

AMIE  SAN



THE LIGHT
OF
AVALON

TRUE LOVE AND MYSTERIES

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Book I

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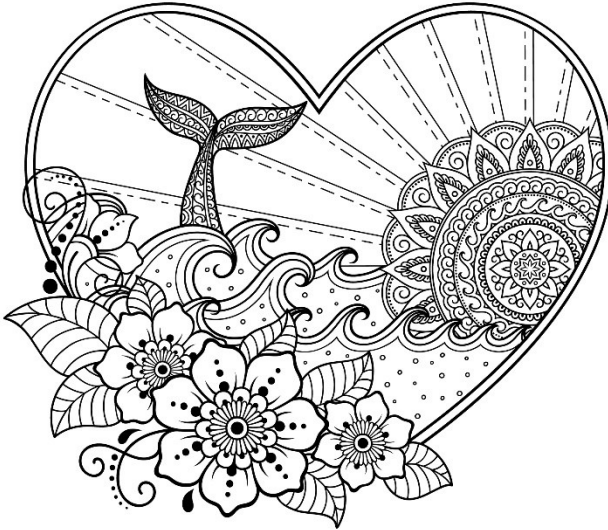
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I



The *Dragon Queen* was in dry dock. She was a stately three-master and a proud one hundred and ten meters in length. During the last voyage, water had entered the engine room, which had almost led to disaster. The storm they had sailed through had been so violent that they had to rely on the use of the engines to prevent capsizing. By the end, they had to scoop out water with buckets to keep the engine room functioning. A storm like this, on the sailing from Gran Canaria to Bridgetown, thankfully happened only every ten years and Brad O'Brien, the captain, had only experienced such violent weather twice during his twenty-five years at sea.

Brad had fiery red, curly short hair and an endlessly long Irish ancestry. He saw himself as down to earth, realistic and pragmatic, which was also reflected in his compact, somewhat squat body stature. He had always had great intuition, and his gut feelings were mostly right. Many things he dreamed while sleeping had also come true. For several days he had been having nightmares, which made him feel strongly that this journey would be very different from the many others on which he had safely steered the magnificent ship through all the waters and storms over the past eight years. Although he didn't want to admit it to himself, he was seriously getting terrified.

Anyway, the engine room was now newly sealed and the rest of the ship had also been checked and made even more highly seaworthy. The ship should be ready for all eventualities and was considered unsinkable with the new

equipment. Also, the weather report only announced a light breeze and sunshine for the next three weeks. Brad tried to focus on that, but it wasn't working well. "Whatever will happen, I'll do my best," he promised himself.



Joana closed the window, locking out the icy cold wind that howled like a demon across the balconies of the stylish apartments, upsetting the dignified atmosphere of the upscale residential area on the banks of the Elbe River in Hamburg. The sky was leaden and covered with clouds. She turned back to her suitcase, which was now almost full with the cheerful, colourful garments she had bought especially for the trip. A journey she wasn't really looking forward to because it was a cruise on a luxury sailing ship with golden taps! But Nikita, her husband, whom almost everyone called Nik, had given her the trip for their third wedding anniversary and he was so thrilled with his idea that she didn't want to spoil his joy. Many would lick their fingers for such an opportunity, but Joana was different. She didn't think much of luxury and glamour and loathed superficiality and false appearances.

Her choice would have been to travel to New Zealand, to watch the whales and to celebrate the Hakas together with the inhabitants of the island. She had long been fascinated by the immense power and archaic expression of this ritual dance. Joana liked things like that because she loved passion, strength and naturalness.

She was a petite woman in her late thirties with long, red, wild-curly hair that danced around her narrow face. Her eyes were of the darkest sea-green imaginable, and it seemed like a thousand stars sparkled in them. Those eyes could look at another so pervasively, it felt they could see to the bottom of every soul and they gave her something magical and at the same time majestic.

Her gaze fell on Sina, the pooch she had rescued on a trip to Spain several years ago. She had found the small, almost starved pup in a garbage bin and showered it with love. Now, the neglected bundle of fur had become a glamorous, huge and strong-minded dog. Sina looked like a white wolf with blue eyes and managed to win people's hearts despite her size. She was very cooperative and had a distinct protective instinct, even growling at Nik sometimes when he was unkind to Joana. Sina saw Joana's look, stood up

and put her big head in her owner's lap.

Joana stroked gently over her silky, white fur. She was grateful she would be able to take her dog on board. Sina wouldn't be allowed to leave the ship at every port, but there was a fenced area on board where she could play, and taking the dog with her was always better than leaving her with friends. Sina didn't like being without Joana at all, and Joana didn't like being without Sina. The two were simply inseparable from the first second, much to Nik's chagrin, as he wasn't a great animal lover.

As soon as Joana thought of Nik, her gaze darkened. Too many things had happened between them. There was too much pain, too many disappointments and unresolved problems. How different it had been when they'd first met. Five years ago, when they had first looked into each other's eyes on Joana's trip to Russia. He had been so devoted, so open and touchable, so attentive and positive during that time. How many magical emails he had sent her, how many hours had they spoken on the phone and how affectionate, cautious and at the same time sensitive and vulnerable he had shown himself.

They had spent a wonderful time together in St. Petersburg. Nik had taken her heart by storm and they had decided to get married. The marriage had been the only way Nikita could emigrate from Russia to Germany.

His parents were of German descent and had spoken German with him, so he had grown up bilingual and was fluent in this language. Within a few years, Nik had built up a very lucrative business in the form of a small construction company. Had she been deluded in his so warm and kind gaze? Today, depending on his mood, Nikita's eyes changed between an ice-cold grey and a warm, bright blue. If his eyes were blue, they still looked warm, open and loving, but if they were ice-grey, they seemed callous, even almost expressionless and then he was just like his eyes. Unfortunately, most days now, only the grey could be seen.



The ringing of her phone ripped Joana out of her thoughts. It was Nik. "Hi, I'll be a bit late today. You don't mind, do you? I still have so much work to

do.” These were some of his standard words and he didn't even realise how monotonous they sounded by now. He also didn't seem to notice that he was repeating this at least every other night, nor that it was never right.

“But no,” she replied. “I'm still busy packing anyway.”

“Then see you soon,” he promised.

“Soon,” she mumbled, knowing she wouldn't see him that day at all. An hour usually meant four to five hours. How many evenings had she waited in vain for him? In time, she had become resigned to it, and also to the sadness that this was apparently the reality of her marriage. At the beginning of their love, she had gone to great lengths to understand and tolerate his behaviour. Right after the wedding, it had started. And if she was honest with herself, actually before. She just hadn't wanted to see it.

Nik, despite his German ancestry, had the depth and melancholy of a Russian soul and he tried to drown it in alcohol, which he regularly succeeded in doing. Unfortunately, he also drowned his sensitivity, his respect and sadly the young marriage, too. Even the wedding had been a huge disappointment for Joana. Nik had been drinking so much during the festivities that the wedding night didn't happen. He just plumped into bed and fell asleep. To Joana's chagrin, Nik wasn't exactly what one would call an experienced and good lover either. He had spent most of his life as a bachelor and had, as he claimed, saved himself up for the right woman. Tragically, this also meant, as romantic as it might sound, that he had no idea how to meet and satisfy a female erotically. Over the years, it had evolved to the point that they slept in different rooms and their original closeness had dissipated into nothing, as had many of the shared ideas and plans they had at the beginning of their relationship.

Joana had truly imagined her marriage differently, and the decision had matured that it was now time to leave Nik for good. Until he was willing to face his addiction and work on his healing, she saw no common future for them. She still loved him and nothing would change that, but she didn't want to live with him anymore.

Actually, she had wanted to tell him on their wedding anniversary, but when he was beaming with the tickets for the trip, she had been unable to do so

and decided to give the whole thing another chance. She closed the suitcase and called Sina. It was time for a final evening walk. Tomorrow afternoon they were due to board at 3 pm.



Nik was tired when he locked up the front door after midnight. He had been working a lot again in the last few days and then mostly sat on the computer late into the night. He went to the kitchen. Too bad that there was no beer left in the fridge. He had forgotten in the hustle and bustle of the day to buy some, and Joana strictly refused to do so for him. Why couldn't she allow him that little joy and relaxation? Nik was upset. He didn't see why he was supposed to give up his beloved beer. After all he worked hard and this was his small pleasure for himself. In his homeland, it was quite normal for men to drink alcohol regularly, only Joana didn't want to understand that! At the end of the day, it wasn't his fault that she was so sensitive, and neither tolerated nor liked alcohol.

The door to Joana's bedroom was shut and there was no light penetrating through the gap between the door and floor. She probably was already asleep. Nik considered whether he should visit his favourite pub for a drink but then decided to go to bed because tomorrow was the big day when the journey started.

Nikita had great expectations for this time and hoped to get closer to Joana again as a result. He hadn't told her, but he planned not to drink anything in those two weeks. He had repeatedly asserted to Joana that he could stop drinking at any time if he just wanted to, but now when he wanted to give it a go, he was suddenly unsure if he would be able to handle it. That's why he hadn't told Joana about his plan.

Nik went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. His narrow face was pale, and he had deep dark rings under his eyes, which didn't bother him. But he noted in amazement that his once black hair at the temples had turned silver-grey and even his eyebrows had become thinner, which were now also crisscrossed with grey. His body was still strong, though for a man quite delicate, and the muscles well defined by his physical work. He looked really good and athletic for his forty-one years.



Nikita wasn't particularly tall. He brought just sixty-five kilograms on the scales, but this only with his heavy work boots on. Nevertheless, he was tough and hardened. The rough life in Russia had made him introverted, as well as physically strong, and he was proud not to be as soft as many other men. He splashed water onto his face, brushed his teeth and then walked into his bedroom. Joana, as always, had left his pyjamas on the bed. He put them on, slipped under the blanket and had fallen asleep minutes later.



Tom sat at the dinner table with the whole family. Lisa, his wife, with whom he had been happily married for fifteen years, had cooked his and Archie's favourite food. There was fried pumpkin with baked potatoes, which almost swam in sour cream and a yummy salad. The dessert tempted with delicious vanilla cream and hot raspberries.

Even Mira, their sixteen-year-old daughter, had come to visit from boarding school. It was the evening before Tom and Archie's big trip. Lisa and Tom had given it to their son for his fourteenth birthday. Two weeks of adventures on the *Dragon Queen*, only father and son. That was what Archie had wished for and also the reason why they were all sitting around the table now, talking excitedly.

Actually, Archie's real name was also Tom, just like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. It was a family tradition that the firstborn son was given the father's name. But with Archie, things had been different. Hardly had he stepped foot into the world, when everyone started to call him Archie instead, and he was glad to have his own name. By now, Tom had also accepted that Archie didn't hold much attachment to this family tradition.

Archie looked a lot like his dad. He had the same almost black, curly hair that Tom had had at a young age and he had the same bright blue eyes. His stature, too, resembled his father's. Tom was medium in size, lean and muscular. He liked his body, paid a lot of attention to it, and went jogging regularly.

He had been attending a yoga class with Lisa once a week for the past year, and they practised diligently during the week. Tom had noticed that this made him feel better, not only physically, but mentally and emotionally too. He felt

balanced and had the impression of being more relaxed. By the start of the yoga class, the whole family, apart from Archie, had opted for a vegetarian diet. Although Archie liked animals so much, he still found it difficult to abstain from the delicious sausages Lisa bought for him at the butcher.

Even though Tom was going grey quite early for his forty-four years, he was nevertheless an extremely attractive man with the touch of a non-conformist, which was partly expressed by his long hair, usually tied in a plait. His sympathetic and casual but neat exterior, combined with simple elegance and great know-how, gave him a certain extravagance that had brought him many customers.

Tom was proud of his work and family. He worked as a real estate agent and was very successful. But the work kept him busy on the weekends as well, so there was often little time and energy left to spend a few hours with the family or even with Lisa, who had never complained about it and always supported him, for which he was very grateful to her. She kept the house and large garden in impeccable order, provided the whole family with healthy, tasty meals and made sure everyone was neatly and cleanly dressed and that they all made their appointments on time.

Lisa was almost an institution. She lived for her family and supported everyone to go their way. She had suggested that Mira went to boarding school for a few years, the same one she had attended as a young girl. There were traditions in Lisa's family as well, and she took pride in it.

Tom was happy to have the opportunity to take a break and do something completely different. Even though he enjoyed his work, it was also a treadmill with the commitment to provide the money for the whole family every month. Fortunately, he had already sold eight large houses this year. After this business success, Tom was particularly looking forward to spending time together with Archie, whose life and development he had hardly been able to follow in recent months, as he had been so busy. Archie was having some problems at school at the moment. There had been fights and Archie had come home a couple of times with a black eye and a bloody lip. Tom wanted to talk to him calmly and with a bit of distance from the action about it and hoped to find a good solution for his son.

Archie wasn't an aggressive boy, but if one irritated and cornered him, he became angry and defensive, and Tom knew from personal experience that it was good to learn to master one's emotions. He had been kicked out of university at a young age because he had repeatedly ended up in fights. That's why he wasn't a doctor now, but a real estate agent instead.

Initially, he had suffered from it, especially since all of the men in his family were doctors. But over the years he had discovered that his profession left him with a lot more freedom and that it was also salutary when people were sold the right house or plot. In his work, he met a wide variety of most interesting people. Sometimes he felt like a therapist helping his clients find the right property or successfully supporting them in selling their home for a good price. He especially liked to sell old houses because they told their own stories. Life had taken place here. Sometimes he almost felt he could still sense the people, who had once lived, laughed and cried there.

Also, each house had an individual scent. Some smelled old, musty and mouldy, others fresh and appetising. Tom had learned that the smell of a house played a significant role in the selling. In the meantime, he had become an expert at improving it before an upcoming sale.



It was time to go to bed. Tom didn't expect Archie to get much of a night's sleep because he was far too excited to do so, but he himself was decidedly tired. As soon as he laid down in bed and Lisa had tenderly put her arms around him, he had dozed off. Actually, he had wanted to say goodbye to her with a wonderful love night, but when he woke up the next morning, he comforted himself with the fact that they could make up for this when he was freshly recovered from the trip.

He jumped out of bed in a joyful mood and disappeared into the bathroom. Lisa said nothing once again. Tom had the same dream again that night, which he remembered completely after waking up. He had dreamed that he lived as a priest in an ancient seaside town, in a temple, and taught sacred geometry there. He instructed his students to build homes according to universal laws, which meant that all buildings were in harmony with nature and seamlessly integrated into the respective landscape. That dream had been

so vivid that he could still smell the flowers, which he had never seen before, that had grown in one of the gardens. They had huge, orange-red blossoms perched on two-foot-tall stems with oversized, dark green leaves and smelled like a mixture of roses and lilies. These flowers had great healing power and were considered sacred. Their blossoms were only allowed to be harvested at the time of the full moon and then had to be dried in a special ritual or pickled in alcohol.

As always after having that dream, he hadn't been able to fall asleep for a long time. In half-sleep, Tom had decided that once given an opportunity, he would investigate on the internet whether this city had once really existed. But the intention was already forgotten when he started his day.



The new morning shone in autumnal splendour. A warming sun lit up the sky and lifted the mood too. Brad was the first of the crew to board. The service team had done a great job. The ship looked stunning. Somehow the *Dragon Queen's* bow head appeared to be alive. Brad was convinced this seventy-year-old wooden yacht had a soul. The brass guardrail flashed in the sunlight that it was a pleasure, and the whole ship smelled of freshly washed laundry and lemon. In his cabin, Brad found red roses on the gold-embellished, small, white table standing in front of the dark red velvet sofa. He sat down in one of the accompanying comfortable easy chairs and looked at the passenger list. The ship wasn't fully booked this time. The tour group consisted of forty-four passengers, all newcomers, who dared to accept the seasonal risk of a somewhat stormy crossing. Autumn trips were less favourable as the weather had proved incalculable. One could be lucky and glide through the waves for three weeks in the most beautiful sunshine, but it could also get damn hard and uncomfortable when the ship got into an autumn storm.

Brad liked the transatlantic rides. They always had a flair of adventure, even for such an old stager as he was. They reminded him of the times when he had sailed the unsafe waters around Ireland as a young boy with his grandfather on his old sailing yacht. He got up and went to the command bridge, where his new First Officer was waiting for him. His name was J. Brooklyn.

When Brad opened the door to the bridge, his jaw dropped. Standing in front of him was a beautiful, young woman in a blossom-white officer's uniform, stretching her hand out to him with a beaming smile.

“You must be Brad O 'Brien. Welcome on board, Sir. I'm Jessie. We've

prepared everything for the first muster. This trip, the restaurant and housekeeping team consists of eleven people, the sailing crew of eight sailors and the machine and technical team has two members. They are all gathered in the lounge,” she reported.

Brad had regained his composure and replied confidently, “Thank you, Jessie, and welcome to the team. I didn't even know that this time we had a woman among the officers.”

“Oh, there are even two,” she replied. “The Second Officer is also female.”

“That's indeed something new. There has never been anything like this on board the *Dragon Queen*, but it's all right with me. Let's get to work!” Brad turned to leave.



They went to the lounge together, where the entire crew was already waiting in a good mood. The transatlantic crossing was popular with everyone. Since there were only two ports of call during the entire trip, the organisational and work effort was much lower and the team could be more relaxed. Brad once again showed the itinerary on the large screen, explaining what to look out for on the trip. Safety regulations, in particular, were taken extremely seriously on the *Dragon Queen*, as well as excellent service.

Brad knew most of the sailing crew members and was secretly glad to have such experienced people by his side. It was necessary to have a great crew to maintain three thousand square meters of sailing space, which was worked by manpower. The *Dragon Queen* was entirely sailed by hand except for the entry and exit into the ports, and navigation was also predominantly done, as in ancient times, with a sea map and a compass. This gave the whole thing a glimmer of classy nostalgia.

Modern, on the other hand, was the osmosis plant, which could be used to convert up to fifty thousand tons of seawater into freshwater. This made the ship independent and met the high demands of its guests. Anyone could take a shower whenever they wanted. The water flowed pearly from the golden taps and the bathrooms were made of the finest marble. In emergencies, the plant could also produce drinking water.



It was always a special pleasure to take a trip on this beautiful ship, and it was obvious that all members of the crew were proud to work on the *Dragon Queen*. Everyone was connected like a big family and when things got tough,

they worked together without exception. Many of them had been around for years, such as Piet, the first mechanic who had brought his daughter Mariah on board this time. It was Piet's ten-year service anniversary and because of that he was allowed to take a person of his choice on the trip.

Piet was an excellent mechanic, but a bad companion. He was mostly cranky and preferred to spend his time alone in the engine room. Had he not been so outstanding in his job, he would have been terminated long ago. But if there were problems with the machines, he was simply unbeatable. There was no problem he couldn't solve, and this was of great value to everyone's safety and wellbeing. As a result, everybody tolerated generously his difficult character.

If one wanted to describe Piet in one word, it was best done with 'cynical'. Sadly, his cynicism also often degenerated into sarcasm. Piet was highly intelligent and had a good heart, but he was deeply disappointed in life and people. His younger brother Gerald had killed himself when Piet had just turned fourteen. He had laid down on the train tracks one night and the train operator saw him too late to be able to stop in time. None knew why Gerald had done that. In any case, he had set in motion the chain of unfortunate events in Piet's life. His parents had divorced a year after the tragedy and Piet had spent the rest of his youth trying to comfort his devastated mother, who had become an alcoholic and ultimately died of cirrhosis of the liver.

During this time, a sense of inadequacy arose in him, which he subconsciously transferred to all women, resulting in him getting one rebuff after another. These experiences were repeated throughout his mechanical engineering studies and when he later married Alicia, he secretly feared the worst, which unfortunately also came true.

Alicia had already cheated on him before their daughter Marta had been born and only a genetic test could have told whether Piet was truly the father. Their son Julius, who was born two years later, died in a car accident on his seventeenth birthday. Piet had never gotten over that. He and Alicia finally separated after twenty years of a marriage full of strife and disagreement.



Mariah, who accompanied him on that trip, wasn't Piet's biological daughter. He had adopted her, so to speak. This was unusual because he had never had a relationship with her mother. He had met Mariah at Julius's funeral. She had been his son's best friend and was just fifteen. The first time they met, he had noticed her glossy, luscious, dark brown hair reaching down to her

hips. She had only silently pressed his hand, but then later at the funeral service so soulfully and virtuously celebrated his son's favourite songs on the piano that many had tears in their eyes.

Piet had subsequently approached Mariah to thank her and, to his amazement, found that she was speaking in rhymes. Her answer to his thanks was, "Dear Lord, I lost my friend and I am very sad. Since his death, day and night, it's hammering in my head."

At first, Piet had thought she was making fun of him somehow, but then Mariah's mother gently took him aside, explaining to him that Mariah had only spoken in rhymes or stuttered since her brother's suicide four years ago. When she sang, there was no sign of the stuttering. Her suffering had touched Piet. Their traumatic experiences and the shared love for Julius connected them on a deep level and when he visited her at her mother's a few weeks later, they found they understood each other even without words.

The invitation to this trip was Piet's gift for her eighteenth birthday. She had been looking forward to it madly, and now she was standing with Piet in the middle of the crew. When he had introduced her, she said in a plain-clear voice, "On a big journey we all go, many foreign places to see and no one really knows whether it's wise to venture out to sea."

Everyone looked at Mariah puzzled, then the entire crew burst into resounding laughter. Mariah turned red and lowered the gaze. Piet protectively put his arm around her and when the crew had calmed down finally, he stated, "If someone laughs at my girl again, he has to deal with me. Mariah likes to speak in verse, and the sooner you get used to it, the better."

The muster for the crew was soon over and everyone went to their positions. Now it was time to welcome and accommodate the new passengers. While some formed a chain to hoist the suitcases on board and distributed them into the right cabins, others prepared a small champagne reception and a first snack. As a welcome, they offered traditionally freshly baked mini-buns with caviar or cheese and delicious little, round almond cakes, the recipe of which only the chef knew.



Katie had made it. She was the first in line in her pretty, green outfit. Already quite a long queue had formed behind her at Pier Six in front of the small, blue pavilion. Around her, life was bustling. People hugged in farewell scenes, boxes full of food were stowed on board and throngs of seagulls circled the ship, hoping for a few titbits. Katie felt like she was in a movie and the best

part was that it was her own. She was very excited. For ages, she had saved up to be able to afford this trip on the *Dragon Queen*, and now it was finally time to board. Her suitcases had been packed and in the hallway two weeks before the start of the trip, and she hadn't been able to sleep properly for a week.

The name of the ship alone had magically attracted her. But most of all, the prow wowed her with this shape of a gorgeous, golden dragon's head. To her, the ship appeared a little like a living dragon, with the ship's slender belly being the body and the stern, albeit a little short, tail. With the *Dragon Queen*, she felt safe and knew nothing bad could happen to her.

At the animal shelter where she worked, they had declared her crazy when she told them how she would spend her holiday this year. Her colleagues couldn't understand why she would spend so much money for such a short time and why she was going on a sailing ship, of all places. Katie didn't care and was just happy to finally be able to fulfil her long-time dream. She had been planning it since she divorced Mico four years ago. Now the time had finally come. She was so curious to see who else would be there and hoped to find nice travel companions and maybe even a few new friends who shared her love of seafaring and warm waters.

Katie had braided her long, red hair, which curled down to the waistband of her trousers, in a loose plait that appeared to glow in the post-midday sun. Her favourite colour was blue, just like her eyes, which had a deep dark colour that sometimes, when she was sad, seemed almost black. Her stature was tall, with long legs and a sleek silhouette. Men liked her body, but this hadn't brought any happiness in her life so far. Her marriage to Mico had been hell. They had daily squabbles and not much remained of Katie's once deeply entrenched, positive outlook on life in the end.

She had been looking for a way out for a long time, and getting the job at the shelter gave her the money and power to leave their shared apartment. After endless driving lessons, she had bought a car which she wrecked on the first ride. After that, she had once again travelled by train.

Last year she was entrusted with the management of the shelter and slowly felt up to the task. While she still wondered whether her colleagues were following her instructions, she was getting more and more used to her position of leading. Katie wasn't an authoritarian boss, instead always having the good of everyone in mind. She was one of the most respectful and prudent people imaginable, and she had a lot of humour. Her cheerful laughter was often heard and was also contagious, which did the whole

shelter and its residents good.

All this had strengthened her self-confidence to such an extent that she had tried to drive again, and now it worked well. How happy she was to be able to travel in her own car to her training in the evening. Katie practised Aikido three times a week and had earned her third Dan, which was one of the highest degrees in this combat sport. Although, if nobody expected it, she could shaft everyone or even put them out of action.

Katie was deeply connected to God. She spoke to him regularly, and she had a big heart that could flare up and make her a fighter when confronted with injustice and violence. In the shelter, she had to deal again and again with the roughness and rawness of the people, who wanted to get rid of their animals, which she was only too happy to receive. She loved these innocent, little souls who endured their suffering so bravely.

