moment at the ball, in fact. Was not wanted there, or anywhere, if it came to that. Erika, sitting in her usual place by the window, stabbed the carpet with her stick.

She did so despise anyone who lost control in a situation, for any reason. It was unseemly. Undignified. But really, she did not consider that she had lost control in the end, even though so provoked by her daughter's stubborn blindness and reckless disregard for the family welfare. No, perhaps it was fortunate he had been waiting out there in the hall. He must have heard most of what went on. And all family members had been present, except Hans, whose opinion carried little weight yet – he was but a boy yet, really – so they need now have no misapprehension whatsoever concerning her view of the whole affair from start to finish. Perhaps it was a good thing her son had that small after school job with Herr Buchner. At least printing had an obvious use, and was harmless enough. It might knock some sense into him. Thinking about making daubs on paper before you had done anything in life at all. Preposterous, really. Life was not about doing what you might think you wanted to. So, anyway, no real damage had been done. And no one of any importance outside the family had witnessed the altercation. Alfred was very unlikely to say anything at the hospital, either, as he always only had eyes for his patients and bugs. And that woman was now out of the house, too, in the meantime. She had been off colour for several days and that witless husband of hers had fussed round her intolerably. So it was quite a relief when he had suggested she should go into hospital for some general tests. She looked out the window for a moment at the gathering dusk in the trees of the garden. She decided she quite liked the night. At least it regularly put a lid on people's folly for a brief span of time. She took up her embroidery again. Her husband would be home, soon, surely. And thank God that woman was not here to fuss over his chair and place his paper just so under the reading lamp. Oh, she was useful enough about the house in many ways, Erika supposed, but sometimes she would like nothing better than to give her a whack with her stick.

Erika went up to bed with a strange excitement coursing through her body. One she was half ashamed of. She did her best to be rid of it. She put on her nightgown and got into bed. She had expressed the desire to sleep apart. Just until the better weather had established itself, she had said. Then I will be all right again. She recalled that Alfred had not questioned her wish. In fact he had stopped what he was reading at the time and looked directly at her as though she were one of his patients.

‘I hope you are not unwell,’ he had said.

She read for a short while from the new Waverley novel on her night table. The hero was a fellow called Ivanhoe and he had to make up his mind between a Saxon woman of his own kind and a Jewess named Rebecca. Erika was impatient to find out whether or not he did the right thing in the end, but religiously refused to take a brief peek. Eventually, she became too drowsy to hold the book up any longer, and closing it, replaced it on the night table. Soon she was asleep, and some time before dawn fell into a deep dream . . .

. . . It had been a hard day of fighting. She felt the war had been going on forever. She is happily married to a woodcutter turned carpenter, and works hard in the city’s garden to grow vegetables to feed the beleaguered inhabitants. They are constantly on the borderline of starvation. Fresh water is hard to come by. She hopes to be noticed by one of the mayor’s men, so that she might be commended for her diligence and reliability. She likes growing things, so would not want to give that up. But a clerk’s job in the offices of the City Council would supplement her family’s income. Some of the chosen women also have the special task of serving as guardians in the wall towers at night to relieve exhausted men. They keep watch and report anything unusual among the enemy outside the city walls. The position has a status normally reserved exclusively for men. She is eager for this too.

On this day she is working as usual in the garden when a Council member approaches her. She tidies herself a little, washing her hands and face in the wooden tub at the end of the plot and fixes her hair.

She goes with the man and enters the office behind him.

‘The enemy have redoubled their efforts and our scouts tell us a full-scale attack against the West Wall is imminent. Last night several guardians reported increased enemy movements. We need to be ready tonight and have decided to double the guard. An extra pair of eyes never goes amiss. You will be with Luise Schulz in the Green Gate Tower. She is an old hand, so you will learn quickly. Any questions?’

She can feel her heart beating rapidly as she ascends the narrow stone staircase. It has been a long clear autumn day but now it has clouded over and darkness is drawing in.

‘Come up, Erika,’ the older woman greets her. ‘I’m glad of company.’

They listen in the darkness, peering through arrow slits. A low deep rumbling as of some heavy object being moved not far off in the gloom below them.

‘I wonder what it is?’ Luise says.

‘Have you heard it before?’

‘No. Perhaps we should tell . . .’

A boom resounds in the valley. Something rushing in the air and a crash against the stone beneath them. Erika puts her hands to her ears. Feels dust stinging her eyes and gritty in her mouth.

‘What’s happening?’ she asks, gasping for air.

‘Canon-fire. The Green Gate. They want to force an entry there.’

Another. And another. The tower reverberates. Din and dust. The two women are on their knees on the stone floor now. Seeking shelter where they can.

The bombardment continues.

Erika, shocked, hears a weeping.

‘Luise, what is it?’ She puts her arm about the older woman.

‘I’ve done this too long.’

She helps her to a box at the back wall, where she helps her sit and draws her shawl close. Luise trembles. Then is still. Then trembles again.

There is a terrible rending directly overhead and they feel the cold night air rush against their skin. Suddenly the sky is lit. Erika looks up. The broken timbers of the roof are like a dark skeleton against the pale sky.

‘Oh! Fire-arrows!’ Luise cries.

At the same moment there is a commotion below them and Erika rushes forward to the opening. There is the deep grinding sound of timbers breaking. The sky is lighting. A sound as of a swift draft. Whistling. She hears a man’s harsh shout: ‘The gate is gone!’ and jerks round to a scream behind her. Luise is shrunk down against the wall, a flaming stick protruding from her chest, her wild hands struggling to draw it out. Erika rushes to her, scooping up what straw she can. The heat is intense. She feels it in her face. Smells burning. Her hair. Her hair. She rolls the woman on the ground. Over and over. Until she has it out. And lies there holding her to her breast. With sounds of battle raging below her.

The stench of burnt flesh in her nostrils. No movement within her arms. Nothing there now. Nothing at all . . .

The following night in her chair she turned on the reading lamp. She had remembered and searched through old texts from her distant Lycee days. And came upon it, at last: A History of Germany. Its pages now browned and mottled with time and dampness. Her index finger poked the contents page till it found it: Chapter V The Thirty Years War. She leafed through nervously until she came to sections of text broken by solid black-ink underlined blocks of print. It was all there, marked by her hand so long ago. A young girl's aspirations: clerk, and guardian. Hopes of status in a man's world. All underlined. Another's dream. Her dream.

She held the book open on her lap and looked out into the black shifting masses of the trees in the garden.

Erika heard the front door shut, and as she was not disturbed as usual by the maid's voice that often accompanied it, she felt a sense of space and something akin to power and added control, as though she had a more secure grip upon the reins of the family. It was a relief not to have that fussing, that inappropriate concern. She felt calmer. It was as though her dream had shown her the way and her old time-worn text had confirmed it. She took it in her hands again. It still felt substantial despite the passage of years. She ran her hand over its hard cover, smooth with use and burred at the corners. It was as though she were caressing her dream in a time before it vanished. She considered it had sent a message down to her from the very core of her past, from a time when her spirit was still intact, when her hope for herself still had that infinite quality. Like a torch flickering on the battlements as she, the new guardian, made her rounds of the wall. The hand of the Old Germany reached from the darkness outside the window to touch her on the shoulder, bestowing office. A confirmed position now. People in the street would acknowledge her enhanced status as they passed.

She turned slowly from the window, hearing the footfall of her husband on the steps. They sounded slow and uneven tonight. She would extract from him exactly what she wanted to know. But she would take her time. She checked. Yes, she had turned on his reading lamp and placed his paper on his chair and not on the table. It was her intimate right.

Her husband entered the room, and stood just inside the door. He seemed confused. He will have been thinking only about the medicine and her. It was a miracle he had not been knocked down in the street.

‘I’ve put your paper there, Alfred.’

She watched as he crossed to the cabinet and poured himself a large glass of schnapps.

‘A difficult day?’

‘Yes, difficult. Desolate. Thank you.’

She would give him time to get his drink and sit down. Settle himself. Take a few sips.

‘And the maid?’

‘We did tests. A lot . . .’

‘And?’

‘It’s not easy to say.’

That was useless. It told her nothing. She waited.

He opened his paper and held it up.

She noticed a crease in her skirt and straightened it abruptly.

‘Alfred, I’m concerned.’

He lowered the paper and looked at her over the top of his spectacles.

‘There are some signs.’

‘Signs?’

She did not like this. She knew from word circulating in the city that he was not slow in his practice. That he deliberated, yes, but that people felt safe with him because his decisions were considered, his hands sure. So it was not the case, however problematic, that caused this indecisiveness in him. It was his concern for her. Misplaced. Inappropriate. Abnormal.

‘There is infection.’

‘What kind of infection? Be specific.’ That was too abrupt. Softer. ‘Did you find something?’

‘Yes . . . She is infected.’

Erika waited. He would know she wanted detail. That she could not be easily fobbed off.

‘It fortunately hasn’t spread yet.’

'Is it serious, then?'

He hesitated. 'Yes.'

'Very?'

'Yes. Serious. Very.'

Exultant, she held herself in check.

Now.

'What is it? Do you know?'

'It has all the signs of . . . tuberculosis.'

*Good!*

The tide surged. She would let the matter drop there. For the meantime. She had found out what she wanted. Established how implicated her husband was in this case. Glancing, she observed her knuckles white on the armrests and immediately schooled them back to their normal palour. She wanted no self-betrays. She would not say that it was sad, because she did not think she could manage that convincingly. So she let him disappear once more behind his newspaper, undisturbed, and resumed her embroidery.

She looked out the window. There was no movement in the enemy camp. They had been driven back from the walls for another day. Suffered severe casualties. Fatal? Perhaps not. Only time would tell. There were literary readings at Frau Becker's tomorrow evening. She would chose a passage or two from the new novel she was reading each night before she fell asleep. One that would show how simple and right the hero's life could be if it wasn't for that woman, Rebecca, always complicating things. She was a constant threat. And Erika would also make some discreet inquiries about the general availability of reliable maids.

## Chapter 10

Ulla knew all the arguments for going to war. Well, of course she did. But Klaus. Her . . . they had only just discovered each other, and . . . Was it all going to be torn away? And for what? For a country that had got too greedy and couldn't just be satisfied with what it had, and make the most of that? His hand. That might stop him. They mightn't let him go with a hand like that. Men were much more political animals than women. They looked around and saw what it might affect. The expediency of doing something. Even where love was concerned. Whereas a woman in love just burned. She burned. It wasn't that he actually valued her Mother's opinion more than hers. She knew that. She shouldn't have accused him of it. But he drove her to it. This insistence on going to war in the face of their love, as though it were some sort of intellectual argument which had to be weighed up and decided upon. And how sensitive his hand was in changing weather.

She heard the lab door open. It would be Papa and she hadn't even got the sputum sample on the slide yet.

He stopped beside her under the tall windows.

'Are you ready to start?'

He sat down. The morning had started brightly but clouded over, which reduced the available light source.

She missed his morning greeting. Things had changed since the ruckus at the house. Since she'd left. He hadn't just simply washed his hands of her in the same way that her mother had. But he had, for the most part, restricted himself to a professional relationship. Which was something she wanted, but not so soon completely devoid of the other. His attitude seemed rather cold. Rather too clinical.

'How is Hans, Papa?'

He did not answer.

She positioned the slide on the platform under the clip. She was aware of his bulk close beside her, tensed, as though ready to attack.

Initially she had a lower power lens to view the field. She was approaching her eye to the observation tube, when he said, 'Let me see. You'll get it back in a minute.' He almost shouldered her out of the way. Not his usual measured self at all. What made this case so different? The patient was Arida, certainly, but did that explain . . .'



‘A stronger lens,’ he demanded.

She got one, and waited as he focused it.

‘Oh, my God! My God!’

‘What is it, Papa?’

He didn’t answer at once, fumbling with the fine adjustor.

‘It’s there already.’

‘What is?’

‘The tubercle. The tubercle bacillus. It’s what I was afraid of. Already it’s ahead of us. Here, see for yourself.’ He got up and began to pace the length of the laboratory.

She could see it clearly. Bright blue. Small for bacteria. And tapered towards one end. Deadly. Standing out starkly, bright blue in the methylene dye solution. She shivered.

‘But there are not many, Papa. Three or four at the most. And single. We ought . . .’

‘Your analysis lacks context.’

She felt her assistant status sharply.

‘When the bacilli enter the host body, they remain hidden. You can’t see them. You don’t know they are there. They lie in wait.’

‘How is that possible?’

‘Nature’s irony. The body manufactures immune cells which work with the invader to build a wall to enclose the bacillus.’

‘Enclose?’

‘Yes. In a tubercle.’

‘What is it waiting for?’

‘The moment when the body lowers its defenses. Shows any sign of weakness.’

‘Then?’

‘Then they break from cover and start the attack.’

‘Arilda has not been herself for several weeks now.’

‘I know. I know. I blame myself for my blindness.’

She is shocked. What is this really about?

‘Are we too late, Papa? Like for the singer woman and Stephanie?’

‘No. No. But we are behind now. – I was distracted.’

‘What can I do?’

‘I will increase the dosage.’

‘And me?’

‘Start thinking. Thinking hard. But like a scientist.’

‘Papa?’

‘Open a dossier. But down every question and detail and fragment that you observe or imagine could have a bearing on the case. We’ll take regular samples. Interpret them at once. Keep detailed notes. We must outflank the disease.’

Her head was reeling.

‘Should I . . .’

‘What is the most obvious question?’

She tried to think. But nothing would come. This was happening to the only woman who had ever really cared for her. Discreetly, yes. But nevertheless cared for her. Always. Constantly. Through the years.

She turned to him. Put her hand on his arm. But he refused to be reached in that way. She imagined Klaus might be like this in the end, if she . . . She thrust the thought away.

Her father was bent forward, his massive shoulders hunched over his barrel chest, his large hands thrust down between his braced legs.

‘I know she matters to you. But you must put this out of your mind.’

‘Why, Papa?’ Why was he so vehement? She knew she had things to learn. Was he punishing her for . . .

‘Because you will fail to see things as they are. You will miss the signs.’

She was silent.

‘You need to have no other thought in your mind when you are here. Only what is before your eyes. Consider that. Only that. And bring to it absolutely everything you know. Keep the focus. Without sentiment. It clouds. Distorts. See like a microscope. See only what exists. The facts. The bare facts. And ask yourself. Unremittingly. What do they mean? What do they mean? Then you might, if fortune is on your side, steal a march on it in the night, when you least expect it . . .’

He got up and shook himself.

‘Go to work, then. We haven’t a minute to lose. Your cultures.’

‘Papa, I . . .’

But already he was moving down the lab towards the door. He was late for his ward rounds. When he was with her in this laboratory, in this hospital, he was not her father. He was a doctor. A scientist. Nothing else. She shook her head. And what was she? An image

of the white shell came into her mind. She was glad she had put it on the windowsill. That he had not put it back in the box. At least they still had that between them. Or did they now?

*It was Arilda.* Ulla was startled by the swiftness and clarity of her realization and wondered why she hadn't seen it sooner. It was because of her that Papa was behaving the way he was. As though, for him, this was the case of all cases, the one that would either make or break his career. That his years of research would finally add up to something or be rendered/turn out to be null and void, a complete waste of time and effort. So it was a test case for him. A test of all his science and all his medicine. And for her? What did Arilda's illness mean to her? This was happening to the one person who had always cared for her, right from the beginning. As her wet nurse and later as her confidante. Discreetly, of course, as befitted her position in the house and family. Mother always saw to that! But cared, nevertheless. Did what she could when she saw her opportunity. And it had always been too easy to take her presence among them, and what she did for them every day, for granted. Ulla would find this antigen then. Not for science. Or the general good. But for this woman who had brought sense and warmth into her world. And it occurred to her that here was/she had been given something beyond the mere dictates of duty. This was a quiet unobtrusive love, as freely offered and steady as the flow of the Leine.

She went to the cabinet and got out the spore culture. The one she had gathered from the foam in the stream's eddy, when she had jumped the stream and Klaus . . . Oh! There she was doing it again, mixing things. Focus. She must learn to still herself, and focus. Restrict, no, delimit her thinking, rather. Wasn't it Goethe who said that genius lies in the ability to set boundaries?

The light was good today and fell full on the tables. With a scalpel she cut a slice of culture and placed it on the slide. Added some methylene dye solution. Screwed on a low power lens. Put her eye to the tube. The field of view was rather dim. She sat up and adjusted the mirror at the foot of the microscope to catch maximum daylight. Hmm, that was clever. Papa had explained how the Abbe had invented the condenser that sat just below the platform, and ensured that light shone at right angles upon the object under observation. Yes, there it was. A sharp image. No distortion. She enjoyed the feeling of

satisfaction and increased confidence these understandings were giving her. Now, the spore with the bacillus. What would she find?

Oh! The blue cells of the bacillus were everywhere, having multiplied completely out of control. There were only a few remaining host cells and these were hopelessly scattered, impossibly isolated from any chance of strength in cohesion. They had been completely overcome, routed, under the aggressive attack of the bacilli. Whatever immunity they had offered was a thing of the past.

Sobered, Ulla went again to the cabinet, found the mushroom with bacillus culture, and prepared it for examination, in the same way she had been shown.

She focused the lens. Ah, what was this, then? The blue army had marshaled their regiments in concert, as before. But this time they had been halted along a clear-cut line of demarcation, the forces of antigen arrayed against them on the opposite side. There were no signs of incursion on the part of either force. It was a stalemate. A matter of who would weaken first.

Ulla realised she had had her left hand braced upon her thigh, so that now it ached. She shook it, unclenching her fist, to renew the flow of blood. She glanced down for a moment, watching the skin suffuse with pink again, and simultaneously worked her jaw.

This was not easy. She felt chastened. The weeks of waiting while the cultures grew. Things rarely happen quickly in science, Ulla, Papa had said. Painstaking. Step by step. Sometimes for years, before any significant result is seen.

She got the mycelia with bacillus dish.

She hoped Papa might be pleased with the mushroom result. Not spectacular, she knew. But something.

The sun had shifted, so she adjusted the mirror. Lifted the most powerful lens from its green felt bed, and attached it. Her right hand went to the fine adjuster. Turning it by increments. Until . . . Oh, nothing. No change. Just as it was at the very beginning of the trial period. A situation of normality. The odd blue cell dotted about, here and there in pairs. Enough to indicate there was disease in the body. She slumped back in the chair, her hands sunk in the valley of her dress. The picnic. And Klaus. That day, with all its hope and promise. All come to the prosaic reality of a stalemate.

She sat a while, then got up slowly. Should she write what report there was first? She hadn't the energy. She knew she was too easily affected. That it wasn't good enough. Yet another thing to learn, if she were to walk the long road.

She left the lab and walked through the corridors. Papa should be well through surgery by now. It was almost noon. She waited in his rooms until he came, and, unable to wait considerately, told him like a child.

But what was this? He seemed strangely excited, shaking his head from side to side. Talking and moving about the room and then surging along the corridor, the way she had just come, with her trailing in his wake.

‘No. You sit there. It is your work.’

‘But Papa . . .’

He shook his head.

‘Now, calmly. Take me through. How many samples?’

‘Three.’

‘Right. First one, please.’

She set it up.

He looked.

‘Right.’

‘The next.’

‘The mushroom?’

‘Yes, if that was the order of your procedure.’

‘Hmm. Good. Solid work, Ulla.’

She was amazed. From where did he get such strength and balance?

‘Now the third. What did you label it, Ulla?’

‘Mycelia, Papa. It was a beech association.’

‘I see.’

He looked in. Was silent. Adjusted the knob. Then the mirror, a touch. He made a sound or two somewhere deep in his chest, as though he were communing with himself, with his own mind. Then he sat up, leaned slowly back, and gazed out the window. What was he looking at? Oh, she wished he would not keep her out so. Then, he turned to her, and putting his stocky arms about her, crushed her to him.

‘Papa! Papa!’

His ruddy, whiskered face had gone red, and his cheek was warm and moist.

‘Daughter, mine,’ he said, ‘I think you may have succeeded where I have failed.’

Ulla walked along the corridor briskly to the far end of the hospital where Arilda had been put in a single room until the exact extent and nature of her infection was determined. She knocked and went in without a reply. A large window let in light and a view of the still, spreading branches of trees. It was a small tidy spare room with pale pink cotton curtains tied back. The strong odours of disinfectant and starched sheets invaded Ulla's nostrils, causing her momentarily to wrinkle it up.

The familiar head on the pillow turned to see who it was. She was struck by the lack-lustre in the blue eyes, making them appear paler than she remembered them, and the corn-coloured hair was lank and darkened with perspiration and prolonged lying in bed. But the face smiled wanly.

'Ulla.'

No strength. Although masked, she knew she must still keep her distance. She drew up a chair to the side of the bed and gently touched the form under the covers.

'How are you, Arilda?'

'Not myself.'

'I'm sorry, my dear.'

'It is just life, Fraulein Ulla.'

Ulla looked at her.

'Are you warm? Is your bed comfortable?'

The patient nodded.

Ulla said how worried she had been about her. That she thought she was the last person in the world this could happen to. Always so cheerful and full of energy. 'Papa and I have found a new thing. We have great hopes for it.' Ulla saw her smile and nod like she used to when Ulla was a little girl and needed comforting. Any movement of her face merely whispers of expression.

She roused herself. 'I cannot imagine how they will manage without you. Mother, in bed in the mornings, not rising until you have brought her breakfast and coffee.' She said how unfair it was that Mother was so abrupt with her. How formal. After all these years.

Arilda shook her head.

'It is my duty, Fraulein Ulla. I am well housed and fed. What more could I want.'

'Respect.'

'Your Papa . . .'

‘Yes, what will he do when he comes in after an impossible day? He will probably need to get his own paper from the gate. Turn on the reading lamp. Try to make it cosy.’ Ulla noticed a sheet of pink sweep up the neck and across the face of the woman on the pillow.

When it at last subsided, Arilda said, ‘Again. My duty. What I am paid for.’ She levered herself up slightly on the pillow.

‘I could not have managed without you.’

‘You would have, somehow.’ She seemed a little more inclined to talk.

‘Always ready to listen to me. And Hans. I know he came to you when Mother said those things about his painting. He told me.’

She had turned her face away towards the wall.

‘Arilda?’

When she turned back, her eyes were full of tears.

‘I lost a child once. So . . .’

‘Yes?’

She put her hand up and drew her nightgown tight about her throat.

‘You were like a mother to me.’

Her body jerked, as though struck.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. It’s wrong of me to make you talk so much.’

Arilda shook her head.

‘No.’

Ulla was watching her closely.

‘I like it when you come.’ Then she closed her eyes and a sheet of tears came down her face.

Ulla stood and leaned forward, but the maid gestured her back, almost fiercely.

‘You and Hans. In my heart you were my children.’

Ulla nodded slowly.

‘That is why I stayed. Why, when Frau Tiefenbach . . .’

Ulla stretched out her hand.

‘You have been like a mother to me.’

A violence. A confusion in the face before her. She got up quickly.

‘I should go. This is not good for you.’

The still face watched her.

‘But it is.’

Ulla patted the bedclothes.

‘You will come again?’

‘Yes.’

‘Soon. Tomorrow.’

‘Only if you promise not to get over-excited.’

‘I promise.’

Ulla was aware of her eyes never leaving her as she crossed to the door. She turned, raised her hand, and smiled. As she went back along the corridor to get her coat, her mind was in tumult. She could not shake free of the images of the jerked body, the look on her/the face. What was it, that strange look? Longing, dismay . . . no, neither of those. Confusion? Yes. That was an element in it. But not the main one: the look of a creature cornered, about to be discovered. What was that about?



## Chapter 11

The air was warm and close as Klaus crossed the square paving of the Bahnhofplatz toward the large glass swing doors of the station entrance. The green foliage of the plane trees made sounds like Ulla's skirts. Carriages, buggies, and the occasional black stately car were continually drawing up and leaving. People moved briskly, having just arrived on the early trains. He paused to one side for a moment, to shake himself, before going on through, and glancing about him. A board announced the Recruitment Office on the left. Ulla's mixed violence still lay somewhere in him like a fuse, as he approached the door.

He knocked.

There was a delay before a clear voice said, 'Enter!'

He went in. A slim man with straight blond hair plastered back sat in a comfortable chair behind a vast desk in the small bare room, shelves of files behind him. The blue eyes watched him.

'Sit.'

Klaus sat down on the only straight-backed wooden chair.

'I have come to . . .'

'Name?'

'Mendelsohn. Klaus Mendelsohn.'

The man in uniform hesitated. Coughed.

'From around here?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Local?'

'No. I've come from Frankfurt.'

'Recently?'

'Pardon?'

'Just arrived.' He started to make a note.

'Oh. It's some months ago now.'

The officer didn't write anything.

'What are you? What's your job?'

'I am an astronomer – a lecturer and researcher at the Observatory.'

'Stars, eh?'

‘Yes, that’s right.’

The man ignored him for a while, writing on a sheet in front of him.

At last he looked up.

‘Bit early aren’t you?’

‘War for Germany seems imminent. I wish to volunteer.’

‘What for?’

‘To serve my country.’

He scribbled something.

‘Jewish?’

‘I come from a . . .’

‘Any experience with weapons?’

‘I’m afraid not. My skills are in mathematics and physics.’

‘None.’ He wrote. ‘Address?’

When will I know . . .’

You will be informed, if, and when, you are wanted.’

Klaus nodded.

‘Any more questions?’

He shook his head. Noticed there was a photo of Wilhelm II hanging on the wall behind the officer. The emperor had a boyish, cock-sure expression on his face.

The officer was no longer looking at him.

Klaus hesitated, then got slowly to his feet.

‘Shut the door behind you on the way out, *Herr Mendelsohn*,’ the voice said.

Klaus left the recruiting office and crossed the platz to the Berlinerstrasse. Here he paused on the curb to allow traffic to pass. He became aware of the wind working the foliage in the row of trees along the street and thought of Ulla again, pondering the mysterious gravitational force of the human heart. After the next carriage he crossed over and entered the Prinzenstrasse. He made his way slowly up the street, studying the pavement as it unwound beneath his feet.

When he arrived at the next intersection he turned right and soon came to where to widened out into the main square. The marktplatz had its day’s business well advanced, but he was not ready for it yet. He ordered a coffee from the restaurant under the Town Hall and asked if it could be brought to one of the little tables outside with the sun.

He noticed workmen busy over on the right. Something was clearly in the early stages of construction. A man in a suit with his hand full of papers moved among the men. Possibly the architect. The object itself looked to have a circular or octagonal shape. Klaus undid the buttons of his jacket and glanced behind him at the clock where the ornate hands stood at ten o'clock, and shortly afterwards chimed the hour. The warmth of the sun began to seep into him and his clenched fist began to relax. He flexed his fingers. That officer hadn't wanted him. A war was coming. But even that made no difference.

He watched the people for a while.

He noticed as he finished his coffee that one of the men was working apart from the others. He'd have a word with him in passing.

He approached.

The fellow in overalls looked up.

'Good day for it.'

What are you making?'

'A fountain with someone in the middle.'

'Do you know who?'

'A girl, I think.'

'A student?'

'No. A country-girl. You know, from a farm.'

Klaus watched him marking up the stone.

'She's supposed to be holding a goose.'

'How do you know where to cut it?'

The fellow grinned and pointed to his head.

Klaus laughed.

'Hurt your hand?'

Klaus nodded.

'Makes life difficult, eh.'

Men who walk alone are like those stars you find at the edge of a galaxy. They emit more light than the others.

Klaus' step quickened. He avoided the Theaterstrasse and joined Ulla's street above the platz. A girl from the country. Well, he knew a girl who loved the countryside too. And he imagined her in the sunlit morning farmyard with her burnished hair up in a bun, wearing a simple cotton dress with apron, stroking a hurt goose she held in her arms,

talking softly to it until its fear subsided. My Goose Girl. My Goose Girl. He lifted the latch on the gate. Roses were fully out in the garden. Single petals, velvet and red, hung suspended at angles in the grass blades beneath.

He could hear her footsteps on the stairs. She opened the door. She was wearing a brown cotton dress and an apron.

‘Why are you smiling like that, Klaus Mendelsohn?’ Her hands were sticky from her cooking and there was a smear of something on her cheek where a wisp of escaped hair stirred occasionally.

‘I’ll tell you later.’

Klaus stood in front of the mirror in the ablution block and checked his dress. Tie straight, ironed shirt – he was getting better at that now – the buttons of his tunic shining, trousers pressed, and shoes, polished until you could see your own reflection. He was proud of his uniform, because it was a clear sign to everyone what his intention was and what he stood for. He was a soldier for Germany, and was ready to give his life in fighting for and defending his country. It meant that he didn’t need to embark on some stumbling explanation. He remembered the sergeant’s words, how the uniform was also worn for two very practical reasons. It made it quite clear whose side you were on, which was a decided advantage to your own comrades in the heat of battle when minds were often confused, tired, and over-stretched. They had also explained that the uniform colour of the *feldgrau*, field grey, helped to conceal the identity of a man, who he really was as an individual. So it made it an easier matter to kill him if you had to. He was just another one of those! But, for Klaus, privately, it had another meaning. It was a sign that he would be fighting to protect her, and he realised that he’d have to leave her in no doubt that this was his main purpose in going to war. He remembered his past mistake. Perhaps it were better he said as little as possible.

Klaus had decided to walk to her apartment for what might turn out to be the last time. He got leave late in the afternoon, knowing he had to be back in twenty-four hours for disembarkation for the front on the following day. He set out through the gates of the barracks on the edge of the city. Over the weeks, whenever he had a chance, he had visited the marktplatz and followed the progress of the Goose Girl with interest. He’d spoken on two further occasions to the same workman. And now, as he went along, he wanted to take his Goose Girl something from the countryside that would please her. He stopped to gather

a small nosegay of wildflowers from the roadside: tiny, delicate faces, yellows and blues and reds. He held it close to his face for a moment. He was sure she would like it, full of the scents of summer. He passed a field where two men were bringing in the last of the harvest. One was just completing a stook, while the other scythed a last row of hay near a willow bush, the strong scent of fresh-cut stalks filling the warm air. The lowering sun bathed the pale green stubble and sheaves and bones of the man's face in a golden light and the cloudless bowl of the heavens was a deepening blue above him. As Klaus approached, the man straightened his back, and waved. 'Good luck!' he shouted.

On the Wall path the last pockets of residual light lingered in the foliage of the beeches and oaks. A picture of Ulla surfaced in his mind, on one of their many rambles in the Wald, in the long grass of a clearing, her hair a mass of shifting light and scent upon his chest. In the Waldbergstrasse several people nodded and smiled at him as he passed.

The latch on the gate made its familiar click. He noticed the plum tree was laden, its purple fruit fallen in the cool shade, split with ripeness, the deep yellow inside stained with juice.

When she opened the door, she was wearing a green dirndl dress patterned traditionally with its small wildflowers and trimmed with lace, its white apron, and her hair loose upon her shoulders. She reached to kiss him.

'Come in, Klaus.'

The table in the living-room was already set. She put his flowers in a vase in the middle between the two lit candles. He recognized the Brahms.

'A glass of wine?'

He picked up her hand from where it lay in the folds of her dress, and brought it slowly to his lips.

'I love you, Ulla Tiefenbach.'

She leant her head against him for a moment.

'But now we must eat. It will get cold. Special soup and plum tart. I have been practicing.'

The soup was delicious. Then she brought out her tour de force.

'Goose,' she said quietly. 'It is a treat.' A spectacle of golden succulence laid in a wide white dish with the candlelight on it.

'It looks just wonderful.'

She carved it, and dished him up a liberal helping, and then sat down again.

‘What have you been doing today?’ she asked.

He talked about the excitement among the men in the barracks. About the final preparations. She made occasional remarks. Nodding her head. But he noticed how she looked at him less and less when she spoke.

He would talk about his uniform.

She smiled a little at the ironing difficulties and the polishing. She looked up once, fleetingly, but then away again, quickly dropping her gaze to his chest.

‘Ulla?’

‘Yes.’ She stirred the last of her goose in the pool of darkened gravy.

‘What is wrong?’

‘Plum tart now,’ she said, levering herself up, her knuckles white as the tablecloth. She wheeled round and went straight into the little kitchen.

He half got up, then sat down again. He heard a harsh rattle of cutlery in a drawer. The opening of the oven door. A pause. Then a cry, followed by the sound of porcelain smashing on the tiles.

‘Oh, damn! Damn! Damn!’

He got up then at once and went through.

The dish lay shattered on the floor, entangled in the mushy remnants of the tart. Her hair was stained purple in several places where she must have inadvertently swept it back from her face. She turned her head and saw him standing in the doorway. Came straight through, so he had to step quickly aside. Went into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

He hesitated, then went in.

She had thrown herself across the bed, face down.

He went to her, and hesitant, touched her.

She twisted on the bed, sat up, then stood up fast, and slammed herself hard against him. She began to tear at the buttons on his tunic. Shouting. Crying.

‘What is it, Ulla? What is it?’

She was round him like a wild thing. Like a she-wolf he’d once seen defending her young in the mountains.

‘You must tell me.’

Her hands struggled with the regulation belt.

‘What, Ulla? What?’

She stood back from him. Her eyes blazing.

'Take them off! Take them *all* off!'

'Of course. But why? Why?'

'It's *those* clothes. I can't see you. I am *losing* you.'

He stared, for a long moment, uncomprehending, at the scattered articles of his uniform.

Klaus was sitting in the mess at one of the long tables, with big fellows on either side of him. Fresh, scrubbed faces, and clean smart pressed uniforms, black boots polished so you could see your face in them. The smell of hot porridge. The energy of strong, male voices. He knew he should be making the best of this opportunity and eating a big breakfast, for once they were on the train and heading for the Belgian border, heaven only knew when and where the next meal would come from. The porridge sat in the bowl in front of him, steaming. It would soon get cold. He got an image of the troop train, newly arrived at the platform, clouds of steam expelled from about its pistons, rising and drifting amongst the crowd. He moved his hand listlessly towards the spoon, picked it up, took a desultory mouthful or two, and put it back on the table. He just couldn't stomach any food. His mind was full of her. How torn she was. How hard she found it to contemplate his departure and how much she hated the prospect of war. And because he was so close to her now, it was as though he were leaving part of himself behind, with the remainder seamed with fresh doubt. How could he possibly be effective as a soldier like that? The excited noise of his comrades about him seemed to underline his unreadiness. He picked up his spoon again.

Back in the dormitory he made his last preparations. He'd packed his backpack and kitbag the night before, cleaned and oiled his rifle, and collected a full issue of ammunition from the barrack storeroom. They'd had their final briefing. The next would be at the regiment's assembly point outside the town on the Belgian border.

The camions were parked on the parade ground, their engines idling. Klaus handed up his gear and climbed in, with his infantry platoon. The backbone of any army, the sergeant had said. He got a seat at the end of the narrow bench along the left-hand side, with his back against the metal frame to which the canopy was secured. The lacing kept digging into his right shoulder. The wind buffeting the heavy canvas made him think of the balloon and their narrow escape and how frightened he had been for her.

It was no distance to the station, and soon he heard the engine revs dropping.

‘All out! We have carriage five.’

It didn’t matter where he sat. They were all going to the same place. He got his gear and followed the rest up onto the platform.

‘The guard’s van’s up the other end,’ he heard someone say.

The platform was milling with people come to see the first lot away. The brighter colours of the women and children’s clothes were patched among the field grey. Soon their enlivening presence would be left behind and he would be left with only the field grey colour of war. He scanned the crowd for any sign of her. She loved him but this she couldn’t face.

He hoisted his battle gear into the van and began to work his way back. He climbed into the first door he came to, but on finding it was only number seven and that he constituted a nuisance always wanting to squeeze past while others settled themselves, he got out again. He tried to keep calm.

‘Excuse me, what carriage is this?’

‘Three, I think.’

He’d gone too far. He turned round and got on at the next door. He was on the train, anyway. That’s all that mattered. To get separated from his platoon at this stage would be sheer stupidity.

He looked in at each compartment as he reached it.

Ah, there they were.

‘Hey, Klaus, we wondered were you’d got to.’

Two big fellows, who were laughing and joking about what they’d done the night before, made room for him. ‘There’s not a chance in the world she’ll forget me now,’ Sigmund said.

Klaus sat, bent forward, his hands clasped between his legs. ‘Would she?’ he wondered.

The guard poked his head in at the door.

‘All right, guys? Five minutes.’

Sigmund nudged him. Klaus looked up. The fellow was grinning and pointing out the window. Klaus followed his gaze.

Ulla!



There she was in the crowd. She'd obviously worked her way forwards to right alongside the train and reached up to knock repeatedly on the pane until she had been noticed.

His mind jerked and banged with the changed reality.

She was making a sign. He saw her lips move and the chords in her throat stand out.

'Go on, mate! She wants *you*.' Sigmund said. 'You've got a minute. We'll keep your seat.'

They shoved him to his feet and pushed him towards the doorway.

'Make way! Make way!' someone bellowed in the corridor.

Another joined in: 'Coming through! Coming through!'

Men stood aside, lining the wall.

Klaus reached the door and half stumbled on the steps. She had come forward so that he dropped virtually straight into her arms, his lips pressing into her hair, his body hard against every inch of her. She was moaning and crying into his uniform, her words tumbling in broken fragments: 'My soldier! I was wrong. I love you.'

The train's whistle blasted in his ear and he heard the guard's shouted warning.

'All aboard. All aboard now. Stand well back, please. Stand well back.'

She was thrusting something across her stomach, at the same time hunting for his hand. He cupped his hands against her, feeling the warm fabric of her dress through her open coat.

She closed his hands about a solid object.

'Keep it and bring it back with you.'

Her lips fused with his own. A last stroke of her hair over the skin of his face.

'I'm sorry. Forgive me, my soldier.'

Then she was removed from him, and the guard turned him towards the train.

'Time to go, mate.'

Others hauled him up. They let him through. The train was already in motion. Moments later he resumed his seat.

'Well done, mate. Well done,' Sigmund said. 'She's worth fighting for, that one!'

Klaus grinned sheepishly and looked down at the object that lay in the open palm of his hand. It had made pale indentations in the flesh, where the blood was beginning to flow back now.

It was a shell. A delicate spiral set into its limestone bed.

‘That’ll keep you safe, all right,’ a soldier said opposite.

The men looked at the shell in silence as the train gathered speed.

‘A gift from the sea,’ someone murmured.

## Chapter 12

Ulla remained standing on the platform in exactly the same spot after Klaus left her. She was like an island, still, abandoned in mid-ocean, with the teeming life of the sea everywhere about her. Once the first flush of her generosity had passed, she felt the emptiness, like a bleak wind-swept plain, of having parted with the shell, even though it was into his safekeeping. She stared down at the two iron rails beneath her, running resolutely parallel to one another, never meeting. Would this be their fate too? Barely a few moments ago, the whole of her space had been filled by Klaus and the great iron body of the train. Now they were both gone. Vanished.

She rummaged in her coat pocket and drew out the worn leather field-bag that had been her constant companion throughout all her wanderings in field and wood. She thrust her hand inside as if to confirm the absence of the shell. She turned her head to catch the last forlorn whistle of the departing train. The crowd was thinning fast. Unless she was to be the last, she should go.

‘He’ll be back before you know it. The war will be over by Christmas.’  
The guard was cheery now, his moment of duty past.

She nodded and forced a smile, pulling the drawstring tight. How futile with nothing inside now. She stuffed it back into her pocket and turned away towards the exit, drifting out onto the platz with the few remaining people. She wandered across to the busy Berlinerstrasse. Should she return to the hospital or go back to the apartment? Officially she had the day off. She stood for a moment. She would walk in the town for a bit. It might clear her head.

The linden trees in the Prinzenstrasse were showing their first signs of colour. Edged with yellow and brown. She glanced up. Moody billows of dark-massed cloud still idled eastwards. More rain?

She heard the sound of the water even before she reached the Leinebrücke and leant on the rail. The spray from the tumult beneath her occasionally landed wet on the skin of her face. Nature’s fresh fury. She liked it. The river was well up its concrete containing walls, swaying and plummeting with a thousand fractured surfaces, bearing its cargo of debris to a distant sea. Planks and boxes, masses of leaves, a child’s rocking horse. Something thudded the underside of the bridge. It was the whole trunk of a tree, stripped of

its bark. It bucked on the white crests. It resembled an engine of war, carrying Klaus further and further away from her. She watched it obsessively, leaning out until it had completely disappeared, then slumping back, her knuckles white on the rail. She glanced furtively behind her. Back at the river. No, it had gone. She adjusted her coat.

She needed something tangible to keep him close to her. Perhaps Bergmann had a private photo of him taken in an odd moment at the Observatory? It occurred to her that she had not a single image of him. How stupid of her! But when a person you love is with you, in your every moment, the need for a duplicate never enters your mind.

The people about her moved briskly about their business. Sometimes she stopped right in the middle of the pavement, so that they had to swirl about her to avoid bumping into her, like a stream round a rock in its path. The Jacobekirche. Along the Domeweg, Street of the Monks. Michelplatz. She reached the marktplatz. A number of workmen were talking among themselves as she slowed by the circle of stone where the fountain would be. A pedestal was already there in the centre. She imagined a breeze nudging the water against the stone base.

‘The statue should come tomorrow,’ one of them said. ‘I hope she’s a real country girl.’

Ulla turned away. She went on a bit, and shortly found herself in a narrow cobbled street to the right, passed a church, and read on a lamppost, Judenstrasse. It opened out into a little hidden square. Oh, wasn’t that where Herr Buchner, the printer, had his shop, where Hans had an after-school job? Yes, there it was, opposite, on that corner. She would just call in and see how he was getting on. Buchner wouldn’t mind.

When she went in Buchner had his back to her sorting some large prints stacked against the wall.

‘You’ll be wanting to see our Hans, then?’ He grinned.

She noted the ‘our’ and remembered that Buchner and Klara had never had any children of their own.

‘Go right on through. He’s sorting supplies.’

Hans looked up.

‘You’re quite the man about town now, eh.’

He grinned and nodded.

‘What can I do for you?’

She took the bag out of her pocket.

‘I don’t know.’

Hans stood looking at his sister.

‘It’s empty.’

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘I’ve something to show you.’

She followed him up a spiral staircase in the back corner, and remembered that other staircase. They emerged in a corridor with a sloping roof. Attics.

‘Herr and Frau Buchner are along there.’ He pointed.

He turned left, and opened the first door on the right.

‘I can stay overnight.’

She stepped in. A tiny room. But with a thousand homely touches. A narrow bed over there under the angle of the roof. A small shelf and table with a night-lamp. A duvet patched with warm colours. Yellow trimmed curtains looped back. Ulla crossed to the window and looked down into a walled garden with fruit trees and a vegetable plot. Houses beyond.

‘It’s lovely, Hans.’

‘Klara hugged me one night. She apologized, but I said I didn’t mind.’

The room next door was the last in the row. Hans pushed open the door and stood back.

Ulla went in.

Hans saw her gasp with pleasure.

‘It’s like my lab. But different, of course.’

A large wooden table stood in one corner strewn with sheets of drawing paper of varying sizes. She went over. Sketches. Some completed. Others partially. Experiments in shading. She loved the textures of the dark carbon strokes.

‘This is the best part.’

She turned round. Her brother had his hand upon an upright of his easel.

‘I got it half price because it was a bit broken. It’s really old. Belonged to a landscape painter.’ The wood had a striking grain. Within easy reach on the left a tall table with thin legs stood. A palette with test patches of bright colour: ochre, vermillion, cobalt, emerald. A rack with several brushes. And a stained rag hung on a peg. A jar of discoloured water. Several fresh canvasses, already mounted, leaned against the wall.

‘Klaus left this morning. I went to the station to see him off.’

Hans came across and hugged his sister.

‘Hans, I need something to . . .’

‘He was good to me. He invited me to the Observatory. In the end I went several times. – How big do you want it?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, just . . .’

She stood beside him as he shuffled some drawings on the table.

‘This one’s a view from the North Window.’

She remembered the first time. How exposed she felt walking the length of the driveway alone. Then with his head bare and in shirt-sleeves waiting on the steps, teasing her. She knew he had watched her on the stairs. And the spell of the great telescope. And the story of the Double Stars.

‘Yes, that one.’

‘It’s become part of my *Dome Series*.’

She picked up a strong-lined charcoal of Klaus sitting in the chair beneath the telescope.

‘The red chair,’ she murmured.

‘Look, I’m sorry, but I’d better get downstairs again.’

‘Oh, that’s right. I’ll go too. But I might come back, though, if I may.’

‘No need to go. Stay as long as you like. You might find something in those big folders over there.’

She smiled.

‘See you later, then.’

She didn’t answer.

He could see she was lost somewhere between the North Window and the red chair. He crossed the room and went out, closing the door quietly behind him.

She stood at the window for a bit, with the drawing in her hands, then put it aside with the other one. Now, these folders. She went round the easel and bent to pick up the first folder. Took it back to the table, undid the ribbon, and opened the flaps.

Mostly oils. A view out the eastern window over the orange-tiled roofs to the green-forested slopes of the Wald rising behind.

‘Hmm.’

Another with much of the telescope and the chair just visible. She lifted it, and put it down to her right. Her eyes moved back.

‘Oh, my God! My God!’

It was an oil. A medium-sized canvas. A vertical. But in perfect balance. The astronomer was seated on the red chair in the bottom left-hand corner. He was on the point of drawing his hand out of the right-hand jacket pocket, with the flap still raised, in the instant before she knew he would pat it down.

‘How typical!’

His eye was close to the tube, with the left hand raised, adjusting the focus. And the great barrel of the telescope soared up on a strong diagonal line away from him, up towards the open dome, pointing beyond into a velvet blue-black infinity far above, where a remote cluster of spark-bright stars burnt in total isolation in the top right-hand corner of the painting. The gentle light shed by the telescope’s intricate workings illuminated the yellow brass of its casing and the fine curving cheekbone of the scientist.

‘Ah, I must have that! I must have that!’

Unthinking, she held the canvas up high about her body, her throat arched, her head tilted back.

‘Oh, be careful, though. You’ll damage it.’

When she came down at last into the storeroom, where Hans stood, surrounded by pallets of paper, he saw the deep smile upon her face.

‘Thank you, brother. You are a very clever man.’

His face flushed.

‘Anything there?’

‘The *North Window* and *The Red Chair*, please.’

‘Is that all?’

‘But it is too much.’

‘Which one?’

‘The one where the dome is open to . . .’

‘Astronomer At Work. You like that. I’m glad.’

She fumbled in her handbag.

‘It’s a gift, sister.’

‘No, I insist. That or nothing!’

He grinned.

‘Consider it your first commission.’

In the front of the shop Buchner clapped the youth on the shoulder.

‘Now, when you have them framed, make sure you give the customer a proper invoice with the shop’s stamp on it. It will mark the official start to your life as an artist.’

As Ulla left the shop, there was more determination in her step. And when she got back to her apartment she hung up her coat and removed the field-bag from its pocket.

She held the bag in her hands and gazed down at it for a long time.

*I, too, will be a warrior.*

Ulla went to the cabinet and got out her most mature bacillus culture and took it to the tables under the tall windows. She had made up a solution, which she put in a labeled bottle, ready for use. Earlier on the sun had appeared, but was now cloud-bound and emitted only a diffuse, uncertain light. She went over to the cages. The mice were busy with their early morning ablutions, washing themselves, and scampering about after a quick breakfast. She turned when she heard the door open.

‘Surgery over already, Papa?’

‘No. I’m anxious to get this under way first. We’ll need . . .’

‘I think you’ll find I have prepared everything.’

‘The patient had a bad night. My chemicals are having a very mixed success. She’s in a lot of pain.’ The muscles in his face worked as he spoke.

Ulla put her hand on her father’s arm.

‘We need to trial as quickly as possible.’

He lifted the bottle and held it up to the light.

‘But Papa . . .’

‘I know. I know. It’s far from ideal. But time is against us.’

He was pleased the way she had the remedy, basin, swab, needles, and syringe laid out, ready, on a trolley near the cages.

‘Let’s get started.’

She reached in for the first mouse.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘They don’t know.’

‘I think they do.’ It struggled. She could feel the pulse of the little creature’s heart beating like a miniature hammer against the pads of her fingers. She turned it over, baring its stomach.



Tiefenbach disinfected the surface. Filled the syringe. He noted the care with which she handled the mouse. A sure sign of a profound respect for life. The mark of a good scientist, cognizant of the sacredness of all living creatures.

He inserted the needle. The small body jerked slightly.

She stiffened involuntarily, her hands gripping.

'Relax the hands,' he said.

'Sorry.'

He held his hands motionless, allowing the fluid to drain. Then smoothly withdrew the needle and swabbed the area.

'Good. Next please.'

'How many, Papa?'

'Four. We need to be certain.'

'Will they all die?'

'That will depend.'

'They were happier in their cage.'

The other three followed.

'Good. That's better. Learn to disassociate yourself. Allow only thoughts relevant to the procedure.'

Each morning Ulla inspected the trial. She hated the way the once intensely active bodies became sluggish, and prone to spasm, as the days passed. The mice mostly lay curled in tight balls in a corner of the cage, getting up only to drag their hind legs to the water bowl or take a few desultory nibbles at the grain. So she was relieved when her father said they would inoculate two of the mice with the remedy on the following day. He noticed that she had got thin in the face.

'Are you not well, Ulla?'

'The mice aren't, Papa.'

'The worst part is almost over.'

She did not reply. She held the two while he inoculated them with the mycelia.

'Steady hands. Excellent. Now, put them in a separate, well-labeled cage and note any change.'

The two which had not had the chance of the mycelia now lay virtually inert on the floor of their cage. An occasional twitch of the bedraggled fur. An increasingly rare eye movement. The water level remained virtually the same, the grain untouched. Once she

turned in alarm. She was sure she'd heard a faint whimper in the stillness of the lab. She abandoned her notes, and went in search of her father. She barred his path in the corridor.

'Can I finish their lives?'

He looked at her hard. Not like her father, at all. 'The involved heart,' he muttered, and pushed past her.

She shouted after him: 'Can I, then?'

'Of course. Decide yourself.'

'I was only . . .' But he had disappeared round the corner. 'It's this particular case. There's something odd about it.'

She filled the syringe as he had instructed her. The mice scarcely made a movement when she inserted the needle. When the tiny eyes closed for the last time, she sat before the cage, with the door open, screwing her handkerchief between her fingers. Sometime later she found the metal receptacle Nurse Hilda used for the disposal of waste material.

On the way back from surgery Tiefenbach paused at a window in the corridor. He used to snatch such moments of respite in frenetic days. Ulla was on her knees beside a back plot in the hospital's walled garden. She had a trowel in her hand. He watched her dig two shallow holes in the dark soil and lift some object out of a shiny dish. Twice. It was too far for him to see exactly, but he recognized the receptacle regularly used for the transport of offal to the disposal bin. He lowered his chin and rummaged in his beard. He would not say anything to her. But his lips moved: 'The scientist has both a public and a private face. The latter is none of the world's business,' he muttered to himself, before continuing on along the corridor.