Luckily, most of them got away with emotional wounds and were at least spared physical abuse. Several months ago, Katie had attended a course in animal communication and was pleased to note that it was indeed possible to communicate telepathically with animals. At first, it felt unusual and a little strange, but now it had almost become a habit for her to get in touch with her furry friends in this way.

They told her many stories and showed her what they liked and wished for. Her staff often wondered where she got her good ideas from, but she preferred to keep that to herself because she didn't want the others to declare her crazy. She used the information the animals gave her to make their life and environment as pleasant as possible. Others were often amazed at the positive effects her suggestions had on the animals' behaviour.

There were times when Katie felt her true power and everything seemed easy. Then again, there were phases when she fell into self-doubt and feelings of inferiority that made her life difficult and gave her long days. Those were the moments when she had to force herself out of bed in the morning, and it cost her endless strength to do her job and fulfil her leadership tasks. But somehow, she always was able to turn her moods around. Life brightened again, and then she was the happiest person in the world.

This was the case today. She strode with her head held high and with the feeling of being one of the main actresses in a play, holding a glass of champagne in her hand, across the gangway. The brim of her huge, also dark green hat bounced at every step and her cream silk scarf was blowing in the wind. She had purposely put herself in the limelight and was enjoying the attention she garnered to the fullest. She was truly eye catching and looked

like a duchess.



That's exactly what Nikita felt when he saw her board from the pier. Following his gaze, Joana thought, "What a beautiful woman. I would like to get to know her." She also wore dark green and gold threads crisscrossed her long dress, which seemed a little too elegant for the afternoon but perfectly matched the nostalgic atmosphere of the sailing ship. "She's beautiful, isn't she?" Joana remarked, taking Nik's arm.

He shrugged. "Let's go and sign in," he suggested and started.

Joana laughed and followed him. She was happy to have Sina by her side and to her surprise, she also liked the ship. It was beautiful in its colour composition of dark wood, with bright white and gold paint. The masts towered an impressive fifty feet high into the sky. "Not for people with a fear of heights," Joana mused. She was terrified of heights and therefore hated even going over bridges or jetties.

Katie was already sitting in a deck chair, watching the guests who gradually boarded the ship across the gangway. She spotted Sina and fell immediately in love with this impressive animal. Joana also had a sparkling wine in her hand and was considering where she would have the best overview of the hustle and bustle. Since Sina had already made contact with Katie, she simply dropped into the deck chair next to her, raised her glass and spoke, "To a good journey."

"Green is hope," Katie replied, grinning.

Joana smiled back. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. They chatted excitedly as the ship slowly left port and set off on the voyage.



Later, when it was time to relocate for supper, they found that their cabins were almost next to each other. They went to dinner together and discovered with joy that they were even sitting at the same table.

Brad greeted his guests warmly with a welcome speech. He described the history of the old ship in detail and explained the safety procedures on board. At the end, he said, "On the *Dragon Queen* it is customary for everyone to be kind and respectful with each other. I hope all our guests will say yes to this." He looked expectantly around the room and saw nodding heads everywhere. "Then we agree," he concluded with delight. "I wish everyone a lot of fun

and a pleasant stay.”

Right after the meal, Nik joined with guests standing at the bar where he washed down all good resolutions with a few glasses of whisky, to Joana's disappointment. “After all, tomorrow is another day,” he put his mind at ease as he failed in his intention at the first hurdle.

Luckily, Joana had found a wonderful conversationalist in Katie. The two had so much to tell each other that they ended up sitting in Katie's cabin until the early morning and Joana finally fell asleep on the second bed, which was free anyway. Therefore, she didn't see that Nik had staggered into their cabin drunk around midnight and had just fallen onto the bed.



Tom was awake early in the morning. He looked with a smile at Archie, who was slumbering peacefully in his bunk. They had booked a former officer's cabin with two wide beds built in on top of each other. This design gave them more space and also a sense of adventure. The sailors used to sleep like this, too. Another peculiarity was that their cabin was right on the captain's deck and when they opened the door, they had wonderfully fresh air on the one hand and could see the command bridge on the other. Archie was just thrilled and had already struck up a friendship with the crew the day before.

Tom thought of Lisa. Should he send her a short message and tell her he loved her? Yeah, that was a good idea. He took his phone off the bedside table, got dressed and went outside. The sight of the sunrise was overwhelmingly beautiful. They had already reached the open waters, and the deep blue of the ocean reflected the orange-golden rays of the rising sun on an almost smooth surface. He wrote to Lisa, “My sweetheart, we are now on the open sea. It's wonderful and Archie is in seventh heaven. I love you.” He then sat down in a deck chair and enjoyed the uplifting sight and silence until a loud barking ripped him out of his rapture.

Sina was chasing seagulls and totally upset that she couldn't catch one. The dog area was much smaller than Joana had expected, but was secured by a high fence all around, so the dogs could romp without running the risk of going overboard. Joana, too, had got up early, using the calm of the ship to get herself rebalanced. She was shocked and once again disappointed by Nik, who even on the first evening couldn't go without his usual behaviour. By the time she had come into their cabin, the whole room had smelled of alcohol. Fortunately, one of the windows could be opened. Nik had still been in a coma and Joana had failed to wake him up. She had showered quickly,

dressed and fled outside.

Now she was sitting next to the dog area and was slowly returning to her normal equilibrium. In the time together with Nik, she had learned to quickly find her way back to her centre and calmness, letting go of the awkward and unpleasant emotions her husband sparked in her. She called it mastering her feelings. Although rather born out of necessity, it was a very useful skill that could ultimately be applied to all life situations, not just a marital crisis. Joana reminded herself to open up to the peace and beauty that surrounded her. She took a deep breath and felt increasingly better.

Suddenly, the dream from last night came to her memory again. She had dreamed she was on an island and an old wise woman told her that every human had a dolphin and that dolphins were divine beings, who did their service on Earth to raise people's consciousness and to heal the planet. She had also told her that her dolphin's name was Shana. The dream had been so intense and clear that she wondered if she had been lucid dreaming. In any case, she could remember every detail exactly. Joana stared at the sea and looked out for dolphins, but far and wide there was nothing to see but the smooth surface of the ocean sparkling with the rays of sunshine.

“Isn't this a dreamlike morning?” A deep, warm voice that sounded somehow familiar ripped her from her thoughts.

She turned her head and looked into two iris-blue eyes in a sunburnt face framed by dark hair which was tinged by grey. Joana felt as if struck by a blow and through her mind raced uncontrollable thoughts. Her heart was beating up to her neck. She couldn't stop blushing and wasn't even embarrassed. Finally, she stood up, reached her hand out to the stranger and gave him her beaming smile, which had enchanted so many. “I'm Joana,” she introduced herself, looking at him openly.

Tom hadn't expected what happened next. He felt his knees wobbling and had to sit down. His hand trembled a bit as he grabbed Joana's and kissed it wordlessly. “I'm Tom,” he put out with difficulty. Then they stood before each other speechless and just looked one another in the eye. The world around them shrank, and it was as if they were immersing in eternity. It was a magic they couldn't escape from and didn't want to at all. After a period that appeared endless, Tom sat down next to her without letting go of her hand. Though they were strangers, it felt perfectly right and familiar to both of them. They sat there in silence, looking out at the sea and the slowly rising sun together. Even if they didn't say a word, both could feel reams of information flowing between them. It was like a reunion after an infinitely

long time.

“Daaaaaad, where are you?” Archie's voice made Tom cringe. He gently pulled his hand back, stood up and whispered in an uncertain voice. “I have to go now, but see you again - promise?”

“Promised,” Joana replied, smiling at him. On her face lay a silky soft, gentle shimmer, but inside she felt like a bright, pulsating sun. Joana was totally confused. She had never experienced such an encounter before and she still had palpitations. Absorbed in thought, she called Sina, and stroked her over the head. This one put the snout in her lap, which was always reassuring for both of them. They stayed like this for a long time.



Finally, Joana got up and headed to the lido deck for a cup of tea. She had no hunger at all, her feelings were far too intense. She saw Katie just entering the deck and joined her.

“Is everything okay with you?” she asked. “You kind of look confused.”

“No, no, it's all great. I slept too little.” Joana laughed at her. “I will lie down for a while, then I'll be fit again for the evening.” With these words she set off in the direction of the recreation deck, where she grabbed one of the comfortable sun loungers and stretched out for a rest. She didn't feel like going back to her cabin and meeting Nik.

She wrapped Sina's leash tightly around her wrist and closed her eyes. Immediately, she saw Tom's face again with his loving look in front of her. He seemed to be so close to her, even though she didn't know him at all. She was eager to see how this would continue.



Tom sipped on his orange juice, while Archie ate mountains of sausages with egg and cheese with great appetite, constantly recounting what he had discovered on the ship, and about his new friend Ken, who had been working here as a sailor for six years. Ken had told him that from tomorrow they could see dolphins who, according to experience, would accompany the ship for a few days. Archie was totally thrilled and so luckily, he didn't notice that Tom was completely absent-minded. Tom was entirely messed up inside and couldn't grasp a clear thought. He turned his still full orange juice glass between his hands and stared out to sea.

“Dad, I have to see Ken right after breakfast. He promised to take me on the

command bridge. May I?”

“Sure,” Tom replied with relief. He was happy to have some time to himself.

A few minutes later Archie was gone and Tom was able to indulge in his confusion alone. Although thousands of thoughts shot through his head, he couldn't make sense of any of them. He had never experienced such feelings. It was like pure magnetism that seemed to connect Joana and him, and he couldn't defend himself against it, however much he tried to resist this attraction. His cell phone hummed. He had gotten a message from Lisa. She wrote, “Hello, my sweetheart, how nice that you are doing so well. Here at home, everything is fine. I love you too.”

Tom read the lines without their meaning reaching him in any way. All of a sudden, everything was different. His feelings for Lisa had changed, and that scared him immensely.

He thought of Joana's wild hair and still had her scent in his nose. She smelled of something special, of fresh air, tremendously good and lovely. Her fragrance was like a promise, a promise of acceptance and love and of a sense of being whole. Tom was horrified. How could he think such a thing? He had been married for fifteen years to his wife and had never even thought or rather felt something like this. He was quite miserable and had no idea how to behave. He couldn't cheat on Lisa! The very thought of it was extremely reprehensible to him. It was good that no one could look into him. He decided to retire to the cabin for a bit. Under no circumstances did he want to meet Joana right now.



Nik slept until early in the afternoon. When he awoke with a terrible headache, he found he had no memory whatsoever of the last evening or night. He was nauseous and so he searched the luggage for the tablets, which often gave him relief after drinking at home. After the contents of all bags lay scattered on the bed, it was clear Joana hadn't packed his hangover-fighting medication.

He was angry with her. How could she be so indifferent, knowing full well that he always needed the pills? “Now I'll have to do something else!” he grumbled putting himself under a freezing shower, which awakened his spirits and got him back on track to the point that he was able to put on fresh clothes and shave. His head was still buzzing, but he felt better. “Alright let's see what's for breakfast today,” he encouraged himself and headed to the restaurant.

To his disappointment, he learned that breakfast was only available from 8 am to 11 am. By now, it was already 3:30 pm. He gently declined a piece of cake and was content with a strong coffee, which he took out onto the captain's deck. From this deck, which was directly adjacent to the command bridge, one could look down at the lido deck. Nik stepped up to the railing. Undecided, he stopped and just sat down on the stairs to watch the hustle and bustle below.

Mr Brettschneider looked like the typical Mallorca holidaymaker with his plump, round belly hanging over his shorts and long, white tennis socks in sandals. Nik involuntarily wondered why he had booked a sailing trip. Right next to him, looking neat as a pin, in a floral tent dress with large blossoms, was Mrs Brettschneider, who was no less round than her husband and had a red flushed face. Apparently, she had spent too much time in the sun or had high blood pressure!

Perhaps it was also because she tried in vain to stop her two offspring, Linus and Natascha, at the tender ages of four and seven, from refreshing other guests with their water guns. "What a stupid idea, to give the children water guns on such a journey," Nik mused. Luckily, the passengers already splashed with water were considerably more relaxed and responded with an amused laugh. Nik got up and moved toward the deck bar. A quick drink before dinner probably wouldn't hurt.



Katie had retired to her cabin to freshen up a little and prepare for dinner. Tonight, it was her turn to dine at the captain's table. She had received the invitation to the captain's dinner in the morning and she was now looking forward to it immensely. For this occasion, Katie had brought a special dress with her. It consisted of a tightly fitting top with a wide swinging long skirt and was made of delicate gold brocade. When she finished dressing and getting ready, she put a dark red stole around her shoulders, and looked in the mirror. The result made her very happy.

This time she looked like a queen. It had become late and was time to leave. She strode down the corridor, leaving a slight scent of jasmine. Her heels clicked quietly on the wooden floorboards. By the time she entered the dining room, the captain's table was already almost completely occupied. With a bit of shyness and slight redness on her face, she took a seat next to an elderly lady.

She was immediately followed by the Brettschneider family, this time thank

goodness without water guns. Little Linus proudly climbed onto a tall children's chair. Natascha had donned a beautiful red velvet dress and glowed with a matching red bow in her blonde curls. Mr Brettschneider introduced himself as Paul and Mrs Brettschneider was called Sophie. She immediately told everybody that it had always been her dream to make such a trip and since she had won a hundred thousand euros in the lottery last month, she had booked the trip right away. Now everyone knew and Sophie was visibly pleased with it. She then turned all her attention to the first course, that consisted of a delicious tomato cream soup, which she had scooped into her mouth in no time.

Katie gazed at her soup and then at the older lady's right hand, where she wore a ring with a fancy, see-through turquoise stone. She thought it was gorgeous. "This is a tourmaline," the lady explained, turning toward Katie, who almost fell off her chair. Looking into the eyes of her table neighbour, she found that they were almost the same colour as the stone, only more intense. They radiated so much love and clarity that Katie couldn't believe it at all.

"I'm Jane, my beautiful child," the lady said with a smile.

"And my name is Katie," the younger replied, realising how she was relaxing in the presence of Jane. Jane spread such warmth that she couldn't help but feel comfortable. Katie was immensely glad to be sitting next to her.

Brad looked outrageously handsome in his captain uniform. His sun-tanned face with the flashing, blue eyes and the short, so typically Irish red hair made a marked contrast to the formality of his uniform. He sat next to Paul Brettschneider and Jane and Katie were seated almost opposite. "What two beautiful women," he mused. "And they are so different. One looks truly lovely but is seemingly quite shy, the other is certainly already in her sixties but has the most wonderful charisma I have ever seen in a woman and her eyes are just indescribable." Brad decided to get to know them both a little closer. After all, he was single. He could do whatever he wanted and so far, he hadn't missed a chance on any voyage.

Katie and Jane liked each other a lot. Later, Joana also joined them. They talked about God and the world, about their work and laughed with each other warmly. The evening passed by in no time. After dinner, there was a cabaret and after that, under the most romantic starry sky imaginable, dancing on deck. Joana and Katie loved music and enjoyed dancing freely and exuberantly in the balmy night air. They looked like sisters from another world, both with long, waving hair and elf-like graceful movements.

That's what Nik thought, too, as he watched them from afar with a drink in his hand. He had barely exchanged more than a few words with Joana since they came on board and she didn't exactly seem interested in his company either. Nik told himself this was normal and that he could do better on his own anyway, but in truth, he was infinitely sad and lonely. Yet that feeling was so deeply buried inside him that he barely felt it.



Brad had been sitting next to Jane for nearly two hours, mesmerised by her. He didn't know what was happening to him, but this woman had got to him. Jane recounted her past, and how she had once had such severe depression that her family had her admitted to a clinic for fear Jane would kill herself. She had felt so worthless at this time that she slept on the floor rather than in bed. One morning she had woken up and was suddenly completely clear. At that moment, she began to question her thoughts about herself and concluded that these were simply not true.

From then on, her life changed abruptly. She was soon released as healthy and had since worked as a midwife and treated people with healing conversations and medicinal herbs. She wanted to pass on the healing that had befallen her to as many people as possible. While Jane told her story, Brad sank into her eyes and forgot the world around him. He only returned to reality when Jane gently touched his arm and said, it was already late and she would love to go to sleep now. Jane gave Brad one last loving look and then walked away towards her cabin. Brad stared after her before he too retreated to his suite.

Sitting, exhausted from dancing, in one of the comfy sun loungers, Katie enjoyed the cool breeze on her skin.

“What an awesome summer evening.” Nik dropped into the deck chair next to her.

Katie looked at him a little in amazement. “I totally agree and the entertainment program was also very pleasant,” she then remarked.

“I'm going to get a drink. Do you want something, too?” asked Nik.

“Yes, please. Can you get me an orange juice?” Katie replied.

Nik went to the bar and ordered two glasses of orange juice. It was strange, but in Katie's presence, he didn't feel like drinking alcohol. The two of them sat sipping their juice and somehow, Nik started to tell Katie about his former life in Russia.

Nik recounted his childhood and how he often had to go to bed hungry. He reported that his parents had sometimes locked him in an old shed for days without food and only with a jug of water if he had done something wrong. Katie couldn't even imagine how he could survive such a sad childhood, but Nik just stated. "It made me strong."



Joana stood at the railing and gazed at the sea, wondering what Tom was doing. She hadn't seen him since their morning encounter. Even at dinner, she hadn't been able to spot him anywhere. It was quite late by now and she was considering whether to go to sleep. From the darkness suddenly appeared two slender hands that leant on the handrail right next to hers, and a familiar voice said, "Hey, Joana."

Her head flew around and she was looking again into those blue eyes, which had touched her so deeply that morning. She hadn't heard him coming as she had been too immersed in her thoughts. "I'm looking out for dolphins," she meant.

"Just like Archie," he laughed. "Archie is my son, to whom I owe this journey."

"I know," Joana responded. "I met him this afternoon, and he told me about the dolphins. I love these wonderful creatures."

"Archie does too, and he hopes very strongly that we will also see a few whales, which is quite possible at this time of year." Tom smiled.

"That would be amazing," Joana confirmed. She would also like to see one of the giants emerge from the deep and jump or even just the fountain they blew out when they breathed.

They fell silent. So much was happening between them that they couldn't put it into words, which seemed rather disruptive at that moment anyway. They both felt the same. "May I take your hand again?" Tom asked quietly. She handed it to him wordlessly. After a while, they sat down on a small bench equipped with soft cushions and nearly forgot about the dolphins.

They had probably been sitting like this for an hour when Joana suddenly pointed towards eleven o'clock. In fact, they saw the first fin sticking out of the water and then they jumped, a school of six dolphins, small and large, lighter and darker. "If that's not a good sign," Joana gasped. She had never seen free dolphins and was extremely happy.

Tom delicately squeezed her hand and affirmed. "Yes, it is." The dolphins swam with the ship and played in the waves. "I hope they'll still be there tomorrow so Archie can see them," Tom reasoned.

"I'm certain they will," Joana stated. She had the somewhat confusing feeling of communicating telepathically with the dolphins, telling her quite clearly that they would safely accompany the ship all the way to La Palma. La Palma was the first and only port planned before heading across the Atlantic to Barbados. Joana preferred to keep the inner conversation with the dolphins to herself for now because she didn't want Tom to think of her as crazy. She would see if what the animals had conveyed to her would come true. In two days, they would reach La Palma if everything went as planned.

"I think it's time to go to bed," Joana finally spoke with slight regret. She found it hard to tear herself away from Tom, but she was incredibly tired. Besides, Sina was waiting for her and she certainly had to get her business done as a matter of urgency.

"Yeah, it's late," Tom responded. "See you again."

"But yes," Joana gave back and stood up.

"May I hug you?" Tom asked in a brittle voice.

Joana came to him wordlessly, and they stood there in a tight embrace, while the world around them seemed to dissolve and time was just an empty phrase.

Finally, Joana gently freed herself from Tom's arms and made her way to her cabin. Tom stayed on deck the rest of the night, staring out to sea. He couldn't sleep and a thousand thoughts and feelings swirled in a great mess through his insides. At dawn, he decided to go to bed. He closed his eyes, but still couldn't fall asleep.

Barely had Joana entered her cabin, when an overjoyed Sina jumped up at her. No sign of Nik! She quickly walked out with the dog and let her run a few laps. Even when she came back, Nik still wasn't there. She was quite happy about that as she was emotionally confused and too tired to think about where he might be. Exhausted, she snuggled up in the cosy pillows and quickly sank into a deep sleep.



A cloudy sky appeared the next morning. It was windy and not particularly warm. Archie didn't mind that at all. Barely awake, he jumped out of bed and with the words, "I'm going to look for the dolphins," he promptly disappeared. Tom also got up and had a shower. The warm water did him good. After that, he shaved and put on fresh clothes. All things Lisa had lovingly packed for him. "Lisa," he thought. "What's happening here?" He felt a guilty conscience and a deep sadness rise again. He had spent so many happy years with this woman, and now everything was called into question by two brief encounters with Joana. He couldn't understand that himself, nor could he accept it.

Tom took his warm, blue jacket and followed Archie, who had just bent over the railing with full enthusiasm trying to feed the dolphins, which were still around, with pieces of bread. Tom grabbed him by his trouser belt and yanked him back onto the deck. "You don't do that ever again! Do you want to go overboard?" he shouted. He had been terrified enormously. "Besides, bread is not the right food for dolphins. It would only hurt them and you certainly don't want that, do you?"

"No way! I wish them to do well." Archie mused. "What do they eat?" he asked after a while, looking at Tom with big eyes.

"Fish," Tom answered.

"And where do I get some?" Archie wanted to know.

"No idea." Tom was still upset. "I guess they catch it themselves. Or you can ask the chef if he has anything left for you. But you stay away from the rail! I'm going to have breakfast now. Are you coming along?"

“Sure.” Archie hooked arms with him. He always did that when something unsettled him.



They went to the restaurant together, where the most wonderful breakfast buffet was already waiting for them. Standing in front of the richly laden table, Tom realised how hungry he was. He had eaten next to nothing since his first meeting with Joana yesterday morning. Quickly he filled a large bowl with cereal and milk and poured copious amounts of honey over it. He then grabbed a mug of coffee and sat down at a table with Archie, who already had a plate of his beloved sausages in front of him. The cereal bowl was empty in zero time and Tom loaded a plate with three half cheese rolls, decorated with tomatoes and cucumbers.

After the meal, he felt better. “At least I’ve stopped shaking,” he thought. He couldn't understand why he was shaking internally since his first encounter with Joana. At that moment, he saw her enter the restaurant. Immediately, his hands began to flutter again, and he hid them under the table. He just couldn't control it and that was worrying and embarrassing to him. He'd always had his mind and body under control.

Joana was accompanied by Nik and an elderly gentleman in giant, flowered shorts and poison-green deck shoes. Tom couldn't resist a grin. Joana saw it and smiled back in amusement. She grabbed some bread and tomatoes, as well as a mango juice, and sat down at a table for three. She had been vegan for two years and although sometimes, when she was out and about, it proved a little difficult to find something to eat, she still felt healthier and clearer than ever with this diet. This clarity also benefited the treatments she gave her clients in her well-running practice as a psychologist for many years. She loved her work.

Nik was already engrossed in a lively conversation with the elder gentleman. He was a professor of monuments and Joana had met him at the dog area the day before. Professor Lohmann, who had simply introduced himself as Henry, had also come on the trip with his dog. It was an ageing, grey-snouted, little mixed breed that responded to the name Puschel, at least when he wanted to. Actually, Henry had wanted to make the trip with his beloved wife, but unfortunately, she had died of cancer a few months ago.

Henry still couldn't believe it and just couldn't get over her death. In case he felt lonely and abandoned, he had bought Puschel with him. Henry was a lovely person and an avid photographer. He was just showing Nik some of

his pictures taken on his last trip. The tears were again in his eyes as he shared pictures of his wife, Mathilda.

During breakfast, the sky had continued to darken and had almost turned black on the horizon. A sharp wind hit the ship in gusts and began to stir up the sea. Ever higher waves were pounding against the hull of the ship.

Luckily, the *Dragon Queen* was well balanced, so the stronger sea swell so far had hardly been felt. However, the boom of the wind could now also be heard in the restaurant. Henry rose and said goodbye. "I need to look after Puschel."

Joana and Nik were now sitting alone at the table. "Where were you last night?" Joana asked, looking him in the eye.

Nik dodged her gaze and replied, somewhat defensively. "Oh, I fell asleep outside on a deck chair and by the time I woke up, it was already five in the morning. So I stayed as I didn't want to disturb you."

Basically, Joana didn't care where he had been. She had seen him again and again with a drink in his hand, and she had been out until three o'clock herself.

Nik switched the subject and Joana was glad he didn't ask how she had spent the evening. She leaned back and listened to him telling her enthusiastically like a young boy that he had been on the bridge with the captain and how well equipped the ship was. Nik had liked ships since childhood, especially sailing ships, and for him, a dream had come true with this trip.

Joana could rejoice for him. Even though their relationship changed more and more, she still loved him, but more like a brother and to her amazement, she felt comfortable with it.

Since letting go of her expectations towards Nik, she no longer felt disappointed and frustrated, and instead, she was finding herself again. This gave her new strength and a good level of hope for her own life.

Before she had met Nik, she had been single for nine years and, unlike many others, had been very happy and content with it. She had some hand-picked, really good friends and also knew many diverse people who made her life colourful and varied.

With Nik, she had been miserable for far too long and now this detachment gave her back her inner peace and joie de vivre, which Joana thought was great. She began to look forward to every day again and to enjoy her life. Ironically, this trip provided an excellent ambience for this.

She looked out the window. The dolphins were still there, and in the distance, she could see the outlines of La Palma. By late evening they would dock, and tomorrow there was a land tour on the agenda. They would call at the port of Santa Cruz and from there take a tour to the famous underwater tunnels that had been used on La Palma for ages to irrigate the land. The rainwater was collected in the mountains and then channelled through canals to where it was needed.

Some of these channels were open for viewing. Whoever was interested, could take a bus to the mountains early in the morning and spend the day there with visits and a short hike. Since Nik was keen to go and the walking-tour would also offer a good opportunity for Sina to let off steam, Joana had agreed to be part of the outing as well, even though she didn't like caves or bus rides through the mountains.

She was excited about the day ahead, but right now she was tired and besides, she was constantly thinking about Tom. "I'm going to rest a little on deck," she let Nik know, who jumped up right away and mumbled something about "visiting the captain". They left the restaurant and walked away in different directions.



Tom glanced over at her. Joana had only briefly gazed at him, but that had been enough to make a shiver run all over his body. This woman just blew him away, and he had no idea why. "Do we want to go to the command bridge and see what's happening there?" He turned to Archie.

"Great," Archie replied, and they set off.

Tom hadn't known he was going to meet Nik on the command bridge and shrugged when he saw him standing there with Brad. But he couldn't step back. Archie had already joined them and was eagerly listening to what Brad said about the *Dragon Queen's* high-sea suitability. "Before we set sail, the whole ship was overhauled and made even safer," he reported.

"In the event of a storm, we can now seal virtually the entire ship, so that no water can enter anywhere, even if we should capsized. This greatly increases security. We can close all hatches electrically or, if necessary, by hand, within thirty minutes."

"That's fantastic," Nik noted. "Considering how that used to be. One had to pump water all the time, even when the sea was quiet."

"Yes, times have truly changed." Tom got into the conversation.

Nik looked at him. Somehow Tom seemed familiar to him, but he couldn't remember where he might have seen him before. "Do we know each other?" he asked, stretching his slender hand at Tom.

"I don't think so," Tom replied, ignoring the hand. "I'm Tom and that's Archie, my son."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Nik." Joana's husband pulled back his hand slightly irritated.

Brad turned to Tom. "Welcome on board," he greeted him kindly. "I already know Archie. He's almost living with us on the bridge. I'm happy to meet his father now as well."

"Pleased to get to know you too," Tom responded. Even though he seemed calm and confident on the outside, he struggled to get involved in this casual conversation. His hands were quite sweaty, but luckily only he knew that.

"So that's him," he mused. He had read their names on the passenger list after seeing them together, putting one and one together. "I wonder if he loves her as much as I love Lisa? And what, if yes?"

As if he had somehow noticed Tom's mind, Nik said goodbye. "I'll look for my wife." He was still slightly upset because Tom had ignored his hand, but he also didn't want to make any drama out of it or ask why. So, he preferred to disappear from the scene. Maybe Tom was just a funny guy.

Tom was glad Nik had left. He didn't like him at all. Brad, on the other hand, he found extremely likeable, and since he had sailed many regattas in his youth, his passion for sailing awoke more and more, and the two found plenty of talking points.

Archie listened to them eagerly. He had rarely seen his father so engaged and interested like Tom was as he talked with Brad, standing on the bridge and gazing out at the sea in front of them. The outlines of La Palma slowly became sharper.



Katie had slept for a long time and took a long shower. She loved the feeling of warm water on her body. Despite the cloudy skies, she donned her sun-yellow mini dress, slipped into her white summer jacket and happily went on deck.

When she spotted Joana, eyes closed and wrapped in a blanket on a deck chair, her heart lifted. She looked so peaceful and happy. Katie decided to

grab a tea first and then sit down with her.

Nik hated it when he caught himself pretending things were fine rather than facing the reality of what was truly happening. He ordered himself another drink while the afternoon sky slowly turned black on the horizon. As of tomorrow, he would stay off the booze. That plan and another drink were enough to calm him down again.



After Tom and Archie said goodbye, Brad and his First Officer were alone on the command bridge. Normally Brad would have enjoyed such an opportunity, but somehow Jessie appeared colourless to him compared to Jane. He found this strange, as Jessie was young and pretty, while Jane was considerably older and had grey hair. But there was this gleam in Jane's eyes, and she had something about her that fascinated him. The love and warmth she radiated endlessly were just indescribable. When Brad thought of her, he felt he had arrived at home. Luckily there was no captain's dinner tonight and so he pondered about whether it would be too intrusive to invite Jane into his cabin for supper.

“We’re heading into a storm. It will hit us before we reach the port of Santa Cruz,” Jessie ripped him out of his reverie. “This could be a restless night.”

Brad knew the waters around La Palma well and considered what the safest solution was. “Let the mainsails down and set the lugsail. Then we’ll look at what’s happening and whether we’ll get away with that. If the storm increases, we’ll turn the ship into the wind.”

Jessie relayed his decision to the crew.

Brad liked stormy weather as long as everything was under control as a welcome change from the daily routine. It was just a shame he had to postpone his plans for a private dinner with Jane. His attention and presence were now needed on the bridge. The First Officer passed on new orders to get the storm safety program underway. That meant passengers had to stay below deck and all hatches were automatically closed.

What Brad had previously explained to Tom and Nik was now deployed. The crew switched to wet weather gear and everybody put on their special life vest to be able to secure themselves with a hook and a rope as soon as they went on deck. All were equipped with radio communication devices so they could communicate from anywhere. This system was sophisticated and fully operational within minutes. Brad looked out at the pitch-black horizon. It

slowly went dark, and the wind picked up in strength. The ship began to roll from side to side and despite its considerable length, it began to dance in the mountain and valley of waves.

Wind strength had now reached force eight. Brad and the experienced crew were able to handle the tossing of the ship, but for people who had never experienced stormy weather on a sailing ship, it was quite a terrifying experience.



That's what Joana, who had retreated into her cabin and looked out the window, was thinking, too. The sea was no longer blue, but a mixture of grey and white foam. If the ship dived into a wave valley, the window was underwater. Joana didn't like that at all, and she was starting to be nauseous. She lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. Slowly, she felt fear rise in her. "Too late," she told herself. "You can't get out, you have to go through this now, dead or alive."

At that moment, Nik entered the cabin, and that instantly brought her back to life. Sina gleefully jumped up at him and Joana, for once, was glad to see him.

"I thought that you could use a little company." Nik lay down next to her on the bed. "Should I take you in my arms?"

"Yes, please," Joana replied. "The storm scares me and I'm not feeling well. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Nik laughed, putting his arm around her from behind. "I don't mind a little wind at all."

She smelled his alcohol breath but didn't like to say anything because that would only lead to strife and she was downright pleased to have his company.

"Maybe we can sleep," Nik suggested.

"Yes, let's try," Joana returned and snuggled into his arms. It was the first time for ages they had been in a bed together. Joana was surprised at how familiar it still felt. "Too bad he drinks," she mused. "We could be so happy with each other." The ship was still rocking, but somehow, she felt protected and safe in Nik's arms and after listening to his deep breaths for a while, she too actually fell asleep.



Katie sat upright in her bed. She was feeling scared and was afraid of death. She hadn't expected a storm, and certainly not that she would feel so miserable in high seas. By the time she had looked in the mirror, her face had been slightly green and she had always thought it was a fairy tale that people would go green in their face. She had already vomited twice and had to run again to the bathroom. How was she supposed to get through the night?

Katie thought about her life so far. Somewhere she had once read that people who are facing death see their entire life in their mind's eye one more time. This wasn't quite as pronounced with her, but many events came to her memory that she had long forgotten. "Had she done everything well? Had it been right to part ways with Mico, or should she have tried once more when he approached her again last year? What had caused her to embark on a sailing ship and thus put herself in mortal danger?" Such questions shot through her mind, but she was far too nauseous to think about them properly or even find meaningful answers.

She curled up. Then it occurred to her that she had packed sleeping pills. Maybe she could manage to sleep if she took some. Desperately she rummaged through her suitcase and finally found them. She swallowed two and lay down again. It was a powerful drug the doctor had prescribed her after she split from Mico and was unable to rest at all. Two tablets were like hitting one's head with a hammer and they were also effective now. After five minutes, she remained already in the land of dreams.



There was a lot happening on the bridge when Tom and Archie arrived. Jessie and Jane stood next to Brad, everyone staring with strained eyes into the darkness, in which the ship's illuminated bow could be seen swaying up and down. Tom didn't mind high seas and Archie bravely held his own too. Because their cabins were right by the command bridge, it had been easy to reach it. Brad offered them hot tea, which they gratefully accepted. However, the sandwiches they didn't touch because the rough seas had already affected their appetite.

"It's going to be a wild night," Brad noted. "But the weather report is positive. We can stay on our course. This is already great practice for our transatlantic crossing. Who knows what to expect?"

Experiencing a storm on an old sailing ship also had something fascinating and nostalgic about it. In any case, the situation was exciting enough to keep them awake until dawn. With the first daylight, the wind was fading.



Tom woke Archie, who had fallen asleep, and brought him into their cabin. Archie plumped into his bed fully dressed and immediately continued to slumber. Tom took off his shoes and covered him. He was also very tired and lay down. Hardly had he stretched out than he had dozed off. That's exactly how Brad, Jane, and Jessie also reacted as they lay down. They had steered the ship through the storm and felt satisfied and connected by this experience. It had been a long, but also a successful night. And now they had five hours left to rest before the ship was due to dock.

That morning, Tom dreamed that he was walking with Joana on an endlessly long, white sandy beach and that they felt like two children in paradise who could have anything they wanted in the world. With that intense sensation, he awoke and rested for quite a while to preserve these feelings for as long as possible. It made him infinitely happy. Archie was still sleeping soundly when he eventually quietly got up and went to the shower and then out on the deck.

After a while, Tom walked back to the cabin to wake Archie, but he was already up and had just come out of the shower when Tom opened the door. "Hey buddy, what do you think of a decent breakfast?" he asked his son.

"A lot," Archie returned. "Let's get started right away. I'm almost dying of hunger and I want to text Mum."

"That's a fabulous idea." Tom had completely forgotten to respond to Lisa's last message. She wouldn't think anything of it because she trusted him. But he already had a damn bad conscience towards his wife and felt like a traitor.

If it were up to him, he would like to disembark in La Palma, fly home and forget about Joana. But he couldn't do that to Archie, and what was he supposed to say to Lisa? That he had met a woman who had attracted him like a magnet, and that he no longer had his feelings and thoughts, even his body, under control? That was probably not a good idea.



By now, they had arrived at the breakfast buffet. Luckily, he couldn't see Joana anywhere. Equipped with jam toast and coffee, he sat down at the big table where Jane, Katie and the Brettschneider family had already settled, along with Archie, who had loaded again a plate with sausages.

They were also joined by Mariah.

“Piet has told us you will give your first concert tonight?” Tom kindly turned to her.

Mariah responded in her well-sounding voice, “Yes, that’s true, my Lord. I hope that everybody will be happy on board. But now I have to have a rest, so tonight I’ll be able to give my best.”

Archie stared at Mariah in wonder. “Why do you speak in such funny rhymes?” he inquired curiously. “Are you a poet?”

Mariah shook her head. “Iiiii cacann either speak in rhyrhyrhymes oor sing, ootherwise Iiii stustutter,” she explained.

“Oh,” Archie responded. “Then you’re special! Glad to make your acquaintance. My friend John also stutters, it’s not a problem for me.”

Mariah smiled gratefully at him and remained silent. Archie also said nothing more and smiled back.

“All passengers who have signed up to visit the water tunnels are asked to arrive on the Lido deck in thirty minutes. We dock at 10.30 am and then we leave right away. Please wear sturdy footwear and sunscreen.” Jessie’s voice echoed a little thin through the speaker.

“We have to go.” Archie jumped up. “Are you coming with us too, Mariah?” She shook her head silently again.

“OK, then we’ll see you at your concert tonight. Come, Dad, let’s get our stuff.” Tom and Archie left the table.

Katie and the Brettschneider family also stood up. Everyone wanted to see the water tunnels, and Katie was secretly happy to once again have solid ground under her feet. She still felt a bit dazed by the sleeping pills, but at least she wasn’t nauseous anymore and she had even had some breakfast. It was warm, and the sea was smooth as a mirror. Katie walked into her cabin to retrieve her sun hat. She wore bright red tight shorts and a wide, white T-shirt that she had knotted together in front of her stomach.



As the ship entered the port of Santa Cruz, the excursion group gathered on the lido deck. It was just blowing a light breeze and the seagulls followed the ship screaming loudly. The dolphins had been missing since the storm.

With Jessie, there were seventeen, which meant they would all find space in the medium-sized, dark blue bus that was already waiting for them at the

quay.

Joana thought it was a pity that they had to leave straight away, but she comforted herself with the fact that there would still be plenty of time for her in the late afternoon and tomorrow to explore the island on her own. Sina was so excited she nearly jumped down the gangway and ran up and down the quay wall, boisterously. Joana let her run and only called her back when the bus was ready to leave. She sat down next to Nik and looked at Tom's neck. Archie was seated with his father right in front of her.

“Well, I'm excited to see what kind of day this turns out to be,” she said to herself, stroking Sina's head. This, as always, was reassuring. As if he had felt her gaze, Tom turned and looked into Joana's eyes. Both seemed to sink into that eye-contact for a brief moment. He then turned his head forward without saying a word. Joana looked at Nik. He hadn't noticed anything and was busy shooting photos.

“This landscape is just unbelievable,” he rejoiced enthusiastically to Joana. “Had you imagined it this way?”

“I've looked at pictures before, but in reality, it's even nicer. What a pity that we only have two days here. I could spend a whole week on this island,” she returned.

“Me too,” she heard Tom say.

Nik frowned. There was this strange guy from yesterday again. He couldn't say exactly why, but somehow, he didn't like him, so he ignored his comment. Joana smiled and Tom returned her smile in the windowpane.



After a good hour's drive, they had arrived at the resort and left the bus. Jessie divided them into four groups of four, and then off they went. Joana and Nik were a team with Katie and Jane to wander the old facilities.

They had pit lamps on the front of their foreheads and Joana felt like a cave explorer. Although she didn't particularly like caves, she was fascinated by this facility. But when they stood in the sunlight again after another hour, she was relieved too. In her opinion, humans didn't belong underground. Katie had gone cold on the tunnel hike. She rubbed her hands together.

Nik suggested they might settle down for a little rest in the romantic tavern at the foot of the mountain. Everyone thought this was a great idea and quickly they ordered something to drink. Gradually the other groups also

trudged in and everyone was very satisfied with their first trip ashore.

After the rest stop, Jessie showed them on a map which way they could walk along. It was a hike of just over two hours and they would get back right to the harbour. "Probably some people might like to walk faster than others," Jessie explained right now. "That's why I give maps out and everybody can go at the pace that suits them best. We'll see you this afternoon for coffee and cake at the dock. I wish you all a lot of fun." With those words, she said goodbye and set off herself. She went ahead with big strides and was soon out of sight. The rest of the group left more leisurely.

Sina ran and ran. She was so happy to finally be able to move properly again. Joana felt truly sorry when she saw how much she had missed her romp and freedom, but she was still glad to have her with her on this journey. They would be on the ocean for a good ten more days, and somehow the dog would cope with that.

She hadn't seen Tom since they left the bus which she found regrettable, but on the other hand, she was able to concentrate completely on the landscape and simply enjoy the island in a relaxed way.

If Nik wanted to, he could be a true gentleman. Jane had a little trouble with the hike. Her health wasn't quite restored after having the flu. She wasn't in a good condition and felt a bit insecure on the rocky path leading downhill. Nik had noticed this and offered her his arm, which she had gratefully accepted. Jane's presence was an asset too, and Nik enjoyed the chat while supporting her. She knew an incredible amount about plants and picked some here and there to make a tea out of them that evening. Nik listened to her with interest and began to look at the fauna surrounding him with new eyes.

He wasn't normally interested in plants, but what Jane told him was exciting and instructive, as well.

"Did you know that the dried bark of young oak branches, cooked as brew, helps against foot sweat, as well as with itching and gum inflammation?" she asked Nik.

"No, I have never heard of that, but I will remember," he replied. They had now almost arrived back at the port and the path became more even.

"Thank you for helping, young man." Jane let go of his arm. "From now on, I can stand on my own two feet again."

Nik smiled and bowed gallantly. "Was a pleasure to me, my lady."

They strolled, relaxed, through the harbour complex and were the last to

arrive in good spirits at the jetty where the rest of the guests had already made themselves comfortable with coffee and cake. Nik fetched a coffee for Jane and himself, as well as deliciously scented apple pie, and they sat down with the other trippers at a table where they recovered and admired the sunset.



When the sun had disappeared on the horizon, lanterns were lit all over the ship and the grand piano, which normally stood in the lounge, was rolled onto the sun deck and illuminated by a warm spotlight.

Blankets were issued to guests against the cool night air, and then Mariah appeared on stage. She wore her long hair loose and had only pinned it back behind the right ear with a hair clip that looked like a rose. The tight, dark red mini dress and red-heeled shoes looked great on her. The girl moved like an elf. She was gorgeous and appeared a little fragile as she bowed and then took a seat in front of the big piano. As her fingers glided over the keys, a true musical storm broke loose. She played self-composed songs that were a mixture of rock and classical music and sang with a divine voice. She had also written the lyrics herself.

With ease, she took her listeners on an emotional journey. Her songs told of love and deep feelings and gave many people a shiver all over the body. Mariah's music was a very special gift, almost like a prayer in the name of love. She played for nearly an hour and then had to give three more encores before retiring with a deep bow.

Archie ran after Mariah. "That was an amazing concert," he praised. "I am your biggest fan."

Mariah squeezed his arm and made off with the words, "Thank you, I have to go now, will see you tomorrow."

Archie looked after her. "She's indescribable," he thought, sensing something of an infatuation for the first time in his life. He went back to the others, and they spent the evening together on the deck. Everyone was tired but satisfied with the hike and the impressions of the day. The evening ended quite early.

IV



A very early start was Joana's goal for the next morning. She was already standing on the deck with Sina at seven o'clock and then she left the ship with Katie. They wanted to spend the day on land and explore the island. Sina ran along the long wooden walkway, and Katie and Joana happily followed her. It first drew them to the small town, where they found a nice cafe to have breakfast. The café had a wonderful garden with fragrant flowers and old olive trees, in whose shade, heavy wooden tables with cosy armchairs invited to linger. A fountain rippled calmly in front of it, and the old walls radiated serenity. It was a place where they could have spent the whole day, but they wanted to see even more.

After breakfast, they left the cafe and jumped on the bus which took them to one of the black lava beaches. "Black beaches are very special," Joana found. "They're like black pearls and the sand glitters mysteriously when you look closely."

They strolled along the beach, enjoying the contrast the black sand offered to the blue water. Apart from them, there was no one to be seen, and they felt like two children in the Garden of Eden. Joana took Katie's hand as they slowly wandered on. At the end of the beach, a trail led into the hills and they followed it, not knowing where it would take them.

The narrow path snaked along the mountain, and Joana wondered why her fear of heights didn't come forward. She could sense that she was deeply connected to Mother Earth, and this felt decidedly good and safe. They came to a waterfall that poured into a small basin. The emerald waters invited them to just jump in and submerge. Sina seemed to feel that, too. She wallowed in the cooling water and obviously enjoyed the refreshment. Joana and Katie

looked at each other, then stripped off and hopped in as well. It was like being in a fairy tale, and after their swim, they felt cleansed and strengthened, as if the water of this lagoon held a special power.

“Let's take a little of it with us,” Katie suggested, filling her water bottle straight out of the waterfall.

“Fantastic idea,” Joana agreed and did the same.

The path continued to a plateau from which they could see the coast and also Santa Cruz. It was an incredible view. At the same time, they were surrounded by a near-audible silence interrupted only by the cries of the seagulls. They sat down for a little rest. The tranquillity that surrounded them was calming after the days with so many people on board. Wordlessly, they enjoyed this wonderful atmosphere and absorbed the peace and strength the place had to offer. From the plateau, they could see a path leading back to Santa Cruz.

It would be a long hike, but they had enough time and so they followed the trail that slowly meandered down into the valley. They wandered without speaking and felt bound together deeply by it. When they finally arrived in Santa Cruz and headed toward the ship, Katie sighed. “What a dreamlike day. I'm so glad I made the effort to go with you.”

“So am I,” Joana replied. “It was awesome to share this experience with you.” They strolled along the wooden walkway and arrived early enough to get on board leisurely before it was time to set sail again.



It was five o'clock in the afternoon. Katie and Joana sat down on the sun deck and watched the romantic scenery recede. After leaving the harbour basin, all the sails were set and the *Dragon Queen* quickly picked up speed. There was a strong breeze blowing and suddenly it got nippy.

“Funny,” Joana wondered. “It had been so warm and now it is suddenly so cold. I'd better hide in my cabin. See you at dinner.”

“And I'm going to lie down for a little bit,” Katie decided, getting up as well. The two quickly left the chilly spot.



Nik had been watching them from the captain's deck and followed Joana. “What was your day like?” he asked as he entered the cabin.

“Just divine,” Joana gushed and let herself fall into one of the armchairs.

“What did you do?” She looked at him questioningly.

“Oh, I was in Santa Cruz with Jane and Brad. We walked through the town and then had lunch at a seaside tavern. Brad told us of his sea voyages. Did you know he used to be a sailing world champion? He has sailed on some of the toughest regattas and has been almost everywhere in the world.”

“Why did he stop doing that?” Joana wanted to know.

“Too much excitement,” Nik replied. “In the end, his adrenaline levels were so high that he was getting health problems and that's when he knew it was time to do something different. He still sometimes has trouble sleeping today and repeatedly dreams of a huge wave in which his ship capsizes.”

“Certainly not a nice dream.” Joana shuddered. She found the thought of drowning extremely uncomfortable.

“I wouldn't mind. Drowning is not a bad death for me,” Nik commented.

Joana shook her head. “We're all different,” she returned. “Finally, it's not important how we leave this life. It's the inner attitude that matters.”

Nik looked at her without understanding while donning his warm jacket. “I'll go back on deck.”

He quickly disappeared. Joana was quite happy to be alone for a little bit. She undressed, lay down in bed and looked out the window at the sea, which slowly sank into darkness. After a while, her eyes fell shut. She dreamed that the ship was running into a bad storm and that they would be rescued by dolphins who showed them the way to a safe bay.

Just as she wanted to say thank you to the dolphins, a loud, female voice in the neighbouring cabin tore her out of her slumber with the words, “This really doesn't work for me!”

The woman sounded very upset. “I'm the ship doctor here and have a lot of responsibility,” Joana heard next. “You can't place me in this storage chamber!” The voice grew even louder. “I want to talk to the captain immediately.”

Then suddenly there was calm. Joana had to laugh. She had seen the cabin, and it was anything but a storage room. “Clear case of profile neurosis.” She grinned and stood up.

She was curious to see who that voice belonged to and went on deck. There, a tall, blonde woman in white jeans and a polo shirt stormed towards the captain. “Brad,” she shouted reproachfully. “I'm quartered in the storage

room.”

Brad had to hold back a grin as well and responded with a serious face, “My dear Rose, how nice to have you on board again. I know it's unforgivable, but we had to change the cabin occupancy in the short term. I ask for your pardon. On the way back we can offer you your favourite accommodation again. I hope you let that count as an excuse.”

“I don't think I have any other option,” the woman chuntered, but she calmed down amazingly quickly. “Then I'll unpack and get up and running,” she meant forgivingly.

“Great!” Brad countered. “See you tonight at the captain's dinner. You are my guest of honour and I will introduce you to our passengers.”

With those words, the two said goodbye. Rose rushed back toward her cabin, and Brad made his way onto the bridge.



Joana strolled to the dog area with Sina. She wondered how Tom was doing. She hadn't seen him all day and missed him. “How can I miss someone I've barely exchanged a word with?” she wondered.

“I missed you,” she heard Tom say, as he suddenly appeared next to her.

“So did I,” Joana responded. “Isn't that strange? We hardly know each other.”