Daily the movements of the inoculated two improved. Ulla kept watch over them almost as though they were her own children recovering from an illness. She smiled more often at her father in the corridor. Steadily the two mice resumed their normal movements and their former healthy appetites. She wondered what the further stage of testing, her father had mentioned, would amount to.

A number of days later he called into the laboratory. Ulla was busy in the workroom but recognized his heavy, regular tread. She realised he must have stopped momentarily at the cages, and when he appeared he started talking at once.

'We can't wait any longer.'

Tiefenbach saw his daughter's brow crease. She was sitting straight in the chair with her head turned abruptly towards him.

'No, there isn't any question. The dear woman is very low. Both in body and spirit. We have to act at once if we're to save her.'

'But Papa, the testing . . .'

'I know. I know. Insufficient.'

Ulla didn't argue. She watched his face. There was something contorted about it. Unlike even the effect Lisa Schwarz's death had had upon him. It was almost as though there was something . . . She shrank back from the thought. But she couldn't hide from it. Yes, something personal about this case.

He saw her flinch. Her confusion.

'Treatment will start tomorrow. Prepare for it, please. You may be present. Sister Maria will assist me, as usual.'

When Ulla brought the mycelia remedy in its bottle and instruments to Arilda's room, she could not have said how aware the maid was of her presence. She seemed to find it difficult to keep her eyes open. Ulla set up things on a trolley close to the bed. Sister Maria came in, smiled at her, and began to remove most of the patient's pillows.

'That should make it easier.'

Ulla caught the Sister examining her.

'Is anything wrong, Sister?'

'You're looking rather pale, Fraulein.'

'Honestly it's nothing, Sister.' But she got the distinct impression the senior nurse did not believe her. She wanted to disguise the fact that when she woke that morning she had felt decidedly off colour. When she looked in the mirror she was taken aback by the paleness of her skin. She saw a face drained of energy. And when she tried to eat something she'd felt sick almost at once and hurrying to the bathroom she'd leant on the edge of the toilet bowl and vomited so violently it had frightened her. Her body shook for a time afterwards as though some other force had taken possession of her organs quite against her will. She'd lain on her bed with a cold flannel on her brow. The last thing she wanted was to be forbidden to attend Arilda's first treatment when her culture would at last be put to the test, and was very relieved when her father appeared. And he was clearly not himself, either. Hardly acknowledging her.

‘Are we ready, Sister?’

The nun nodded.

‘Prepare the patient, then.’

Ulla moved the trolley closer.

‘No. Leave it there.’

The patient stirred once the nun began to unbutton her nightdress. Her eyes opened.

‘Oh, everyone’s here. What a fuss.’

‘Arilda, are you properly awake?’

‘I am Herr Doctor.’ Her tone was warm.

‘We are changing your treatment this morning. Don’t be afraid if things seem a little different.’

‘Am I going to die, Herr Doctor?’

Ulla thought he ignored this. Usually he responded to everything.

‘Herr Doctor?’

‘Be quiet. Sister, please swab an area on the abdomen.’

‘The abdomen.’

They worked like a single mind, these two. It was the result of years. Knowing each other’s movements intimately. Ulla saw the Sister touch her father’s arm and glance toward the patient. Tears were leaking out onto the once rosy cheeks, now hollowed and yellowy.

‘Papa!’

Tiefenbach did not take his eyes from the syringe where the liquid was filling the tube.

‘Focus,’ he said coldly.

Arilda opened her eyes.

‘My family is here,’ she said distinctly. She smiled and the eyes closed.

Sister Maria glanced at the surgeon.

He did not look up. He inserted the needle.

Arilda flinched.

‘This is my punishment.’

Ulla glanced from one to the other. Her father’s hands had started to quiver. The liquid in the tube had stopped.

‘Arilda, it’s . . .’

‘Leave the room.’

‘But Papa, I . . .’

‘The door!’

Hot waves flooded her chest and the skin of her face. She searched the nun’s face for support. She saw her lean across the bed and place her hand upon her father’s shoulder. Almost at once the quiver subsided and a moment later the liquid moved again.

She turned and left the room, holding her breath to close the door behind her. Even so its click sounded inordinately loud in the stillness of the corridor. She slumped against the wall, outside.

Ulla got up quickly and went straight through to the bathroom. She knew she was going to be sick again and only had a minute. It happened every morning now. She retched again and again into the toilet. How long would it go on like this? Soon she would have no option but to ask for help.

She returned to sit round-shouldered on the bed, her hands braced on her thighs, incapable of doing anything for several minutes. Then she lay flat on her back. The events of the previous day paraded through her mind. Especially she remembered being ordered to leave the room.

At last she forced herself up: to wash, to do her hair, to dress, to breakfast. But when she opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch, she hesitated, looked about her at the leaden sky, shivered, then turned about and went back inside, pulling the door shut behind her.

She crossed to the drawing of him pinned to the wall beside her bed and touched his face with her fingers. The black was smudged where her lips had pressed the night before. She tried to stroke it sharp again but only made it worse. She slumped, fully dressed, among the tangled sheets. What if she were simply unable to go outside the house? A bout of nausea rose in her. She went to the bathroom and returned. Smoothing out her dress, she noticed it now had a stain.

This not knowing where he was. With not the slightest idea where he walked and breathed and laid his head at night. It was intolerable. Was there no way she could . . . she remembered the names of places mentioned in newspapers. Names of German victories. Only these were ever reported. It did not do to lower the morale of the people. She rummaged amongst the stack of clippings in the drawer of her night table and strewed them in the hills and valleys of the duvet. Then fetched an atlas from the shelf in the living room.

Opened it upon her skirt. The index indicated a map of Belgium and France. She thumbed through. She found the page and bent over. Then impulsively held it up against her chest: My heart will know. My heart will find him.

Where to start? She put her finger on the border town where he had told her the troops would disembark from the train early in August. She imagined him marching for countless hours, with full kit, in relentless autumn rain. Liege. Ah, that had been one of the names. She ran her finger, westwards, following the red line of the road. And beyond, Namur. The bombardment had been fierce there, the newspaper said. But despite its ring of forts, it too had fallen to the might of German guns, ultimately through a stratagem. She let her finger linger there, before continuing on cross the border into northern France. Where was he? Here. Or here. Perhaps. She moved the tips of her fingers slowly up and down the meandering blue threads of the Aisne. And Marne. Finally she placed both palms flat in an attempt to cover the departments embracing both watercourses from their sources to the ocean in the west. Still dissatisfied, she crossed to her sewing table and took from its drawer a sharp, long-bladed scissor used for cutting out dress patterns. She got the atlas on her lap again and lifted the desired page. She hesitated a moment, her hand shaking slightly, she managed to place the sharp point at the foot of the right-hand margin and commenced to cut a jagged line upwards through the polished white paper until the blades slipped clear at the top. She held the page in her left hand. No, she could do without northern Belgium, much of Germany, and southern France. She cut again. Large tracts of land fell to the floor, with the German territory largely obliterating the other two. She held the truncated page. He will be in the fields. Somewhere. And systematically she began to kiss all the green parts of northern France, even those close to the sea. Then she folded the page quite small, opened her coat, and pulled up her blouse. No. It was not enough. Not close enough. She wanted him as close as possible. Frantically she put her undergarments in disarray and placed her new map next to her skin. Held it pressed there. Yes. Yes. There she would be able to feel its definite shape, its texture, at any moment of the day, wherever she was.

She tidied herself.

Within minutes she stood once more outside the door and found she could proceed, tentatively at first, along the garden path to the gate, and out into the open street.

*“To Relieve the Suffering of Others.”*

.....

Ulla read it again above the front door of the hospital and then went in. She didn't want to have to talk to anyone and when she passed the reception desk the nurse on duty got no reply to her greeting. Ulla kept on right through to the back and was relieved when she had shut the door of the laboratory firmly behind her.

She must make up a fresh supply of the remedy. That was the least she could do for Arilda. She expected to get the first samples of the treatment during the morning. She deposited her things in the workroom, put on her lab coat, and crossed to the cabinet to inspect her 'garden': *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*. Yes, that Voltaire was a wise fellow. He knew what you had to do in order to keep the different parts of yourself in balance. And she touched the bas-relief of her new map secure beneath the band of her skirt.

She tightened when she heard the door behind her. Sister Maria stood in the opening. Ascertained she was indeed there, then came straight on and sat down calmly, facing her, taking both her hands in hers.

.....  
'I glimpsed you come in, Fraulein, and knew I'd find you here.'

Ulla did not reply.

'God told me this morning I was needed here. Go, he said, the Fraulein Tiefenbach has need of you. She suffers alone.'

Ulla looked down at the strong, smooth hands that enclosed her own. She raised her eyes.

'Sister, I have lost my way.'

'No. Not lost. Just in the thick of the tribulations of the journey.'

Ulla remained silent. A pool of quietude seemed to emanate from the nun.

'I miss him terribly, Sister.' Ulla felt the lightest pressure about her hands. 'And Papa is so . . .'

'He has his own cross to bear at the moment.'

Ulla glanced up inquiringly. But there was no movement in the nun's face.

'I wish I did not anger him so.'

'You are not the root of his affliction.'

Ulla felt the calming touch of the nun's hand upon her cheek.

'Now, my child, you need to look after yourself.'

'You know?'

Sister Maria nodded.

‘How far are you along?’

‘More than three months now.’

‘Sick?’

‘Most mornings.’

They were still.

‘You will have to go away soon.’ The nun saw a look of fear and desperation in the young woman’s eyes. ‘When the time comes, I will help you. I will arrange a place.’ She got up. ‘The ward round is about to begin.’

‘What if he does not return?’

Sister Maria came back several steps.

‘It is unwise to leap ahead of God.’

‘But . . .’

‘Part of him lives and grows in you at this very moment. Nurture it. That is your principle work now.’

Thank you, Sister.’

‘You are to be a mother, Ulla.’

Amazed, Ulla looked up at the senior nun. There was an unequivocal shining in her eyes.

‘There is an abundance in your garden, Fraulein. Healing for your patient. And a new person for the world.’



## Chapter 13

Klaus lay on his stomach, waiting for word from his corporal to begin digging. Over to his left above the swaying grass he could see a row of poplars, their leaves turning to gold. And though the sky was clear and blue there was a coolness in the air now. Autumn weather. He buttoned his greatcoat. Five days they'd been marching north from the debacle on the Marne. They'd almost had it in the bag and Paris in their sights, but dissent among the generals and enemy initiative had lost them the advantage. So they'd withdrawn. The objective over the days that followed was to dig in and hold the line.

The seven other men in the unit had gathered for their corporal's orders.

'I'm worried about an all-out assault before we're ready for them,' Volkner said.

'Fighting by tomorrow, then, sir?'

'Hard to say, Schmitt. We'll at least get some scrapes dug. Minimal, I know. But better than nothing.' The name suggested a shallow depression.

The men spread out.

Klaus was aware of the other seven men in his unit going to work around him. He could hear scraping and the occasional clink of metal on stone. He unstrapped the short shovel from the back of his rucksack. They'd been harried off and on by enemy artillery so it would be good to have some shelter.

He raised himself on his left elbow and removed the turf. The subsoil was drier here. Amazing the effect of even a little more elevation. He had it in the manual in his bag, but he'd committed it to memory. First dig out a hollow for the head – the most vital part the body. Chest area next. And from thereon down. He scooped out the earth, piling it in front of the hole, thus creating a rudimentary parapet at the same time. He spat out some dirt and grinned, imagining Ulla's amused face as she teased him about the importance of keeping his feet on the ground too. He felt his left-hand tunic pocket for the hard outline of her shell.

It was hot work. He wanted the coat off.

'Keep it down, mate!'

That was Georg over on his right. Ulla would have approved of him. He was from Bavaria, in the south. From peasant farmer stock. They'd met up on the first days of the march, and become friends.

‘How deep, Georg?’

‘‘Bout fifty centimetres, Prof. Makes it harder for those sneaky sniper types.’

Klaus grinned to himself. He had Bergmann’s humour. Interesting.

Volkner crawled from hole to hole, urging them on, encouraging. The light was fading. He wanted them to ‘assemble’ again in a few minutes.

‘We’re still pretty vulnerable,’ he said. ‘Need some support.’ He called for two volunteers. ‘Machine-guns. Enough to set up several posts.’

Darkness provided further welcome cover. And the machine-gun crews began to arrive. They set up their posts along the line, stationed between each unit, from where they would be able to cover the intervening spaces with their fire.

‘Hopefully we’ll have a better system soon,’ Volkner said.

Dawn came with a slit of light along the eastern horizon. The men rose and were sitting eating their porridge in silent groups, washing it down with strong tea, when the first shell ripped open the silence.

Dawn bombardment.

Here it starts again, Klaus thought. The ritual of war. An hour before sunrise. An hour before sunset. Every day. His head was not the same as when he stepped off that train two months back. He knew it. He could feel it, too, in his bones. In the dragging weariness of reluctant limbs.

‘Holes, men!’ It was the corporal.

Klaus had his rucksack and rifle, running forward, keeping low.

Shells began to come about. Shrieking and whistling. So far usually either falling short or overshooting. The enemy still a bit uncertain where exactly the German forces were.

As the hour went by it settled into a solid more concentrated barrage. Like a giant hand corralling them rather more psychologically than physically, with the thought of the hunted animal, that protection lay in staying put and resisting the urge to make a dash for it. He would raise his head gingerly to peer forward round his pile of dirt, but the sense of exposure and din would soon cause him to draw in again. He closed his eyes and had a fleeting vision of the quiet corridors of the morning Observatory, before the wave of noise swept over him again. A shell exploded close and its shock waves momentarily unstrung him.

It lightened. Mist low, wreathing the poplars, swirling thinly white like snakes above the undulating sea of grass.

Volkner: 'Rifles in position!'

Klaus got the stock of his rifle up on top of the earth and worried it down a bit till it was in line with his body and he could sight along the barrel.

'Jesus Christ!' It was Georg on his right.

Klaus took in the machine-gun posts at a glance, one to the right and left of him and slightly forward of their position. Helmets and greatcoats, like bears, their outlines blurred by fog. The enemy artillery had fallen silent. An uncanny lull spread along the line of waiting men in this rural landscape. Light dispelling the mist with every passing minute as the sun rose. And out of this backdrop dark figures appeared. First one, then two, then groups running together, in lines, behind each other, serried, like waves, wave on wave, in serried ranks.

'They come!' His corporal's voice jerked him back to reality.

He laid his jaw against the hard wood and sighted along the barrel. His finger trembled violently inside the trigger guard and the rifle exploded in his arms.

'Hold your fire!' Volkner bellowed.

Klaus cursed himself. Light glinted on metalwork and stung his eyes. He shook his head and blinked his vision clear.

The scene before him was filling fast with running figures. Every now and then, they'd crouch. Bursts of fire would redden the ends of muzzles. Bullets sang amongst them. He saw something flash beyond a muzzle-end, caught in the sun's rays like a stick of silver.

*Bayonets!*

He shook his head and wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. The ground was hard under him and his rifle was still an alien creature.

He heard Georg fire his first shot.

Dark clumps of men were now emerging, running at the double, bent over, cradling their rifles in their arms. Running together, joining up in a single long wave as it gathered momentum, ominous and evil, movement rippling along its full length.

A concerted burst of fire on his right.

The first of the machine-guns, he thought. At first he saw only single figures fall. Then another post opened fire on his left. Sharp prolonged chatters of sound ripped the air, one answering the other, as in furious debate. And one beyond that, on both sides.

For a brief span the main formation of the on-coming line seemed to remain much the same, virtually unbroken, save for odd points at staggered intervals. But as the voice of the machine-guns rose and became an unbroken sheet of needled death, the great wave began to unravel, larger and larger gaps appearing in its surface. For a time new figures surged to close the gaps, but gradually the whole was torn apart until all that remained were flailing remnants, which swiftly diminished into a single soldier, finding his own last dark road. Too far now from his own line to go back, the coming light behind him, etching his final moments in stark silhouette.

He found he was firing indiscriminately, not making sure of each target, as he had been instructed to. He found, too, disgusted with himself, he'd periodically duck wildly, thinking, in the end, every whining bullet, announcing its shrill approach, was meant for him alone.

A shot rang out, close, and he saw a man stop in mid-stride. Then take a further step or two, fire once more, at nothing and everything.

A second, his body jerked, tottered, and fell straight forwards on his face, the hump of his pack still visible. Still.

And yet another, to his right, caught by two shots simultaneously. He looked as though he might reach the parapet in a few strides. Silhouetted dark against the yellow light, his two arms thrown up straight and wide above his head like a scarecrow. Then ages after, one arm flick down, and the other follow, and the whole body folding itself away forwards, with still enough momentum to carry it forwards to crash prone at last within a finger-stretch of the line. And lie there, still. With his helmet off. And a tousele of hair a loved one might have touched. His uniform brown – the only difference. For all the rest, in every feature of his body – in arm and leg and face – like him. Exactly. Klaus saw the man lever himself up, then start to crawl towards the first heaped earth. A bullet rang out and the man sank into the grass. Red blood seeped from a small round hole in his head, staining the curls.

Digging the trench took place on the second night, as soon as it was dark. He was glad to have something physical to do, for the images of the attack still crowded his mind and stuck there. The realization that he couldn't fit any thought amongst them frightened him. There had been a sunset and he had watched the light withdrawing from objects on no man's land. The row of poplars seemed the only thing so far untouched, like something held in a hand

above a wild sea. Swathes of grass were flattened, ground underfoot, their delicate greens dulled. Their sweet smell replaced by something rancid. And already the landscape was pocked intermittently by the craters of exploding shells, like a planet left to die after the departure of its inhabitants.

‘We’ll take some bearings and lay out the line,’ Volkner said to the men sitting and standing about him.

‘How long will it take, corporal?’ asked Schmitt.

‘We should get the guts of it done tonight.’

They began to strip off the turf.

It took three hours solid to dig down to the level of the fire-step – about a metre and a half. It was hot work, and soon he was stripped to his singlet. Georg worked alongside him.

‘At least we’re making them and we’re on the inside,’ he said.

‘What’s that, Prof?’

‘These walls – they’re ours.’

Georg looked at him sideways and grinned. He noticed how Klaus always liked to make a clean cut with his shovel. And measure stuff exactly.

‘The Tommies’ll pay a good price for this one, I reckon,’ he teased.

Klaus grinned. He liked this Bavarian.

‘Chalky soil,’ he said. ‘Limestone. Must have been an old seabed once.’

‘Not bad digging, either.’

He nodded.

Once they got down a bit, they were allowed a lamp. Its wan light picked out the whitish granular face. Every now and then he came across a fragment of shell. He paused to touch the outline of Ulla’s whole one in his tunic pocket.

Volkner appeared out of the gloom.

‘How’s it going, boys?’

‘One and a half metres, sir,’ he said.

‘Good. That’s the fire-step, then. Watch you get the path right. Not too wide.’

‘This is our city wall,’ he said. ‘It’ll be well fortified.’

The corporal looked puzzled.

‘Klaus is glad he’s inside!’ Georg said.

‘What’s that, private?’

‘Never mind, sir. It’s just the Prof, you know. Got a different way of looking at things.’

‘Oh. Right, private.’ The corporal shook his head and moved on.

‘Don’t think he knows what to make of you, Prof.’

Klaus grinned.

They dug on down behind the fire-step.

Every now and then he held a sack open, while Georg filled it with dirt. They took turns at hefting it up onto the front lip of the trench. He liked the way something removed immediately assumed a new function, and added height to the front wall too.

By five they had it deep enough. The revetment would have to wait a bit.

The men cooked up their porridge on their little stoves, then sat around tucking in. It was a bit lumpy but it warmed the stomach and filled a hole. A sausage wrapped in blackbread and washed down with a mug of hot black coffee concluded the first meal of the day. Some smoked.

It would soon be light.

‘Got a girl, Klaus?’ Reichardt asked.

Elbows on knees, his chin cupped in his hands, he looked up. The fellow wasn’t trying to be funny. He nodded.

‘Got a photo?’ It was Lens.

He hesitated.

‘You’re a nosey bugger, Lens,’ Schmitt said. ‘Mind your own business.’

Klaus said: ‘It’s okay. Yes, Lens. I have.’

‘Don’t s’pose we could see her,’ Meinhardt said.

‘Go on,’ said another.

Klaus fumbled in his pack and got out his notebook. He handed the small photo to Lens.

The soldier’s face became still.

‘Here, you’ve had it long enough!’ someone said.

Lens parted with it reluctantly. He looked across at Klaus.

‘She’s real nice,’ he said quietly.

‘Hang on a minute.’

Klaus saw Schmitt wipe his hands on his trousers and glance down at them, before taking the photo. He looked for a moment.

‘Bet you wish you were in bed with her tonight, not digging this bloody trench!’

‘Yes. I certainly do.’

The men grinned.

‘What’s her name?’ Lens asked.

‘Ulla.’

‘That’s pretty.’

The photo was handed back. The men sat on the completed fire-step, the lamplight flickering on their weary faces. Silent. Waiting for the guns to start.

‘Have another cuppa, Klaus,’ said Lens.

Sitting on the fire-step. A day or two after the first attack. Still early morning.

Bombardment past. Blue sky above. With an odd cloud. Looking up, the horizon of his world was now defined by the edge of the trench. He took out her photo, and his eyes rushed and riveted to her face. How he longed for her lips to part and speak to him, to feel them press against his own. The other guys had liked her. She’d done a lot for him there. He was glad he had shown her to them. He had an image of a cobbled street and the sound of young voices receding behind him. Did you not see how the students like you, Klaus? Do you not see now, how your comrade-in-arms look upon you as one of them?

He pulled the notebook from the outside pocket of his pack. After a last look, he replaced the photo. Started, tentatively, to make a note or two. A series of equations that he speculated might define the scope of the question.

At his elbow: ‘Well, Prof, what’s cooking, today?’ Georg sat himself down on the fire-step. He had a bowl of steaming cabbage soup with lumps of potato bobbing about in it. Greenish.

‘It’s a question that has interested me for a long time.’

‘What’s that, then?’

‘The sky – why the sky is blue.’

Georg’s spoon stopped in mid-air.

‘Why is it blue, Prof?’

‘Well, I suspect it’s got something to do with layers in the atmosphere. And light passing through them on its way to us.’

‘Sunlight seems pretty white to me, eh?’

‘Excellent, Georg. It is.’

‘Where does the blue come in then, Prof?’

‘First, it travels in straight lines.’

‘Smart, eh. Fastest way to get there.’

Klaus grinned. He liked this man’s strong, basic way of thinking. He passed his hand through the air.

‘Easy, eh, Prof.’

‘Yes. But look at this.’ He closed his hand in a fist and pushed it against the back wall.

‘Bloody impossible, mate.’ Georg grinned.

‘Exactly. Different densities. Air and earth.’

‘All right, then,’ Georg said slowly.

‘Now, your white light contains a secret.’

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s actually made up of seven colours.’

‘Bloody marvelous, Prof. Who would’ve guessed it.’

‘When your white light passes through things it gets bent and split –’

‘Crikey.’

‘Split into a rainbow.’

Georg was silent for a bit.

‘I must say I’m very glad whoever chose it, chose blue.’

‘Me, too,’ said Klaus.

‘Red’s fine. But red all the time. And all over.’ He swept his arm in an arc above his head. ‘That’d be a bit much of a good thing, I reckon.’

Klaus found himself strangely moved by the good sense and conviction of his comrade’s homespun philosophy.

‘I agree, Georg. It was a wise choice.’

‘Blue you can live with, all right.’

Klaus scribbled in his notebook while Georg returned to his sausage and black-bread. Then he got himself some soup and the two of them settled down together on the step, content in each other’s company, like brothers.

They’d had something of a bunker dug for some time now in the back wall. A flap of canvas hung down serving as a door. Klaus sat on a wooden ammunition box beside his



bunk. He'd cleaned his rifle the night before and was ready. Autumn was passing and the temperatures had dropped. He huddled in his greatcoat, the collar well turned up. A rough table occupied the small mud-walled room. Several lamps and candlestick holders stood about on it. A pack of well-used cards. An operations field manual. Several grubby paperbacks. His body was trigger-tight, waiting for the guns, waiting for the first shock. He felt his head like a lump of meat tenderized by repeated blows from the butcher's mallet. He never got used to it. His hand pulsed slightly, worried by the cooler weather. Yesterday on the parapet it had been unsteady on the butt of the rifle, rendering his firing ineffective. It aggravated him, but Georg had helped.

He heard the first detonations of gunfire.

It increased, isolated explosions joined by others, until it was a solid wall of sound, reverberating the framework of the dugout, spasmodically releasing small showers of dirt and dust onto heads below. They'd shored it up as well as they could. It struck against his skin. Thumped incessantly against the lump of his awareness like a bully intent on provoking a fight. Until he did something inauspicious. Shrugging deeper into the bowl of his shoulders, he did his best to keep it at bay. But the blows increased, like a boxer delivering a relentless pummeling. And the cacophany of din entered his skull, invading every vestige of his self-possession, until a thousand gongs rang at once and took up permanent residence there.

'Firing positions!' the corporal ordered.

The bombardment was easing. But you had to be ready for an attack, whether it came or not. It was reported another regiment had lost a section of their trench through inattention, and had taken several grinding weeks involving close combat and heavy casualties to reclaim that forward position. Vigilance always, then. And aside from the standard bombardments at dawn and dusk the enemy had taken to worrying the line with spasmodic volleys of shell. The accuracy of their artillery had steadily increased.