“Yes and no,” Tom countered and sat down next to her. “We only met briefly a couple of times and hardly spoke, but nevertheless, I have the feeling that I've known you for ages. You're so familiar to me and I feel so close to you that, frankly, it scares me. I'm married, have two children and I love my wife. Yet since I met you, I can't think of anything other than you. I truly have no idea how to deal with it. Please excuse my directness, but I just wanted to let you know how I feel and be honest with you. I had to express what it looks like inside me. Whatever that means.”

Tom put his hand on her forearm and Joana could feel his shaking.

“That, by the way, is also something that scares me. Whenever I see you, I start shaking and I can't control it. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. What's going on here?”

Joana turned her head and pinned her intense gaze on him. Tom drowned in the green of her eyes. He knew she could look to the bottom of his soul and

he allowed it. No one had ever touched him so deeply. "I've been waiting my whole life for an encounter like this," Joana spoke quietly. "By the way, this trip is a gift from my husband for our third wedding anniversary."

Tom had to laugh. "Well, then we're on the same page."

His eyes beamed like two blue stars and what Joana saw in them she could only denounce with one word. "Love." She gently took Tom's hand. "I'm still thinking about how to deal with it yet and I have no idea what to say to Nikita. He's aware that I don't want to be with him anymore, but he doesn't know you exist. We can't say yet what it's all about for us. My feelings for you are incredibly intense. I perceive an immensely great familiarity with you, although I hardly know anything about you and that sense of closeness is indescribable, but it doesn't scare me, rather on the contrary. When I think of you or when you are near me, I feel calm and yes, I can't say otherwise, like I have arrived and at the same time. I feel like I'm in seventh heaven and no longer of this earth. You could also say it feels almost sacred and I can't think of a better feeling." Joana took a deep breath.

"What would I tell Lisa and the kids?" Tom looked at her perplexed. "I can't say, hey, I met someone and I believe that she's the love of my life. Sorry, Lisa, that's it. That being said, we don't know what's going to continue to happen between you and me and she just doesn't deserve that. We have been a happy couple for many years and with the children, we have an inseparable connection and a shared responsibility."

"I understand absolutely," Joana responded. "So far, I didn't even know that I could feel this way. You know, I have such a deep sense of love and connection for you that it's much more important to me that you're doing well and that you're happy than that you're leaving your family and rushing head over heels to throw yourself into an adventure with me. We can also be best friends who are just there for each other. There are so many forms of love. We don't have to become a couple. That would only go well anyway if we were both entirely free."

Tom nodded, and they both fell silent.

"It's time I look for Archie. Luckily, he's already very independent, but if he notices this here, it could get very complicated and I don't want to do that to him either. Please let's keep our distance when others are around us. We're deeply connected anyway. Is that bearable for you?"

Tom looked at her sadly.

"Yes, it is." Joana stroked his cheek and smiled. "Let us be careful with this

situation. This isn't just about us. And if we truly belong together, we will find a way that is acceptable to everyone. I don't like secrecy, nor fraud, because that's ugly. We can talk to each other when there is room for it and that has to be enough for the moment.”

“You're wonderful.” Tom kissed her on the forehead and rose. “See you again soon,” he promised.

Joana gave him her charming smile and Tom's heart melted. He had to make an immense effort to tear himself away from her. Reluctantly, he turned around and walked toward his cabin with long strides.

Joana looked after him. “I love you,” she thought, wondering to herself how such an intense and pure feeling could arise in such a short time. She had the impression that she had always known Tom.



Then she, too, got up and took Sina to the cabin where Nik was waiting for her. “It's time for dinner. We have to go,” he urged.

Joana, however, took a short shower first and then slipped into her gold-coloured long evening dress. She stuck her hair up and put her opal earrings on.

“Today you are the Queen.” Nik stared at her and for a moment he felt the old, strong attraction that had brought him to Joana at the beginning.

“Today is captain's dinner,” Joana laughed, and she seemed to shine from the inside out. “I have to be dressed accordingly. Let's leave, otherwise, we'll be late.” She felt great. Sensing the deep bond with Tom, Joana knew in her heart that nothing and no one could separate them anymore.

She took Nik's arm and so they entered the on-board restaurant. As they headed towards the captain's table, she slowed and took a deep breath for a little moment, because that's where Tom and Archie were already sitting. She hadn't known that. “Well, this is going to be an interesting evening,” she mused, straightening up even more.

Tom sat with his back to her and therefore couldn't see her coming. As they stepped up to the table and greeted everyone, his jaw dropped open. He hadn't seen Joana looking like that before. Archie, too, stared at Joana.

“Wow, she's pretty,” he whispered in Tom's ear.

“Yes, she is,” Tom replied equally quietly and managed to close his mouth

again.

Still, he couldn't tear his gaze away from his new love. They took a seat at the other end of the long table and she smiled lovingly at him. Tom started shaking again, which was uncomfortable for him. He wondered how to survive the dinner and Archie said, "You are shaking. Are you cold?"

"Yes, a bit." Tom leaned back. "I'm not quite at ease today."

Luckily, the matter was over and done with for Archie who turned with excitement to the famous tomato cream soup, which was always served to kick off the captain's dinner. Tom made an effort to focus on the soup as well and he was surprised at how delicious it tasted.

Brad, on the other hand, could no longer stand the tomato soup and only took two spoons of it. He then pushed the plate away from himself disgusted.

"Too much of a good thing, spoils the appetite," grinned Joana, who sat next to him and had witnessed his aversion.

"Indeed," Brad laughed. "I'm going to change that. After all, it's not an incontrovertible law that every guest must have tomato cream soup at the captain's dinner."

He, too, was charmed by Joana's charisma. "What a wonderful woman," he thought. "A shame she's already married." But then his gaze fell on Jane, who sat at the side table chatting to the professor who had lost his wife. The old gentleman visibly flourished in Jane's presence. Brad's heart leaped, and he made the decision to invite her to his cabin for dinner the next evening. He wanted to learn more about this woman and to get to know her better. Brad turned back to his guests.

Katie sat at a table with Jane and Henry Lohmann. Her gaze fell on a new guest, who must have come on board in La Palma. He had long, red-blond hair and wore a plaid neckerchief and an expensive, well-fitting suit.

He was sitting next to a tall, blonde woman who also had to be new on board. The two chatted excitedly and laughed. The woman was dressed in a white jacket that looked like an officer's jacket. Apparently, she belonged to the crew. Sitting next to her was Piet, the mechanical engineer and next to him Mariah, who looked enchanting in her blue velvet dress but remained silent. Katie smiled at her and she smiled back.

Brad got up and knocked on his glass with a spoon. "Dear guests, dear crew. May I ask for your attention for a moment? First of all, for all new passengers on board, here it is common for us to be one big family and polite to all. I

hope everyone agrees?” He looked questioningly around the room and saw a universal approving nod. “Wonderful,” he continued. “Welcome on the *Dragon Queen*. I would also like to introduce our new ships doctor, Rose, who joined us at La Palma and replaces Sam. She will provide medical care for the crossing and is accessible day and night.”

He bowed respectfully toward the tall, blonde woman, who briefly stood up and looked kindly around the room. “I hope no one spoils my holiday and that everyone stays healthy,” she joked and raised her glass in a toast. “To health and a good trip.”

The guests also raised their glasses and toasted to her. With that, the announcements were finished and Rose sat down again.



After dinner, the restaurant emptied quite quickly. Most of the people were exhausted from their time on land and retreated to their cabins. Joana, too, was tired and said goodbye early. She gave Tom one last smile, which he was only too happy to reciprocate.

Joana arrived in the cabin, immediately ripped off her shoes and ran barefoot with Sina to the dog area. She sat down on the bench and looked out to sea. All of a sudden, she heard quiet footsteps and turned around. Tom stood behind her.

“I had to see you briefly again before I go to sleep. You look so gorgeous. I wasn’t able to follow the conversation the whole dinner and couldn’t even tell you what there was to eat.” He sat down next to her. The sea was calm, but it was still chilly. Joana was cold. “May I put my arm around you and keep you warm?” Tom asked.

“Yes.” Joana leaned on him.

“I didn’t notice much of the food either,” she confessed. “My thoughts were with you. I’m glad you’re here.”

“And I,” Tom replied. “But I have to go before Archie misses me.”

“Let’s sit quietly here for a little moment and then we’ll head back,” Joana suggested.

“Yeah, that’s good.” Tom gently held her in his arm.

They sat for a while and looked into the starry sky.

“When I’m with you, I feel like we don’t need words at all to communicate.

Do you feel the same?” Joana wanted to know.

“Totally,” Tom confirmed. “And that scares me a bit too. It almost seems like telepathy to me and I always thought something like that was nonsense.”

“Yes, you never know what you will learn next.” Joana stood up. “Come on, let's get some sleep.” She laughed. “I mean, of course, everyone in their own cabin.”

“Too bad, actually.” Tom also had to laugh. “See you tomorrow,” he said. “Sweet dreams, my angel.”

“You too.”

Joana disappeared into the dark with Sina and Tom made his way back to his cabin and Archie.

“Where were you?” the boy wanted to know.

“Oh, I took another little walk on deck and I met Joana and chatted with her a bit.” Tom tried to sound casual.

“She looked amazing tonight.” Archie stared at Tom for a long time.

“Yes, she did,” he replied, and couldn't avoid turning red.

“You like her, right?” Archie drilled.

“Yes, but now let's go to sleep.” Tom switched off the light and, after getting rid of his clothes, slipped into his bunk. His heart was pounding wildly, and he felt miserable.

“Thank god it's dark,” he thought. “Sleep well,” he wished his son.

“And you,” came back from Archie's bunk.



The next day it was sultry and hot. They all spent most of their time having cold drinks and resting on the sun loungers. Only Katie was uneasy. She had dreamed of a big storm last night and still had the house-high waves in front of her inner eye.

On the bridge, she saw Brad standing. He was in conversation with Jane. Katie got tired and decided to look for a deck chair and rest a little.

No sooner had she sat down, when Joana was standing in front of her.

“Hi Katie, how's it going?” She grabbed the chair right next to her.

“So-so,” Katie returned. “I’m hot and I dreamed of a terrible storm last night. The dream was so realistic that I still feel seasick now.”

“Oh, you poor thing.”

Joana put her hand on Katie’s arm. “Can I still ask you something?”

“But sure.” Katie looked eagerly at Joana.

“Well, it’s a slightly more significant question. Would it be possible for me to move into your cabin with you? I would also be happy to pay for it. It’s getting harder and harder for me to lie in one bed with Nik and I’d be incredibly grateful to you if you thought about it. If you don’t want to, it’s totally fine, but I thought I’d just ask you. We get along so well and have so much fun together.”

Joana looked expectantly at Katie.

“What a great idea.” Katie was thrilled. “I’d be glad if there’s someone else here. I feel lonely at night and I can’t imagine better company than you. The cabin is already paid for anyway, so let’s not talk about money.”

“Oh, you’re wonderful!” Joana jumped up and hugged her warmly. “You don’t know how much you are helping me. I haven’t told Nik yet because I wanted to talk to you first, but I’ll let him know later. It’s very sad but we’ve slept apart for ages and our marriage has only been existing on paper for a long time. I was hoping we would get closer again on this trip, but the exact opposite has happened. We are moving further and further apart from each other. I can cope with that because I have already detached myself from Nik internally, otherwise, I would truly suffer now. It’s not nice, but I’ve accepted it.”

Katie looked at her compassionately. “I didn’t know it was that bad,” she reasoned. “If you need someone to talk to, or lean on, I’d like to be there for you.”

“Thank you. What luck I met you!” Joana sat back in her deck chair.

“I totally agree.” Katie felt very touched.

“Why did you actually book a double cabin?” Joana inquired after a while.

“I didn’t like the single ones.” Katie laughed.

Then they both looked out at the waves deep in their own thoughts. “I’m glad we can stay silent together, too,” Joana remarked when it was time to get ready for dinner and got up. “I’m going to talk to Nik now.”

“Good luck.” Katie rose as well. She looked after her new friend, who walked away with heavy steps towards the on-board bar. “He drinks,” she thought. “That’s the problem.”



Joana sat down at the bar next to Nik and ordered a mango juice. They were alone. “Nik, I want to talk to you,” she opened the conversation.

Nik looked at her alarmed. When Joana started like that, it always meant something unpleasant. “What is it this time?” he asked cautiously.

“I spoke to Katie. I’m going to sleep in her cabin starting today.”

“What?” Nik shrugged. “Are you completely shunning me now?”

“No, and you know that too. I’m just being honest and I see you drinking every day. We have lost each other and I can’t sleep next to you anymore. Besides, the smell of alcohol makes me feel sick. Nik, when we get home, I’m going to move out and I want to get divorced. I don’t want to live with you anymore. I very much hope we manage to remain friends, but more is no longer possible between us. I don’t want to spend my life as it is now.”

Nik didn’t say anything at all for quite a while. Joana saw the corners of his mouth twitch and the facial muscles working. “I’m truly sorry, but I’m not happy with you, Nik.”

“That’s clear to me,” Nik mumbled in an uncertain voice. “What should I say about this? If you see it that way, what can I do? I’m just like that.”

“Looks like it,” Joana agreed sadly. “I can’t be with you any longer. We’ve talked about everything so many times and we have to accept it and make the most of it.”

“Hmmm.” Nik stood up abruptly. “It’s time for dinner. Are you coming?”

Joana nodded and also got up. She was glad the conversation had ended, and she felt terrible and liberated at the same time.



When they entered the on-board restaurant, Tom immediately saw that Joana wasn’t well. He stood next to her as if by chance at the buffet, quietly asking, “What’s going on?”

“I finally separated from Nik,” Joana whispered soundlessly. She was shaking all over her body, struggling not to cry.

It tore Tom's heart to see her like that and he just wanted to take her in his arms. "Can we see each other at the dog area later?" he stroked inconspicuously over her hand.

"Yes." Joana took her plate and went to see Katie at the table where Jane and the professor also sat.

Tom looked after her. He then turned around and went to Archie.

"Our Queen is sad," Archie commented.

"Damn!" Tom thought. "This little one gets it all." To Archie, he said. "Yes, she has problems with her husband."

"I'm really glad you and Mum are doing so well. In my class almost all the children have parents who have separated or are currently separating. I wouldn't stand that, I'd run away."

Archie happily began to eat his chicken thighs.

Tom pushed his plate away. He had suddenly lost his appetite. "Yes, Mom and I have been lucky," he replied, adding in thought "so far."

"Are you not hungry at all?" Archie asked.

"Something isn't right with me," Tom claimed. "Whenever it becomes windy and the sea gets stronger, it affects my stomach." He was grateful that an increasing wind had emerged again, which was clearly noticeable and made the ship sway.

Archie was content with it, telling Tom what he had experienced with his friend the sailor today. Tom tried to follow him, but the words didn't reach him.

"Did you hear what I said?" Archie's voice penetrated his ear. "Ken is convinced we're getting a mega-storm."

"How does he know?" Tom was still mentally absent.

"Ken says he feels things like that in his left arm. He was injured there at some point and now it hurts whenever the weather gets stormy and this time the arm hurts like never before. I'm a bit scared, Dad."

"Did Ken tell the captain?" Tom was suddenly interested.

"Yes, he did, but Brad just laughed. He says everything is calm on the radar and there is also no storm warning from the weather service."

"Maybe we should rely on the captain. After all, he has a lot of experience."

Tom tried to calm Archie down.

“I believe Kenny, though. Ken is my friend, and he also has a lot of experience.” Archie slipped back and forth uneasily in his chair.

“We'll see,” meant Tom. “At the moment, we can do nothing but wait and hope the weather doesn't get worse. Should we see find a dessert for you?”

“I'm not hungry anymore.” Archie looked at Tom with dark eyes. “Maybe we should send Mum a message so she knows.”

“If we do that, then we would just scare her and maybe nothing happens at all.” Tom tried again to appease Archie. “But we can still send her a message which will make her certainly happy. Want to write one?”

Archie nodded and took out his mobile phone. “I texted her that we love her and miss her,” he reported after two minutes.

“That's good.” Tom stood up. “What do you think about stopping by Ken again whilst I take a little walk on deck?”

“Yep.” Archie jumped up and had already disappeared. Tom breathed a sigh of relief, then slowly followed Joana, who had left the room almost at the same time as Archie.



After a few minutes, she showed up at the dog area with Sina. Tom wordlessly took her in the arm and just held her. Joana put her head on his shoulder and felt comforted.

“It was long overdue,” she remarked. “Nik and I just don't match. We have completely different lifestyles and needs and we aren't happy with each other. We've lived side by side for the last year and a half. That doesn't make sense.”

“No, it doesn't,” Tom whispered. “I love you, sweetheart.”

Joana raised her head and looked him in the eye. “I love you too, Tom,” she replied. “I've never had feelings like this for anyone in life, but I've been hoping for it all my life. I've been waiting for you for an eternity, Tom.”

“So have I,” Tom countered in a raucous voice. “But I wasn't aware of it. I didn't know until the moment I first looked into your eyes. I have no idea yet what's next, but we'll find a way, I promise you.”

Again, they fell silent, gazing at the waves, which were getting higher and wilder. “Maybe Archie is right,” Tom voiced after a while slightly worried. “His friend Ken the sailor says we're getting a bad storm.”

“Katie dreamed that last night too, and I did yesterday,” Joana shrugged. “I don't like storms at sea.”

“Yes, they can be something tremendous and threatening,” Tom agreed. “But we are on a good ship. I don't worry too much about it,” he tried to reassure himself.

“Then let's hope you're right. I'm going to sleep in Katie's cabin from today, by the way. She thinks it's great too and I will be much better off than with Nik and his stinking of alcohol. This trip is really special. I lost my husband, but I met two of the most important people of my life. Sometimes the saddest and the most beautiful things happen at the same time.”

Tom struggled with a fit of tenderness and kissed Joana's hand. “I have to go now and look after Archie. Take care, my love.”

“You too, and don't go overboard! I still have many plans with you.” Joana laughed. Tom threw her a kiss and left. Joana looked after him lovingly. She then called Sina and set off to get her belongings.



Hardly had she opened the door to her cabin, when Nik stumbled toward her. “I probably drank a glass too much,” he babbled.

“Looks like it!” Joana replied dryly. “I'm coming to get my stuff.”

“Can't you reconsider?” Nik pulled himself together and tried to straighten up. “We wanted to make this journey together.”

“Yes, we wanted to.” Joana had tears in her eyes. “Sadly, there's no we left, Nik. Haven't you noticed that yet?”

Nik took her hand. “I'm sorry.”

“Me too.” Joana pulled her hand back. “I wish you luck, Nik, and that you find someone who suits you. I'm just taking the necessities with me today. I'll get the rest tomorrow.” She hurriedly grabbed a bag. “Until then,” she whispered and had already disappeared.

Nik stared in front of him with tears in his eyes, then turned around and walked to the bed with sluggish steps.

Joana rushed to see Katie. By the time she got there, she was heavily sobbing. Rarely had she felt so miserable, but she knew it was right.

Katie looked at her compassionately. “I know how you feel,” she spoke quietly. “I was the same when I split from Mico. But I knew it was the best

thing to do and even though there were a lot of tough moments, I was still sure I had made the right decision.”

“Yes, that's how I see it.” Joana dried her tears. “But damn, it hurts anyway.”

“Yes, it does, and it also takes time for the pain to subside, but the day will come.”

Katie packed Joana's belongings into the empty cupboard and uncovered the bed. “Are you ready to go to sleep?” she asked, caringly.

“Very.” Joana undressed and disappeared into the bathroom. By the time she returned, she already looked better. “Thank you, Katie.”

“You are most welcome.” Katie smiled. “Sleep well, my dear.”

“You too.” Joana slipped into her bed and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Katie turned the lights out.



Brad looked at his phone. It was nearly 11:30 pm. Time had passed quickly. He had sat with Jane after dinner and they had retired to his cabin. Jane had recounted her life and her marriage. She had been very happy with her husband after her recovery, but on her fortieth birthday he had suffered a stroke and she found him dead in the bathroom. She had never celebrated her birthday again, nor had she ever had a relationship with another man. The shock of that loss sat too deep. She had thrown herself entirely into her work as a midwife and had devoted herself more and more to studying herbalism.

Jane had been very successful in her work, helping countless children see the light of day. She called them “our youngest earthly citizens” and Brad was enchanted by her description of these tender beings.

“When they come into the world, they are so small and fragile and entirely helpless. But if you think kids don't notice what's going on around them, then you're terribly mistaken. They don't have words for it yet, but they perceive everything emotionally,” Jane explained.

There was a knock on the door. Brad opened it and in front of him stood his First Officer Jessie. “A serious storm is brewing, Sir,” she formally reported and Brad wondered a little about her tone. “Something is wrong. The measuring instruments are going crazy and we have observed in the last two hours that the sea is rapidly getting higher, while the wind is slow to increase in strength.”

“That's indeed strange.” Brad was puzzled. “I'll be on the bridge in a few minutes.” He turned to Jane. “I apologise, my dear, we must continue our conversation another time. Now I'm needed on the bridge.”

“Of course,” Jane replied in her indescribably amiable way. “Can I come along?”

Brad hesitated for a moment. “Why not,” he agreed, and they left the cabin together.



As they entered the bridge Brad could feel the blood pounding in his veins. The sky was pitch-black and so was the sea. He had never seen such darkness. He hadn't noticed before that the ship was already struggling through meter-high wave mountains. How could he have missed that? But he had been immersed in the conversation with Jane. Barely had he arrived, when he turned to his team.

“Do we have radio contact?” he asked.

“It has just broken off,” Jessie announced with concern. “We got a message that a storm front was hurtling towards us and that was it.”

“Well, then I think we're on our own.” Brad took the wheel which was normally put on automatic at night. “Can someone please bring me a coffee and tea for Jane?”

Jane smiled gratefully at him and wordlessly stood next to him.

He could smell her perfume. The scent was of orange blossom and it smelled immensely good. Brad caught himself thinking he would love to kiss her on the neck. But he just remarked, “It's nice that you're here.”

“Thank you,” Jane replied. “This could be a long night.”

“Looks like it!” Brad gazed at her in a concerned way. “Aren't you tired and want to go to sleep?”

“With this sea condition I can't sleep anyway and when I lie down, I get nauseous. I'm much better catered for here and maybe a little company is a good thing on a night like this.” Jane tried to sound brave.

“It is indeed.” Brad looked strained into the darkness. “I prefer storms in the day, but you can't pick that. Have you ever experienced a real storm at sea, Jane?”

“Luckily not.” Jane laughed. I also very much hope that tomorrow morning

the sun will shine again and the whole thing will be over.”

“Only God knows,” Brad responded. “Let's be surprised.”



Nik was still staring at the door through which Joana had disappeared a few hours ago. He tried to sort out his thoughts. “Best, if I take a sip, then I can think better,” he persuaded himself, went to the fridge and opened it. It was empty. “I'll have to go and find some,” he muttered and staggered to the door with unsafe steps.

The ship rolled extremely from one side to the other and he struggled to maintain his balance. He clattered down the corridor and on to the deck where he had to hang onto the railing to avoid being blown over as the wind was so strong.

Still, he kept moving toward the deck bar. When he got there, no man could be seen far and wide and it was super dark. “Oh, crap.” Nik was upset. “Now I came all the way for nothing.” He took a step towards the counter and slipped. The deck was wet and slick with seawater. Nik tried to hold on to a bar stool, but the ship tilted to the side in a strong motion at that moment, so he lost his footing and slid helplessly toward the railing until he managed to hold on to the edge.

Jane got up to take a few steps. She looked out the window toward the captain's deck. “Brad, come quickly,” she shouted. “Someone is in danger.”

Brad stood next to her within a second. “Damn it! That's Nik. What is he doing there?” Now the storm was so strong that the wind just swept over the ship and the waves kept putting the deck underwater. Brad responded professionally but was extremely concerned.

He called for Archie's friend Ken, who was standing on the bridge three minutes later. “We have to secure ourselves. We can't get out like this.”



They strapped on their life vests and fought their way forward, metre by metre, through the severe weather. Nik, meanwhile, was exhausted and the breaking waves took his breath away. He was immensely relieved to see help approaching.

When they nearly reached him, a huge wave broke and washed over the entire deck with a white-foaming mass of water. Brad and Ken were just able to

save themselves with their safety ropes. By the time the water had run out, Nik had disappeared. Brad was horrified. Nothing like this had happened in his entire career. He rushed to the railing and looked stunned into the darkness.

“Niiiiik,” he roared, but his voice was torn away by the wind. “Ken, we need the big headlights and let the ship turn in.” Ken rushed away and came back with the headlights. Then, as quickly as possible, he ran to the bridge. Brad felt the ship slowly turning. “How good that I have such a top team,” he thought, pointing the search beam at the seething water. No sign of Nik.

It appeared that Nik had lost his bearings. It was so dark under water that he didn't even know where up and down was and where to swim. Slowly he ran out of air and felt panic rising in him. “And all this because of a drink,” shot through his head. Then he thought of Joana and felt a deep sense of love. He had always loved her and always would, but at the same time, he knew he had lost her. “Maybe I should just stop fighting. There are worse deaths than drowning,” he mused and had to laugh.

In front of his inner eye, his life ran like a movie. “What a dreary and sad childhood.” For the first time in life he had compassion for himself. He let his body drift and noticed he was sinking deeper. “So that's down,” a blurry thought flashed in his head, but he made no effort to swim back up. He'd run out of strength. “This is it then,” he said to himself, while his senses gradually swelled. He suddenly felt light and free, infinitely free.



On deck, everyone was still feverishly looking for Nik. Ken had rushed to Archie and told him what was going on. The wind had luckily subsided a bit and so it was again possible to move on deck. Tom dressed and hastened to Katie's cabin. He knocked and Katie opened the door, sleepy. “What are you doing here?” she asked in amazement.

“Nik has gone overboard,” he reported.

“What?” Joana had heard what Tom had said and was out of bed and dressed in seconds. “Let's go,” she urged. “We have to help him.”

Tom hurried on deck with her and Katie threw a jacket over her pyjamas and also followed them.



Meanwhile, more passengers had gathered at the scene of the accident and

more spotlights had been pointed at the sea, which was bubbling terrifyingly like a witch's cauldron. The ship wrestled with the high waves and everyone had to put on life vests. Luckily the wind continued to take a break. On the horizon, the first morning red was already dawning.

“How high is the chance we'll find him?” Joana turned to Brad directly.

“To be honest, not very big,” Brad replied concerned.

“We must not give up!” Joana looked at Brad resolutely. “We'll find him, I know.” She then stared at the water, which took on a golden shimmer in the spotlight. “Nik,” she swore. “What kind of idiot are you?”

Nik had lost consciousness for a brief moment. When he came back, he noticed something gently carrying him through the water and then suddenly he had his head above water. He gasped for air and breathed and breathed. In front of him, a dolphin's head popped up, and it appeared to look him straight in the eye.

“You have to make up your mind,” the dolphin demanded. “We took you to the surface and saved your life, but you have to decide now whether you want to live on or not. If you want to live, fight. You have to swim in the spotlight so they can see you and save you. If you survive, you won't be the same as before.”

Nik was confused. Was this a dream or reality? He couldn't tell, but he saw the spotlight and new life poured into his body. He started using his arms and moved slowly forward.

He thought of God and although he wasn't a believer, he began to pray. “God, if I survive this here, I'll stop drinking and start a new life.”

“This is a word and worth a chance,” God answered.

Nik felt himself regain strength and swam toward the spotlight. After a period that seemed endless to him, he had reached the cone of light and began waving his arms.

“There he is,” Joana yelled. “I knew it!”

“He's too far away. We can't throw the life ring at him.” Brad seemed helpless.

“He doesn't seem to be able to manage to get closer. He must be too exhausted. I'll swim to him and save him.” Joana was unstoppable.

Brad didn't agree with her idea at all. The situation was so dangerous that he didn't even like to send one of his men into the water. He realised that if he

said no, she would jump in anyway, so he hesitantly responded, “You can try, but the risk of something happening to you is huge. In such a rough sea, we can’t guarantee your safety.”

“I won't let him drown. Please, we need to be quick. I'm a very good swimmer,” Joana urged in a firm voice.

Tom took her aside. “Are you sure you want to take that risk?” he asked. “Let me go, I'm stronger.”

“No,” Joana refused. “This is my business and I have to go.” She was quickly kitted out with safety lines, a transmitter and a life ring for Nik.

“The most dangerous moment is when you jump into the water,” Brad explained to her. “Make sure you're getting away from the ship as soon as possible. We will set the spotlight to narrow and then you can follow the cone of light because when you are in the water, you otherwise have little orientation with the high waves.”



“Okay.” Joana took a deep breath and jumped overboard. The water was icy cold and took her breath away for a moment. She pulled herself together

“Don't think now,” she ordered and focused on the beam of light. She swam with all her might towards Nik. It seemed to go on forever but finally, she reached him. Just when she arrived, Nik sank before her eyes. “No, no, no!” Joana yelled and desperately dived to find him. Miraculously she spotted him, got hold of his sleeve and pulled him up. With a burst of strength from each of them, she got Nik into the life ring.

She then pressed the button of the remote control Brad had given her. That was the signal that they should drag them back to the ship. Joana clung to the ring with a big effort, ensuring Nik's head stayed above water.

She was infinitely grateful that they were being towed in as she would never have had the strength to swim back to the ship by herself. Nik hung lifeless in the ropes. After a period that seemed endless to her, they reached the ship and were hoisted on board.

Tom reached out to her and pulled her over the guard rail. He wrapped her in a warm blanket, gently took her in his arm and wanted to take her below deck, but Joana freed herself.

“We have to take care of Nik first, I'm fine,” she gasped, breathless. “How is he?” she asked Rose, who was examining him. “He lives,” the ship's doctor

replied. "Everything else, we'll have to wait and see."

At that moment, Nik began coughing vigorously and opened his eyes. His gaze sought Joana. "Thank you," he whispered, then he lost consciousness again.

"We'll take him to the hospital ward," Rose ordered. "I want to check you though too, Joana."

"All good. I'm fine," Joana repeated. "I only need to put on something dry, then I'll come along."

When Joana arrived at the infirmary, Nik was conscious and having a hot drink. "I don't know what to say," he greeted Joana and looked at her with love and gratitude. "You saved my life."

"I'm not sure why," Joana gazed at him angrily. "Was that really necessary, Nik?" she asked, gratefully taking the mug of steaming tea Rose handed her.

"No," Nik admitted. "To be honest, it was pure stupidity and sheer selfishness. And I put both of us in grave danger as a result. I don't know how to ever thank you."

"No need," Joana yawned. "The main thing is, you don't do something stupid like that again. Next time I'll let you drift off in the cold." She grinned and stroked his still wet head. "I have to lie down now. I'm totally done."

"Yes." Nik looked at her gratefully. "Rest, my sweetheart and thank you again."



Joana left the hospital ward and went to Katie's cabin, where she was expected. Katie had prepared a hot water bottle and a hot chocolate drink as a precaution. "It's soy milk," she assured and packed Joana into a warm bed.

"What a lucky fortune that I have you! Thank you, my dear." Joana smiled at Katie.

"You're my heroine," Katie reasoned. "I would never have dared to do that."

"To be honest, I didn't think about it. I just followed my gut feeling," Joana mused. "It was creepy to know that I wasn't alone in the water. I would never normally volunteer to swim in the open sea because I'm scared of sharks. But I'm glad I did it. If Nik had died, I would never have forgiven myself."

"Yes, but you put your life at risk too. You could have died, Joana."

“I know,” she replied. “But I always rely on my intuition and it told me very clearly that I would survive this. And you have to trust something like that. Such a test of courage is like an initiation! But now I have to sleep. I can't do any more.”

“Let beautiful angels watch over you,” Katie told Joana, as she closed the curtains in front of the small windows. “The storm is still raging. I hope that will be over soon. I'll lie down again too.”

Katie slipped into her cosy bed and pulled the blanket over her ears. “What a journey,” she thought. “This is pure adventure. I'm excited to see what else is going to happen.” Then her eyes closed, and she drifted into sleep.



Brad was back standing on the bridge with Jane. “I think we should get some rest after all that excitement. The storm is continuing and we will still need our strength. Would you like to come and have breakfast with me?”

“I would love to.” Jane smiled at him. “However, we should continue our conversation on another day. I'm very tired.”

“I agree. Let's go.” Brad held the door open for her. He was magically attracted to Jane. Breakfast had already been prepared in the captain's cabin. Brad fetched a second chair, and they enjoyed fresh croissants and hot coffee. “Please, excuse me for a moment.” Brad briefly left the room.

By the time he returned, Jane had fallen asleep on his sofa. He took a soft blanket and tenderly covered her. Then he, too, lay down for a while in his bedroom. Brad didn't feel good about this storm. His inner voice told him the worst was still ahead of them. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and dozed off. He awoke in the early afternoon and was incredibly pleased Jane was still there, which surprised him. She had also slept soundly.

Jane opened her eyes and gave him a beaming smile. “Your sofa is comfortable. I hope I didn't disturb you.”

“Not at all,” Brad rushed to reassure her. “And I would be very happy if you'd let me get you a belated lunch.”

“That sounds great. I just need to go into my cabin for a short moment, to freshen up.” Jane got up and left the room.

Brad jumped into the shower, then shaved carefully before ordering a light lunch for two.

When Jane returned, she looked fresh and rested.

“The long night doesn't seem to have left a mark. You look wonderful!” Brad pulled out a chair for her.

“Thank you, I feel amazing, surprisingly.” Jane sat down and lifted the lid of the terrine. “Hmmm, tomato soup, I love that.”

Brad's face fell. “You can eat my portion too. I've had too much of it this year.” He piled a mountain of fresh salad on his plate. “After the meal, I have to get back on the bridge. The weather seems to be getting worse.” Brad looked worried. “Sometimes the only path is straight through the middle of it.”

Jane put her hand on his arm. “We're going to make it and we couldn't have a better captain than you.” They finished their meal and headed out onto the bridge. Although they hadn't spoken about it, it was self-evident to both of them that Jane accompanied Brad. And only Jane noticed the surprised looks as they entered the bridge together. She relished the situation.



Nik awoke after a deep, dreamless sleep. Rose sat in a chair next to his bed reading a book. “Were you here all the time?” he asked in amazement.

“That's my job,” she noted dryly. “Luckily, you seem to be fully intact after your adventure, but I'd like to examine you again.” She checked his pulse, listened to his heart, as well as his lungs, and tested his reflexes. “Most don't survive such an experience. You must have had a damn good guardian angel.”

“Two,” Nik asserted. “One of them was Joana. She risked her life to save me, that's unfathomable.”

“I'm not sure whether to think of her as brave or stupid. Stupidity and heroism are sometimes close together,” Rose remarked.

“Joana isn't stupid, certainly not. She has a good heart, and she's brave, very brave, but I wouldn't have thought of her as such in the past. She always seemed rather cautious to me.”

“Well, you can be wrong. I'm going to go to sleep again now.” Rose sounded a bit upset. “It was a long night.”

“Thank you for the good care. Can I go to my cabin?” Nik stood up.

“I'll take you.” Rose hooked her arm under Nik's as he was quite shaky. When they arrived, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and was horrified

to see he still was chalk white.

“That's from the low blood pressure,” Rose explained. “You were underwater for a long time. This kind of thing doesn't pass over you without a trace. Lay down again. If something is wrong, just press the beeper next to your bed. I'll look in on you again after I've rested a bit too.”



“I will.” Nik stretched out on his bed. He felt weak and hungry. It had to be early in the evening and he hadn't consumed anything since yesterday's dinner.

A thousand thoughts were going through his head and he sent gratitude to the dolphin and a prayer to God.

“Now I have to stop drinking,” he said aloud, looking up as the door opened and Joana came in with a tray.

“Who are you talking to?” she wanted to know.

“With God,” Nik replied.

“This is new. I didn't even know you had a connection.” Joana placed the tray on the table and filled a plate with fresh vegetables and potatoes.

“I wasn't aware of it either until today!” Nik immediately reached out. “How did you find out I was starving? Now you are saving my life for the second time today.” Joana laughed. “But that's enough.”

She filled another plate and sat down next to Nik on the bed. “I'm glad you survived,” she confessed in a quiet voice.

“Me too.” Nik looked at her with tears in his eyes. “I had already given up and then something strange happened. Dolphins rescued me and brought me back to the surface of the water. Can you imagine? And then a dolphin talked to me.”

“What did it say?” Joana inquired.

“It said that I would have to fight if I wanted to live and that my life will change when I returned to the living.”

“Now you're back.” Joana looked at him openly with a deep look.

“Yes, I know and I'm very grateful for that. I got a new chance. It's up to me now what I make of it.”

Joana stood up. “I need to lie down again. The weather is still stormy and I'm

a little unsteady.”

“You can rest here.” Nik moved to the side.

“No,” Joana rejected with a decisive tone. “Those days are over.”

Nik looked at her sadly. “I can understand it. I'm sorry.”



Joana nodded and closed the door. When she arrived at Katie's cabin, Sina gleefully jumped towards her. “Thank you, Katie, for taking care of her so well.” Joana picked up the leash and put it on Sina.

“My pleasure.” Katie laughed. “It was a joy for both of us.” She stroked Sina over the head.

“We'll go to the dog area for a moment.” Joana took the dog and set off.

The ship was still swaying heavily, and she was glad she had the leash. That way Sina was safe.

Once at the dog area, she let go of Sina after closing the gate. Sina joyfully jumped around.

“How's it going?” Professor Lohmeyer entered the area with his small dog.

“Not too bad, thank you.” Joana smiled kindly at him.

“I heard about the rescue,” Henry praised appreciatively. “All respect, that was very brave of you.”

“Maybe,” Joana replied. “Anyway, I'm glad it turned out well.”

“Yes, I am too. How are you doing with the storm?” He looked at her questioningly.

“I'm coping so far,” she gave back. “It scares me a bit, but we can't just get off, so I make the most of it.”

“I'm using the time to sort my photos and create albums. Nowadays with computer technology, that is so easy,” Henry told her. “It keeps me busy and I'm doing something useful. When I'm back, I want to publish an illustrated book with impressions of our journey.”

“What a wonderful idea. I will be one of the first to purchase your book,” Joana replied with enthusiasm.

“I better get back to work now. Puschel come, we have to go.” Henry nodded to her friendly.

“Happy working.” Joana gave him her charming smile.



No sooner had Henry disappeared, when Tom entered. “I thought the professor would remain forever.” He took Joana in his arms. “I just had to meet you and know how you were doing.”

“Oh Tom, how nice to see you. I’m fine thank you. What about Archie?”

“Everything is perfect. Archie thinks the storm is great and was completely over the moon when you rescued Nik. Now he's on the bridge with Ken.”

Tom sat down on the bench and Joana settled next to him. “When you jumped into the water today, I almost died,” he confessed to her.

“The thought that something could happen to you, and that you might disappear from my life again was unbearable. I'm still not over it. I feel so deeply connected to you that I can't even describe it in words.”

“There we have something in common.” Joana looked at him happily and they both felt like they were merging.

“If this continues, it will be difficult to tell apart who is who here.” Tom gently stroked her hair. “I've never been so close to anyone in life. I didn't even know that such a thing was possible.”

“And I've always dreamed of it and now it's reality.” Joana laughed. “It can be so simple and it feels absolutely right. Tom, I've dreamed of you all my life, and now you're here. I can feel it.”

“Me too, my darling.” Tom had tears in his eyes. “It might sound cheesy, but I feel like I'm on the Titanic.”

“As long as we don't sink,” Joana laughed quietly, leaning her head against his shoulder. “Look, there are the dolphins again. I last saw them before La Palma.” Joana pointed her arm towards the stern. An entire school accompanied the ship and even seemed to have fun on the huge waves.

“They look very cheerful,” Tom noted. “They don't seem to mind the wild sea.”

“Indeed, they're doing much better than I.” Joana grinned. “I've been very queasy in my stomach since yesterday, but at least I can eat something from time to time. The situation is not life threatening yet.”

“Luckily!” Tom stood up. “It's time to look in on Archie, and please don't jump off board again.”

“Promised.” Joana laughed. “I’m going to lie down now. See you tomorrow.”



Tom found Archie on the bridge. He was in his element. “Kenny says the storm hasn't even got going yet. The worst is still to come and we already have quite high seas.”

Tom sat down next to Jane. “This could be exciting,” he remarked.

“Looks like it,” Jane confirmed. “We still don't have radio contact and all the measuring devices are going crazy. Even the compass keeps flipping.”

Tom took a look at the giant, old brass compass. The needle rotated wildly counter-clockwise. “What is that?” He was horrified.

“No idea! I've never seen anything like it, either. This has been going on for an hour.” Brad was also worried.

“I can no longer navigate, nor can I say exactly where we are at the moment. This is completely out of control and I can't do anything about it. We have to just get through it. Lucky we are on the open sea, so there is zero danger of running up on a reef, but that is the only good news at the moment.”

“What does this all mean?” Tom sat down next to Brad and looked out the window.

“I wish I knew.” Brad sighed. Then they remained silent.

“Let’s go. I think it's time we went to sleep,” Tom decided after another hour and left the bridge with Archie. They went to bed straight away.

When he opened his eyes again, he had no sense of time whatsoever. A look at the clock revealed to him it was already lunchtime. But it was still dark outside. Irritated, he dressed and woke Archie.

They decided to go back to the bridge.



Here they met Brad and Jane, who had also treated themselves to a few hours of sleep.

“It doesn't get any brighter today,” Tom noted, distressed.

“Yeah, that's really weird,” Brad confirmed. “At no time have I had such a dark day at sea. I can't make sense of it.”

“This must be a pole shift,” Archie excitedly shouted.

“What?” everyone asked as if one mouth.

“Oh man, you don't know anything at all. Maybe you should get smart and read the internet. There is this huge storm and weird noises from the Earth's interior, with three days of darkness and then the north and south poles are swapped or at least shifted. Surely every kid knows this!” Archie explained.

Tom looked at Brad. “What do you think of this idea?”

“I don't know, there's supposed to have been something like this before, but I can't imagine it. In any case, this is all unusual here and I can't classify it either. Let's hope for the best.” Brad looked helplessly at the wild seas and the ever-increasing waves. Piet came to the bridge.

“The electronics are going mad,” he reported. “In the engine room, some of the devices have already failed as there has been a short circuit. I've turned on the emergency generator, but the ship's engines don't run on it. We are now completely dependent on the sails.”

At that moment, a strange noise sounded. It was almost like the earth was groaning. Tom shuddered.

“Did you hear it,” Archie triumphed. “Sounds from the Earth's interior.” The alien noise grew louder and then ebbed back.

“Give a message to all the passengers. No one is allowed to go on deck anymore. It's too dangerous.” Brad gave Jane a look that left no doubt the situation was serious.

Jane gazed at him calmly, then got up and fetched two cups of hot tea. She stood next to him. “We will master the situation,” she said quietly. “But it won't be easy.”

“I fear that,” Brad barely audibly countered. “I'm glad you're here.”

“I'll stay with you!” Jane stared out to sea. “It's scary and impressive at the same time.”

“Yes, it is.” Brad held the steering wheel with a firm hand. “I'm going to guide us through this.”

“To all passengers,” Jessie's voice came distorted over the speakers. “Please, stay below deck. We have a severe storm and for your safety don't risk life and limb up there. The ship is running with emergency power at the moment. Please use electrical appliances as little as possible. Tonight's dinner will be a cold buffet as we can only use the kitchen to a limited extent. We will get back to you as soon as things improve or there is any other news. Internet

and mobile phones are currently unusable because the radio connection is broken. We apologize for this inconvenience.”

Jessie looked at Brad. “Anything else to say?”

“Not at the moment. We don't want to worry our passengers too much,” Brad countered.

The strange noise rang out again, but this time noticeably louder. The storm became more and more violent, but the ship could still be manoeuvred in a controlled manner through the wild sea. “How high are these waves?” Tom inquired.

“I guess up to seven meters high,” Brad presumed. “We’re still within what can be handled. It's just not exactly pleasant for most, especially when they have no experience with rough weather. I guess Rose already has her hands full, as some are already seasick.”

And again, the unknown noise could be heard. It sounded sinister.

Joana was woken by the unusual sound. She had fallen completely exhausted into a deep sleep and still felt battered, but at the same time fully awake. Katie came into the cabin.

“We have a gruesome storm, no one is allowed on deck anymore and we just have emergency power left,” she reported distressed.

“Oh, my goodness.” Joana straightened up. “What do I do with Sina? She has to go about her business somewhere.”

“Typical of you.” Katie laughed. “Everyone else is scared for their lives and safety and you're worrying about where your dog can go pee.”

“First things first.” Joana had to laugh too and stroked Sina's head.

“But I've good news for you.” Katie also stroked Sina's head. “I spoke to Jessie. The dogs can still enter the area. There is a door that leads directly from the ship's interior there and it is safe. But you'll have to wear a life vest and secure yourself.”

“Well, I best go right away before it gets any worse.” Joana got up and dressed. She put the lead on Sina and set off.

Katie looked after her. She then sat down in one of the soft armchairs and peered out of the porthole at the roaring sea.

“This isn't how I had imagined the trip,” shot through her head. “But at least it's a real adventure. I will have something to tell when we are back. What if

we don't return?" That thought occupied her mind, but strangely, didn't agitate her. "What if we're stranded on a deserted island, like Robinson Crusoe? That would truly be something else. Do I really want to return and go back to the shelter every day? If I am completely honest, the answer is NO." Katie got up for a blanket as she was suddenly cold.

"Well," she thought, "something is coming my way. Maybe it's indeed better if we're stranded on an island, then I don't need to have to deal with these things anymore, and we all have to adjust, whether we like it or not." She closed her eyes and gave herself entirely to the ship's movements. "Like a big Hollywood swing," she mused and suddenly felt safe, cared for and at ease. She had the impression that something was opening up in her and as if she was connected to the big picture all at once. "God makes no mistakes," she encouraged herself. "Everything is good, as it is," and with that thought, she relaxed.



When Joana opened the door to the dog area, an ice-cold wind slammed towards her. "Wow," she thought. "This isn't funny." She strapped on a long security belt and hooked Sina to another. The dog area was sheltered, so the waves couldn't spill over here, but the ship rocked violently as it fought its way up each water mountain.

Sina didn't seem to be impressed by the whole thing. She ran in circles a couple of times and got her business done. Joana was glad it was quick, and they retreated into the inside of the ship. She was now aware that the situation was very dangerous.

She made a visit to Nik's cabin, but it was empty. "Where might he be?" Joana wondered. She quickly took Sina back to her place and went in search. Finally, she found him in the on-board restaurant at the bar. "Hadn't you told me about God and dolphins?" She sat down next to him.

"True," he slowly confirmed and ordered another drink. "But who knows if we're surviving this here. I'll stop drinking when we get back. And if we don't, then it doesn't matter, does it?"

"Whatever," Joana answered dryly. She didn't want to show it to Nik, but she was deeply shocked. Not even his almost deadly experience could dissuade him from his addiction. Joana was grateful and glad she had already broken away from Nik. That's why she could let him do whatever he wanted and be ok with it. She thought of Tom and felt warm around her heart. Turning her head, she saw him enter the restaurant with Archie.

When Archie caught sight of her, he rushed towards her. “Joana, you're truly cool.” He was beaming at her.

Joana had to laugh. “Thank you for the wonderful compliment, young man.” She bowed slightly.

Archie also bowed and asked, “May we invite you to our table for dinner today? Mariah and Kenny are coming too and after Mariah will sing for us, isn't that great?”

“That's wonderful,” Joana agreed. “I am happy to accept the invitation. See you.” She turned to Nik and stood up.

Archie extended his arm and gallantly led her to their table. Tom watched them amused. “If this continues, I will soon have competition,” he whispered, as she sat down next to him.

“I hardly think so,” she whispered back. “Look at him fawning at Mariah.”

Tom glanced at his son admiring the girl who had just entered the room. Archie jumped up to offer her an arm too. “He's slowly becoming a young man,” Tom realized surprised.

Mariah looked like a princess. She wore a dark blue mini dress and colour-matching gold-rimmed shoes. Piet, who accompanied her, beamed like a proud father. He also sat down with them at the table.

“Hello Piet, how are things? Do you have an idea where we are?” Tom asked and everyone looked at him eagerly.

“It's strange,” he began. “This storm is different. We have no radio contact and therefore no information about our course. Now we are truly sailing! The crew is already divided into shifts, so an experienced team is on at all times. Still, I hope the weather settles soon. We have to head for a port, otherwise, I can't fix the damaged equipment. But now let's eat something. In any case, I won't let a bit of wind spoil my appetite.”

Piet stood up and everyone followed him to the buffet. Joana was amazed that she was hungry, and she filled her plate with various salads. The chefs had conjured a wonderful meal despite the adverse circumstances.

After dinner, Mariah gave a little concert and presented more of her self-composed songs. They told of a distant world where everyone lived together in peace and harmony. Joana particularly liked the song about the freedom of all animals from their use by humans.

The concert made everyone forget the bad weather for a while, even as the

ship swayed mightily and continued to work its way through the house-high waves. Mariah's songs warmed the hearts of the people gathered in the dining room that night. Her last song was about the love between a man and a woman who couldn't be separated by anything and no one. Tom took Joana's hand under the table and pressed it gently and tenderly.

Katie realised what was going on between them and gazed at Joana in amazement. Joana just nodded slightly, looking so happy at that moment that Katie would have loved to embrace her. After the concert, the guests dispersed and retreated to their cabins. The storm had an attenuating effect on everyone and lay over them like a dark shadow.