Klaus settled into his position on the fire-step. Shells were landing closer now. Regularly. Just the other day the parapet was breached in a unit to his left.

A shell coming now. And now each one seemed to be marked with his name. And its destiny was to end his life. He even thought the bullet trembled on its path, as though it were smiling.

One passed overhead, quite close, and landed metres back of the trench and showered them with dirt. Barely had the noise of its explosion died away, the dirt, the

whine, and the deadly spray of its shrapnel subsided, than he heard another coming, hot on its heels, as though born out of it. It came closer.

From the moment he'd heard the boom, the image of its trajectory seared its pathway through his mind, arcing upwards to its apogee, then curving downward, an element of evil beauty in its flight, zeroing in. The din of its approach increased with its descending velocity, until it howled in every fibre of his skull, and finally entered there and took up residence. A moment. Suspended. Then all the earth about him exploded. Up and up. A knife cut his brow. His eyes and mouth rammed full with dirt forced into him, defenceless. Then the subsequent rain of dirt and something struck him in the chest, to the point of tears, hammering him against the trench wall. Rebounded, imprinting him face down in several centimetres of wet mud, so his first breath near drowned him, left him gulping frantically for air.

He slumped forward. Lay prone. The guns now distant, there voices petering away.

After a while he stirred. The ritual started. His mind went round the parts of his body, gingerly, to check what was still there. Even if it did not now belong to him. Was beyond his reach. Under another command.

Then he smelt it. A strong, acrid odour. Blood. Close to him. Inches away. He eased his head up, sucking from the mire. Drew an arm roughly across his face, blinked into vision. Something not large, outlined itself vaguely at first, inches from his face. His vision swam, and cleared. One end of the object, torn, jagged, faced him. His thoughts scrambled to make sense. To define . . . to refute . . . to . . . a hand . . . a human hand lay, half-buried in the mud. Almost as though the start of its age-long journey as a fossil had begun, and already had begun its million-year dream of lost origins . . . Revulsion struck the back of his throat and the pit of his throat simultaneously and he vomited violently. Retching and retching. Weeping and weeping . . . on and on . . .

At length he felt hands upon him. They gently eased him up, and sat him on the fire-step, holding him, his back to the wall. He heard no reprimand for the unbroken stream of gibberish that poured uncontrollably from his mouth, in series upon series of screams and mumblings – the incendiary endpoint of a hundred days.

In the end he was aware one remained at his side. He felt the body solid against him. Every last fibre of him clung and leaned towards the bulk of his comrade, the only point of light and sanity that remained in his existence.

Later Georg brought him bread and cheese and hot tea and sat a little off. But still there.

And then the torn hand stood erect in the centre of his skull, asserting its reality. And he howled and whimpered.

Finally all that was left was his bottomless void of silence. And something thrashing the step at his side. He glanced down. It was his own hand, beating the hard surface, like the flipper of a stranded fish, unable to get back to the sea.

He had to hold it with his own right hand. Once its involuntary struggle became so strident, it escaped his grasp. At last, as the sun's rays eased through the mist, it merely trembled at his side. Occasionally up, and slammed down. And finally vibrated. Lay still. Or twitched again, once, after he had almost forgotten it.

Once the dawn bombardment was past, Klaus turned his attention to building himself a Siegfried shelter in the front wall of the trench. Sometimes you needed protection, but could not afford to be so far removed from the action as the bunker. As Georg was doing the same they worked away together, comparing notes, and coming periodically to inspect each other's progress.

It had rained heavily again during the night, so everything was sodden, the air dank. It got into Klaus' chest and he constantly wanted to cough. Once, when he glanced out, he saw the ground beyond the parapet was becoming a marsh.

He started slowly. The soil behind the revetment was drier and firmer, which should have made the job quicker, but Georg often found him propped on his shovel. His mind seemed to squat impotently round the image of the hand, stripped of volition. On other occasions he would glance down at his own disfigurement, and he'd remember how his left hand would tremble on the stock of his rifle, upsetting his accuracy, while Hartog's barrel had always been rock solid.

The sun broke through the mist about mid-morning and shoals of steam rose steadily from the crushed earth of no man's land, as though from smoldering fires. And the poplars, touched by light, resembled a row of deep orange-gold torches. He took out the shell and placed it in a little alcove he had made especially and he closed his eyes for a minute and struggled to think solely of her. He heard the student call him again from the café and the words she had said afterwards. He caught himself talking to a student or a colleague in the corridor of the Observatory. He remembered a resolution he had made. Not

to leave them until they were lighter in spirit. And he looked along at Georg, then turned his head to Hartog's replacement, digging on his left. He saw their drawn, weary, muddled faces. 'This is my Observatory, in the meantime. These are my stars. I will look out for them,' he murmured to himself.

'You all right, Klaus?' It was Georg.

'Yes, thanks.' He nodded and smiled.

By evening the shelters were completed and Klaus had immediate protection during a bombardment. But handy enough to keep an eye on any unexpected moves from the enemy line. Klaus spent a bit less time at the parapet, but turned his hand to other matters: refilling water bottles, re-stocking ammunition, anything that he saw needed to be done. And his fellow soldiers accepted his new role. Let him know they appreciated it. Joked with him in passing.

It had clouded over, concealing the moon. And the temperature had dropped. The wind got up. Quite noisy in the trench, in fact, the flapping of canvas at bunker entrances. Visibility quite poor twenty metres out from the parapet. Not a night to be out. The firing of the guns had become more intermittent and the men stepped down, leant their rifles against the back wall and prepared for supper. A sentry was posted, but he reported no movements from the enemy. The night closed in. Several sat about, with the light roar of stoves, while Schmitt told a story. Some had turned in. A few sounds drifted along from other units. An occasional burst of laughter.

No one noticed when away along to the right some new elements of sound were added to the wind. Like a sort of gathering, a coming closer. But Klaus did. He was watching.

There were irregular sounds of struggle quite close and a figure appeared round the end of the partition wall. Klaus saw it. Something odd. Different. The uniform, in the lamplight. Yes, not field grey. Not field grey, at all! Brownish-yellow, what does one say? Khaki.

'Out! Out!' he shouted.

Georg was first on his feet, but facing the wrong way.

Klaus saw the khaki arms move forwards and upwards, the figure take a step forwards. Lunge. Saw the barrel rising with its long silver knife, swiftly closing the distance to Georg's back.

Klaus threw himself against Georg, knocking him to one side, remembering he had to simultaneously sideswipe with his arm. He felt the bone in his arm jar against the hard wood and pain shoot, lancing his hand. Then he was wrestling the other. Knew he was fighting for his life. Stumbled. Down. On the ground. Expecting it. Expecting the bayonet.

Voices broke out above him.

He felt a white heat. Searing.

Shouts. Aware of a struggle above him. His head kicked. Once. And again. Then a black lid descending. Descending.

## Chapter 14

Erika left the house in the mid-afternoon, ostensibly taking a carriage to the station. The previous evening at dinner she had informed her husband that she would be attending her brother's sixtieth birthday celebration at the estate in the country. And that she would only be gone for one night, returning sometime on the following day.

As the carriage descended the Prinzenstrasse, she brooded over what had transpired. The first treatment had shown a slight improvement. That it would take time, Alfred had said. But it was a step in the right direction. It appeared that the thing her husband was so excited about – the thing that had made the difference – had been largely due to Ursula's imagination and flair for experimentation. What had they called it? . . . Yes, a 'culture'. Something you grew, as in a garden. And its name – she turned tilted her head, supporting her narrow chin in the fork of her hand – began with an 'm', and resembled a girl's name, ending in 'a'. She looked out at the fading light. 'Mycelia.' That was it. Quite pretty, really. She shook her head. That's what had made it possible, apparently. Evidently the result of more roaming in the countryside! Well, she would have a little roam herself, but in the city. That's what she was good at. A master, in fact. But not before a pleasant *caffee und kuchen* in the Hotel zur Sonne's side-room. She did like Mein Host of the Sonne. He understood how the world should work.

The driver let her down at the hotel. She went in and settled herself. Mein Host came at once and assiduously danced attendance on her.

'Yes, I will take a room,' she said. 'Just for one night, though. Thank you, Gustav. Please let it face the trees of the old Wall. I can open the window. I do enjoy listening to the wind in the foliage. It is a comforting, ancient sound, reminding one of a time when Germany knew her own mind. But, like the times, the leaves are changing now. Those russet browns and yellows are such sad colours, I think, don't you? And they were so lovely in summer, with their deep greens.'

Gustav straightened the white linen napkin that hung upon his sleeve, inclining his immaculately groomed head.

'Indeed, dear lady. They were.' And he disappeared into his kitchen.

She walked in the hotel garden a little in the evening, where a small fountain plashed. And while there was still light, kept on with her Walter Scott. This *Ivanhoe* was a

silly fellow. If he were not careful the treacherous Rebecca would turn his head. He were far better advised to pursue the Saxon woman. His own stock. His duty to his family lay clearly with her.

Erika took a light meal and adjourned to her room. She sat at the open window listening to the wind working the large leaves of the plane trees. Rustling in the trees. No language on earth says it as well as German does. She could see a section of the Wall path and some lichen-covered stones. The Wall is the division between the Old Germany and the new. She shivered. I am on the inside and it is as though the careless world is bustling past on the other side, heedless of me. But what it does not know is that I am not so easily overlooked! She watched until the trees lost their features and became black throbbing masses in the night.

Alfred was too involved with this patient. She was clouding his judgement. He would make a crucial error unless he were very vigilant. She had haunted the house for far too long. Always there. Always present. It was time she went. And there was an abundance of good maids available at the moment, with so many men away at the war, and families desperate for another breadwinner. Now that Ursula was out of the house, and Hans virtually gone, there was no longer reason for her to stay. She had come with the children. She could go with them too. Erika's mind was made up. Tonight she would merely endeavour to hasten the process if the opportunity offered.

She rang the bell. The proprietor came to the door.

'I have changed my mind, Gustav. Call me a carriage, please. I will go to the theatre.'

'Ten minutes, Frau Tiefenbach.' He bowed.

When the carriage came, the driver assisted her in.

'To the Humboldtallee, driver.'

She got him to let her down at some small distance from the Marienhilf. You can never be too careful, she thought. And they think that they have the monopoly on exactness, all these scientists! What they can never understand is that this society is my laboratory. And here, I am a master surgeon. And in my drawing-room, they are the patients. And I am the good doctor. I weigh and measure everything. Nothing escapes my attention.

She paused at the door, seeing the young nun asleep at the desk.

Erika went swiftly past, took a side corridor, and was quickly into the darkened part at the rear of the hospital. She turned left, moving slowly now, running her hand along the

wall until she felt the door handle to the laboratory. She turned it without a sound, and entered.

There was still a surprising amount of light from the tall windows. She started once when the mice moved in their cages to her left. Scuttle. Silence. Scuttle. And went forward again. She had memorized perfectly the layout of the room. Knew exactly where she was going. What she was looking for. She stopped at the research cabinets on the far wall on the right, handy to the tables. She drew a candlestick from her bag, inserted a candle, placed it on a bench, and lit it. A scuffle. She turned and saw several pairs of pink eyes watching her from the cages.

She turned her attention back to the cabinets.

Slowly. Slowly. Take your time. You have all night. First, survey.

She pulled open the glass doors.

‘Fungi Cultures.’ A label on the back wall. Written in her daughter’s hand. The letters too large. Careless. Too free. Far too free! And in red ink. Ridiculous! Not a formal bone in her ungrateful body, despite all my years of patient tutelage.

Erika studied the three rows of dishes. One behind the other. Like chairs in a classroom. ‘Mycelia.’ ‘Mushroom’. ‘Spore.’ Front to back, respectively.

‘She can do things properly when she wants to, silly girl. So why make things so difficult for me? I’ve always only had her best interests at heart. Ach, but it’s too late now!’

She took out her empty embroidery bag. Her hand stopped, poised over the first dish. The word thief came into her mind. Yes, that was too simple. Too obvious. Everything was so clearly labeled. Painstaking. Typical of Alfred, though. But not surprising, really. He had to be doing something with all the hours she never got.

Then she had it. Something that would confuse. Send into disarray, because it involved initially doubting, then systematically unpicking a rigorous line of procedural thought. And most importantly, it would take time to unravel. Time they did not have!

She noticed how lightly each label was attached to its container. How all the dishes in a row bore the same name. Ancient rows of little trees swept unasked for into her mind. She cursed them, thrusting them back into the shadows. Keep your gloves on, woman. Concentrate now.

Also, the position of the rows would be important. Oh, the ancient trees were/are back again! Well, I will bend them to my purpose. I will let them help me. Steady me. I am planting again, now. In my bones I know about rows. Here I will do my own planting. A



new planting. A planting no one will suspect. Largely because they think all knowledge of such things was put to the sword in me.

The front row: Mycelia. Second or middle: Mushroom. Third or Back: Spore.

Erika paused. In her mind's eye she saw: the small trees had stayed small; the once-raised axe had fallen; a Jewish astronomer was scrambling over the stones of the Old Wall, with her daughter bundled in his obnoxious arms; there was a strange discoloration appearing in her ancestral stream; her own daughter was turning away from the front doorstep of the house, and moving away . . .

Erika stilled herself. Husband and daughter: scientists. She sat in their minds to see clearly how they functioned. How they would read, would interpret, what she was going to do now.

With great care. As though she were arranging items for a critical social event. She uprooted the trees. Changed their names.

'I am planting a forest of death,' she muttered. 'Who enters here, will not live. They denied me life, so I will give them death.'

She replaced the dishes in the front row with those at the back. She changed their names. Labels must occupy their former positions. Appearances are everything. As in my drawing-room. As in society. She smiled when she had finished. Saw that everything was as it had been before. She closed the glass doors softly. Waited in that large room, still, for a few moments, with all the dark objects of science about her. Were they looking at her? Did they judge her? She waited for the beat of her heart to settle.

Pausing in the corridor, she ascertained that the desk was deserted. All was quiet. She went out by the front door then, and followed the path under the great beeches to the street. She walked on in the opposite direction for quite a way, before summoning a cab. It returned her to the hotel, and she spent some time in her room. Then, having packed her single traveling bag, she went down to the desk and rang the bell.

She explained to the proprietor that she had received news of her brother's sudden illness, and must regrettably leave at once. Would he be so good as to call her a carriage?

Not many minutes later, she sat in the carriage in the pleasant dark, as the vehicle descended the Grunerstrasse and swept through the Grunertor, out into the open countryside. She settled back in the seat. She would still be in ample time for the birthday celebrations on the following day.

Ulla sat at her table by the window in the workroom. She could hear the wind rising outside the window, and turned her head to watch it stirring the foliage of the beech. The leaves were starting to turn, the occasional russet edge amongst the green. Sister Maria's words came up warm inside her: There is an abundance in your garden. Healing for your patient. A new person for the world. The first treatment had halted the advance of the disease. The second, administered this morning, would take about twenty-four hours to show any effect, Papa had said. She hoped Arilda would have a reasonable sleep. Since there was nothing more for her to do that day, she put her notes away in the drawer, took her coat from the hook, and left the laboratory.

Sister Maria was at the nurse's station as Ulla went past.

'Your patient's taken a turn for the worse.'

'Arilda?'

'Yes.'

Ulla stood in front of the desk. The Sister saw confusion in her face.

'It seems she has had quite a violent reaction to this morning's treatment.'

'Oh. – What did Father say?'

'He was quite puzzled by the whole thing. Said we'd make an analysis in the morning, first thing.'

'I'll stay.'

'You know you need your rest, Fraulein.'

'Why does he keep me away, Sister?'

'He thinks it best.'

'I'm not a child. I don't need protecting.'

'I don't think that's his reason.'

'What then?' But she saw she wasn't going to get anything further from the Sister.

'It's going to be a wild night, Fraulein. The forecast's for storm – rain and wind. You should get home before it breaks.'

As it was, Ulla got drenched in the Herzbergerstrasse, and turned in the gate quite bedraggled. She was cold and wet. She got out of her clothes and into a warm bath straight away and lay there thinking about Arilda. What was happening? What was happening?

She got into bed early, and read for a while, before she turned the light out. But she couldn't sleep. The wind buffeted the house. It was driving branches against the wall

somewhere. She could hear the smack and scrape. The rain lashed the windowpane. Lightning lit the curtains periodically, followed by a roll and boom of thunder, like artillery. In the end, quite exhausted from the turmoil of her thoughts and constant din of the storm, she drifted into a restless sleep, and began to dream . . .

. . . She is terribly afraid for him. He has clearly forgotten where he is and is standing there, unthinkingly. The guns have fallen silent. The silence over the land is as profound as on a still summer day. Then, a single shot is unleashed, like a knife cutting into a bed of warm silk. She hears and knows the bullet is on its way. It whines. It does not bend in its course. It is not the result of a calculated aiming, but simply an errant bullet. A young, battle-weary, British soldier has loosed it from the barrel of his rifle, merely to empty the magazine. His mind is preoccupied with thoughts of sleep and a meal that probably doesn't exist. He turns away.

She is the only one who has knowledge of the bullet's path now. Knows where it is going. She is filled with the terror of her knowing, and her complete impotence to intervene. She cries out in her sleep to warn him. She hears the whine of the bullet, closer now. He has paused on the fire-step, his notebook in his hand, scribbling. His head and shoulders are clearly visible above the parapet. The bullet is smiling now. This is why it was made. She lunges in an attempt to knock him aside. She only has a split second before the bullet smashes into his temples . . .

Something struck her. It wasn't the bullet. She'd landed on the floor, entwined in bedclothes.

'Had she got to him in time?'

Then she remembered where she was. She turned her face to the wall and stuffed the duvet into her mouth, howling into its depths. She was left breathless and perspiring, with strands of tangled hair pasted upon her cheeks and brow. A feeling of terrible loneliness swept over her. At last she fell into an exhausted sleep, as the first rays of the rising sun touched the boughs and leaves of the trees on the Waldberg, with a tender yellow light.

It was late when Ursula woke. She knew at once that she'd overslept. And she also knew that she couldn't ignore or deny it any longer. She had missed her courses once. And here again, they were late. They weren't coming. The usual things were just not happening

in her body. She moved her hands up to her breasts. Oh, they were so tender! And after a minute, she let her hands rest in her lap, as she sat on the edge of the bed, and let the enormity of it wash over her. She was going to have a child. His child. Hers. Theirs. She had given herself to him. Completely. Out of her love for him. Out of her desire to reassure him that no matter what lay ahead, she would be there for him. Then. And always.

She continued to sit for a while.

*Arilda!*

Ulla got up quickly, washed, put on a freshly laundered dress with her coat over the top, and set out for the hospital.

Sister Maria was at the Nurses' Station as Ulla passed.

'Fraulein Tiefenbach?'

'Yes.'

'The Herr Doctor would like to see you. He's very concerned. The patient had a bad night.'

Ulla took the other corridor and knocked on the office door. She went in.

'Oh, Ulla, we're in grave trouble.'

She waited.

'Arilda . . . the patient, had a very bad night. I was here for a while. The nurses told me this morning that after I went home she got steadily worse.'

'Do you know why?'

'Not really. I expected some reaction to a new substance. That's normal. But why now? And why so violent? The patient's . . . Arilda's getting weaker at an alarming rate.'

Ulla saw his desperation. He never used first names when discussing cases. But then it had never been about this woman before. He clearly found it very difficult to talk about her clinically.

'I've no option but to return to my 'chemicals',' he said. 'Unless we attack it with everything we've got, the bacillus will spread in no time.'

'What should I do, Papa?'

'Find out what happened. Test everything. Take nothing for granted. Go back to the last solid fact you have, and work forward systematically from there. We must find an answer.'

Ulla sat in front of her ‘garden’, as though it had been cultivated by someone else. She realized it was the effect of something having gone wrong. Seriously. For the first time, perhaps. Something she didn’t understand. Something that put her beyond. Outside.

She let her eye move over the each dish. Each label. Repeating what was written there. Front row: *Mycelia*. Second row: *Mushroom*. Third row: *Spore*. There were none out of place. Each row, the same type.

She laid out her notes and diagrams on the tables. Studied them. This is what things had looked like as she had observed them. Each item named and annotated. Meticulously. She’d been extra careful because she had wanted her father to be pleased with her work. Though he’d said that wasn’t the best motivation. Was it good Science? That was the question. Was it always the best she could do?

She got up and walked slowly back to the cabinets.

*Test everything. Ask yourself the question: What am I assuming is right? Especially ask this, when something has gone wrong.*

She looked at the cultures.

‘I am assuming that everything I have done is correct. That I have put all the cultures of the same type in the same row. That what’s on each label represents the contents of that dish. And no other. That nothing is out of place.’

So this is what it is to push knowledge out to its knowable edges, its limits. To chase it into the woods, and corner it. Demand it give an account of itself.

*Go back to the last known point. The last established fact.*

Her eyes shifted to the cabinet on the right. There, in their dishes, was her original collection of field data. Gathered on that wonderful, unending soft summer day, when they had spread their rug in the warm grass beside the sparkling stream, and she had laid out her picnic for him. All that now seemed so far away. And now he was . . . A tightness in her chest and the tears began to well up. Her stomach was out of sorts. She had a tendency towards nausea. And poor Arilda . . .

*Go back to the start.*

The mice scuttled in their cage and squeaked.

One at a time she took her samples to the microscope and compared what she observed there with her meticulous notes and diagrams.

Yes, that was correct.

*Assume everything is wrong until proven right.*

All right, I will. I will.

She went to the culture cabinet and took one of the Petri dishes marked 'Mycelia'. She made up a slide. She put it under the microscope. Got the appropriate diagram at her right elbow, so she had only to shift her eye a fraction to see in one glance the details of the organism, then the diagram on the page.

What! What was this?

This was not mycelia. Wrong structure. It had not turned blue with the methylene. Where was the tapering at one end? It did not group characteristically.

She sat back. Gazed out the window into the trees for a while. Leant forward and began slowly to leaf through her diagrams.

She stopped short.

'Oh, my God!'

She looked again. Closer. Checking every detail. Struggling with her incredulity.

This resembles a 'spore'.

Oh, Ulla, Ulla, you could not have done this, girl!

She got up and crossed quickly to the cabinet to fetch the next dish in the same row.

It revealed the same result.

And a third, and fourth!

She slumped back in the chair, her hands limp in the valley of her dress.

Does this mean . . . I gave the wrong one to Papa, for Arilda? I . . . I am the cause then of her distress . . . oh . . . oh . . .

*Test everything.*

She would. Oh, she would. He would be furious. He could not possibly want her working in the hospital after this. And Mother would be proved right, after all. She could almost hear her voice: 'Such arrogance! To think she could so blithely turn her back on woman's time-honoured sphere.'

But she would not go to him until she was absolutely certain. She examined the remainder of the row.

All yielded the same result.

Should she go at once?

*Test everything. Imagine what you can't see. But leave nothing to chance.*

Her eye wandered disconsolately over her diagrams . . . She went over to the cabinet. These mycelia, they claim to be what they are not.

She heard her mother's voice again in her head: 'Appearances are everything, Ursula. What people cannot see does not worry them in the slightest.'

No, Mother. You are wrong. Wrong. What may be fine in your society, is a lie in Science. A lie! A deceit! It can only have one result. Death. Science demands the truth. Otherwise it will kill us. Oh God, Arilda! My Arilda! What have I done to you? In society you may hurt someone by your deceit. That is surely bad enough. But in Science . . . it is like war . . . disease is like war . . . a mistake made, means you die for it. Or a comrade dies. Which is worse, if it is your mistake. In society armed words in a drawing-room can inflict invisible wounds that either heal with time or can be lived with. But in War and Science wounds can be fatal.

Her eye moved slowly along and up from dish to dish. If those labeled mycelia are not mycelia, but actually exhibit the characteristics of spores, what does that say about the identity of the others? That is, what they actually are as distinct from what they claim to be?

She reached to the back row, lifted a dish, and took it back to the tables. Cut off a sliver. Put it on a slide. Placed a drop or two of methylene solution. Slipped it onto the platform.

Focussed it.

Blue. A bright blue. Exactly as Robert Koch must have first seen it. And the bacilli were small for bacteria. Narrow, elongated. Tapered at one end. Clustered in groups of two or three throughout the field of view.

She didn't need to have glanced at her diagrams for confirmation of what she saw. But she did. It was imperative now.

Carefully, pointing with her finger, she checked each feature on the paper, moving her eye back and forwards from the tube, firmly mouthing her observed findings – in order to make doubly sure – comparing them with her previously constructed model of the tubercle bacillus.

What she found matched exactly. She performed the same procedure with each dish in the third row. All, like those in the first row, were not what they claimed to be.

Liars! All liars! Claiming they are one thing, while concealing their true natures. Their true identities. Saying one thing, and meaning another.

Furiously, she wrote up her notes. Not as neatly as usual. Her letters cramped. Without the nice tall loops that Klaus liked so much, she thought, through her tears, as she brushed them fiercely aside with the back of her hand.

At last she sat back. Light was now streaming in through the windows, out of a brilliant sky. The trees were still, as though exhausted from their night of travail.

She would go to Papa, now. She stood up slowly, and looked about her at all the familiar objects in the laboratory, as she might perhaps for the last time. She went and stood watching the mice for a few moments. Glanced in at her desk and chair in the corner by the window. She would have to come back to clear out her things, anyway.

Then she went back to the tables and gathered up her materials. Her evidence! She patted the pages into a tidy pile and held them vertically under her arm, pressed against her body. She turned and walked the length of the laboratory, opened and closed the door slowly behind her. Walked to the corner, then quickened her step.

Ward Round should be over. She went to his office and knocked.

His voice answered.

She went in.