Katie and Joana were also in their cabin early. Katie was almost bursting with curiosity. "What have I seen?" Questioning, she looked at Joana.

"Love," was Joana's simple response.

"Would you like to me tell more?" Katie inquired.

"No." Joana undressed. "There's no more to say about it at the moment. Tom is married. He has a family, and that's where he belongs. Who knows what will be in a few years?"

"What a shame." Katie switched off the light. "He's decidedly attractive."

"Yes, he is," sighed Joana. "And he has absolute integrity. I've never loved anyone like him in my life. We will see what the future holds for us. Sleep well."

"You too," Katie mumbled.



Nik had retired to his cabin without dinner. He wasn't hungry and felt lonely. Even the alcohol hadn't saved him this time. This was new. He didn't know how to handle that. Should he have another drink? He was already nauseous.

Nik sat down in the armchair and stared out through the porthole into the darkness and agitated ocean. He registered that the wind had gotten even stronger. The waves must have reached a height of ten meters.

The ship was battling through the bad weather and appeared to be riding a bucking bull. At times, it felt like free fall when the ship shot down a giant wave. "It's time to stop!" Suddenly it was like an inner voice speaking clearly to Nik. "It's time to face up to yourself and get rid of your addiction. Whatever it takes, you know you have the strength to do it. It's time, Nikita."

He remembered his childhood and thought of his father, who had only ever criticised him and made him feel small. And then he thought of his mother. She had starved him and his brother because she felt it was more important their father got enough to eat. He and his little brother had often waited outside the door in the bitter cold until she got home because there were only two keys and the parents never let them out of their hands. Many evenings, they had gone to bed hungry because there wasn't enough food for everyone and how many times had their limbs been blue and stiffly frozen by the cold of the unheated house where ice had formed on the ceiling and inside of the window of the room in winter. Nik swallowed. He had never allowed himself to pursue the feeling of being so unloved and unwelcome. His parents had only married because he was born and his mother hadn't been happy about his birth. He felt down to this day not welcome in the world. Despite spending time with Joana he had no idea what it was like to be truly loved or how to give love and care.

Nik felt tears rising and for the first time, he didn't push them away but let them run. Finally, he allowed all the displaced pain of his childhood to come up. He knew instinctively that was the only way to help himself. What had Joana once said to him? "Sometimes, the path runs right through the middle of it." Joana ... he knew he had lost her. He had seen her sitting next to Tom, and he could feel this man was her future. Nik was sad and relieved at the same time. He hadn't really understood Joana, but could he let her go? Tears streamed down his face and Nik became aware this was a good thing. They were tears of pain, but also of healing and purification. "If all this had happened sooner, I wouldn't have lost her. She's a gem, and I treated her so badly. I was trapped in my patterns and my addiction, what a shame, too bad, too bad. Joana, I'm so sorry, please forgive me," he whispered.

Then a loud sobbing broke out of him and he slapped his hands in front of his face. Nik indulged his sensations, and gradually he became calmer. At one point, he must have fallen asleep. When he awoke, the morning dawned in a dark grey. But Nik was clear like never in his life. And he knew what he had to do.



Brad had spent all night on the bridge. He was exhausted and at a loss. The storm had gotten stronger, and he had no idea when it would turn. What if Archie was right and there was something like a pole shift? What would that mean for them all and the ship? Would he be able to save everyone and bring them back to shore safely and if so, where would that be? Brad felt like a

pawn of fate. He was aware that he still had no control over the situation and that he could only react and make the most of it.

Jane had fallen asleep behind him on the small bench. Now she was opening her eyes and wondering. "What's the situation, captain?"

"It doesn't look good," Brad told her distressed. "The storm seems to be getting stronger and stronger. We can still steer the ship to some extent, but if the storm continues to increase, it becomes critical."

"That's not good news." Jane wanted to get up and lost balance, as at the same moment a nearly twelve-meter-tall wave lifted the ship into the sky.

"Oh, my Goddess!" She held onto the bench which thankfully was tightly bolted to the ground. "This is a hell of a rollercoaster ride. Haven't you slept all night?"

"No." Brad looked at her tiredly. "But I'll get some sleep for a few hours right away. Jessie will take over the next shift. She is experienced enough to do so."

"That's good. You're going to have to save your energy."

"Are you coming along with me?" Brad was surprised himself at the directness of his question.

"Yes," Jane replied simply as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Jessie entered the bridge. She had slept for some hours and seemed rested and fresh. When she saw Jane, her gaze darkened for a brief moment, but then she kindly spoke. "Good morning everyone, I'm ready to take over."

"Thank you." Brad instructed her. "The storm is stronger and you have to tackle the waves head-on. If you have any problems, wake me up immediately and I'll be here right away." Jessie grabbed the helm. Brad took Jane's arm, and they left the bridge.

V



Tom barely slept that night. The storm worried him, and he got frightened that he was putting Archie in danger with this trip. How easy his life had been. He could only now see it in retrospect. But it had also been flat, emotionally flat, neither special ups nor lows. Seeing that shocked him. He hadn't even noticed. Had Lisa and he lived alongside each other? Sure, they didn't always have an endless talking point and even their love life had barely taken place anymore, but wasn't that normal, after all these years they had spent together? Didn't other couples fare the same way?

He had always seen himself as happily married, and now everything was in question. Tom tried to imagine Lisa's face, but succeeded only with difficulty. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw Joana and he could smell her perfume.

“Apple, fig, vanilla,” she had let him know, but for him, it smelled like a promise. What would it be like to kiss Joana? Tom lost himself in that thought and realised how he smiled in the dark.

As the morning dawned, Tom got up and had a cold shower as the hot water had stopped working. “Well, at least I'm awake,” he mumbled and decided to let Archie sleep in. He sat down in the big easy chair and tried to read, but the ship moved up and down so vehemently that even he became nauseous. Luckily, Archie was about to wake up so Tom could distract himself. “What do you think of visiting the bridge and checking what's going on?” he asked his son.

“You just have to wash with cold water, because there is no warm anymore.”

Archie brushed his teeth. “Do I really have to do this?” he lamented.

“Yes,” Tom replied and his tone didn't condone any intolerance. Archie disappeared again into the bathroom. After ten minutes he was back and had also put on fresh clothes. “Well done.” Tom went ahead.

“What about breakfast?” Archie requested.

“Certain there will be something on the bridge,” Tom replied. “And if not, we'll go to the restaurant.”



By the time they arrived on the bridge, breakfast had just been served. Due to the high sea, everything was in boxes, which were safely stowed in specially designated mounts. “Perfect timing!” Archie took a bun and reached for a small bottle of orange juice. Tom chose a tea.

“Are you sick, Dad?” Archie looked at him questioning.

“I've seen better days.” Tom sat down next to Jessie. “How are things going?” he inquired.

“Not very good,” she reported. “The waves are now around thirteen meters high and that is no longer easy to handle. All electrical navigation devices are still out of action and the compass rotates like crazy. No one can say exactly where we are, and it's just about steering the ship safely through the waves.”

“You are doing a great job.” Tom noted appreciatively.

“Thank you.” Jessie smiled. “I just hope things will calm down soon.”

“We all do.” Tom gazed nervously at the sea, which looked like it was a huge cooking pot with the white foam and the gigantic waves.

“It seems like we've reached a wind speed of force twelve. The sky appears still ominous and it's now the second day that it doesn't get beyond a twilight. If you look at it closely, we've already have had two days of darkness. That worries me.” Jessie held the wheel and cleverly piloted the ship through the next monster wave. “We've never experienced anything like this. If the wind continues to increase, we'll also need to take down the last little storm sails,

but then we'd be completely unable to manoeuvre. It's already a ride on a monstrous rollercoaster. Gladly we have such a good crew. A solar storm must have damaged the technical equipment. I can't explain it any other way." She was very pale.

Archie nodded. "I'm sure it's a solar storm. On the internet, they have always written about the fact that the pole shift can be triggered by a large solar storm. But no one, of course, could exactly tell what happened then. Now we know more," he stated.

"Sometimes, I feel like you youngsters are miles ahead of us in many things." Tom tenderly stroked Archie's black, curly hair.

"I'm happy you're getting it." Archie took a step back. He didn't like Tom showing him gestures of affection in public.

At that moment Piet entered the bridge.

"We have to turn off the electricity in the cabins," he reported. "I need all the power for the osmosis plant, otherwise we'll run out of water in a few days and no one can say how long this will last. We are able to maintain the most necessary functions, but nothing more. Everything else is a luxury at the moment."

"I'm going to make an announcement!" Jessie reached for the microphone. "It's best to let Brad continue to sleep. We're still going to need him."

"To all passengers," Jessie's voice sounded over the ship's loudspeakers. "We're truly sorry, but we have to turn off the electricity in the cabins for some time. We have been using emergency power since yesterday and we now need the electricity for the osmosis plant to ensure we have drinking water. We apologise for any inconvenience. The showers, sinks and toilets are designed to be operated by hand with a pump. The instruction manual is located in the bathroom cabinets. We ask that everyone uses as little water as possible, thank you very much. Due to the high sea conditions, we are unable to continue serving large buffets, but basic supplies are offered at the usual meal times in the restaurant. It is strictly forbidden to enter the deck. There is a danger to life!"

"What do the dog owners do in this weather?" Tom thought of Joana.

“Oh, there's a small room next to the engine room with sand-covered mats. The animals can't romp there, but they're safe,” Jessie replied.

At that moment, they heard a loud scream through the howling of the wind. “Puschel, Puuuschel, come here right away. Puschel!”

“That must be the professor! His dog's name is Puschel.” Tom peered outside, alarmed. He saw the professor running behind his dog, which sprinted towards the prow. The ship was just shooting down a mega wave and when it reached the bottom, another huge one rolled across the deck, putting everything under water. Tom's blood froze in his veins. When the water disappeared, Henry and his dog could no longer be seen.

Jessie slumped. “We can't turn around and look for him in this storm! Can someone go and get Brad, please! I don't know what to do.”



Brad was deeply asleep when there was a loud knock on his door. He had held Jane in his arms and was happy, as happy as never before in his life. Brad got up quickly and opened the door. Standing in front of him was a sailor, sadly reporting.

“A man has gone overboard and so has his dog. Can you please come as soon as possible? We need your orders on what to do.”

Brad just nodded and turned around. He got dressed in a hurry and rushed to the bridge. Jane hadn't noticed a thing and continued to slumber.

“What happened?” Brad inquired.

“The professor ran after his dog on deck, and then a big wave came and ripped the two of them into the ocean. It's going to be impossible to discover them in this sea state and we can't turn around to look for them, either.” Jessie was distraught.

Brad took a deep breath. He knew that Henry was lost. They couldn't save him in this wild weather without risking the whole ship. “We have to sail on.” He was deeply dismayed. “We can't imperil everyone's lives and, apart from that, the ship wouldn't be manoeuvrable at all. Sadly, we can't save him even if he's still alive. This is a tragedy! Does he have loved ones or friends here

on the ship that we need to notify?”

“No,” Tom responded shaken. “He was alone. His daughter lives in Germany, but we won't be able to contact her at the moment.”

All remained silent. It was one of those moments in life when there was nothing to say.



Nik took a cold shower. “Feels good,” he thought, putting on fresh clothes. After shaving in the semi-darkness, he made his way to the bridge. When he opened the door, the state of sheer sadness struck him. “What's going on here? Did anyone die?” he tried to make a joke.

Archie looked at him angrily and reported, “Henry went overboard, and he hasn't been as lucky as you! We couldn't save him.”

Nik had to sit down. “This is a huge disaster. He was such a nice old gentleman. How could this happen?”

“He wanted to save Puschel,” Archie explained with tears in his eyes.

“Joana would do something like that, too,” Nik stated.

“I hope not,” the words escaped from Tom's mouth.

Nik looked at him and Tom suddenly realised he knew. “We have to take good care of her,” he said.

“Yes, we have to,” Nik agreed seriously. “I better go and tell her what happened. She'll be very sad. She liked the professor a lot.”

“I'm going to refresh myself and after that take the wheel again so you can rest, Jessie.” Brad left the bridge with Nik. Going out, Nik stopped him.

“Thank you for saving me. It was very stupid what I did and I'm sincerely sorry.”

“We all make mistakes and it went well in the end.” Brad reached out to him.

Nik shook his hand gratefully. “I hope I can make up for it. Once we get this storm behind us, I'd be happy to help fix the ship.”

“I’ll take you at your word!” Brad smiled at him. “Let’s hope this will be over soon.” Then he went to his cabin.

When he opened the door, Jane approached him.

“What happened?” she asked when she saw Brad’s face.

“We lost Henry. He’s gone overboard,” Brad told her with a brittle voice. “We couldn’t save him, the storm is too strong.”

Jane took him in her arms and calmly stroked his head. “This is horrible,” she whispered. “The poor man! What do you guess he experienced in his final minutes?”

“I don’t even want to think about that.” Brad started undressing. “I’m going to shower now and then I have to get on the bridge.”

“I’ve already showered. The water is freezing cold and there is no light.” Jane looked out the window. “Apparently, it’s not going to be bright again today,” she noted.

“Looks like it.” Brad disappeared into the bathroom. After showering and donning fresh clothes, he felt a little better. “Are you coming?”

Jane nodded and took her jacket. “I’ll just stop by my cabin for a short time, then I’ll come along.”



Nik quietly knocked on Katie’s cabin door. “Can I come in?” he asked.

“Yes,” was the reply in chorus. Joana and Katie grinned at each other. They had both slept soundly and Nik had woken them up.

Nik stepped in and sat down in the big armchair. “Henry has gone overboard,” he informed them regretfully. “He wanted to save his dog and, in the process, a wave ripped the two of them into the ocean. I thought it was good if you guys knew. It’s a shock to everyone and a big loss as well.”

“Oh no.” Joana burst into tears and Katie also swallowed heavily. “Now at least he’s with his beloved wife,” Joana finally sobbed. “Even though it is mournful for us, I firmly believe that every human being has a soul plan before coming down to Earth and that he fulfilled his. When our time is up

and the soul plan is complete, we leave. Whether we are prepared for it or not. Apparently, it was time for Henry to go.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Katie agreed with her. “He was only a shadow of himself without his great love. As tough as it is, it's coherent.”

“That's weird.” Nik shrugged his shoulders without understanding.

“We look at the whole thing from a higher perspective.” Joana gazed at him with dark eyes. “What is a loss for the bereaved or a shock to us may be just the right move for the person affected. We have a strange idea of death. Many still believe that it is the end, but it's just a gateway to another world. The body dies, but the spirit and soul, the essence of who we are, live on.”

“That's too high for me.” Nik stood up. “I'll go back to the others. Maybe I can make myself useful there.”



“We're coming too.” Katie jumped out of bed. “I'll just have a shower first.”

Joana, too, got up and donned jogging pants. “Come Sina, let's check out your new loo. I'll see you soon,” she said to Katie and left the cabin with her dog.

Showering wasn't that easy in the high seas, and Katie had to keep clinging to the handles embedded in the wall and operate the pump with one foot. She was wondering why the water didn't get warm.

Katie and Joana met on the bridge half an hour later. Luckily, it was a big room, so everyone had space. As soon as they had opened the door, Archie ran towards Joana.

“Did you hear what happened to the old professor?” He was still crying.

“Yes, I did,” Joana gently replied. “It is very sad and the only good thing about it is that he is now with his beloved wife in heaven.”

“The dog is also dead,” Archie lamented.

“No, he isn't.” Kenny came in with Puschel in his arms.

Everyone jumped up and surrounded him excitedly. “We found him in one

of the fishing nets. He had got tangled up there and that saved his life.”

“Have you found the professor?” Archie inquired.

“Unfortunately, not,” Ken replied with a rough voice. “We searched the whole ship and spent the last hour looking out for him, all unfortunately to no avail. But this little guy here needs good care now, and a new owner.”

Archie looked at Tom. “What can I say.” Tom went to Ken and took the exhausted dog out of his arms. He then handed it over to the boy, whose face lightened up. “Always keep him on a leash until we are safe again.”

“I’ll do that.” Archie took the trembling bundle of fur and wrapped Puschel lovingly in a blanket. Then he gave him a bun which the little guy greedily devoured. “Don’t be sad Puschel, you’ll be fine with us.” He fondled him tenderly.



The door banged open and Mart, one of the sailors, rushed in. “One of the little storm sails has ripped loose and we have to take it down, otherwise it will be completely shredded.”

“I’ll have a look at the damage.” Brad went outside with him. It appeared nasty. The sail hung at a height of twenty metres and had wrapped itself halfway around the mast. “I can’t send someone up there. It’s not safe,” he told his crew.

“But we have to fix it,” Mart urged. “If we leave it that way, we risk the mast breaking and then the ship becomes halfway manoeuvrable. I’m going up there with Peter, Manni and Fred.”

Brad hesitated. “Then I’m the fifth man! I know I’m not allowed to do that, but I can’t expose you to danger alone,” he finally decided. “We’re all going to secure ourselves twice, that’s all we can do.”

“What if something went wrong and you get injured?” Mart contradicted.

“That’s not going to happen,” Brad claimed in a firm voice. “Besides, Jessie is so experienced that she could replace me at any time.”

“As you say, Sir,” Mart shrugged.

They put on the extra safety belts and Brad, Mart and Fred started climbing up the mast. Brad felt fear creeping up inside him. This was incredibly dangerous. Once at the top, they tried to catch the sail, but the wind was so strong that it kept tearing loose. They fought for half an hour until they had secured the sail to the point where they could take it in. But they were too exhausted to finish their work. "Let's stop here. The rest has to be done by the others," Brad yelled and gave the hand signal to descend.

The men understood and made their way down. Fred climbed first. When he was halfway down, he lost his footing in a strong storm surge and fell. The two crew members on the ground strapped to the safety ropes were able to catch his fall, and he was left dangling just over a metre above the ground. They carefully let him down the rest of the way and Mart and Brad climbed after, as quickly as possible.

"How is he?" gasped Brad, immediately after he landed on the deck. Fred lay motionless on the ground.

"We're taking him to the doctor's room. Rose is up and ready for action."



Brad and three other sailors carefully lifted him and carried him below deck. They put him on the treatment table. Fred still didn't show a sign of life. Rose raised his lids and checked the reflexes.

"He lives," she announced with relief. "But it doesn't look good. I'm going to give him some oxygen and then we'll have to wait and see. Put him in the bed there. Strap him tightly so he can't fall off."

When she had secured Fred and put on the oxygen mask, they stood helplessly around his bed.

"Don't you have anything else to do?" Rose asked. "Best you leave him alone. I'll get in touch as soon as there's something new."

They went outside to the others. "He's alive," Brad let them know. "We'll have to wait and see how he's doing later. Let's finish our task now. Get Ken, we need a new fifth man." Mart soon came back with Ken and this time Peter, Manni and Ken climbed up the mast.

The storm appeared to be getting even stronger. Brad felt very concerned, but the ship's manoeuvrability depended on saving the mast and being able to raise a new storm sail. As soon as the storm subsided, he wanted to set a much smaller one.

When they were nearly done, the gaff broke and the part where Peter, Manni and Ken hung dangled freely in the wind. At that moment, a strong gust almost put the ship on her side, so the gaff was now hanging in the water.

Brad and Mart used up all their strength to hold on to the ropes and succeeded to put the end around a post for safety. To Brad, it felt like an eternity for the ship to lift again, but now the gaff was empty. The three sailors must have become unhooked.

Brad and Mart frantically pulled on the ropes, catching them up bit by bit with the greatest effort. It was a life-and-death situation, but Brad was unwilling to leave his sailors to the sea. Finally, Ken showed up at the railing, climbed back onto the ship with a final pull and hooked himself tightly again. Brad and Mart moved on. They were almost at the end of their resources. Now they could see Manni and Peter. Their bodies hung stock-still in the ropes.

“We need help,” Brad screamed in despair.



Tom was uneasy. The action with the sails had been going on for too long. “Should we go after them?” He turned to Nik.

“Yes,” Nik agreed.

Barely had they got outside when the strong wind almost knocked them over. It was so dark that they could hardly see anything, and it was bitterly cold. They strapped on the safety harnesses and set off. When they arrived at Brad's side he yelled, “Thank heavens you came. Can you help drag and secure Manni and Peter on to the deck? We're too exhausted!”

Tom and Nik cautiously scrambled to the railing. “I'm okay,” Ken gasped when they arrived at him. “Take care of the other two.” Nik and Tom carefully pulled the two lifeless bodies on board.

“Oh my God, please don't,” Nik pleaded. He had already seen several dead people, and his experience told him that these two had lost their lives.

They were immediately rushed below deck to the hospital ward, but after a glance Rose also confirmed shocked, “We can't do anything for them anymore. They drowned.”

“It's good Archie doesn't see this,” Tom thought. Then he passed out.

When he returned, he was lying on the hospital stretcher. “You fainted,” Rose looked at him compassionately. “That was probably a bit too much.”

“Apparently.” Tom wanted to get up. He was embarrassed that he had swooned. “I've never seen a dead body before,” he apologised.

“Such a tragedy can knock you off your feet,” Rose reassured him. “Let me measure your blood pressure before you get up. All right,” she reported after a while. “You can go.”

“Thank you for the good care.” Tom looked at her with sad eyes. “How is Fred doing?”

“He is conscious again. Although he has a severe concussion and a broken arm, he'll be fine. It will just take a few weeks,” Rose let him know.

Tom felt a little relieved. “And Ken?”

“He's been very lucky. Except for a few abrasions, everything is fine with him. Only for Manni and Peter could we do nothing more.” The doctor lowered her eyes.

“What will happen to them now?” Tom was still in shock.

“If we don't get ashore soon, we will have to hold a sea burial. We'll see. Don't worry about that now.” Rose helped him get up.



Tom was still a bit shaky on his feet, but he felt grateful that he was alive. He made his way to the bridge. Archie ran towards him.

“What happened to you Daddy?” he shouted, worried. “You're very pale.”

“All good.” Tom tried to smile. “I was just dizzy, but now it's OK again.”

Joana handed him a tea. In the process, her hand delicately touched his. She said nothing, but only looked at him with deep love in her eyes. He felt so close to her.

How much he would have liked to have put his head on her shoulder. Instead, he drank the tea and turned to Brad and Mart. "Are you doing ok?" he asked them.

"I can't say so," Brad admitted. "Anyway, we are physically unharmed and that's worth a lot, as we've just had to learn. We need to repair the gaff as soon as possible, then we can raise a new storm sail as soon as the wind subsides and thus steer the ship safely again."

"What a high price," Joana noted, dejected.

The others nodded mutely.

"Dad, are you coming with me to visit Ken in his cabin? I want to check if he is alright."

"Sure." Tom set off with his son.

They quietly knocked on Ken's door and then opened it. "It's Archie, Kenny, and I brought Dad. Are we allowed to come in?"

"Yes." Ken was lying in bed and had a bandage around his head. "Looks worse than it is. What luck I have had," he said sadly.

"I'm so glad nothing happened to you. You are my best friend here on the ship, except Dad, of course." Archie took Ken's hand.

Tom smiled and felt deeply touched. "Is there anything we can do for you, Ken?" he inquired.

"Not at the moment. But thank you for looking after me. I just want to sleep and forget about the terrible happenings and when I wake up, the storm is over and the sun is shining again."

"Then we'll leave you alone now. Come, Archie." Tom turned to leave. The boy took Puschel in his arms. "We'll visit you again when you've slept. Get well soon."

"Thank you." Ken closed his eyes, exhausted.

Tom and Archie left the sailor. "Come on, we'll show Puschel the new dog toilet and then we need to get some rest too," Tom suggested.

On the way to the cabin, they picked up some more sandwiches and a drink. It was now evening. However, since it had been dark throughout the day, it made no real difference.

The storm continued to rage with full power. After a little bite to eat, Tom and Archie fell asleep. Puschel had moaned quietly and was, therefore, for once, allowed to sleep in Archie's bed. That did both of them good. Tom was glad Archie was busy with the dog because that distracted him from the gruesome misfortunes of the day.



Joana and Katie said goodbye on the bridge. "See you tomorrow morning." Katie tried to sound positive, then the two retreated to her cabin. Jane, too, decided to rest a bit. Nik sat down next to Brad, who held the wheel tightly clutched as he wrestled with the forces of nature.

"I will be your company if you like," he offered.

"Thank you. If you stay here, I can send the others into their bunks. Most have been on duty for far too long, and there's not much to do at the moment."

Nik nodded.

"You can all go to sleep," Brad shared with his crew. "See you here again tomorrow morning at six o'clock."

The crew members were all happy for this respite and disappeared into their cabins with the speed of light. Nik and Brad sat alone in the faint emergency light, staring into the blackness.

"How can it be so dark?" Nik wondered.

"Everything seems to be out of control," Brad reasoned. "I just hope we'll survive this."

"Me too!" Nik fetched a strong coffee for them both, then they sat silently next to each other, each deep in their own thoughts. It was a companionable

silence; both glad the other was there.

By the time morning dawned, the storm had strengthened even more. The ship was now dancing like a nutshell in the boiling sea and it remained dark and gloomy with no sign of the sun peeking through. On time, Jessie appeared on the bridge and replaced Brad.

“Are you sure you can do this?” He looked at her bleary-eyed.

“Yes,” Jessie replied. “I used to sail big regattas. We also had some very powerful storms.”

“Wake me up immediately if anything happens.” Brad left the bridge and fell into his bed. He was dead weary and immediately sank into a dreamless sleep.

Nik, on the other hand, was still wide awake. He stayed up and kept Jessie and the crew company. Since he’d stopped drinking, he felt restless.

“Abstinence phenomenon symptoms,” he admitted to himself and was glad he was doing well physically. At some point, the inner restlessness would settle, too.



Joana dreamed that dolphins would show them the way out of the storm and save them all. It was such a crystal clear and intense dream that she could remember it exactly after waking up. “We have to watch out for dolphins,” she told Katie when she opened her eyes.

“Huh?” Katie was wondering. “What do you mean?”

“I dreamed they’ll show us the way and save us,” Joana explained.

“That would be great.” Katie climbed out of bed. “I’m truly fed up with this storm. When are they coming?”

“No idea.” Joana also got up and dressed. “Again, no daylight.” She looked through the porthole at the roaring sea. “No change on the horizon.”

“Should we go on the bridge?” Katie tried to keep her balance on the swaying ship.

“Yes, once I’ve looked after Sina, I’ll join you.”

“I have to go outside. In here, I'm getting quite nauseous.” Katie looked a little green in her face again.



No one thought of food in these sea conditions, except Archie. “Will you come to the dog toilet with Puschel and me and then can we go for breakfast?” he asked Tom, securing Puschel with the leash. The little dog had calmed down and became more and more used to Archie.

“Yes, let's go, but you'll have to have breakfast alone. I'm already feeling seasick.”

“No problem!” Archie ran ahead. He held onto the railing with one hand and under the other arm, he carried Puschel.

“How good it's just a small dog,” Tom mused. When they arrived at the dog room, they met Joana. Sina was delighted to have company. She didn't seem to mind the storm.

“Hey Joana.” Archie was also happy to meet her.

“Hey, Archie. Hello Tom, how are you?” Joana looked Tom in the eye.

The world around them disappeared abruptly and Tom and Joana at the same time felt that there was only the two of them.

“Thank you, we're fine,” Tom finally spoke.

“That's good to hear.” Joana called Sina and secured her. “How is Puschel doing?” she asked Archie.

“Last night he cried at first, but then he was allowed to sleep with me in my bed and now he is already much better.” Archie gently took the little dog in his arm.

“You like animals, hmm.” Joana smiled.

Archie smiled back. “Absolutely,” he confirmed. “I've always wanted to have a dog, but mum hasn't allowed it. What do you think she'll say when we get home with one?”

“Puschel is so nice, I'm certain she won't mind.” Joana stroked his little head.

“Who knows when we'll be back? This may take a while.”

“Then I'll miss school.” Archie grinned.

“Well, we'll see,” Tom remarked a bit helplessly. “Let's go.”

The three set off. “Feels like a family,” Joana thought in amazement, but she kept that to herself.

A shift change had just taken place on the bridge and Jessie was instructing the crew members of their duties. “We must replace the destroyed gaff today. We will need it soon to set the sail again. Do you dare?” The four sailors nodded.

“Please be extremely careful and secure yourself with double ropes,” Jessie added as they left the bridge. The waves were still rolling over the ship but there was little to see in the darkness. “I just pray it goes well,” she told Nik.

“I hope so too.” Nik stood up. “For now, I'm going to lie down. If you need help, wake me up.” He was still unsettled, but the fatigue suddenly overwhelmed him so that he simply had to rest. He fell asleep immediately.



Katie stood next to Jessie and sipped her tea. “How do you think this will turn out?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Honestly, nobody knows.” Jessie also picked up her tea. At that moment, the door opened and the man with the ponytail stuck his head in.

“May I enter?” he asked politely.

“Yes certainly, everyone is welcome here,” Jessie invited him.

Katie involuntarily turned red. “How embarrassing.” She tried to hide it. “Hopefully he won't notice.”

But the man didn't seem to notice her at all.

“I'm Bashan,” he introduced himself. “And I wanted to ask if I could help with anything. I sailed big regattas and weathered many storms, but none was like this one. I have a lot of sailing experience and participated in the World Sailing Championships for years.”

“Then we must have met.” Jessie looked at him with interest. “When exactly was that?” she wanted to know.

“1988 to 1996,” Bashan remembered. “I was still quite young at the time, at least at the beginning.” He laughed. Jessie also laughed.

“That was well before my time. I didn't start the regattas until 2001 and quit after three years.”

“When we're back in calm waters, we should exchange stories,” Bashan suggested.

“That would be nice.” Jessie held the wheel clutching and steered the ship safely through the darkness.

Bashan's gaze fell on Katie and now it was his turn to go red.

“What a beautiful woman,” shot through his head. “I've always wanted one like her.” He smiled at her and Katie smiled back.

“I'm Katie. Glad to meet you,” she greeted him, totally excited inside. Apparently, he liked her too. Why else had he turned red?

“I'm very pleased to meet you.” He reached out his hand. Katie gently offered him a tea, which he gratefully accepted. “It's good to drink something warm,” he noted. Then they remained silent.

Joana, Tom and Archie came to the bridge.

“Hello Jessie, do you know how Ken is doing? Can I visit him again?” Archie inquired, immediately after they had closed the door.

“He is doing quite well,” Jessie informed him. “I think he just needs a bit of a rest, but you can visit him, that will certainly please him.”

“Then I'll go after breakfast?” Archie looked at his father, questioningly.

Tom nodded. Archie was the only one of them all who was hungry, but even he only ate half a bun, the rest he gave to Puschel.

Katie introduced Bashan to Joana and Tom. They all liked each other straight away.



The door was ripped open, and a sailor rushed in. "Three men have gone overboard! A wave has washed them into the sea and ripped off the security ropes," he yelled.

"What should we do? They just disappeared."

Everyone stared in horror at the sailor who stood in dripping wet clothes and with bleeding hands in front of them.

"We can't do anything for them anymore, Martin. We can't turn the ship around and look for them, it would capsize," Jessie responded quietly.

Martin collapsed. "You can't just let them drown," he pleaded.

"I have no choice, Martin." Jessie struggled with the steering wheel. "As it is now, we can hardly save the ship."

"You shouldn't have sent us outside!" The sailor shouted at her angrily. "You're a murderer!"

"Please hold your tongue," the Second Officer Babette intervened. "If we don't fix the gaff, the ship could get into serious trouble. So far, the safety ropes have never been torn, no one could have foreseen that!"

Jessie was very pale. "We can't do anything," she repeated in a trembling voice.

"The gaff is repaired," Martin mumbled barely audibly and left the bridge.

Archie leaned against Tom and held Puschel tightly in his arm. Tears ran down his face.

"Let's please visit Kenny, Dad," he sobbed.

Tom immediately got up and escorted him to Ken's cabin. The others remained without saying a word.

The ship continued to bravely work its way up the huge waves and then, at an unfavourable speed, shot into the ocean valleys.

"How long can a ship endure this before it shatters?" Joana wondered. She felt miserable. Although she hadn't known the three sailors personally, the very fact that people had already died to save the ship and their lives made it difficult for her to cope.

Katie looked at her devastated and took her hand. "What a drama," she whispered.

Joana nodded and felt tears rising within her. "Did they have a family?" she inquired.

"One has a young daughter and is ... has been ... happily married for three years. The other two had girlfriends." Jessie suppressed a heavy sobbing.



None had noticed how time had passed by. It was now early afternoon and still dark. When there was a knock on his door, Brad had an uneasy feeling. Jane stepped in just as he was coming out of the bathroom.

"Three other sailors have gone overboard," she reported, dejectedly.

"Who and how did this happen?" Brad was deeply shocked.

"You have to ask Jessie for the names. I don't know them. They went overboard as they fixed the gaff."

Brad looked at her, depressed. "This must not continue," he stated in an uncertain voice.

"We all hope that," Jane responded. "It can't be that the sailors give their lives to save ours."

They went to the bridge together. Jessie stood slumped at the steering wheel.

"It's not your fault." Brad took over. "Maybe you can stop at Rose's on the way to bed and she can give you a sedative," he suggested.

"I don't need that," Jessie rudely declined. "I'm going to deal with it my way." She walked away wordlessly.

"Should I go after her?" Jane offered.

"I think that won't help her at the moment." Brad looked compassionately after his female officer. "We need to give her some time for herself. She is in shock; some rest is certainly good for her. We'll look after her later."

Tom and Archie came back.

“Kenny is doing well again,” the boy reported happily. “Tomorrow he wants to get up.”

“That's good news at last,” Joana replied. “Would you like some orange juice?”

Archie nodded.

“I'll also have one.” Tom got himself into the conversation. The three sat next to each other and peered outside into the blackness.

“Do you see the dolphins?” Archie excitedly shouted after a few minutes. “I've never seen a big school like this. They are everywhere as if they have surrounded the ship.”

Joana and Tom looked strained at the water and actually, Archie was right.

Brad pointed the spotlight toward the bow of the *Dragon Queen* at the waves and now they could see them properly.

The dolphins had spread around the ship, but also seemed to float ahead. They jumped and swam through the fifteen-meter-tall waves with ease, repeatedly popping up in front of the ship.

“I can hear them,” Joana all of a sudden exclaimed. “They talk to me and they say we should follow them.”

Most looked at her in a concerned way.

“The storm seems to have messed you up,” Jane remarked kindly.

“No, no, no,” Joana strongly disagreed. “They talk to me very clearly. Let's try, please. We have nothing to lose after all. We're without orientation anyway!”

Brad looked at her thoughtfully.

“Basically, you're right,” he agreed then, to the surprise of the others. “We can only win and why shouldn't we try. The navigation devices don't work anymore. We can't even tell if there are shallows here somewhere. We're at the mercy of the storm.”

“I also think we should try it,” Archie confirmed. “Dolphins are clever animals and there are many stories in which they have saved people's lives.”

“That's true,” Tom interjected. “We have a book at home that is full of stories about this phenomenon. It was more about people in the water, but that is no longer important and if we aren't careful, we will also end up in the sea.”

Jane and Katie also nodded in agreement now and Bashan added, “I believe very strongly in something like that. Animals also have much better instincts than we do.”

Brad was now trying to navigate the ship so they could follow the dolphins and the amazing thing was that this made it easier to steer the *Dragon Queen* through the wild ocean. The dolphins seemed to know where the waves weren't as high and how to get through best. Brad was thrilled. “It works,” he exulted and for the first time, a spark of hope could be heard in his voice.

Everyone was fascinated and deeply impressed. Although the night was slowly falling, no one wanted to go to sleep.

It was a miracle and after a few hours the waves became significantly less and the storm decreased measurably.



Around midnight, the ship was back in a calm sea for the first time in three long days, and they no longer had to hold on if they took a few steps.

“Come, Archie, we can go to the dog area with Puschel and Sina,” Joana invited the boy.

Archie took his little dog and followed her. “Joana, how could you hear what the dolphins said?” he wanted to know.

“I would like to understand that as well,” remarked Tom, who had joined them.

“It was like an inner voice that became louder and clearer.” Joana described her experience. “I know this from my treatments and I often talk to Sina in spirit, but I've never had anything to do with dolphins before I started this journey, even though I've always loved these animals. It was like telepathy.”

“Truly remarkable.” It seemed to Tom like a mystery. “Who knows? Maybe you saved the lives of all of us.”

“Yes, and at the end of the journey, I’ll get the Iron Cross.” Joana laughed. “You know what? I’m hungry. I haven’t eaten anything properly in days. What about you guys?”

“I’m always hungry.” Archie grinned.

Tom suggested, “Let’s secretly sneak into the kitchen and see what’s left of our wonderful food.” They turned off.

When they arrived at the kitchen, they burst into loud laughter. Many others had obviously had the same idea. The table was set with everything that could be found right away and illuminated by candlelight. There were already lots of the passengers and some of the crew sitting around it.

“It’s a bit like Christmas.” Joana sat down next to Katie and Bashan, who also had already found their way here.

“We celebrate our survival,” Katie joyfully told her.

Joana looked out the window and saw the sun rising on the horizon. She was overjoyed.

Everyone jumped up and ran outside. There they hugged each other, laughing and crying. Without anyone uttering it, it was clear to everyone. They had narrowly escaped death.

Tom put one arm around Joana and the other around Archie.

“The dolphins are still there,” the boy realized happily.

“Yes,” Joana and Tom confirmed together, and they all laughed. After everyone had eaten something, great fatigue washed over them. The fear and tension of the last few days slowly fell away and one by one they returned to their cabins.



Brad and Jane also decided to lie down and rest for a while. Babette, the Second Officer, took the wheel. Jessie was still in her cabin. Joana stopped at her room on the way to bed and quietly called her name. Jessie appeared to be asleep and gave no answer. Joana had a strange feeling. She opened the door and tiptoed up to Jessie's bunk. On the bedside table, she found an

empty pack of sleeping pills and Jessie lay lifeless in the pillows. Joana rushed out into the corridor.

“Get Rose immediately,” she yelled. “Jessie has taken sleeping pills.”

After a few minutes, Rose came running. “Oh, no!” she shouted in horror. “She came late to my cabin yesterday, and I urged her to take the tablets with her. I couldn't have known she would take them all. She was shocked but seemed to be stable.”

All Rose could do was confirm Jessie's death. “We are too late,” she stammered, stunned.

Joana had to sit down. She was totally dizzy. “Great Goddess,” she whispered. “That shouldn't have happened. We didn't pay enough attention to her.”

“No one could have guessed she would do this.” Rose sat down next to her. “Look, she came to me at 1 am and told me that she couldn't fall asleep. That's when I gave her the tablets and said she could easily take two of them. She was acting quite normal.”

“Can you determine when she died?” Joana wanted to know.

“According to the body condition, it must have been at about 3 am,” Rose estimated. “We should have looked in on her. We were awake.”

Joana was beside herself.

“Please don't make any self-reproaches. If someone wants to kill themselves, it's impossible to stop them from doing so,” Rose sadly explained.

“We have to report it to Brad.” Joana stood up.

“That's what I'm going to do and you should lie down and rest now. You look like a little ghost.”

Rose gently pushed her out to the door and Joana ran to her room. Katie was still awake.

“What's going on,” she inquired, concerned when she saw Joana's face.

“Jessie committed suicide.” Joana threw herself on the bed and burst into tears.

“What? That can't be.” Katie started crying as well.

Once they had both calmed down again, Joana told her about the sleeping pills.

“No one could have foreseen that,” Katie stated, too. “As sad as it is, we should try to sleep a little bit. Exhausted as we are, everything only gets worse and for Jessie, unfortunately, we can't do anything anymore.”

“You're right,” Joana agreed. “Fortunately, the ship is now rocking only slightly. After the storm, this seems like a gentle cradle. I'm going to shut the curtains.”

“Oh, please leave them open,” Katie asked. “After these three days of darkness, I am so glad to see daylight again.”

“True, that was stupid of me. Rest, my dear.” Joana stripped off and got into bed.

“You too, my angel,” Katie muttered and had already fallen asleep. She was just too exhausted.

Joana stared at the ceiling and caressed Sina. She would have loved to have taken her into her bed, but then Sina would always want that and so she was told to lay down on the floor at the side of the bed. Eventually, Joana drifted off too.



In the early afternoon, passengers gradually came out of their cabins and enjoyed the warm rays of sunshine on deck again for the first time in days. The crew had cleaned up as best they could. Most of the traces of destruction left by the storm had been removed. It was totally windless, and the ship was floating with the current.

Babette was in command on the bridge and decided to just leave it as it was. Brad should determine what to do. The navigation devices were still out of service and the compass yet showed strange coordinates. Babette couldn't make sense of any of the measurements and didn't have a clue where they were. The dolphins had also disappeared. Around them, there was only smooth blue sea with no land in sight. “Maybe it's just the right thing to do

nothing after such a storm.” She calmed herself down. “We all need some respite and relaxation.”



Brad woke up. In front of him, he saw Jane's silver hair. “She has beautiful curls,” he realized, tenderly touching them.

Jane turned and looked at him. There was nothing to see in her eyes but love. Brad got quite hot, and he felt his heart opening. “May I kiss you?” he asked.

Jane pulled him wordlessly towards her and stroked lovingly across his chest with her fingertips. “Yes,” she finally answered.

Brad started kissing her face, fondling every single little wrinkle and gently touching her cheeks with his lips. His mouth wandered down to her neck and explored it extensively, then continued to dive down and trace the fine lines of her body.

Brad carefully unbuttoned her nightgown, discovering Jane's body with dedication. He wondered about himself. This time it wasn't about sex, it was about love and this was a whole new experience. Jane's body shook delicately, and she made a quiet sound that struck Brad right in the heart. Tears rose into his eyes and he felt such a deep bond and tenderness as never before in his life. Jane's hands now began to wander across his body, awakening him unexpectedly. She stripped off his T-shirt and underpants and cradled her soft physique against his hard muscles. They kissed and gave themselves completely to each other.

As they rested after a long time, Brad saw light sparks dancing in front of his eyes. “I see stars,” he stated, confused. “I've never felt anything like this, Jane. I love you. I love you.” He intimately took her in his arms. “I will never let you go again,” he whispered.

“Did I tell you that I haven't been with any man since my husband died?” Jane responded quietly. “I've always thought that was the end of my love life and now you've shown up and I'm happier than ever.” Jane gazed deep into his eyes and they kissed again and again.

After laying silently entwined in each other's arms quite a while, Brad grew

restless. "I think it's time to get ready. The ship is calling. I need to check what damage it has suffered."

"Yes, let's start the day." Jane left the bed and slipped into her clothes. "I'll go to my cabin and refresh myself."



"See you soon." Brad looked after her, then he too got up and took an extensive, cold shower. There was still no electricity and no warm water, but the outside temperature had risen again and so the cold shower was rather pleasant and vitalising.

Brad felt like he was reborn when he left his cabin to head to the bridge.

Along the way, he passed the infirmary. The door was open and he saw Rose. Her body language told him that something must have happened. He stepped in and looked at her, questioning.

"Jessie committed suicide last night. She took an overdose of sleeping pills." Her voice sounded broken.

Brad had to sit down. He lacked the words.

"For God's sake," he finally reacted and slapped his hands in front of his face. "We let her down. We should have realised how bad it was for her."

"We were all overstrained," Rose replied regretfully. "It's not an excuse, but in situations like this, one can make mistakes."

"It won't be easy to live with such a mistake. I'll see you later. Then we must consider how to proceed with the burials. We can't keep the bodies for long."

Brad stood up and abruptly ended the conversation.

Rose just nodded.



The captain tried to straighten up and entered the bridge.

"Where's Jessie?" Babette inquired. "Is she better?"

Brad shrugged.

“What happened?” Babette looked at him, alarmed.

“She took sleeping pills last night. We will never see her again.” Brad was white like a sheet.

Babette burst into tears. “How ghastly. We should have known she couldn’t handle it. She was so responsible and correct. We shouldn't have left her alone.”

“Yes, we made a bad mistake and we have to cope and ultimately live with it as well. We were all in an exceptional situation. Tonight, we will have a meeting with the crew and all the passengers. We need to inform everyone what happened and also tell them what our situation is in general. We don't know where we are, we can't navigate and we have to decide together what we're going to do.”

“Then I better have a rest now.” A devastated Babette left the bridge.

Brad looked out at the calm seas. “We're going to anchor here,” he decided. “We'll stay here until we have an idea how to move forward.” He felt lost and headed off to inspect the ship. It had weathered the storm amazingly well. Two sails were torn, and a mast had lost its top. To his great relief, everything else was battered by the waves, but intact.

Brad instructed the crew to take down and replace the torn sails. The mast would have to wait until they could find a port. When he got back on the bridge, Jane was waiting for him.

“I heard what happened,” she said, deeply concerned. “The storm has charged a heavy price. Can I do something for you?”

“No,” Brad responded in a rough voice. “I'm going to have to live with my failure. I take the guilt on myself.”

Jane looked at him compassionately and full of love. “Please don't make the same mistake as her and blame yourself for her death, otherwise you'll never be happy in life again. Jessie made that decision and it was her free will. It would have been difficult, or perhaps not even possible, to stop her from taking this cruel step.”

“Maybe you're right. I'm going to have to think about it.” Resignation

resonated in Brad's tone. "We did our best in this storm and it was way beyond our powers. But we shouldn't have let her down anyway."

"I agree." Jane handed him a tea. "But we couldn't provide for her better. In extreme situations sometimes things just happen, even if we absolutely don't want them to. We're going to learn from it."

"I don't know how to tell our passengers and the crew. I feel horrible." Brad looked miserable.

"I'll be with you and together we'll make it through." Jane took his hand.

"What would I do without you?" He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it gently.

"You'd also manage the situation, but as a couple, it's easier." Jane smiled lovingly at him. They looked out at the completely flat sea together as the sun slowly sank in a golden orange on the horizon.



Katie and Joana had slept for a few hours. When Joana woke, her head buzzed and the horrific memories came back. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that it was important to master one's emotions and not allow the bad feelings to gain the upper hand. "Sometimes easier said than done," she noted dryly. How could she focus on something positive when tragedies like this happened? "Negative feelings cost energy, make you incapacitated and prevent your creativity," she admonished herself. "So, take a deep breath and find something positive about this story!"

However, since nothing occurred to her straight away, she turned to Katie. "Is there anything good about our current situation?" she questioned.

Katie looked at her in surprise, then she answered, "Our ship didn't sink and most of us survived. I can't describe it exactly, but somehow, I feel different than I did before the storm. I'd be most likely to call it 'purified' and my fears are blown away."

"True," Joana confirmed, astonished. "I haven't been scared since yesterday morning and it seems to me that I perceive more than before." She had to laugh. "Sounds weird, doesn't it?"

“Not at all! I feel something similar and clearer than any time in my life,” Katie responded.

“Maybe Archie was right about his solar storm after all. Solar storms are supposed to expand consciousness. Soon we will be able to read each other's thoughts,” she quipped.

“That could get embarrassing.” Joana grinned and felt comfortable in her skin again for the first time since the storm began.

“Come on, let's go outside. The sun is still shining. I'll just quickly go to the dog area and then I'll see you in the restaurant. I'm very hungry.”

“Me too.” Katie went to the bathroom. “Still only cold water,” she shouted.

“Then at least we'll wake up properly.” Joana hopped into the shower after her and enjoyed it thoroughly. After she finished, she felt even better.



In fresh clothes, she strolled with Sina to the dog space. To her great delight, she found Archie, Tom and Puschel there.

Sina played pleasurably with the boy and the little dog while Joana sat down with Tom.

“You smell so good again.” Tom smiled at her radiantly. “One day I will eat you.”

Joana focused her green eyes on him, and he got lost in them.

“Joana, I can no longer imagine life without you,” he whispered in her ear, breathing a kiss on her cheek. “I don't want to obscure and hide anymore. I want the whole world to know that I love you above all else.”

“And what about Archie and your family?” Joana stared at him in amazement and at the same time her heart was pounding so wildly that she was afraid it could jump out of her chest.

“You have to be careful with what you say,” she quietly demanded. “You have my heart and I cannot protect myself against you or close myself to you.”

“You don't need that either, my angel. I will always look after and worship you. I promise. By the way, I think Archie already suspects something anyway. Whenever we talk about you, he says 'our queen' and his eyes shine in the process. And you know what? He's right! You're our queen.”

Joana couldn't stop tears running down her cheeks. “I've never been treated so lovingly and respectfully by a man as by you, but I have always wished for it.”

“Everyone gets what she deserves. And you deserve only the best, my sweetheart. For me, you are an angel in human form. And you know what's truly remarkable? Before I met you, I didn't even know that I was capable of such feelings at all. My heart and soul sing as soon as you just get near me. Do you find this unmanly?”

“Not at all! I think it's magical. You men must have access to your feelings again. It's gorgeous.”

“Puschel and I are hungry. Can we have breakfast and will you come with us, Joana?” Archie interrupted them.

“That's a great idea. However, it is unlikely to be breakfast. We're probably more in time for dinner. Katie is already waiting, too. Let's go.”



She called Sina and they set off. By the time they arrived at the restaurant, most of the ship's guests were already gathered and the mood was cheerful and boisterous. There was a small buffet and most of the food was cold. But everyone was hungry and grateful for the first proper, shared meal. They sat down at the table with Katie and Jane, Piet, Rose, Nik and Mariah also joined them. Katie saw Bashan entering the restaurant and looking around undecided. She waved her arm and made signs that there was still room at their table. Bashan seemed delighted and gratefully accepted the invitation.