He was writing up his patient notes. He looked up. He could not have explained easily what he saw in the eyes of his daughter.

She put her papers on the desk in front of him.

'Papa, my findings.'

He did not look at her, but gesturing her to sit down, fell to at once with studying them.

She sat. And remained silent. Her heart beating loudly in her breast. She realized she had wanted this work so much. This work that had given her life a purpose, a direction. She watched him hunched over her papers, moving them about, his lips at once still, or engaged in bouts of rapid movement. Indicating or stabbing with the index? finger of his right hand, as though to reinforce or emphasise something he had just read. He would turn his head to consult a table of figures on his left, pinpointing an item with his finger. Holding it there, while he related it to something else. Pausing to read, then moving his eyes, to correlate, to check, to integrate, to make sense.

In the end he sat back in his chair with a great expulsion of air from his lungs. His arms stuck out straight, hands placed flat on the table's surface, like the supporting buttresses of the Jacobekirche. He looked towards the window. He looked fierce. His beard jutted.

'The shell has gone,' he said.

She was almost bursting.



‘It has gone to war, Papa.’

‘I see. It has decided to fight for its freedom, then.’

His eyes came back slowly to rest on her.

She sat up straight in the chair, her hands clenched in her lap.

‘Papa?’

‘Ursula. This is not your doing. I’m certain of that. But I do not understand it yet. How it could have happened. But this . . . this abomination . . . is not your work. You are not a careless person. And you had too much reason to get it right. No, this is something else – the work of someone else.’

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

‘It is my opinion that this was not your doing at all. Someone else has tampered with your work. Someone who knew enough to know what they were doing, and had an irresistible reason for doing it.’

When Ulla got back to the laboratory, she went straight to the workroom and subsided in her chair. A weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Papa did not think her implicated. The unsolved matter of the labels still remained and niggled at the corners of her mind. But now she needed to give every thought to Arilda, before it became impossible for her to remain at work. Or, in fact, to stay longer in the town.

She stood up. But too quickly. Her head spun. She sat down again, and waited until her vision cleared. Then she got up cautiously. To the right of the door were the equipment cabinets, handy to the tables.

She opened a drawer and took out several small brown bottles. They’d slip easily into Papa’s pocket. Labels, small size. Marking pen. A Bunsen to dissolve the culture more quickly. Scalpel. She laid these out on one of the tables. Then went and brought back two of the cultures. Checked them under the microscope, and labeled them correctly. Put a beaker on the tripod. Poured in a definite amount of dissolving agent. Several slices of mycelia. Heard a rush of gas and lit the Bunsen. The flame trembled and burnt yellow. She adjusted the air intake hole, and as the Bunsen assumed a deeper note, the flame narrowed and stretched upwards to a steel-blue point. Tiny, translucent bubbles began to form on the beaker bottom, and rise, singly at first, then in hurrying clusters. She stirred the solution occasionally with a glass rod.

The bubbles suggested the eddy where they had found the spores in the foam. And remembering the ebb and flow of the water her body began to move in sympathy. She tried to pull herself back from that place but her limbs would not obey her. A thought would hook for a moment, then slip away, and hang just out of reach.

With a jerk she sat up, inadvertently making a swipe with her right hand. Several of the bottles toppled and splintered on the floor. She shouted out her disgust, rocking forwards, the flame's heat upon her skin. She had to get up. She could no longer do this. The flame. She must turn it off. She moved her hand. Her finger-tips met hot glass. Drew back, surprised how little she had felt.

*Bunsen . . . Bunsen . . . must.* She went for the little knob but gripped the metal collar instead. Her flesh sizzled and stank. Knocking the beaker, the hot liquid splashed her dress. She leapt up, reeled.

She began to work her way towards the far end of the room. Once she struck a bench, jarring. Then squeaks told her she had bumped the cage. Finally grabbing the door handle, the thought of the flame would not leave her. Had she managed to turn it off? Or did it now burn, unattended?

In the corridor she pushed herself along the right wall, and fell into the gap at the corner. On her knees, leant her head against the wall, breathing heavily.

She was in the main corridor now. *Papa's office . . . she must . . .* She heard feet. Coming closer. She propped herself against the wall, and began to slide downwards. Voices.

'What in heaven's name is this?' It was Papa's voice.

Now he would find out. Nothing she could do, anymore.

'It is the Fraulein, your daughter, Herr Doctor.' That was Sister's voice.

'We must examine her at once.'

'The medications, Herr Doctor. I will attend to her. With help.'

'Thank you, Sister. I will return.'

Ulla was aware of heavy footsteps receding, as she sank into strong arms, her cheek pressed into smooth, laundered cloth. She heard a shout. Sister, shouting.

'Nurse Hilda! Nurse Elizabet! Come, immediately.'

Other steps. Lighter. Sharper.

'Nurse Hilda, help me here. Nurse Elizabet, a wheel-chair.'

Other hands. A blanket, wrapping. Easing down. Sitting. Movement.

Sister Maria issued orders: 'I want her in the convent. Without delay. Utmost care. I will come as soon as I can.'

The quick, light footsteps again. The sound of a door opening, and a draft in her face. Moving in the open, then. And all about her, a sound like the sea.

'Wind in the beeches,' Ulla murmured

Nurse Hilda's anxious voice: 'What was that, Fraulein?'

'My great beech is near. He is waiting for me. Tell him I am coming through the earth as quickly as I can. Not far now.'

'No, Fraulein, we will be inside in a moment.'

'He is always outside! Why will they not let him in? Why? Why?'

A door closing. And the wind no longer in her ears and against her skin. A softer sound as they move now. Another door.

Several hands unwinding the blanket. Supporting her. A softness against her knee. Ah, the lying down. Warm covers. Gentle hand, and cool, smoothing her brow.

'Ulla. I am here.' *Sister Maria's voice.*

*The unattended flame.*

'Oh, Sister, there is a tall woman coming towards me. She brandishes her stick. She has only ever had a stick for me. She cannot help my heart. She has no good lessons for my body. – And she, who might have been a mother to me, is dying. I have killed her through my negligence. I could never focus like a true scientist. Papa was right. He was right to be angry. He tried his best to teach me. Now she is dying, and it is because of me . . .'

'Ulla. Ulla. Child. Be at peace. All will be well. All will be well. Take your rest, now.' Sister Maria's words, soft and low and clear, came to her then, like summer light, dappling the riven waters of her troubled sea.

## Chapter 15

Klaus left the farmhouse HQ on the edge of the Forest of Argonne with the signalman, Fritz, as dawn was coming. The mist still shrouded the valley of the Meuse, entwining itself about the trees as they entered the hill path. A building chorus of birds. And a scuttle in the leaf litter as an early squirrel foraged for breakfast. The fresh smell of wet leaves after rain was strong in his nostrils. He drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs.

‘Great time of day!’ Fritz said. He was a round, jolly fellow, rather like Georg. From Bavaria, too, with the same infectious sense of humour, as Klaus had learnt the previous evening when he arrived by lorry. And Major Scharnhoff had talked about nothing else except the inconsistency of the artillery and how he fervently hoped Klaus could do something about it, or else they were just wasting their time and money.

‘Prefer it here, Lieutenant?’ Fritz asked.

Klaus grinned. ‘I haven’t really been here long enough to know yet.’

The ground steepened. Fritz led the way. Every now and again they came to another clearing

‘We have guns on the other side of the valley, as well. Up there on the Heights of the Meuse. He turned and pointed behind him.

They climbed in silence for a while.

‘Go easy at the start with this Captain Dietrich fellow. He’s a grumpy sod. Doesn’t like anyone interfering in his patch.’

Klaus noted it.

‘The Major wants us to make this big push day after tomorrow. Our guns have been pretty useless so far. Inaccurate, he says. Providing little support for troops on the ground.’

Klaus began to run the theory through his mind. Doing the sums, as he called it. Seeing the pattern of the beast. He imagined the shell, leaving the muzzle of the gun, arcing upwards in its smooth ascending trajectory, to its apogee. Then the steeper, accelerating line of its descent towards the target. The charge and shell relation. Build up of gases in the chamber. Riffling in the barrel to spin the projectile on a steady flight path. Muzzle velocity. Jump and drop. Wind, temperature and humidity. All exerting their influence on the shell. Pure physics and maths, really. Scharnhoff, in charge of this battery regiment, worried by the general inaccuracy of his gun teams, especially those on the Argonne Forest

side of the river – this Captain Dietrich’s domain. Range tables were still very much in their infancy, he had said.

Sun was starting to come through, releasing the water from the glistening canopy above him in spirals of vapour like white veils, drifting upwards. Klaus shook himself and stamped his feet, to shift the night chill in his body.

The sound of the first gun startled him.

‘Here it comes again,’ muttered Fritz. ‘Always at dawn and dusk.’

Klaus had almost forgotten what it was like to constantly live on the raw edge of his nerves. Several weeks in the field hospital while his arm healed. The surgeon had done a good job, and he’d still have the use of it. Of course it had to be his left arm. ‘Take’s my mind off my hand, anyway,’ he’d said wryly, to a nurse, at the time.

They entered a clearing.

‘The telephone line is along the edge here,’ Fritz said. ‘We really ought to get it underground. Especially in the more exposed places where it’s a sitting target for the stray shell. Communication’s vital to a co-ordinated operation.’

The slope began to ease off as they approached the ridge.

‘We’re almost there.’

Klaus heard the voice of the sentry before he saw him.

‘Who goes? State your name!’

‘Lieutenant Mendelsohn and Signalman Strendal.’

‘OK. Pass.’

Klaus saluted briefly as he passed the fellow, who looked frozen, as though he’d been there half the night.

Fritz led them to the end of the trench, where they descended, and moved along, greeted every now and again, until they came to a canvas door in the trench wall. He stopped outside it.

‘Signalman Strendal and Lieutenant Mendelsohn reporting,’ he called out.

The canvas stirred and a short, powerfully-built man stood in the entrance.

‘Dietrich,’ he said.

Klaus stepped forward.

‘Mendelsohn, Captain.’ He offered his hand.

But the other did not reciprocate.

‘Come in,’ he said. ‘We were expecting you. Major Scharnhoff said you were on your way.’

They went in.

Bunks lined three of the walls. Floor of beaten earth. Even a bit of old carpet in one place. A large collapsible metal table occupied the centre of the dugout. A few up-ended ammunition boxes served as stools, their charge or shell data stenciled in black on the outside.

‘Drink?’

‘That’d be great, thanks, Captain. Chilly start,’ Klaus said. He was aware Dietrich watched him constantly.

‘So, you’ve come to sort us out,’ Dietrich said, unsmiling, placing mugs of steaming black coffee on the table.

Klaus looked up, steadily holding the other man’s gaze. He remembered the cagey start he’d had with a new professor of physics at the Observatory.

‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ve just come to see if I can be of some use/have something useful to offer.’

‘How much field experience have you had?’

‘Very little, I’m afraid.’ Klaus thought he detected the faintest shrug of the thickset shoulders.

Dietrich got up and crossed to a shelf in the wall. Cleverly carved out, with an ammunition box inserted on its side. He came back with maps and spread them on the table. He remained standing, leant over and pointed, his arm straight.

‘We are here.’ He stabbed the map. ‘The enemy’s position is there.’

‘Down in the valley, where it opens out?’ Klaus said.

‘Yes.’

‘Difficult when you can’t see the target.’

Dietrich glanced up. Was there a fractional shift of resistance in his eyes? He coughed and straightened up.

‘We’re having a meeting after dinner. This damn push that Scharnhoff’s proposing . . .’ he added.

‘You think it’s premature?’

‘We haven’t been long in the area. It takes a bit to know your ground.’

Klaus nodded. He was studying the map, taking in the densely wooded, deeply fissured nature of the terrain.

‘Not easy to fight in,’ Klaus said.

‘You’re right.’

Later Klaus joined Dietrich and Fritz at the table for the evening meal. It was getting dark, and Dietrich lit a lamp. Dietrich had taken Klaus on a tour of the gun teams under his command.

‘The terrain’s certainly tricky, isn’t it,’ Klaus said. ‘It’s not just a matter of firing straight at a visible target.’ He liked to think out loud like this. It was his chosen way of making the other person feel included. He used it all the time with colleagues and students in order to stress partnership rather than hierarchy and difference. And word of their appreciation had filtered back to him. ‘So, what does this mean in practical terms, Captain?’

Dietrich paused, and looked up from his soup.

‘Elevation. Different levels.’

‘I see . . . where the enemy is . . . and where we are . . .’

‘The gunner has to manage altitude difference between himself and his target.’

Klaus saw that something had occurred to Dietrich.

‘It’s tricky all right, Mendelsohn. But let’s see what the men have to say for themselves.’

The men of the battery crew filed into the main dugout and sat down in any space they could find, perched on the edge of bunks, on ammunition boxes, even on a mat on the beaten earth.

‘Okay for a young chap,’ someone said. A ripple of laughter.

Dietrich had pinned up a large piece of brown paper on the wall, mid-way between the door and the end of the bunks. He got up from the table, crossed over, and stood to one side of it. Put the word ‘Solution’ in large capitals in a thick blue ink.

Just like me at the lectern, Klaus thought, smiling inwardly.

The men fell silent.

Dietrich cleared his throat.

‘The trouble is, we’re not hitting anything.’

‘Nothing, Captain?’ It was Schmidt. If anyone was likely to stir things up, it would be him.

Dietrich looked at him.

‘Schmidt, don’t let’s haggle about it. Something, yes. But there’s no consistency. Some of us seem to be doing better than others.’

‘Why’s that, sir?’ said Adler.

Dietrich: ‘I’m not exactly sure.’ He glanced over at Klaus, who tried to make his face say, so far so good. The man’s relationship with his men was reasonable enough.

Klaus saw him hesitate, look about, then plunge in again.

‘The Lieutenant here’s been sent to show us the error of our ways.’ His tone was neutral, but the man was struggling with his pride. It was a question of keeping face. You were meant to know all the answers.

Klaus let his eye run as unobtrusively as possible round the room.

‘This is ridiculous. You’re the one who should be standing here. Not me.’

Klaus turned slowly. ‘No, Captain. You’re the expert on gunnery. My maths and physics might just help a bit with the ballistics of it.’ He got up, took his box, and set it down on the other side of Dietrich’s chart. But he made sure he was sitting down. Not standing. ‘With your permission, we can have a go together, if you like.’

Dietrich expelled air from his chest, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Very well,’ he said. He looked round his men. ‘Rundel.’

‘Yes, Captain?’

‘Did you take an altitude reading for our position here?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘A bit under a 1000m above sea-level, sir. Nearer 900, say.’

‘And our target area?’

‘You mean the enemy position, sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I didn’t worry about that. Should I have?’

‘Anyone get that figure?’

‘I make it 500, Captain.’

‘Where did that come from, Tronshardt?’

‘A chart back at HQ, sir. Thought it might be generally useful.’

Several grinned.



‘Tronshardt’s always pickin’ up handy things, sir.’ That was Linge.

A burst of laughter.

Dietrich didn’t smile. He looked along at Klaus.

‘Any ideas, Lieutenant?’

‘Thank you, Captain. – Are we all taking into account the factor of height difference when we set up our guns?’

‘That’s got to do with the angle of elevation, hasn’t it?’

‘Direct your comment to the Lieutenant, Schmidt,’ Dietrich said.

Schmidt hesitated, then repeated what he’d said.

Klaus: ‘It would be a relatively simple matter, one, if we could clearly see our target, and, two, if guns and target were both located on the same horizontal plane.’

The men were silent. This guy could think. He mightn’t know much about guns, but he could think, all right.

‘What are you getting at?’ Rupert Sondheim interjected.

He was a tousle-haired, slender lad, with spectacles. Klaus liked him immediately. He was typical of one of the twelve who sat in the benches of his advanced seminar class.

Klaus glanced up at Dietrich.

‘Since gun and target are not on the same plane, in this case, do we have to make some allowance for this in our calculations?’

‘Of course,’ said Dietrich.

‘What’s it got to do with, Captain?’

‘Angle of sight.’

This could be useful, Klaus thought.

‘Are there any laws governing it? – Sorry, I know it’s probably a funny way of putting it.’

‘No, good point. In gunnery terms, when the target is below the gun, there’s a figure to be subtracted to get the correct A of S. When it’s located above the gunner’s position, an addition is required.’ Dietrich turned to his men.

‘Heinrich.’

‘Sir.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Took it off, sir.’

‘Well done.’

‘Gutler?’

‘Don’t know, sir. Can’t remember.’

‘Lupptel?’

There was a murmur of laughter.

‘Me, sir?’

‘Yes.’

Don’t know, sir. Think I added it on. – Just for good measure, sir.’

Laughter. Instantly silenced. A ring of men, waiting. Awaiting the outcome.

Klaus knew Dietrich was avoiding his gaze. This wouldn’t look good at HQ. The head of a battery regiment bore the final responsibility for all attitudes and actions within his domain.

‘A very worthwhile discussion, I think, Captain,’ Klaus said.

Dietrich turned to look at him. There was still an element of reserve in his eyes. And what was that? A fleeting regret that he’d opened himself up to this inquiry, at all? That he’d allowed a witness to be present? He turned to face his men.

‘It’s clear there has been some variation in procedure. We need to improve on this. Tonight’s bombardment will give us an opportunity to sharpen up before the big push.’ He paused, and looked about him. ‘As officer in charge here, I take responsibility for any shortfalls. I could have gone over procedures in more detail beforehand. But I need your co-operation.’ He nodded. It was a sign the meeting was finished.

The men rose slowly, and made their way out the door, back to their own shelters.

Dietrich busied himself taking down the chart, now covered with labeled diagrams of gun and enemy positions.

Klaus came up to him.

‘Very profitable, Captain. Thank you for allowing me to be present.’

Dietrich half-turned. He was looking down at the chart as he rolled it up.

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ Klaus said, ‘this discussion remains strictly within these walls.’

Dietrich looked up.

‘Thanks. We don’t always get it right.’

‘None of us do,’ Klaus said.

Dietrich offered his hand.

Mist as usual these mornings. Cold. The day for the big push. Klaus got up early and made enough porridge for all three of them, and ladled it out onto the metal plates.

‘It’ll help to have a spotter,’ Dietrich said. ‘Reports are that our guns were more use yesterday. Let’s hope we can repeat it today, for today’s critical. If you can seriously distract the enemy in some way, it makes the job of troops on the ground that much easier.’

Klaus accompanied Dietrich out to the first of the gun teams. Light was coming now.

Dietrich said to Fritz: ‘Get the spotter on the line, will you.’

Klaus squatted.

Fritz plugged in, connecting his line to the balloon’s machine-gun post. It would be relayed through directly.

‘Battery One calling Spotter. Please come in.’

Klaus heard a youthful voice.

‘Spotter, here. Ready.’

‘We’ll do the usual 5 rounds to get our range. Please report result.’

‘All right. Wind velocity 20 knots WSW, and rising. Could be tricky.’

Dietrich looked worried.

‘It’s not going to be straightforward. Forecast’s not good for later on.’ He stood, his chin thrust between the lapels of his greatcoat. He had a mumbled conversation with Fritz, then turned to Klaus. ‘Lieutenant, I want you to take the phone and work with me on this.’ He took the phone: ‘You there, Spotter?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Look, I’ve got a ballistics expert here. He’ll do the operation with you.’

Klaus expressed embarrassment but Fritz gestured his willingness and pushed the hand-piece into his hand. Produced a pad and pencil.

Klaus introduced himself.

Dietrich came and stood beside him.

‘Sorry about the lack of warning.’

Klaus shook his head.

‘The major hopes the mist will hang around. It might give the troops some cover going forward.’

‘I see,’ Klaus said.

Dietrich stood for a moment. Then walked up and down. Checked on something with the gun team. Looked down at his watch.

‘Right, signalman, notify the other teams. Five minutes.’

Five minutes seemed an eternity. All talk had stopped.

Dietrich looked at his watch.

‘0800. Right. Gunners, five rounds.’

Klaus had braced himself, but still wasn’t prepared when the first charge fired. The thud of the departing shell struck his body. The ground reverberated beneath his feet. He hurriedly lowered the leather side-flaps on his helmet.

Four more.

Each one, a blow. Then silence. Or the more distant reports from the surrounding guns.

‘Lieutenant, Spotter here.’

‘Receiving you.’

Trial rounds falling short of target area. And too far east.’

Klaus visualized.

‘How short?’ he said.

‘About a kilometer.’

‘Why east?’

‘Wind factor. Due west now, 50 knots and rising.’

‘Thanks. Standby.’

Klaus was thankful for the communications training he’d had. He scribbled some figures on the pad, and went over to Dietrich.

‘Shells falling short, Captain,’ he said.

Dietrich gestured to the gun team leader. ‘Lieutenant Mendelsohn’s got a report.’

Klaus repeated.

‘And the easterly component?’

‘Wind velocity 50 knots, and rising.

‘How much am I out by, Lieutenant?’ the gunner asked.

‘Spotter estimated 500m.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Range?’

‘Suggest an A of S addition to land shells 1k further due south.’

Dietrich nodded vigorously, and clapped Klaus on the back.

‘Get Fritz to forward this to the others, would you.’

Klaus strode across, and worked with Fritz until everyone was in the picture.

‘Our very own communications centre.’ Fritz grinned.

It took another five rounds before Dietrich was satisfied that all fire was co-ordinated within the section of the enemy line where the major hoped to break through.

The bombardment continued.

Klaus and Fritz hunched down in their overcoats.

Fritz put his mouth to Klaus’ ear. ‘Nice chap that in the balloon.’

Klaus turned his head. ‘Seems very young,’ he shouted.

‘Eighteen. Name’s Wolfgang. Wants to be an artist. Got a girlfriend. She wants to be a pianist. Never stops talking about her.’

A wave of feeling washed over Klaus. Another Hans. And was she like Ulla? The sweet hurt of her. The curves of her thighs and back in sunlight by a stream. Kneeling on the earth in the forest. That evening in the house wrapped about her cello, like two bodies whose joining created music . . .

Fritz nudged him.

Red light on the phone flashing. He couldn’t hear its ringing for the guns.

He held the phone pressed to his ear, inside the flap.

‘Spotter here. Wind 100 knots. Patches of clear sky. Firing consistent. Some direct hits.’

‘Thank you. Over.’

Klaus scribbled as the boy spoke. Took the report across to Dietrich.

‘Thanks, Lieutenant. We have about another 20 minutes. Advise keeping phone open because of weather.’

Klaus returned to his post, sat down beside Fritz, and kept listening. For a while a clear line, like the universe breathing.

Then a rattle.

‘Spotter, here . . . wind . . .’

Something was wrong.

‘Spotter, are you all right?’

The young voice. Far too young.

‘Fighters!’

‘Repeat, please.’

‘Fighters approaching. Three. From the south.’

Nothing.

‘He’s not supposed to talk about other things,’ Fritz said.

‘I get the impression he can’t help himself.’

A click.

‘Phew! Driven off. My gunner managed it.’

Pause.

‘Each Spotter has his own machine-gun post below,’ Fritz said.

Klaus pressed the right side of his head against the ear-piece. He recognized the sound. An aircraft engine. Approaching fast. Then the sound of rapid gunfire.

And the boy’s voice, high and shrill, out of control, calling for his mother.

‘He’s through! They can’t get me down! Flames everywhere. My chute’s burning!’

The line went dead.

‘Fritz, what’s happened?’

The signalman looked at him in silence.

‘Balloon’s are attached to the ground by a cord. They can usually get the spotter down in about a minute. But they need time. And sometimes a fighter manages to penetrate the defensive ring of fire.’

‘And the spotter?’

‘He usually waits until the last minute. Chutes have a reputation for unreliability.’

Klaus was sitting, hunched over, the phone dangling on its cord, swinging in the wind. Thinking of a young, young man in Berlin . . . a piece of drawing-paper with an unfinished sketch slips from his fingers into the mud beneath the bench . . . the thick black charcoal strokes . . . a girl . . . the charcoal sweeps her breast and thighs, the proud tilt of her chin . . . the fall of her hair is impossibly red . . . he fumbles in his tunic pocket for her . . . she is hard to make out . . .

‘Lieutenant . . . Lieutenant . . . Mendelsohn . . . Mendelsohn . . .’

It was Dietrich’s voice, he knew that. Something had shifted. And he ought to feel a flood of warmth – of acceptance. But all he could see was the muddied charcoal, and walking over its surface, exchanging places with the half-drawn girl, singly, one by one, each of his twelve students, like a row of stars, their lights going out, extinguished one by one . . . and lastly, there, Ulla, his own Ulla, muddied now, too, almost unrecognisable . . .

He opened his eyes, then, and stared down at his uniform, its dull, unchanging surface of field grey, and he heard her words shouted in his brain: I cannot see you! I am losing you!

He looked down.

‘I can no longer see myself,’ he muttered.

When Klaus woke he could not make out where he was at first. Then he was aware of lying on a bunk. With another above him. The skin of his face gritty to the touch and a strong smell of earth and its taste upon his tongue. He ran his tongue round the inside of his mouth. In sleep he’d pressed himself up against the wall of the dugout. But something was missing. Something ever-present in his nights. And, on drawing back, he realized it then: the distinctive scent of limestone. Of chalk of the trenches. The scent of the sea, locked in the rock/stone – the ancient bed of the shell – was absent here up on this forested ridge. The further he was from the sea, the further he was from her. He stared at the wall for a few moments, then turned impulsively, and stared into the room.

Dietrich and Fritz were already at the table having breakfast.

‘Good morning, Lieutenant. You slept deeply,’ said Dietrich.

Klaus sat up, swung his legs round, and perched on the edge of the bunk.

‘We’re cut off from the world,’ Dietrich said. ‘Can’t raise anyone, at all.’

‘Line must be broken,’ said Fritz.

Klaus remembered the balloon. Not his night adventure with Ulla. Or testing the star compass. But the boy, tethered to the earth. To an earth that couldn’t help him when he needed it most. He had called out for his mother. Klaus had been fortunate, his mother had heard his cry: Die Sterne!! Die Sterne! What if your mother never hears you? What becomes of a life then? That is the true task of a mother. To know in her heart the meaning of her child’s cry. He drew on his trousers, buttoned his tunic, and went over to the table.

‘How are you, Mendelsohn?’

Klaus looked across the table at the Captain. His name had escaped him for the moment.

‘The boy,’ he said. ‘Have we had any word of him?’

Dietrich shook his head.

Fritz came and put porridge in front of him. Klaus forgot the milk, and stirred the thick oats desultorily with his spoon.

‘Fritz is going down. We can’t afford to be isolated like this. No warning of attack. We must have that link back.’

Klaus stared at his plate.

‘The guns were good,’ he said.

‘This time,’ Dietrich added. ‘Largely thanks to you.’

‘We did it together.’

‘Would you like to go down with Fritz?’

‘I don’t know.’

Dietrich looked at him.

‘The boy might’ve got out of it. We don’t know for sure.’

‘Many die. That’s war,’ Fritz said.

‘It’s the single man that matters. War is always about one man. Him alone,’ Klaus said.

Dietrich got up and started to look through his things. Gun maintenance. A tour of the teams. His daily tasks.

Fritz turned to Klaus. ‘Come with me. I’ll pack some stuff for repairs. We can be off in half an hour.’

‘You could report back to the major about things up here. I’d like that,’ Dietrich said.

Klaus looked up. He remembered the front and his self-appointed role among his comrades.

‘Fritz, I’ll come down with you,’ he said.

They left together and Dietrich followed them along the trench and up into the woods. He turned to Klaus.

‘Come back soon and check on us again,’ he said grinning.

They shook hands.

Dietrich stepped back and saluted him.

Klaus returned the salute.

They continued on through the trees for a short distance, before the path began to dip down. Fritz in the lead again.

‘You got on well with Dietrich,’ Fritz said.

‘Do you think so?’



‘No doubt about it. He didn’t know what a smile was till you arrived on the scene.’  
He checked the line. ‘No breaks so far.’

They’d got well down the slope when they came out into a clearing. The line ran along the northern edge.

‘Let’s look closely here,’ Fritz said. ‘It’s a bit exposed.’

About halfway along they found it. A loose end. The wire splayed, sticking out. The cover shredded.

Klaus took a few steps.

‘The shell landed here.’ There was a crater, its sides clean with the force. Branches broken and sticking in the ground at odd angles. He looked across the clearing. Mist still wrapped the trees, and the air was still cool from the night. No sign of the sun.

Fritz set his pack down, and undid the straps.

‘We’ll need to find the other end,’ he said.

‘I’ll look.’ Klaus went on slowly, studying the ground closely. About twenty metres on, he found it entangled in the branches above his head. It took some force to do that. The wire had been laid bare in several places.

‘Could you pace it out for me, Lieutenant?’ Fritz shouted.

Klaus came back, taking good metre strides.

‘Twenty-five, I’d say, Fritz.’

‘Sure glad I wasn’t here then!’ He uncoiled a bit of cable and made a length from fingertip to chest.

Klaus grinned.

‘Trick of the trade, eh.’

Fritz winked. ‘Never without it!’ He glanced at his watch. ‘We ought to be out of here.’ He cut off the required length. Stripped back the covering and entwined the two ends. He asked Klaus to hold the new join while he taped it up.

They both heard it in the same moment. Gunfire.

‘My God, it’s started,’ Fritz said. ‘It’s a bit early. We’ll just do the other end.’

They hurried along together, Fritz carrying the pack in his arms, with Klaus a step behind, bringing the reel of cable.

The sound of the guns deepened into a continuous rumbling like rolls of thunder, punctuated by booming detonations. Klaus hoped Ulla was all right. He didn’t know why he should think of her then, but he did. Acutely. The sweet feel of her suffused him.

‘They’re giving our fellows the works this morning,’ Fritz panted.

The sound of a single shell coming passed well above their heads and crashed into the forest beyond.

‘Looks as though they could do with a bit of help from you, Lieutenant.’ Fritz laughed.

Klaus buried his left hand in his greatcoat pocket.

They made the join, and Fritz shouldered his pack. He glanced back the way.

‘Look, Lieutenant. This line’s too exposed here. You go ahead and tell the major I’m on my way. I’ll just bury it a bit.’

Klaus stood. He hesitated. Looked ahead, and back. Eying the track.

‘No, Fritz. Two of us’ll do it in half the time. Quick. Tell me what to do.’

Fritz unstrapped and assembled a portable shovel.

‘I’ll dig,’ he said. ‘You set and recover the cable. ‘Just stamp it down with your foot.’

They worked fast. In silence. Sweat poured off both men. Klaus could feel it pooling in the small of his back and under his armpits. The bulkier Fritz was soon breathing heavily. He’d stand for a few moments, then straight back into it.

They’d almost done it, when Klaus heard the shell coming. It emerged from the general din, becoming more and more distinct. As though it were asserting its authority. It struck him it had a mission, separate from the others. A task, not to deal out general death, indiscriminately, dispassionately. But a particular one. For an unaccountable reason he thought of Erika Tiefenbach: He will destroy this family! Germany does not want him! He pictured the shell now. Coming clear through the vault of the sky. Arcing in the glory of its power. Coming for him. Its trajectory had already passed the zenith of its flight, and had begun the descent. Steeper now. Accelerating. Boring on. Hell-bent.

‘Run, Fritz! Run! Into the woods!’

Klaus saw Fritz jerk upright, surprise on his face. It was the middle of the usual dawn bombardment, he would know that. And in a moment they would be gone from there, the job completed. But now Klaus had him roughly by the shoulder, and was shoving him ahead of him into the forest. The sound of the shell was everywhere now. Entered into the innermost recesses of his brain. Taken up residence there. Vibrating utterly every cell in his body. Hungry. Hungry for him.

An instant.

A crash of branches, splintering. Falling. Something solid under him. An explosion. Blinding. Deafening. And a thousand knives arriving in his body.

## Chapter 16

The months of the winter had almost passed and spring was just around the corner. In the mountains of the Harz the thick blanket of snow that had covered fir and spruce was melting away, becoming merely white islands with rounded edges amongst the green. Occasionally pieces would slip to the ground with a loud plop in the stillness of the forest. And boughs, long-burdened, would spring up again, released, like a miner putting down his load. Below, at the foot of the Brocken, nestled the tiny village of Clausthal, where Ulla had found refuge with Mother Theresa and her nuns in the convent close to the square. And it was scarcely a step or two along the Sturmweg, the Way of the Storm, before you were in the fields, where Ulla would walk daily in the countryside, surrounded by her beloved Nature.

On this particular morning Ulla was sitting in the garden in the central courtyard. Greenery surrounded her, and the gentle plashing of a fountain's waters. She was heavy with child and nearing the end of her term.

'Good morning, mother-to-be. How are you this morning?' It was the Mother Superior, head of the convent. While the more junior nuns had been civil enough over the months, they had maintained an element of reserve in relation to Ulla. But Mother Theresa had befriended her from the first night she arrived, troubled and tired, on the coach from the station.

'Mother, I have had no news of him.'

'When was the last time, my child?'

'Shortly after he arrived at the Front. He told me a little of life in the trenches. And of his friend, Georg. But since then, nothing. Not a single word.'

'You must be patient. Things are changing all the time. Perhaps he was shifted, for reasons unknown to us.'

'Could he not write, though?'

'I'm sure he will at his first opportunity.' Mother Theresa looked at the young woman sitting on the bench, hardly a space now between the full round of her belly and the curve of her breasts. Her hands below, out of sight. The fingers constantly knotting, straining, untying themselves.

‘You should go for a short walk to keep your strength up. But don’t overtire yourself. Make it a half hour, at most.’

Later that morning Ulla went for her walk. In the square, the leaves of the plane trees showed their white undersides in the playful breeze, like peasant girls kicking up their heels to show off their petticoats. Ulla followed the Sturmweg to the edge of town, then got onto her favourite path that wound beside a brook. Wildflowers were up everywhere. In their violets and yellows, and the purples which she had a special liking for. And tiny white-petalled daisies with their piquant yellow faces. She promised herself that when her child was born she would go on the Brocken to see the first of the edelweiss. The sun was warm, and the first lambs either gamboled about or lay in white woolly curls, exhausted from birth, while their mothers peacefully nibbled the new grass close by. Ulla lowered herself awkwardly to the ground.

She watched the water slipping past, and gurgling at the bend.

*What was that?*

There it was again. And another. Pronounced movements in her belly.

‘Yes, little one. Soon. Soon.’ She stroked her tummy.

She’d had some quite lively little kicks from down there during the past week. ‘You must be like me. Want out. But now,’ she said out loud. She was struck by how she assumed the child was a girl and had recently adopted the habit of addressing her directly. ‘I want you to come naturally, like the lambs from their mothers and the flowers from the earth. Oh, how I wish your Papa were here to share this with us.’

Ow, that hurt! She drew her breath in sharply. And not stopping, either. Like a drawing in. Tight. Like a fist, clenching. ‘Let go! Oh, please, let go! –Ah, there, at last.’

She was shaken. She had to get back. Now. As soon as possible. To Mother Theresa. She would help. Would know what to do.

So it had happened – was happening – and sooner than expected. She was sure of it.

She turned over slowly onto all fours. There was a smooth stick abandoned in the grass by the last flood. She stretched to grip it, and levered herself into an upright position. She started out along the path back to the village.

‘I am become as an old woman,’ she said, and laughed nervously at herself. ‘Come on, now. You must keep moving. But be careful.’

It was hard work. With many unavoidable halts to regain her breath. At last she reached the first of the houses, and shortly after sank down on a bench in the Sturmweg. She called out to a middle-aged woman with a basket, who was passing.

‘Could you get word to Mother Theresa at the convent. I am with her.’

Ulla saw the woman hesitate, and read it in her eyes: ‘A fallen woman. With child.’

Tears welled in her eyes.

‘Please, I need your help.’

‘My husband will go,’ she said gruffly. ‘Stay here.’

Ulla let her chin fall forwards. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured.

She was aware she was being wheeled along a corridor. That doors were being opened and shut. When the trolley stopped.

Someone leant over her.

‘You have been given a mild sedative. Doctor Spengler will arrive shortly.’ It was a nurse.

The words settled in Ulla’s brain.

‘To do what?’

‘To deliver your baby, of course.’

Ulla lay still. She turned her head. The nurse was doing something. She had her back to her. Then she saw her swing round. Her hand rising, coming towards her face. A square of white muslin. With a smell. A smell she knew she didn’t want. She scrambled in her memory.

*Chloroform!*

‘No!’ She struck upwards with her right hand, and saw the cloth fall.

‘Really.’

‘I want no aids. I want this experience for myself. For him.’

‘We’ll see what the Herr Doctor has to say about that, young lady.’

‘I want it to be natural. A pure experience.’

‘Pfui! You’re in no position to bargain.’

Ulla heard the door open and shut again.

‘Here’s the Herr Doctor now.’

‘Thank you, nurse. Good morning, Fraulein Tiefenbach. We got you here just in time, I think.’

She turned her head.

He was a small dapper man, with twinkling eyes behind his gold-rimmed spectacles, and a shiny bald head.

‘Doctor, I want to be without, please.’

‘It’s for your own good, Fraulein. And the child’s. It’ll relax you. Ease the passage of birth.’

‘But will I be completely conscious, Doctor?’ She watched his face closely.

‘Not ideal, I admit. But we feel a compromise is sensible.’

‘No, doctor. This is my body. My right to choose.’

Spengler looked at her.

‘Very well,’ he said at last, his lips set in a firm line. ‘Are we ready to begin, nurse?’

‘Yes, Herr Doctor.’

It came again. Seizing her in its implacable hand. The contraction, as it was called. She held her breath against it.

‘Try to breath normally, if you can. Breathe through it.’ The doctor’s voice.

She tried.

Just when she thought she couldn’t any longer, it stopped. She lay on the trolley, breathing heavily. Hoping it wouldn’t . . . but here it was again. She screwed her face up even tighter. Bit her lip. Until she felt a sharp pricking and the taste of blood on her tongue.

Oh, God! And it came again, as though it wanted to destroy her, and then, only when it was done, drawing back like a heavy sea into the boiling ocean.

Spengler saw the fine-boned hands whiten on the metal frame.

‘Just a little aid, now, Fraulein?’ he ventured.

‘No, doctor. I absolutely refuse.’

A moment of silence.

‘Shall I get it, Herr Doctor?’ the nurse said.

‘We’ll wait. But the timing’s critical.’

Hardly a gap now. Again it came. Crushing her. Invading her brain. She arched her back. Up and slam down. And was aware her right leg thrashed the air.

Spengler watched a moment. Then his jaw jutted.

‘Nurse, the gurney. At once.’ Simultaneously he put his arm across the patient and leant over with his slight frame.

‘Fraulein,’ he forced a whisper. ‘This has become dangerous. For you. And the child.’

He heard a suppressed sob.

The nurse returned.

‘Right leg, nurse.’

Ulla shrank within herself. Cold metal against her skin. A definitive clank. Locked in.

‘Yes, yes.’ Spengler nodded vigorously. ‘Left one too.’

A second clank.

‘I am a prisoner.’

Spengler grimaced. This was not fine medicine, at all.

‘Nurse, I’ll try a mixture of the new procedure.’

Ulla heard.

‘No! No!’ She thrashed her fists in the air. Inadvertently striking the left one against the metal, and a hard blow to her stomach, with the other.

‘Fraulein! Fraulein!’ It was Spengler. ‘Once more, Fraulein, and I will be obliged to restrain your hands as well. Quickly, nurse.’

A strange smell assailed her nostrils. Sweet. Cloying. Seductive. Her senses began to twist. An object approached her face, and softly pressed there. Reeling. Wildflowers and lambs and wisps of cloud kaleidoscoped inside her head, drawing her irresistibly into a spiral . . .

. . . she woke. She opened her eyes. There was the ceiling above her. But it was somehow a different ceiling. And she became aware of someone sitting beside her. She turned her head. It was Mother Theresa. She was smiling. A firm hand came to rest on hers – cool and smooth and calm.

‘Good girl.’ She heard the words. ‘Good girl.’ All those years how she had hungered to hear those words. But now, when at last they came, it seemed as though they must belong to someone else.

‘Where am I, Mother?’

‘In your own room. It is over.’

‘What is? What is?’

‘The birth of your child, Ulla. Your own child.’



A yawning gulf. An expanse of desolation.

‘But I knew nothing of it. I cannot remember a thing. Only that I was made a prisoner.’

Tears ran down her cheeks, unchecked.

The Mother Superior sat still, holding Ulla’s hands in her own. Letting the ocean of the universe flow through them into the exhausted body of the young woman.

She woke while it was still dark. Disorientated. Her head whirling. A glass of water and a bell had been placed on the night table by the bed. She reached out and drank. How thirsty she was. Her lips and throat dry. She looked about startled, then, as though there ought to be something she remembered. News she ought to be aware of. A stab of pain in her middle regions and about her ankles.

She remembered. The struggle. Being a prisoner, instead of . . . a wave of remorse, of loss swept over her.

She rang the bell, and pushed herself gingerly into a sitting position, propped on her arms. But no, she hadn’t the energy. The door opened and a young nun came in.

‘Fraulein Tiefenbach, you are awake. I will bring breakfast.’

Fraulein. No, not that. Something else. But definitely not that. She had changed in the night.

‘I want to see Mother Theresa,’ Ulla said.

The young nun saw the unbuttoned nightdress and the hair in disarray upon the pillow, like a Brocken demon howling in the wind.

‘I will get her for you.’

Mother Theresa came and brought a lamp and set it down on the table beside the glass.

Ulla saw her shadow spring on the wall.

‘Now then,’ the Mother Superior said, sitting down close to her on the bed, like a mother who is in no doubt what is best for her child.

Ulla impulsively turned and pressed her face against the other’s body.

The nun felt a trembling, and placed her open hand upon Ulla’s back.

‘It is the years,’ she said. ‘All those years without.’ Stroked, tried to unknot, smooth out the cords of iron. Muffled against her, she heard: ‘They made a prisoner of me.’

‘Your child needs you, Ulla.’

‘I don’t want it.’

The Mother Superior felt the young woman draw away sharply, shocked at her own words.

‘All the time she looks around, wondering where to begin,’ she went on. Stroking.

‘Begin? Begin what?’

‘Begin on the world,’ Mother Theresa said deliberately.

‘She doesn’t need me.’

‘She? So you have seen her already, then. Beautiful, isn’t she. And you’re going to do it the same way?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Refuse to see her . . . as your mother did to you,’ she added.

‘I never had a mother.’

The Mother Superior waited until the truth filled the small room.

‘Mother, I am afraid. I know neither the way back nor the way forward.’

‘Knowledge is not necessary, my child. You must only be willing to begin?’

Ulla was silent.

‘But where?’ she said in a forced whisper.

‘With your own child. That is the beginning that is being offered to you. It is not a command. It is an invitation.’

Ulla tuned against the nun again and began to cry softly. And she could not understand why.

‘This child you have made is the way back to your own mother,’ she heard Mother Theresa say.

‘But she despises me.’ Ulla sobbed.

‘Does she really?’

‘I displease her.’

‘I displease God all the time.’

Sobs.

‘Love your child. She is the new light, given. Take her hand in yours and show her the world, for it is to be her home and her dwelling-place.’

‘But, Mother, I do not know . . .’

‘Knowledge is given, Ulla. Only begin.’

‘I am afraid.’

‘So is the little one.’

Mother Theresa rose gently. ‘I will be back with her in a minute.’

She returned with a little bundle, to find Ulla propped on her pillows. She placed her against the breast. ‘Make a cradle with your arms,’ she said.

Ulla looked down.

Two small dark eyes gazed up at her.

‘It’s as if she is filling my heart with a question, Mother.’

‘Yes.’

‘What is it?’

‘You know. And you know the answer, too.’

Ulla took the tiny hand and pressed it to her lips.

‘I am your mother,’ she said.

*The mycelia stirred in the earth.*

The days passed and spring established itself. The buds on the plane trees in the square burst and gradually the green shoots unfurled. Each day Ulla stopped on her short walks to examine them. To begin with she enjoyed the fine down on a leaf, stroking it with the back of her finger. It reminded her of Stella, when she first woke, and still drowsy with sleep, rubbed her eyes. It took some weeks before the leaf surfaces were smooth to the touch, and deepened to their true green. And the veins stood out clear and red with the flow of sap. She compared them to the filling and ripening of her breasts, heavy with milk now, her nipples pink and tender in the suck of the little mouth.

Once Spengler passed her in the square, sitting on a bench in the sun. She smiled up at him. He stopped, his face in a quandary. Then broke into smiles, and complemented her heartily on the health of her baby. How well she looked. Said how pleased he was to see her, bowed a little, and went off whistling to himself.

Ulla was regularly seen about the corridors of the convent, and in the garden sitting by the fountain when it was warm enough outside for the little one. Mother Theresa asked her one day whether she had thought of a name for her yet.

‘You said she was my new light,’ Ulla said. ‘I have named her Stella. It means star.’

The Mother Superior looked out over the garden wall, across the roofs, up to the rocky summit of the Brocken. ‘Occasionally, she said, ‘something makes perfect sense.’ And she laid her hand gently on Ulla’s shoulder. Some of the iron had gone.

Shortly after this exchange, the Mother Superior met her in the grounds, and stopping, said, 'Have you introduced Stella to our famous son yet?' The nun saw her puzzled look. 'Oh, did you not know. Dr Robert Koch. He was born in this village. There is a commemorative plaque on the wall of the house, facing the street. You can imagine how proud we are of him.' And she gave Ulla detailed instructions on how to get there.

Next day Ulla waiting until mid-morning. By then the night chill had completely gone out of the air, and she set out, with Stella well bundled up. She soon found the Brockenstrasse. Went down its length and turned right into Bergarbeiterstrasse, Street of the Miners. And there it was directly opposite. She guessed it from the plaque catching the sun. An imposing building of three storey's, quite long with seven windows on each floor, and the front door in the middle. It would surely have taken several Arildas to look after it. Oh, imagine that. The home of the great scientist.

'Look, Stella,' she turned the baby in her arms, 'Koch. Robert Koch. The man who taught us how to see the invisible.'

She crossed over, and approached the front door.

'Dr Koch, I have brought my daughter. I would like you to welcome her to the world of science. I would like you to give her your blessing.' And she held the little girl up to see for herself.

The child stretched out its hand, as though there were something she desired.

'What do you want, my little one? What is it?'

The child gave small pushes with her body.

Ulla went closer.

The child touched the door. Then slapped its surface repeatedly with her small palm, making little fluting sounds of pleasure with her mouth.

Ulla sat at the window, in the hut on the Brocken, gazing down into the valley. She was eating the thick sandwiches of black bread and tasty sausage. She would save the cake for later. And drank a cup of hot sweet tea from the thermos cook had got ready for her in the convent's kitchen, before she set out. She had climbed up on the broad winding path through the sweet-scented woods of fir and spruce. It was Mother Theresa who had suggested a day in the open. And that she would gladly look after Stella. Ah, a day of roaming, with her beloved Nature all to herself. What could be more invigorating.

She opened the small leather-bound volume Mother Theresa had slipped into her rucksack. Goethe's poems and essays. Leafed through to the start of his account of a winter trip he had made in the Harz Mountains. The path from the hut to the summit had been named for him. She began to read.

He had sought the mountains, exhausted after at last completing his *Faust, Part Two*, and had had to take shelter from a storm. She realized, raising her eyes for a moment from the page, to gaze out at the deep blueness of the sky, that this must have been the hut. She went back to his words. During the night he'd woke up, apparently. Everything was still. He got up and opened the door. The whole mountain was bathed in moonlight, glistening on the snow, and the full moon stood clear above the rocky summit of the Brocken. He had gone up at once to gaze, in a state of ecstatic trance, at the splendour. And then come straight down to write to Anneliese, to share his joy of it with her.

Klaus would have been entranced by such a sight. He would have gazed at it intently, for a while, then pointed out the perfect symmetry of the moon's circle to her, and probably bemoaned the fact he didn't have his telescope with him. She closed the book. She would go on herself, now.

The afternoon had developed a moodiness about it, a warm swirling quality. The long grass bent and sighed beside the path, which was narrower here, above the hut. She stepped off into it, and hoisted her skirt and petticoat so she could feel its silken stroke upon the bare skin of her legs. Why didn't he write? She had so much she wanted to share with him. Anything and everything. Even if it were only some small thing that had happened with Stella that day.

She looked at her watch. She had spent far too long over her lunch and book, and would be lucky now to reach the top, before it was time to turn back. She climbed until the sun shone directly in her eyes and, on stopping for a moment, realized she was quite exposed. She squinted upwards. It couldn't be far now. Inadvertently, she glanced over her shoulder.

Unobserved, mist had drifted in thick below her, obscuring the valley, and deepened the green of the forest into a silent black world. But it was not that that made her twist about and stare down, her heart pounding in her chest.

Ring upon ring of the brightest colours – blue (on the inside) running through greens to red and purple (on the outside) – one within the other, suffused the white. But

right in the centre of this radiance a huge, distorted figure reared itself, shadowy and dark. One moment motionless. The next convulsed.

Ulla dragged her eyes away.

A shudder ran through her. She buttoned her jacket to the throat. Forcing herself not to look, she jerkily adjusted her skirt, and set off down the path, with quick steps, half glancing behind her. She was almost running, the bag slapping up and down on her back, when the hut came into view.

Should she seek shelter inside? No, that was out of the question. She couldn't possibly think of passing the night there, while that unknown creature lurked about. Perhaps it strode the mountainside at night. Anyway, the trees would hide her.

No longer the scents of the morning under the darkening canopy of the forest now, as she hurried downward, her breath in tatters. The day was completely spoilt. And it had been so lovely, the Goethe, and the going up. She kept looking behind and reprimanding herself, for not being a prudent climber, at all. But just a silly girl, who dreamed and longed for her soldier's hands to touch and move over her, like the honeyed stroke of summer grass. She worked her mouth constantly to lessen the tightness in her face, the band of iron settling about her head. And her eyes . . . *Get a grip, woman. Steady yourself. Keep control.*

She broke into a run when she sensed the trees opening ahead. There had been so much less light once she was within the trees. She leant on the signpost to catch her breath, to allow her heart's beat to steady.

Just before she entered the village, she adjusted her clothes again, so as not to draw attention to herself. And when she finally came in sight of the convent gates, she involuntarily stretched out her hand in front of her.

Once inside, in the warmth, she stood in the hush of the carpeted vestibule, her face burning. She had not noticed that she sweated, the damp patches about her clothing. She would go to her room first, to compose herself.

'Ulla, back then?' It was Mother Theresa's voice. 'How was your day?'

Ulla turned.

'Whatever's the matter, child?'

Ulla ran forward then into the wide embrace, and was enfolded there, without need of explanation.

In the kitchen, the thick broth was good in her stomach. And the aroma of fresh-baked bread.

‘It was the spectre the poor girl saw.’ The cook laughed, her cheeks red. ‘The ghost of the Brocken! It’s a common enough sight at this time of the year. But I shouldn’t laugh. For folks who haven’t seen it, it’s sure a scary thing.’

Ulla turned to Mother Theresa.

‘Mother, I fear our love harbours a shadow in its heart.’

‘Come now, my dear, it’s as Bettina says. The Spectre of the Brocken is a well-known phenomenon in these parts – Look, I’ve something here you’ve been waiting for.’ She drew a white envelope from the folds of her habit.

Ulla noticed the Rothenheim postmark.

‘Here, you’ll want a knife,’ Bettina said.

But Ulla was already ripping the letter open with her finger, oblivious to the ragged edge.

She drew out a single sheet of writing paper. It contained a short note.

Dear Fraulein Tiefenbach,

I am the bearer of difficult news. The Herr Doctor, your father, has just received word today from a colleague in the public hospital in Potsdam. A patient, Klaus Mendelsohn, was admitted yesterday from the front in the Forest of Argonne. His wounds are serious. I thought you ought to know this at once.

Yours in Christ,  
Maria

## Chapter 17

Mother Theresa had written at once, and Sister Maria was there on the platform to meet Ulla when she got down off the train with her baby in her arms. They had gone in a carriage directly to the Mariahilf convent. And in the morning Sister had persuaded her to see her father at her first opportunity, and that it was probably wise to go just by herself, at least in the beginning.

Ulla left early so as to catch her father before he started his ward rounds. At the hospital there was someone at the desk she hadn't seen before. The corridors echoed her feet as she walked.

She knocked on the familiar door.

'Come in.' It was him. The director's voice.

She went in.

'Ulla! My God, how wonderful! You're back at last.' He was surrounded by papers as usual, and seemed to rise through them, bustling round the end of the desk to envelope her in one of his bear hugs. 'There now,' he said, holding her at arms' length, 'and let us take a good look at you.'

She stood, smiling.

'Papa, it's so good to see you. And tell me, how is Arilda?'

'Arilda. Completely recovered. No trace of it, in the end. A struggle, though.'

'Will it return?'

'Well, it's not out of the question. But it's unlikely. – But sit down. Sit down.'

She sat.

'Well now, and do you feel more rested? More yourself again? Did the Harz air do you good?'

'Papa, I have something to tell you.'

'I'm sure you have. I'll need to go in a few minutes, as well you know.' He grinned. 'But we'll have plenty of time later for stories.'

'Papa, I came to you first . . .'

'Of course you did. We are colleagues now. And I am your father, after all.'

'No . . . I mean, yes . . . Papa, I need your help.'



‘Oh, Mendelsohn. Yes. Poor fellow. Like countless others. Terrible. Terrible. – I’m sorry, Ulla. I am.’

‘Papa, I have a child.’

‘Oh, well done. That’s kind of you. Cousin Beatrice in Berlin’s always wanting us to have her two boys for the holidays. So, you gave in, eh.’

‘No, Papa. It’s my own child. It’s a little girl.’

His body lurched forward, and hung there, rather like a cave entrance. Hung in the air.

‘You mean . . .’

‘Yes. I am a mother, Papa.’

She saw the entrance to the cave droop slowly, and the stocky arms thrust, as though to hide the knotted fingers, underneath. Like a boxer, expecting blows.

‘Oh . . . I see . . .’

‘Papa, she is beautiful. Her name is Stella.’

He said nothing. Stayed where he was.

‘Papa – can you not say something?’

‘No. I cannot.’

‘I must go to Klaus . . . I do not know . . . Papa, Arilda, she knows so well how to . . . Could she look after Stella while I’m away?’

He did not look up. The silence in the room deepened.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘No.’

He got up slowly. Then, without looking at her, he returned to his desk. Once he had settled himself, he cleared his throat, leaned back in his chair, expelled the air slowly from his lungs and gazed out the window.

‘A child,’ he said, as though talking to himself. ‘A child.’

Ulla sat straight-backed in the chair. Her fingers bloodless in her lap.

‘The shell is gone,’ he said distantly. ‘It is lost.’

‘No, Papa. It is trying to find its way back to the sea again.’

He paused. Stroked his beard several times. Then looked directly at her.

She had the impression he was making a great effort to choose his words carefully.

‘This type of shell, you know, Ulla . . . It finds itself in a new environment, on the foreshore, on the first rise beyond the normal reach of the waves . . .’

‘Papa, I . . .’

‘In palaeontological terms, it is called the strand line. Carried there by the waves. And stranded there.’

‘Can it get back to the sea, Papa?’

‘Not usually. It takes exceptional circumstances. A storm might do it.’

‘Why is it so difficult?’

‘Well, you see, Ulla, the shell has put itself halfway between the water – its natural habitat – and the higher more developed land. So, it can’t get back, and, in the meantime, it is has no means of getting on.’

He pushed back his chair, placed his large palms flat on the table, and thrust himself upright.

‘I need to see my patients, Ulla.’

‘Of course, Papa. Of course,’ she murmured, unable to look up.

She held her breath until she heard the door open and shut behind him.

It was evening in the Tiefenbach household, and Erika was sitting in her usual place in the drawing-room, waiting for her husband to come home from the hospital. She was impatient to hear further news of the astronomer. Serious wounds. ‘The war is indeed my ally,’ she murmured, as she looked out at the darkening garden.

She heard the sound of the front door opening, and Arilda’s cheerful voice welcoming her husband home. ‘I much preferred it when she was ill,’ Erika thought. She listened to his heavy steps on the stairs, and the silence as he crossed the hall, and entered the room.

‘Good evening,’ he said.

He looked pre-occupied, as he made his way to his chair, put his bag down, and, almost at once, got behind the newspaper.

‘We’ve gained a useful salient in the Argonne,’ he said.

‘What does that mean, Alfred?’

‘Our troops managed to push the line a bit further into enemy territory, at a strategic point.’

‘That’s progress, then, isn’t it?’

‘Ugh. Every little bit counts, I suppose.’

‘You seem preoccupied tonight. Is it the astronomer?’

He lowered the corner of the paper abruptly.

‘That’s the least of our worries now.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘Ulla’s back.’

‘Oh.’

‘She came to see me this morning. She has a child.’

‘Whose child?’

‘Her own.’

‘God help us!’ Erika turned her face away at once, so her husband could not see what transpired there. The trees in the garden massed blackly outside the window, as though threatening her. All her friends and acquaintances – what on earth would they think? Would they indiscriminately cut her off, the moment they heard? Years of social toil wasted and lost overnight.

‘Erika, what are you thinking? – Erika, look at me.’

She turned her head slowly, her chin slightly raised.

‘Well, what did she have to say for herself?’

‘She wants to go and see him immediately, of course. But is constrained by the child. Asked if Arilda could help.’

Erika looked away again.

‘Erika!’

‘I’m thinking, Alfred. You wouldn’t want me to give you an ill-considered response, would you?’

Hunched forward in his armchair, he missed the ghost of a smile that played for a moment at the corners of her mouth.

‘Of course she must go. And without delay,’ she said.

He looked up, bewildered.

‘What are you saying, exactly?’

‘If you were lying gravely wounded somewhere, you would want me to run to your bedside, wouldn’t you? – At least, I hope you would.’

‘Yes. Well. Of course. What else would one do?’

She smiled.

‘I can’t for the life of me imagine what you thought you were doing, Alfred. Not helping the poor girl at all, by all your prevaricating.’

He spread his arms wide, open-palmed, simultaneously shrugging his shoulders.

‘I had understood you were strongly against any further association with . . .’

‘Alfred. You know so little about women, really, don’t you.’ She smiled sweetly. He looked nonplussed.

‘No, Arilda’s the perfect solution,’ Erika went on. ‘She’s so good with children. You must tell Ursula to bring the child here today. We’re her family, after all. And it’s unlikely to be for long, anyway.’

‘You can’t be sure of that.’

‘It’s a trifle. Better to keep the matter strictly within the family, wouldn’t you agree?’

He nodded, his head down, his hands hanging limply between his legs.

Erika waited until the house was completely quiet. Then she contained herself for a further hour, in order to be sure everyone was fast asleep. The wind had got up a bit. She was glad. It would hide any unavoidable sounds she might make.

She dressed warmly. She had spirited her coat and hat upstairs before dinner, and it helped she was sleeping alone at the moment. She collected her stick from its usual place at night, leaning against the wall by her bed. She’d left the door just pushed to, so now she opened it silently, making only a silent curving shadow on the carpet. She crossed the landing, passing the master bedroom where Alfred slept, and started up the stairs to the attics. There was a faint light from the windows, so she could make out the edge of each step before she put her foot down. In her left hand she carried a cloth sling to carry the baby in.

To her relief Arilda’s door was open. It was a small room, so needed air. She went in, and stood for a moment. The wind was noisier up here. The maid was lying on her back, breathing in a deep, regular rhythm, and the cradle stood at the foot of the bed.

Erika peered down. A little shape, well wrapped up, lay on its side. She propped her stick against the cot, while she adjusted the sling firmly about her shoulders and back. Then she bent over and eased the covers back. The child made a few snuffling noises, and the maid stirred, muttered something in her sleep, and turned onto her side.

Erika got her stick and went cautiously out into the passage. ‘Don’t hurry,’ she told herself. ‘You have all night.’ Once passed her husband’s room her confidence rose. Down the stairs she went, feeling each step before entrusting her weight to it, learning to manage her stick and the added burden of the child.

She had ensured the drawing-room door was left open, and the French doors at the far end were simply pushed to and held by a heavy object. Since she often spent warm afternoons on the little balcony, where she could enjoy the traffic of the square, it might easily have been overlooked. She descended the few stone steps to the lawn and made her way round to the front of the house.

Once in the street, things were more straightforward and she found she soon established a sort of rhythm. Ungainly, but effective enough.

She was in the Prinzenstrasse when it happened. An incident that unsettled her. She was moving along, as close to the walls of buildings as she could, so as to take advantage of what shadows there were. When a sizeable object appeared about twenty metres in front of her on the footpath. It was a bit misty, so it was a moment or two before she decided it was a man. A big, bulky fellow, moving in a jerky manner, as close in to the wall as he could get. Though every now and then he wove a small irregular circle out onto the pavement and back again. It was difficult to say exactly where he would be when.

Erika adjusted her position on the footpath several times. She was determined to avoid a collision. So when he was only a few steps off she selected a line. But in the last moment he bounced off the wall directly in her path. He was bigger than she had thought, and bumped into her roughly, only realizing in the last instant someone blocked his way. He swore violently, and shoved his face into hers. Unshaven. A foul odour of sweat and drink engulfed her. Blinded, she stumbled against him.

‘Want me, do ya, wench?’

She went rigid, stood and shook, forgetting she had her stick.

He was passed.

She glanced behind her.

‘That chest’s a size too big for a beanpole like you, girlie! Stealing something?’

She hurried on, still shaking some minutes after. Glad of the swirling mist. And by the time she reached the square she had to have a seat. She crossed under the town hall clock that was showing ten past three, passed the empty tables and chairs outside the restaurant, and found a seat at last on the stone ledge of the new fountain. She looked up at the dark outline of the Goose Girl. Peasant, obviously. She had lived in the country once, when she was growing up on the family estate. But she had never dressed like that, in a simple cotton frock. And she had never once touched the animals. More like their maid, anyway, that girl.

She went on. Soon she was in the Grunerstrasse, and kept on until she reached the Grunertor where the Wall path emerged. 'Now left,' she muttered. 'Not far now.' She came to a wide wrought-iron gate. Just beyond it she stopped, and ran her hand over the stone surface, searching for the hole she knew was there. She heard women's voices whisper in her head: 'It's the only place where those wretched girls can leave it, you know. The nuns know what to do.'

She found the aperture. Glancing, she'd seen it from the street opposite the day before. She propped her stick against the wall, and felt about inside. She would do this quickly. She pushed her arm in further until she felt the lip of stone, and beneath it the ripple of cane under her fingers, which was the reputed basket.

She started to lift the little bundle clear of the sling. It caught once, and she almost dropped it, striking her elbow against the stone. Would it fit? Yes. Just. Most children were the same size at this age. Without looking at it, she passed it through the opening, and lowered it into the basket.

No sound.

She turned, took a last look at the dark hole. Like the maw of some hungry monster. She shuddered.

Two steps away, it came. A whimper. A plaintive sound.

She turned involuntarily. This was the bit she had practiced for. Setting her mind a memorized incantation.

A cry.

She turned away abruptly.

Small cries, quick now, and building.

Erika struck her hand against the stone. She dropped her stick. Worked her way down the wall to retrieve it.

Crying now.

Someone would hear. She must go. She started forward, but too quickly, stumbled, and fell against the wall.

The cries were clear and strong now.

She had wanted to give her husband a child. Early and quickly. Not because she derived an ounce of pleasure from this lying on your back, being dug into, poked and prodded. But because it had been her duty. And everyone had been so relieved when she abandoned all her foolish ideas and married young. Especially Father.

But that need not concern her now!

Once upon a time, rows of trees. Later, rows of children in her dreams of being a teacher. None of it was of the slightest consequence now. – But even then, at soirees, whispers behind hands, overheard: ‘No child yet for Erika Tiefenbach? Does she not know how to do it? Oh, poor girl!’ She could not say that three attempts had come to nothing, before Hans had finally arrived. That almost nightly, the little planter girl was pursued through the forest by a huge man, shouting at the top of his voice, an axe raised above his head.

Crying, crying, from the dark hole in the wall behind her.

She could not wrench herself away. Her shoulder seemed cemented to the stone. She shrank down, almost to the ground. Half-kneeling. Propping herself awkwardly on her skewed stick. A welling up inside her. Beating at the front of her brain, so she put her hand up to her brow at once to stop it bursting forth.

*Take me back! Take me back! Do not leave me! I am your little planter girl!*

‘Alfred!’ Alfred!’

Erika stiffened in bed. Listening. She had been back for barely an hour and found it impossible to sleep. She has completely forgotten herself. It was hard to say exactly where the maid’s cries had come from: it had sounded like somewhere on the stairs above. She remembered her near collapse at the wall, and how it had taken a supreme act of will to regain her composure. But now she must be seen to be genuinely shocked and concerned. She eased herself out of bed and felt for her stick.

‘The child! The child is gone!’

That was definitely outside on the landing. When she opened the door, Alfred was standing in the doorway of the master bedroom in his nightshirt. The maid was almost at the foot of the stairs, attired only in her nightdress with her hair about her shoulders.

‘What a wild thing she is,’ Erika thought. ‘No wonder it happened as it did.’

‘What are you saying, Arilda?’ Tiefenbach said.

‘The child, Herr Doctor. The child is not in her cot. Nowhere in my room.’

‘We must search the house. Top to bottom. Systematically. – This is ridiculous,’ Erika said.

‘I’ll get my robe,’ Tiefenbach said. ‘There must be some mistake. Are you quite sure, Arilda?’

‘Yes. Yes. I would know if the little one were anywhere close by.’

‘I will look downstairs,’ Erika said. ‘Although how on earth she could be down there . . .’

Arilda followed her down soon after, now in her dressing-gown and hair up in a hurried bun, some hairs straggly.

‘Typical,’ Erika thought, passing her in the hallway.

After a flurry of activity, Tiefenbach said, ‘I think we should meet in the drawing-room to decide what to do.’

They stood.

‘We need the police,’ Tiefenbach said.

‘Is that necessary yet, Alfred?’ Erika said. ‘There may still be some simple explanation. – Arilda?’

‘Frau Tiefenbach, I . . .’

‘Do you actually remember putting the child to bed after its bath?’

‘Yes, oh yes.’

‘I’ll ring,’ Tiefenbach said impatiently. ‘Time is vital. A baby. Quite defenceless.’

‘I wonder if there is anyone I could ring?’ Erika said.

They both stared at her.

A constable came within the hour. He apologized. They’d been having a very busy night, he said. He made a quick search of the house and garden, while the others sat in silence in the drawing-room.

He came in.

‘Nowhere about,’ he said. ‘Very strange. The child has clearly been taken.’

‘Taken?’ said Erika.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’

‘What are you saying, exactly?’ Tiefenbach said.

‘It appears to be a clear case of abduction.’

‘Someone has taken the child on purpose, then?’

‘Yes. It would appear so. It happens sometimes if a child is not wanted in a family.’

Erika glanced at her husband. He was looking down, stroking his beard.

‘Who would do such a thing,’ he murmured. ‘What should we do?’

‘In an hour Inspector Mitchener? will start his day.’



‘Mitchener?’

‘He’s our local detective. If the case widens, we can ask for help from Berlin.’

‘I see. Good. Please let him come as soon as possible, then,’ Tiefenbach said.

Inspector Mitchener was a tall thin man, with a narrow nose like a promontory. His hair was immaculately groomed. He spoke in a clipped, precise way. And rarely. In general, people said things to him, but he didn’t necessarily answer. He believed a case had a unique set of dynamics, which it was the detective’s job to tap into. It was usually a matter of a silent, painstaking piecing together, demanding acute observation and a persistent state of open-mindedness.

About mid-morning Mitchener said he would like to interview members of the Tiefenbach household, individually, in the drawing-room.

‘This is quite objectionable. This interrogation,’ Erika said.

‘A necessary evil, I’m afraid,’ Mitchener said. ‘Now, Frau Tiefenbach. Can you describe your movements for me last evening?’

‘I was here, of course. I went to bed early. I’d had a tiring day.’

‘Nice clear night, wasn’t it?’

‘No . . .’ Erika realized it was a trap. She looked straight at the detective. ‘I said I was in bed early. But even then, there was cloud about and the wind was rising.’

‘Hmm. Are you close to the child?’

‘Close?’

‘Yes. Fond of it, I mean.’

‘I had never set eyes on it until yesterday. We are looking after it, while my daughter is in Potsdam. Her . . . husband is wounded. She went to see him.’

‘I see. Tragic, eh?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Tragic. Your son-in-law?’

‘Ah . . . yes . . . certainly, tragic indeed.’

‘Thank you, Frau Tiefenbach. I will keep you well informed. – Could I see your husband now, please.’

‘He is in the study.’

Tiefenbach came in.

‘Herr Doctor. Regrettable affair, this.’

‘Altogether confounding, Inspector. Deeply disturbing. I don’t know what to think. I’ll sit if you don’t mind.’ He found his way to his armchair, sat down, and turned the lamp on.

‘Herr Doctor.’

Tiefenbach looked up.

‘The French doors over there.’ The Inspector pointed. ‘Are they used much?’

‘More so in the warmer weather. My wife sits out there on some afternoons.’

‘But not as a general thoroughfare?’

‘No, no.’

‘Locked?’

Tiefenbach hesitated.

‘At night, yes.’

‘Whose duty is that?’

‘The maid’s – Arilda.’

‘Did she lock them last night?’

‘I would imagine so. She’s very diligent.’

‘Not last night, though, it would seem. The constable said he found them open early this morning. – A rare oversight, perhaps.’

‘She has taken the child’s disappearance very much to heart. She feels responsible.’

‘I’m sure. Otherwise I’m sure she would have cleaned up what looks like fairly recent mud on the sill and carpet, as well.’

‘The maid, Arilda, has she been long with you, Herr Doctor?’

‘Many years. She came initially for our first child.’

‘That’s you daughter, sir – the one in Potsdam?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tragic about your son-in-law, Herr Doctor?’

‘He is not . . .’ Tiefenbach was flustered. ‘Not yet,’ he added. ‘But completely tragic, yes. An exceptionally gifted man.’

‘But soon the happy event, we hope?’ The Inspector smiled.

‘Of course, yes. Thank you.’ Tiefenbach forced a smile.

‘Thank you for your time, Herr Doctor. I will have a report for you in due course. – And may I see the maid, now, before I go?’

Tiefenbach nodded, and got up.

‘You are the maid of this household?’

‘Yes, Herr Inspector,’ Arilda said.

He noticed that she had gone straightaway and sat down on the edge of the Herr Doctor’s chair. Her knees pressed firmly together. Her hands clasped in her aproned lap.

‘The child was in your keeping?’

‘Yes. Oh, yes sir. It was my responsibility. Completely.’

Mitchener saw tears glistening in the woman’s eyes. She fumbled for a handkerchief in her apron pocket.

‘I’m sorry, Inspector. This is a nightmare . . . I don’t understand how . . .’

‘Only a few questions, Fraulein. Necessary, I’m afraid. In order to find the child, you understand.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’

He saw her make a visible effort to pull herself together.

‘Were you fond of the child?’

‘But of course. Though I’d only had her a very short while. She’s Ulla’s child, you see.’

‘And you like Ulla?’

‘I . . . I love her.’

The tears came.

‘And this household?’

‘This is my family, Herr Inspector. Why . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Why would I want to steal from them?’

‘Exactly, Fraulein. Why would you, indeed.’

‘Normally I have a meeting of my Literary Circle this afternoon, as you know.’ Erika had come to the study.

‘You should just go, then,’ Tiefenbach said. ‘We can do nothing until the Inspector tells us the next step. He’s promised a report as soon as possible.’

‘It is terrible, I know. But there is bound to be a simple explanation. Meanwhile it would be very unwise to go around the neighbours, just yet. It may be quite premature. In which case, that could only harm us unnecessarily.’

‘Yes. I suppose so. But it’s hard to sit here and do nothing/feel so helpless.’

‘The Inspector’s the best person to be doing something at the moment, Alfred.’

‘Yes. Yes. You’re quite right, of course.’

‘I will cut my session short today, all the same.’

He nodded.

Tiefenbach waited until he heard the front door close. Then he laid his papers down. First he would ring Potsdam. It was only right that she should know. He phoned his old colleague, the superintendent, who commiserated with him and said that he would personally relay the message to his daughter at once. Setting down the receiver, he leaned back in his chair. Now he was alone in the house – apart from Arilda. There was something he wanted to check out for himself. Basically he strongly disliked the idea of snooping around behind someone’s back. Especially if that person was his own wife. But there was something the Inspector had said to him that had raised a question in his mind, and he knew it would give him no peace until he had done what he could about it.

He shut the study door behind him. Then listened at the top of the stone steps by the front door. He could hear sounds faintly from the kitchen. Arilda, poor woman, would be preparing the evening meal. He was unlikely to be disturbed.

He didn’t want to go anywhere near the French doors in case he disturbed something. And the Inspector had as good as asked him not to. But he knew that the fellow had not looked in detail in any of the rooms upstairs, further than to establish the presence or not of the missing child.

He was about to go up the stairs, when on impulse he turned and went back down to where his cloak hung on a peg just inside the front door. He felt in his pocket for his gloves.

‘It has become like laboratory work. Quite out of place in one’s own home, though.’

He returned to the stairs, went up to the first landing, and opened the door of the room where his wife slept.

‘Sad,’ he thought, ‘this sleeping apart.’

Clothes. He crossed to the wardrobe. Yes, the same pattern as in the other room. Clothes hung in a row at the front, with shoes below on the floor. He lifted each shoe in turn, starting from the left. It would not be shoes she wore to balls or to the theatre or opera. More likely just a pair of ordinary walking shoes. He inspected the upper surface and sole of each.

He finished the row. Sat back on his heels a moment. Yes, a row of shoeboxes stacked behind. She invariably kept the cardboard boxes. One of the few utilitarian elements about his wife. He knelt forwards, and stirred them about a bit, thinking. He removed a couple. Oh, what was this? A plain shoe, behind. Where was its pair? Right. He lifted them out and placed them on the floor in front of him. The left one had a smear of dirt on its upper surface. And the other? Dirt on the sole, and in the instep, a largish chunk of muddy clay, with a slit in it, as from the edge of a solid object. He touched it with his finger. It was still quite soft, like putty.

He stared at it. The Inspector's words stirred in his mind: 'Mud on the sill and carpet.'

After a time he replaced everything exactly as he had found it, closed the door behind him, and went slowly down the stairs back to his study.

Tiefenbach arrived early at the Mariahilf. He couldn't have stood another minute in the house. Arilda had hurried in at mealtimes, served nervously, then departed, her eyes always downcast. And Erika, seated at the far end of the table, tried several times to get him to talk. But he was too preoccupied. He had been in his office only a few minutes when there was a knock at the door and Sister Maria came in.

'Good morning, Herr Doctor.'

He just nodded. Grunted something.

'Your patients have been asking for you?'

'Oh, damn my patients! They want too much.'

Sister Maria turned to go. 'I will wait in the ward room, Herr Doctor.'

'Don't go!' he bellowed. 'I need you here. I think I must be going mad.'

Sister Maria closed the door quietly, crossed the room, and sat in the chair opposite him.

'Maria.'

She looked at him steadily across the desk.

'I am here, Herr Doctor.'

'Someone has stolen Ulla's child. Someone has . . .'

She saw him sink his head in his hands, the big body shaking. A line of Rilke rose in her mind: *How much suffering there is to get through!*

She stood up and walked round to him. Put her arm about him and pressed her flank like a warm rock against him.

He turned and put his head against her.

He wept.

Sister Maria stayed like that. She had known this generous man for thirty years, and this was the first time he had ever raised his voice to her.

In the end he sat up. Mopped his face and beard with a large handkerchief and stuffed it back in his jacket pocket.

She saw him glance towards the window. 'I wish the shell were here,' she heard him say. Fiddled with his papers on the desktop, searching for his patient notes.

'I'm sorry I shouted at you,' he said.

'I think you must be mistaken, Herr Doctor.' Sister Maria stood up. 'Come and do some healing, comrade. We can talk as we go.'

Tiefenbach looked up. He had the strange sensation of seeing her for the first time. He got to his feet, and came round. She stood back, but he insisted, and held the door for her.

'I was in contact with Mother Adeline of the convent close to the Grunertor. You know the one. Only yesterday morning she remarked she'd had a child in the basket. It must have been put there sometime during the previous night, she said. Hadn't had one for months.'

After the ward round, Sister Maria said, 'Shall I call a carriage, Herr Doctor?'

'Yes.' Tiefenbach was more settled now. He had attended to the work he loved most, in the calming company of a woman he admired greatly.

They walked out under the beech trees to the footpath of the Humboldtstrasse. The carriage came and they got in.

They were silent.

'We searched every inch of the house,' Tiefenbach said. 'A detective came. Interviews. Each of us, separately. As though we were not divided enough,' he added.

'No wonder you were not feeling yourself.'

The carriage turned left into the marktplatz.

'Nice to see running water in the heart of the city, Herr Doctor.'

He turned to look. White droplets cascaded and danced in sunlight.

‘You are a blessing to humankind, Sister Maria.’

She was silent, looking to the front.

They entered the Grunertorstrasse. Turned left again.

‘Convent of the Virgin Mary,’ the coachman shouted.

They got down and went inside the gate. They entered under an archway and waited in a foyer. Sister Maria, straight. Tiefenbach, slightly hunched, his hands thrust in his jacket pockets, a step behind.

Soon a tall strong nun, with an open face, appeared.

‘Good morning, Mother,’ Sister Maria said. ‘This is my colleague, Herr Doctor Tiefenbach of the Mariahilf. We’ve come about the child.’

‘Ah, welcome both. Doctor, I know you well by reputation.’

Tiefenbach nodded, attempted a smile.

‘Come through here. It’s warmer. Mary has gone to fetch the child that was left in our basket the night before last.’

They went into a small side chapel and sat down.

‘This is a terrible thing, Herr Doctor,’ Mother Adeline said.

‘I am beside myself with worry.’ He looked down at his hands.

A young nun entered, wheeling a cot.

‘Just leave it there, Mary. Thank you. – Now, Herr Doctor.’

Tiefenbach got up. *How would he recognize the child?*

‘You will need to come closer for purposes of identification,’ Mother Adeline said.

He stood beside the cot and peered down. Sister Maria drew the edge of the cover back from the little face. Two dark brown eyes gazed up at him. A tiny hand stretched. A soft cooing, like a dove sleeping and dreaming.

He felt a flush of blood spreading up his neck. He knew the two women watched him. He knew his daughter’s eyes were amber. ‘The colour of honey, Papa,’ she’d told him once, chiding him gently about how little he really noticed about his children. And the astronomer’s eyes? A complete unknown.

‘Is this the child you have lost, Herr Doctor?’ said Mother Adeline.

‘I . . .’ He shuffled. Bent closer over the cot. ‘The eyes are dark,’ he heard himself say. ‘I think this is . . .’ But he wasn’t sure, at all, really. ‘The child was in the house for barely a day.’

‘Sister Maria?’ He straightened, and turned.

‘Mother, Ulla first brought the child to the convent. I remember the dark eyes, and that fetching habit of stretching out the hand, with the tiny fingers pointing in different directions.’ She bent and raised the corner of the shawl, so that Tiefenbach might see what was embroidered in the corner. Two letters, ornately and lovingly sewn: S.M.

He remembered his daughter standing in his office, the first time: ‘I have a child, Papa. Her name is Stella.’ And the second letter stood for ‘Mendelsohn’, he supposed.

He nodded abstractedly, bewildered. ‘Yes, yes,’ he muttered. ‘This is she.’

‘Right then.’ Mother Adeline drew herself up. ‘We will require a signature, Herr Doctor.’

She placed a form before him on a little table to one side. And a pen. He noticed the city’s crest at the top. An official document. The transaction would go on record for all time. To be housed where? Whose eyes would peruse it, over time? On a certain day of Our Lord, Dr Alfred Tiefenbach, respected physician and director, head of one of the town’s leading, longest-established families, in the company of Sister Maria of the Mariahilf, collected an abandoned child from the care of this convent.

Mother Adeline stood and waited.

Tiefenbach straightened. He turned and looked directly at the Mother Superior. Hesitated. Then said: ‘Mother, this is my daughter’s child. I have come to get her back and take her home. My daughter has gone to Potsdam to be at the bedside of her man, who is seriously wounded. – They are not married.’

Mother Adeline looked at the man standing in front of her. She knew him to be a physician and councilor, widely respected and loved for many years in the town.

‘As God knows the truth now, Herr Doctor, a signature will not be necessary,’ she said.

‘Thank you, Mother.’

Ulla glanced back from the front door as she heard the rattle of the carriage departing in the Theaterstrasse. She turned and pressed the bell. She stood close to the door, her feet together. Touching the side of her face. Smoothing her dress repeatedly. She put her ear close, and heard ascending feet.

*Arilda!*

The door opened. Straight into her arms.

‘What has happened?’ Ulla said.



‘I . . . oh, I . . . I don’t know.’

Tears. Warm body. Comforting.

She followed Arilda up the stairs and crossed the hall. The drawing-room door was partly open. No sound of voices reached her. She went in. Father was in his usual chair on the left. Mother away over by the window. Both were silent.

Mother rose, and stood stiffly beside her chair.

Papa, with a shout, thrust himself to his feet, and swayed forward, his arms wide.

‘How is he? How is he?’

‘Improving, the doctor says.’

‘Thank God!’

‘Stella? Where is she?’

He stood quite still.

‘We appear to have lost the child, Ursula . . .’

‘*Stella*, Mother.’ Then she realised what was being said.

‘Our world has been turned completely upside down.’

Ulla refused her father’s offer of a chair.

‘We’ve searched the house,’ he said, ‘and been asked many questions.’

‘We should be looking *now*.’

‘We have looked *everywhere*,’ Erika said.

‘How could it happen? Here, in the house.’

‘We were all fast asleep until she woke us with her noise.’ Erika indicated Arilda, with a jerk of her head.

Ulla saw Arilda flinch as though struck. Then turn, and leave the room.

‘How can you be so sure of that?’ her father said.

He knows something, she thought.

‘It was the case, Alfred. Wasn’t it?’

‘Shoes, Erika,’ he said, his voice clear across the room.

Ulla’s attention fastened on her parents.

Her mother held his gaze.

‘Muddy clay. On the upper surface of one. On the instep of the other.’

Ulla turned her head. Her mother remained unmoved.

‘Behind boxes. Cardboard boxes. Concealed.’

Ulla saw her mother's chin lift a fraction. The shadow of a smile twitch the corner of her mouth.

'Tiefenbach, you old fool. For years I have lived with you. You know perfectly well that I always keep all my shoes in a single row in the same place.'

'What does he mean. Mother? What is Papa talking about?'

'I have absolutely no idea.'

Ulla heard the door open, and Arilda stood there, disheveled and flushed. She looked only at him. Beseeching.

'Herr Doctor, I've burnt the chicken.'

'Typical,' Erika said.

A sob escaped her. 'It's the child, Herr Doctor . . .'

He took a step towards her.

'Definitely past it.'

'Erika!' he swung round. 'That's enough!' he bellowed.

'Always the excuse for her, Herr Doctor.'

'Both of you!' Ulla slapped her thighs. 'I want my child back.'

'You ought to have taken better care of it, then.'

'I thought she was safe.'

Arilda stifled a sob.

'It was entirely beyond our control.'

'But not beyond yours, though.'

Ulla glanced at her mother.

'You are becoming tedious, Alfred.' Her tone was like ice.

He turned to Arilda.

Ulla held her breath.

'Did you lock the doors last night?'

'Oh yes, I always do.'

'Those ones over there, too?' He pointed in the direction of the French doors at the end of the room.

'Yes, yes. Those too.'

'The constable said he found them unlocked. And there was fresh mud on the sill and carpet.'

'Not before I went to bed, Herr Doctor.'

‘We have all used that entrance,’ Erika said matter-of-factly.

‘No. Only you.’

She glared at him.

‘How dare you insinuate that I . . .’

‘Mother.’

Tiefenbach fastened his eyes on his wife. He took a step towards her.

‘Behind the boxes, a pair of shoes smeared with fresh clay. Explain that.’

Ulla saw her mother reach for her stick. Her hand whitened on its knob.

‘All right, then. I did go out. I could not sleep. – There, now. Have you enjoyed yourself at my expense?’

Ulla stared at her mother. She became aware of the clock ticking.

‘And you were not alone.’

‘Since you appear to know so much about it, I presume you can tell us exactly where I went, too.’

‘I can,’ he said quietly.

Ulla made a sharp intake of breath.

‘I dare you.’

‘The gate . . . the Grunertor . . . the basket in the wall . . .’

‘We needed rid of it.’

‘Oh, Mother! Mother!’

Erika planted her stick.

‘I am not your mother,’ she said. ‘She is!’ Stabbed the air towards the door. Then swung her stick again. ‘Ask him. Ask your dear Papa. He gave her food and shelter beneath this roof, for all these years.’

Ulla turned.

Her father stood, feet apart, staring fixedly at the carpet.

She jerked round: ‘Arilda?’

‘Oh, my child, my *darling* child.’

‘We have the truth at last. And now it will destroy us all,’ she heard her mother say.

## Chapter 18

Ulla quickly pulled the door of the house shut behind her, hurried to the gate, and set off down Theaterstrasse. Once they discovered she was nowhere in the house, Papa had said there was no time to lose. He was not sure how stable she was. He had suggested she search between the square and the station, while he searched the area between the hospital and the Wald.

She would just see if there was any sign of her in the square. There were not many people about. Only the empty tables, a stray dog, and the plashing of the fountain. She retraced her steps.

She was still some distance from the Leinebrücke when she heard the rumbling. Ulla leant on the railing, the chaos was evident below. Bursts of spray, like exploding shells, wet her face and hair. Days of incessant rain in the Mittelgebirge was seeking release on the northern plain. A periodic booming rose from tree trunks, stripped and white, like naked bodies, driven into stone walls. A terrible thought occurred to her. A human body would stand very little chance.

She was about to turn away, when her eye caught a movement well down the Leineweg – the narrow road that ran beside the river. A figure. With that distinctive seesaw gait, particularly pronounced when in haste. Ulla could picture the stick being driven into the footpath repeatedly.

She turned back and entered the weg. Despite Mother's impediment, Ulla would have to run to catch her. She was closing the gap between them when she saw her veer to the left and disappear. She got there, out of breath, and saw her mother ahead striding through the tall grass on a path. She clearly knew this place where the river won free of its confines in the town and began to unwind itself upon the plain.

'Mother! Stop! Mother!'

Her words were like rags in the wind.

When she got closer, she shouted again.

Erika jerked to a stop, and wheeled about right where she stood.

'Go back, damn you!'

She could not reach her in time. Her bun had come undone.

Erika kept straight on, spurred by being close to her goal now, hesitated on the bank, then, spreading her arms wide, threw herself into the torrent. She was gone in an instant.

Ulla shook free of her coat and ran beside the racing waters of a river gone mad. Leaping and striding to keep pace. Her breath laboured in her lungs. In one glance, she saw the body of her mother borne on the next crest against the sky. Then, doubling her effort, she would draw even, and see her robe streaming behind her down a remorseless face into the white bedlam of a trough. She noticed the body no longer struggled in the river's fury. But surrendered.

Desperately she glanced ahead. *The Hunter's Bend!* There was an island there. But beyond it, she thought. If only she could . . . When she got there, she abandoned the river, and took a line straight across the field. She prayed her memory served her well. As she ran, she shook the burdening coat free of her shoulders, stooped and ripped at her laces, kicked her shoes free, and barefoot, began to run like a young girl again, ignoring her body's protestations.

She reached where the river comes back to you. Stood wild-haired on the bank. Glared about her. Saw the island in mid-stream. Took in the fact the river narrowed and raged past on the far side. Hauling her skirts high, she went straight in to the thigh, and waded against the current, flung herself onto the island. Panting, got up. Looked upstream. There! Riding the waters. Twenty metres now. What she hoped to see. Would currents turn the body into quieter water behind her? She waited. Then, no! She stretched. Perversely the bundle turned and inched beyond her straining finger-tips. She saw it pass.

And leapt.

*God, how the cold clutched the bone!* Went to the marrow. She struck out, seized the bundle, and gripped. Both hands. Tried to keep her head up. Shook the dark dragging mane of her hair from her face. Sucked air into burning lungs between white fists of water.

*Let go. Let go,* a voice inside her said.

'I will not! I will not!' she screamed in defiance above the din.

Then wrestling, she got over on her back, her legs straight out in front, beating and lifting in the waves, the precious bundle in her arms. Give it time. Give it time. Work with the stream. It knows you. It knows who you are. It remembers you. A hundred metres. Two hundred. Half a kilometre. And she felt the stroke of trailing grass across her face.

She sensed a change in the current.

*Cove of the Maidens.*

Yes, this was her river. She exulted in her knowledge of the wild.

She jerked her head up past the bundle, and saw the broad sweep bending away to the left, and the higher stones of the little bay ahead. She worked her body over as close to the racing shore as she could. Made her body straight like an arrow. And fastened her eye and every taut fibre on the fast-approaching bay, where the river piled up high its fury, threshed for a cauldron moment in a corner, and was gone.

When it came, she held her breath, clung to the bundle as it were part of her own body, was pummelled in the cauldron, and flung clear on her back into long grass, to lie quivering, staring upwards.

A moment of terror.

No. Beside her. Flung too, by God's mercy, the bundle.

She lay, gasping, and clinging. Weeping and panting. Body to body. Warming the other. Her teeth clenching and unclenching involuntarily.

Time past. And the wind in the grass about them. And the river's authority ever-present in her soul. She raised herself cautiously and with tenderness turned the body over. Squeezed. Water in spouts from the mouth. The paleness of the face. The palour.

No movement.

Her mind turned.

*Lost. Lost.*

How could this body that had caused her such anguish occasion sorrow?

A stirring, then. A quiver over all its length. The flicker of eye-lids, and eyes, wide open, staring up into her peering face.

'I wanted death,' she heard in whisper. 'You cheated me.'

Ulla shouted against the wind and the river: 'I want my mother back!'

## Chapter 19

He lay there in the hospital bed. The curtains were open and if he turned his head he could see the big bulbous clouds behind the soaring beeches. The nurse had come in, adjusted his pain relief, straightened the covers, and opened a window a little for some air. The cotton curtain had a pattern of wildflowers on it and he imagined it was them that moved in the light breeze. Ulla had been there and had been called away because of the child and he had persuaded her to go even though she had insisted on staying. He knew that both things needed to be looked after in her heart now. Her coming had been like a sweet, sweet wave arriving upon his shores. Washing him, turning him over, cleansing him. But now it had gone out to sea again and left him like a black rock, standing alone and desolate.

He too felt as though he swum at the edge of things, lapsing in and out of consciousness. In, and out. In, and out. In . . .

*“Run, Fritz! Run! Into the woods!”* And he could hear the shell coming. He held his breath for the moment of explosion, the moment of impact. And the star exploded. And like it, in a moment in a far place that no one knew about yet, but would hear mentioned in a conversation a day or an eon later, he knew in his innermost self that he was debris now. But his particles were still calling out to each other through time and space.

His first awareness was of being gathered in. But over a vast expanse. Like a crop rather, at harvest time. Gathered in, but at the same time, a growing sensation of traveling. Slow motion, because of the vastness of the territory. After the manner of a star or a planet, so to speak, moving on its orbital path.

After a time he sensed a purpose, or rather the possibility of a destination, a movement towards something, at least. And an instinct that it was not arbitrary, but that it would turn out to be ultimately specific. He could feel the stroke of space as he passed upon the surfaces of his skin. If he turned his head, in any direction, he could see the light of countless stars, as they stood about him. Some closer. And those more distant, mere pin-pricks of light. Still all sharing with him the companionship and blessing of relativity. He hoped he was still a light-giving object, so they might see him, and know of his existence.

His second awareness was of being gathered in, as though by a pair of cosmic arms, majestic and irresistible. And the notion of hurtling towards a point entered his mind. This notion occasioned tears. For he still had things he badly wanted to tell the world: unfinished

equations that might make all the difference, once solved. Things he wanted to touch. Error. One person he wanted to touch: Ulla. Did he make that clear? Ulla.

He noticed how one by one the points of light were receding or extinguishing. He had the impression he might be leaving the stars behind. Of outstripping light.

He noticed that his companions were changing. That there was now a preponderance of particles like himself: flaming, jagged lumps, with white and violet and crimson streamers, quivering straight behind their bodies.

And then, without warning, over a lip of dimensionless darkness, with no companions save these chosen few, plummeted, still burning, into a world of ebony velvet. With no light, save their own.

*Ulla!*

Time, or something like it, passed.

Had his companions moved closer to him? He was dazzled by their desperate brightness. Shaken by the ferocious roaring of their torn and straining masses. With their greater nearness, he now became acutely conscious of his own inexorable velocity.

Then a third awareness arrived: a converging. His world was diminishing. Notions of passage and containment materialized and trembled in his head. One of his fiery companions, who traveled at his left shoulder, peeled off and scribed a bright arc away and under him. He did likewise. Until all were spinning, descending in a dizzying spiral.

His fourth awareness came: he was in a vortex.

*Ulla, where is the shell? Did I remember to give it back to you?*

He glanced about at his companions. One by one their roaring decreased and entered silence. Their light shrank – and went out.

His fifth awareness: a point. It stood in his skull, waiting. He hurtled towards it.

And beyond? Would he have to wear clothes? Or become like a breath of wind. A leaf on the tree of God or a particle of His breath. A circle. A line. A point, only. Or

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*Ulla! Ulla! Ulla!*



## Chapter 20

Ulla stood by the carriage door as the train pulled into Potsdam station. The telegram had said: 'The patient has succumbed to a deep coma. Not expected to recover'. She pulled open the door, got down on the platform and strode towards the entrance through drifting clouds of steam. With only a small case in her hand she was among the first to reach the street and signal a cab.

'Take me to a jeweler, please. Someone who knows his business.'

'At once, Fraulein. I know just the one for you,' the coachman said.

They came to the old part of town, and the driver set her down in a narrow cobbled street.

'Over there.' He pointed. 'Herr Schinkler's shop. He's always been there.'

'Please wait.'

The doorbell tinkled.

The eyes twinkled at her over the spectacles on the end of his nose.

'You are after a keepsake, a token, Fraulein. Let me see.'

'Yes. A key, if possible.'

He opened a glass cabinet, looked about for a moment. 'Ah,' he said, and handed her a small casket.

She held it in her left hand and carefully raised the latch. It lay in red velvet. Ornate and very old.

'Where's it from?' she said.

'I have absolutely no idea. I've had it for years.'

'It's beautiful,' she said.

'Guaranteed to open any door,' he said.

'That's what I need, then.'

He wrapped it, handed it to her, and went quietly back to something else.

'How much is it?'

It has never had a price on it.'

'But I can't just . . .'

Herr Schinkler took his spectacles off.

'I hope it brings you happiness,' he said.

She followed the director along the same corridor to the small room at the end.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said.

How she regretted ever having left.

He opened the door. A nurse stood beside him.

‘There has been no change,’ he said.

She went in and sat down, her knees touching the bed. He lay with his eyes closed. Quite still. She got up for a moment to take her hat and coat off, then sat down again. She noticed the movement of the beech-trees at the window and the occasional sway of the curtain. She bent over and touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers. She then began to trace each feature of his face. Like she had the tattered map still folded under her waistband.

‘Only this is the real geography,’ she murmured. ‘This is the landscape I love above all others.’

The afternoon passed. Each hour the nurse looked in and asked if there was anything she could bring.

‘I have all I need,’ Ulla said.

The director came.

‘Where will you stay the night?’

‘Here,’ she said.

Shadows began to gather in the trees and the lowering sun put its last light among the foliage and touched the bare limbs.

For a time now she had rested her palm on his brow, hoping to cool it. It burnt with fever. Without warning, under her hand, she felt a quiver. And he began to speak, incoherently, words tumbling over each other like the Leine in flood. The eyelids flickered, opened, stared, and shut again.

Both her hands held him now, and she slipped off the chair onto her knees, to be closer to him.

‘I am old figure . . . Old Jew come bent on the road to the city gate again.’

The tears sprang to her eyes. How she wished she could have wiped out these/those images that had always tormented him.

‘. . . Come to this point. Light grows into the circle of a day, and I am the oldest figure on the road, coming hungry at dawn to the city gate as always since the birth of our

people . . . But what is this strange spectacle? Workmen on the city wall so early. Broken stone raining in the moat. And the ring of hammers everywhere. Cries: “Down with the walls! Tear down the walls!”

I approach the closed gate. Gates of all of Europe and the World are closed against me. I have come to expect nothing more. I will wrap myself in my coat and get close in under the wall out of the wind. – But what is that rattling at the gate. A tall woman in a robe comes out into the swirling dust and stands beckoning to me. Unbelieving, I scramble to my feet and approach her.

‘Come in,’ she says. ‘We have been looking out for you.’ She has hair to her waist, the colour of flame.

‘What is your trade?’ she asks.

‘I am a Starman.’

‘How fortuitous! How timely!’

I ask what is happening.

‘We are building a new city.’

She strides through the streets.

‘Walk beside me,’ she says. ‘We are equals. It is a new law.’

I cannot believe my ears.

This woman takes me to the mayor’s house. He is about to sit down to breakfast, and asks me to join him. He says he is glad of my company. (Ulla is startled by Klaus’ laughter.) He reminds me a little of Georg. His openness and bonhomie. He says I have come just in time. He needs a new adviser. And since I am a Starman, and well used to looking beyond things, he wants me. I have always only worked with men who cannot see further than the walls, he says. We’re going to have a day set aside each month for every citizen – man, woman, and child – to study the stars. You will choose the most suitable night, and all the lights will be turned out. We must become a people accustomed to living without walls. Of seeing and finding each other beyond the walls. But we are afraid. You will need to help us/look to you for guidance. We have a house set aside for you close to the square. You will hear the clock strike the hour and can listen to the sound of water in the fountain on warm evenings. We hope you will want to stay and live with us . . .’

Klaus fell silent at last. His lips moved sometimes. She saw his hand struggled to be outside the covers. She helped him and saw he wanted her. She got the thing she had brought from

her coat pocket and she took the pins from her hair and loosened her waistband so that the map drifted away to the floor. She kicked her shoes off and got in under the covers and put her body against his. She saw his eyes open and his lips move.

‘Ulla. You are here.’

He had come back to her.

‘Did I say something?’ She found it hard to hear him. ‘Mostly nonsense, I imagine.’

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘You were telling me about a new city.’

‘Where was it? Did I say?’

‘It is here. It is here. I have this for you.’ And she felt to open his left hand and close it again.

‘It is hard. Metallic,’ he said. ‘What is it? Tell me, Ulla.’

But she would not. She wanted him to know it in the core of himself.

Silence.

She pressed her ear close to his lips. Brushed her hair aside.

‘A key?’ she heard.

‘Yes. Yes.’

And she took his hand and moved it up to the place just below her breast and arched herself so that he could feel its beating.

‘ . . . heart . . . your heart . . . ’ she heard him say.

‘Yes, my darling . . . this is the new city . . . ’

‘The city of your heart,’ he said.

She wept.

‘Your city. Forever,’ she whispered.

She saw him smile and she put her arms around him and she watched the stars shining among the trees. One star stood apart from the others. But she knew there was another. Close to it. Unseen. Holding it.

Several years slipped past in the town. Ulla continued to live with Stella in the apartment on the Waldweg. It was handy for going for walks in the woods. Stella now attended the school in the Schuleweg, just as she had done. Sometimes they went to the cemetery to tidy Klaus' grave or place fresh flowers there. On a fine day she would wander on the Wall path and sit on a bench in the sun, reading or dreaming. She continued to work at the Mariahilf, and in time became a respected researcher in her field. And Papa would consult her regularly, as he said she invariably raised questions that had never occurred to him. Sometimes Stella would accompany her to the laboratory. And on others she would leave her at the Observatory with Herzberg, and he would bring her home later in a carriage like a proper lady. She would be full of jokes and stories and anecdotes of her father, which she would recount, tucked up in Ulla's bed, far into the night. On other occasions the two of them would go on a fine night to the Dome Room, where there always seemed to be a third person present. And Ulla would sit quietly while Stella sat on her father's red leather chair and gaze up at the stars.

One afternoon they were both invited to a special tea party in Erika's garden. *Kuchen mit schlagsahne*, cake with whipped cream, had been promised. They were sitting at a table in the shade under the trees and tea was about to be served. Ulla had just returned from wandering about the old house and a conversation with her father in the study, when the maid came across the grass carrying the tea- tray. She arranged the table carefully, as she always did, complete with little cakes she had freshly baked and chocolates. Stella was talking animatedly to her grandmother about her lessons and friends at school. The maid paused to check everything was there, and correct, and was about to turn away, when Erika interrupted her conversation and turned to her.

'Oh, Arilda, thank you,' she said.

Arilda poured and Stella got up and helped her distribute the cups and cake, making sure each person had a plate and napkin.

Ulla watched her other mother go back across the grass, and was content to sit while the other two talked. She had a sudden image of a younger woman with a bicycle unlatching the back gate, and wheeling her bicycle through the trees to keep a secret meeting on the Wall path. She smiled to herself.

'We should be going soon, Mother.'

'Oh, just before you do,' Erika said, 'I have a little thing I hoped Stella might help me with. She's young and strong.'

Ulla saw her mother get up too quickly from the table, and stand there, uncertain on her feet.

‘Mother, you’ll fall! I’ll get your stick.’

‘No, thank you. I have Stella’s arm to support me.’ She turned slowly, and looked hopefully at the little girl.

Stella leapt up and took her grandmother’s arm.

‘Come on, my little tree-planter,’ Erika said. ‘We’ve work to do!’