Joana sat between Nik to her left and Tom to her right. She was surprised that it felt right and enjoyable. On the left was her past and on the right her future. These were good prospects, and she was glad she and Nik hadn't separated in contention. She already felt he was just a good friend, and she was happy to have him in her life. Nik also had a lot of good sides. He was

extremely patient and had always let her have her freedom. “If he didn't drink, who knows what it would look like,” she thought and smiled at him.

“I stopped drinking,” Nik proudly shared. “Already before the storm started. I made a clear decision and this time it works out. I hardly feel the need for alcohol anymore and I'm doing better every day.”

Joana was speechless. Then she said slowly, “This is the best news I've heard in a long time. That's great, Nik.”

“Can I talk to you later?” he asked.

“Yeah sure,” Joana agreed, as she felt Tom on her other side become restless. She gave him a quick look and there was so much love in it that he immediately calmed down and smiled. She returned his smile and knew at the same moment that Nik had realised everything. If he wanted, he could be very sensitive. Joana decided to focus on the table talk because her feelings became a bit too much.

After dinner, Brad entered the restaurant. He had put on his captain's uniform and was very pale. Something about his charisma silenced any conversation and everyone looked at him, questioning. Brad straightened his back and stepped up to the microphone. It had been brought back to life with an emergency power generator.

“Dear guests,” he began his speech and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. “We have weathered the worst storm ever and I can make the gratifying message to you today that the ship, apart from the power outage, is in very good condition.”

Everyone clapped enthusiastically. Joana saw a lot of relieved faces.

“But there's also very sad news,” Brad continued. “We have to mourn the tragic loss of life. Five of our crew members have died in their efforts to secure the ship and one sailor is seriously injured.”

A frightened and horrified murmur passed through the room.

“Besides, one of our guests, Henry, the professor, went overboard when he tried to save his dog. The dog luckily survived, but not our wonderful friend. Unfortunately, we couldn't help him and the sea took his body.”

Brad swallowed. He was afraid he couldn't get out another word. A deep sadness dragged him down into a maelstrom of guilt and the knowledge of having suffered such a great loss. He saw the faces of his men in front of him and he heard the professor say in his deep voice, "When I'm back, I'll publish the photos from that journey in an illustrated book." Then he thought of Jessie and he became nauseous. "Tragically, our First Officer Jessie took her own life. We couldn't prevent it. The sea burials will take place tomorrow."

Brad couldn't keep talking and tears were in his eyes. Destroyed, he glanced at the people standing and sitting in front of him, looking at him shocked and at the same time deeply affected. Some spontaneously started to cry. He pulled himself together and continued with difficulty. "We would now like to read out the names of all passengers to make sure that everyone else is safely on board here. Babette, can you please start?"

Babette stepped next to him and slowly read out name by name. When she arrived at the end, the Somerset couple and the Brettschneider family were missing. Brad sent a sailor to the cabins to determine if they were staying there and in fact, the Somerset couple were quickly found. They had fallen asleep and missed the event. However, there was no sign of the Brettschneider family.

Everyone helped search the whole ship but without success. They were missing. After an hour of futile effort, they gathered again in the restaurant. The mood was at zero points and Brad felt completely done. He stood in front of the passengers and announced, "I think for today, we've all had enough. I suggest we meet tomorrow, after a few hours of sleep, at 11 am back here and then we can discuss everything else."

Most nodded silently. Some stood up without any reaction and left the restaurant. Brad felt like he was in a nightmare. He gazed over at Jane and what he saw in her eyes made life return to his heart. She looked at him with such devotion and respect that he gained new strength and straightened up inwardly.

Jane approached him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Let's go to sleep, my love. We can't do anymore today." They went to the captain's cabin and undressed in silence. As they lay next to each other in bed, Jane gently took

him into her arms. “You can let out your feelings. No one can only ever be strong. I’m with you and here for you.”

Brad buried his face at her chest and began to cry bitterly. “I feel so guilty,” it broke out of him. “I failed, I had to save them all. I’m the captain, I have the responsibility.” Fierce sobbing shook his body. Jane gently stroked his back and just gave him time.

After a while, Brad slowly calmed down and eventually, he lifted his head and looked at Jane tearfully.

“Thank you,” he spoke from the bottom of his heart. “I have never felt so safe, accepted and loved in my life, especially now in the darkest hour, the night of my soul.”

“You have all my love,” Jane whispered. “I will always be there for you while I live.”

“And I’ll be the same for you.” Brad tenderly hugged her and kissed her gently on the mouth. Then a fire of passion and hearts blazed up between them like they had both never experienced. They burned in the light of love and their souls flew into the sky together.



Joana felt heartbroken after the meeting and went to the dog pen with Sina. Tom was already waiting and Archie was playing with Puschel. “How is he?” Joana inquired.

“He takes it all with amazing serenity and an attitude from which many adults might take a leaf out of his book. I’m proud to be his father and to accompany him through his life for a while.” Tom looked at her. “You seem to be very affected and I can’t even take you in my arms in front of Archie. That hurts me.”

“It’s all good.” A slight smile scurried over Joana’s exhausted face. “I just need rest and sleep and then I’ll be fine. It was a bit too much and for me, it may be even harder than for some others because I am so sensitive. In between, I just need time off to regenerate myself and I haven’t had that since the start of the storm. I’m going to lie down right away and simply sleep.”

Tom stroked her hand lovingly. "I wish you could relax in my arms, beloved."

"That would be nice," Joana replied gently. "Who knows? Maybe we can do that at some point."

"Once things have eased back down and we know what's going on, I'll talk to Archie. I don't want to put too much on him at once. But I think it's time that he learns about us. He's not a little kid anymore, and he gets it already anyway. He deserves to know the truth, otherwise, at some point, he might think his perceptions are wrong and that would be unfair."

"I see it the same way. Please take enough time because it will be painful and a shock to him. And we should also give him plenty of room afterwards to get used to it and process the whole thing. When he's ready, I'll talk to him, too." Joana rose. "I need to go to bed now."

"Sleep well, my sweetheart." Tom also stood up and waved to Archie, who came straight away towards them.

"Hey Joana, you look tired." He was out of breath from playing with the dogs. "You're so right and that's why I need to go to sleep now. I wish you both gentle dreams." She stroked Puschel over the snout and then made her way to her cabin.

As she turned around the corner, Nik emerged as if out of nowhere. "I thought you would stay in the dog area forever," he pouted, slightly reproachfully.

"Nik, can we talk tomorrow? I'm terribly tired and need to rest."

Nik looked at her in disappointment. "It's important, Joana, can't we at least speak briefly?"

"If need be." Joana dropped onto a deck chair.

Nik sat down next to her. "I can understand that you don't want to live with an alcoholic and I also know that I made a lot of mistakes," Nik started, slipping back and forth on his seat. "But I stopped drinking and I would like to make up for things. Joana, don't you think our love deserves a second chance?" He looked at her beseechingly.

"You know, Nik, I thought the same way, and I didn't wish anything more

than that for a long time. But, to be honest, my feelings for you have changed. You're certainly one of my soul mates and I'm glad you are a part of my life. I will always love you, too, though not as the man by my side, but as one of my best friends. I'm truly sorry, it's too late. Plus, you know Tom is my new love and I hope you can and will respect that. You had an infinite number of chances, Nik, and you didn't take any of them. Please let's be friends. We can also be there for each other. Who knows? Maybe even better than we could as a couple. We're very different and you never really understood me. That's not a basis for a fulfilled romantic relationship, is it?"

Nik stood up wordlessly and walked away. Joana looked after him with tears in her eyes. Then she also got up and went to her cabin. She was happy to have Sina by her side.



When she opened the door, she found to her surprise that it was empty, even though it was already very late. But she wasn't worried. She had last seen Katie engrossed in a conversation with the Englishman and she suspected she was still out with him. Joana briefly jumped under the still cold shower and then hopped refreshed and clean into bed.

"How good it is that we at least have water," she thought and immediately fell asleep.

After a few hours, she woke up sweat-bathed. She had dreamed of the Brettschneider family and seen what had happened to them.

The two children had sneaked outside to play on deck. Just at the moment that mum Brettschneider found them there, a huge wave came and ripped the kids away. She could just grab one of her son's shoes, but the pull was so strong it tore the child away from her. With the shoe in her hand, she jumped after them to save her children. Dad Brettschneider, for his part, was then trying to save his wife and bent over the guard rail. The next big wave swapped him into the deep too.

Joana was sitting up straight and pale as clay in bed when Katie entered the cabin at around 5 am.

"Have you seen a ghost?" she asked, terrified.

“No,” Joana countered soundlessly. “I saw what happened to the Brettschneiders.”

“Maybe that was just a dream.” Katie tried to appease her.

Joana was agitated and replied, “It was too real. But I'm going to keep it to myself. It is no use to anyone to experience even more bad things. Let's sleep and then you can tell me tomorrow morning what it was like with Bashan.”

“How did you know I was with him?” Katie was surprised.

“Seventh sense.” Joana grinned and switched off the light.

“It's all her fault.” Nik poured himself a large water glass of whisky in his cabin. “I would have stopped for her, but she doesn't want me anymore, so for once I can allow myself another drink. There's still plenty of time to stop tomorrow.” He then drank a second and a third glass and felt his inner tension subside. At the fourth glass, he lost consciousness and found himself on the ground hours later. He stumbled to bed and fell into a coma-like sleep.



Joana awoke the next morning with a stale taste in her mouth. She got up, brushed her teeth and put herself in the freezing shower until she slowly felt better and awake. On her way to the dog area, she came across a knot of people on deck standing around something. There was absolute silence there. She got closer and then she saw it. On the floor lay mom Brettschneider, dead and with a children's shoe in her hand. Joana had to vomit. She was incredibly nauseous and dizzy.

“She had got caught up in one of the safety nets,” she heard a sailor's voice say from far away. Then it all turned black around her.

When she opened her eyes again, she was laying in Tom's arms, gazing into his worried face.

“You fainted for a few seconds. How are you, should I get Rose?”

“No, no in your arms I feel good.” Joana smiled slightly. “I saw in my dream last night the Brettschneiders going overboard, and that mum Brettschneider had a children's shoe in her hand when she jumped into the water. When I

spotted her body with the shoe, it overwhelmed me, but I'm a bit better already. Where's Sina?"

"Don't worry, she's in the dog pen with Archie and Puschel. She didn't want to be away from you, but Archie was able to convince her with a leash and kind talk," Tom reassured her.

Joana sat up. She then lay back into Tom's arms. "I should take advantage of this situation. Who knows when I will have the opportunity to lie in your arms again?"

Tom hugged her warmly and gently. "Soon, my dear, soon." He kissed her on the neck. A shiver ran over Joana's body and Tom started shaking again as well.

"I think we're better to be going now," he suggested. "The others are already peering." He helped her get up, and they went arm in arm to the dog area, where they were greeted joyfully.



Brad awoke, still with Jane in his arms. He tenderly stroked her hair, and she opened her amazing eyes. "You make me the happiest person in the world," he whispered.

"I can say the same of you. I didn't expect this in my life anymore and so the gift of love is all the bigger. Let's get up. I'm hungry and a day of new challenges is waiting for us," said Jane, cheerfully.

"With you by my side, I can manage everything." Brad jumped out of bed and felt like twenty, full of energy and power. "It truly is a gift," he mused. "And a miracle too." They took a shower together, then got dressed and went to the restaurant.



After breakfast, Rose stepped up to their table and reported sadly to Brad. "We'll have to hand over the bodies to the ocean today."

"Yes. That's the only thing we can still do for them." Brad's voice sounded in deep grief. "We'll set the funerals for 3 pm. Can you please make the

appropriate preparations?”

“They are all ready except Mrs Brettschneider and she will be so by then.” Rose swallowed heavily. “I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

“Me too!” Brad stroked her arm and Jane nodded, too.

“We’re going to get through it together,” she bravely professed. They sat side by side for a while and then it was time for the next meeting.

Passengers gradually gathered at the restaurant.

Brad grabbed the microphone and greeted those present. “Thank you for coming. Let’s start by looking at the current situation. As you probably already know, we have also lost the entire Brettschneider family. Mrs Brettschneider’s body was found in the safety nets this morning. The funeral for all who have died will take place today at 3 pm. But now let us also take a look at our circumstances. We still don’t have electricity and our emergency generators will last for about three weeks. Then we need new gasoline for them.

“Fortunately, we can switch the osmosis system to solar power. By doing so we have water galore. The stores are a little different. If we eat modestly, there is enough for about four weeks. As far as our navigation is concerned, none of the electrical devices are working, which means we have neither radio nor radar, nor anything else and even the mechanical instruments continue to act crazily. The needle in the compass repeatedly rotates counter-clockwise or displays non-evaluable coordinates. So, practically speaking, we have no way of navigating.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but even the stars show different constellations, which I’ve never seen before. For this reason, our nautical charts are also currently useless. To put it bluntly, I have no idea where we are and I can’t say where we’re going. We can neither sail towards our original destination, nor home. We will have to set a course on good luck based on the sun and then see where it takes us.”

Brad paused looking into agitated and confused faces. “Yes, none of us has ever undergone anything like this and there is no patent remedy to our situation. We are entirely dependent on ourselves. As you may have noticed,

there has been no wind since the storm. We can barely sail, but rather drift away. Our sailors, whom we have lost, aren't only a great human loss, they also had valuable sailing skills.

“My suggestion, therefore, is that we reorganize. We can't go on with the old division of guests and crew. What do you think of all becoming crew and we master this situation together?”

He looked eagerly around the room and it took a load off his mind as he watched more and more heads nod. “Is anybody against it?” he asked. None came forward. “Then let's see what questions you have and after that, we'll redivide the work.”

For a moment there was complete silence. Then Joana stood up.

“I have no question, but I suggest that we set up a guard to make our look-out to be occupied day and night so we can watch for land, ships or shallows. Even though there's not that much to see at night, I think it should be staffed twenty-four hours.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“We don't know what's coming in the near future,” Katie then spoke. “I suggest everyone is now responsible for their cabin and laundry and we should also prepare meals and do all other work for the community together.”

Again, everyone agreed.

“It looks like our holiday trip has turned into an adventure with an uncertain outcome,” Piet, the mechanic took over.

As he rarely spoke, everyone was all the more attentive when his deep voice sounded. “Except for the osmosis system, no machine works anymore, but I will be reworking some solar panels with my colleague over the next few days, so we have enough energy for light and cooking. The showers will, unfortunately, continue to remain cold, but I think we have other concerns at the moment. Is there anyone who wants to help us with this?”

Bashan and Katie raised their hands.

“Can I join in, too?” Archie wanted to know.

“Sure, I think that's great,” Tom encouraged him.

Archie came forward with a slightly red face and Piet patted him appreciatively on the shoulder. “I'm happy that you're with us mate,” he praised kindly. “Your friend Ken will also be part of the gang.”

“Cool.” Archie was excited.

“There will be job lists that everyone can sign up to. Just choose what you like or can do best. Who takes over the first watch?” Brad inquired.

Tom gave him a yes.

“It's probably just a task for those who aren't afraid of heights,” he noted. “The lookout is thirty meters high and can only be reached by climbing. As already mentioned, the funeral takes place at 3 pm. We ask you to come and pay your last respects to the deceased,” Brad stated in conclusion.

Then the meeting was over. Tom received some quick briefings from the captain and went to his sentry duty. His shift was from 12 to 3 pm, so he would be able to attend the funeral. Archie went to see Ken and most of the others retreated to their cabins.



The burial at sea took place in warm sunshine under a bright blue sky and in mirror-smooth ocean. Brad had donned his white captain's uniform and the other crew members were also dressed in white. The bodies of the storm victims were wrapped in canvas and laid at the guard rail. It was a terrifying sight to look at the dead bodies side by side and from a couple of them, the sweetish smell of decay was already emanating. Brad paid tribute to every single one, including those who had gone overboard and drowned in the sea, in his funeral speech. Mariah played an idiosyncratic rendition of the “Ave Maria” to their farewell. No eye remained dry. Amazing was the mood that prevailed throughout the ceremony. It was marked by deep sadness, but at the same time also by much love, respect and a solemn and holy silence that only eternity knows.

Once they were all handed over to the ocean together with the words, “May your bodies find their final resting place in the sea and may your souls make

their way into the light,” something very special happened. The dolphins, who’d accompanied the ship repeatedly since the storm, showed up and two of them each took a body between them and carried it away toward the sun. Everyone stood speechless at the railing, staring after them until they disappeared on the horizon. It was exactly eight dolphins. The rest continued to stay with the ship. They jumped and dived, making a happy and boisterous impression.

“I can hear them speak again. They talk to me,” Joana whispered in Katie’s direction.

“What do they say?” Katie asked quietly.

“They say that they are taking the dead to a sacred place from where their souls can return to their origin and that they are doing well and we need not worry about them.”

“You won’t believe it,” Katie murmured. “But I heard it, too. They have been talking to me for a few days, but I didn’t want to tell anyone because I was afraid the others might think I was crazy.” They looked at each other and had to giggle.

The remaining guests threw them uncomprehending glances. “Maybe we should tell them?” Joana considered. “We are now two.”

“I’m not ready yet.” Katie hesitated. “Let’s wait a little longer.”

“When then?” Joana urged.

“No idea, maybe just once we feel a little safer and more familiar with it. Most are already shocked and messed up anyway. If we tell them about the dolphins yet, it could trigger more confusion, don’t you think?”

“Probably you’re right. There is no need to make it public at the moment. We can test what happens if we only tell individuals. I’ll share it with Tom and Archie later, let’s see how they react. After all, the dolphins led us out of the storm.”

“And I’m going to talk to Bashan.” Katie blushed.

Joana looked at her eagerly. “Let’s leave. The funeral service is over and I would very much like to know how you did with the English man.”



They left the others, who still couldn't grasp what they had seen and were now discussing. Joana and Katie hid in a quiet corner and Katie began telling with glossy eyes.

"We talked all night," it gushed out of her. "And I have rarely laughed that much. It was simply glorious."

"Are you in love?" Joana inquired.

"More than any time of my life! It feels very different. Kind of self-evident and he understands things no man has understood so far. A couple of times he surprised me with his views and what he shared about his way of life. Also, he told me something. I don't know what to make of it. He has said he is an emissary from inside the Earth and that people live there. He said he was sent out to take me back there. What do you think of that?"

Katie gazed at her agitated.

"The funny thing is that deep down, this elicits a resonance which I can't explain to myself. It's like something is being evoked inside me."

"I've read about it." Joana thoughtfully wiped a fiery red strand of hair from her face. "But real evidence of a life inside the Earth I haven't found yet. I would love to talk to Bashan about it. Who has had the chance to talk to a member of the Inner Earth?"

Katie sighed in relief. "I was already afraid that you would think of me as completely nuts and Bashan as well. He said even more, by the way. He said that I also came from there and that I was given to my earthly parents as a young child. Originally, I'm supposed to be an underground princess, if you will. What do you say now?"

"That's some news." Joana laughed at her happily. "Do I have to call you 'Your Highness' now?"

"No, you may stick to Katie. I'm generous." Katie grinned. "And I'll keep that to myself, too. I have no desire for everyone to think we are completely mad."

“I can understand. Probably, I would do the same. It’s unwise to be open to everyone. I don't do that anymore as well. A much better way is to look at people very closely and then to decide who to tell what. Many are at a very different level of consciousness to me and have no idea what I'm talking about because they can't perceive it. Sometimes I can translate it for them, so to speak, but often it's just better to stay silent.” Joana looked distressed.

“Does it make you sad that many don't understand you and do you feel lonely?” Katie asked compassionately.

“Both,” Joana replied. “But the hardest thing for me is seeing how unconscious many people still are and how carelessly they deal with themselves, the environment and, unfortunately, the animals. I can hardly bear it. There is so much suffering and destruction on our planet. Since living vegan, I have become even more sensitive and I can sense and feel so much, which is sometimes overwhelming and not always pleasant. I can feel the pain of others, see their aura and I know when they are lying and disingenuous. To me, people are like an open book to read. If I just look closely, I can also read their thoughts, at least energetically. Since I don't always want to do that, though, I think carefully about where I look into deeper and where I'd better stay away. But there's also a lot of beauty and love and more and more people are waking up. That does my soul good. A few years ago, I often felt like I was alone with it. But now, I know there are many others who are like me. This is reassuring and gives me strength and confidence.” Joana smiled at Katie. “Do you know what your life's mission is? The task you incarnated for on Earth?” she wanted to know.

Katie looked at her a bit insecure. “Unfortunately, I don't have a clue. So far, I've never been fully passionate about something. I never really burned for anything. I have always lacked that and still do today. Sometimes that truly gets to me, but I don't know how to change it. I still wait for the big realisation. That's why I booked this trip. I had the hope of finding myself and transforming through this adventure. But I didn't expect it to be such a challenge. By the way, since the storm, I have had very clearly an impression that something is shifting in me, although I can't figure out what it is yet. I also find it exciting that I met Bashan. He's so different from all the men I know and he doesn't play power games. He treats me very lovingly, with great

respect and is able to sense my feelings and desires. Can you imagine how good that feels? I almost don't care where he comes from. I'm just blessed when I'm with him. But this has nothing to do with my life's purpose.”

“Who knows?” Joana stroked Sina’s head. “Maybe you have a common task and he is your soul mate.”

“I've never really dealt with that, so have no idea.” Katie shrugged her shoulders.

“You know what, I'm thirsty. Should we get something to drink?” Joana jumped up and Katie as well. Sina followed them. “Let's go to the bar and make fresh juice. There are still fruits, even if we have to press them ourselves now.”



They went off, but when they could see the bar, they both stopped in their tracks! Nik stood there, several empty glasses in front of him and was in the process of pouring himself a whisky.

“He told me yesterday that he was no longer drinking,” Joana remarked, disenchanted. “He just can't stop. Let's quickly make the juice and then disappear again.”

Katie took her arm. “How good that you broke up with him. He would just keep dragging you down and making you feel miserable.”

“Yes, sometimes it's disappointingly easy.” Joana held onto Katie's arm.

“Hi Nik,” Katie greeted him as they arrived at the bar while Joana remained quiet.

“Hello you two, how's it going? I've only just woken up thinking until dinner is served, there's still time for a little sip. But there is no service. I had to make myself a drink.”

“The days of service are over,” Joana informed him briefly. “We decided at the meeting today that we would divide all the work among us. Anyone can sign up to appropriate lists.”

“Why are such gatherings always so early?” Nik half-emptied his glass in a

single move.

“I suppose this afternoon's funeral service was also too early for you.” Joana gazed at him with a mixture of disgust and compassion.

“He's indeed very sick,” she thought. “And he looks pathetic. But it's his life and his decision.” She squeezed the juice out of a few oranges and added a dash of water to it. “Come on, we are finished here.”

They went back to their sun loungers again.



For a while they didn't speak, but all of a sudden, they said at the same moment. “Time to let go,” and had to laugh heartily. “To get back to the Inner Earth again.”

Joana smiled at Katie. “I watched videos about it and also read a lot and when I was in Mexico, we were in a huge underground labyrinth, where there were amazing sculptures of life, images of plants and animals out of stalactite. It was like its own world underground, totally fascinating and magical.

“Some researchers say that besides the North and South Pole, there are different approaches to the Inner Earth and that in South America in particular, some access systems exist via caves and underground tunnels.

“From what I saw there myself, I wouldn't be surprised. It was all so vivid and I have something of an inner knowledge that tells me that the Inner Earth exists and that wonderful beings are living there, most of whom are taller than ourselves. That would also explain the bone finds of so-called giants. Quite exciting, isn't it?”

“Indeed.” Katie sighed in relief.

“I'm so glad we're on the same page. Other than that, I would feel quite alone. Maybe we can have breakfast tomorrow together with Bashan.”

“Yeah, let's do that, that would be great. I've got to go now because I signed up for the kitchen service tonight.” Joana jumped up and set off.

Katie closed her eyes and relaxed cosily in her deck chair. “How good that I don't have to do anything until tomorrow,” she mused, enjoying the last

warm rays of the evening sun.

VI



The break of dawn came along with a fresh breeze. Brad decided to sail west following the sun. The compass was still rotating, and he was unsure if west was still west. But they also couldn't float forever in the middle of the ocean. Brad knew if they didn't reach land within three weeks then they were in trouble. He was terrified of having no clue of where the nearest land could be. It was a pure gamble.

Brad started to think of the dolphins at the sea burial. That was a new experience and it had deeply impressed him. After the sails were set, Brad held the steering wheel with a firm grip and he felt invincible. Now the fate of the ship and its passengers was all in his hands. What a task!

Jane entered the bridge. She had slept a little longer and then helped complete the worklists. "Good morning, how are you?" Jane looked at him with her radiant eyes.

"When I see you, it makes me feel way better!" He kissed her hand, and it didn't bother him at all that at that moment Nik entered the bridge.

"Good morning, everyone. I wanted to inquire if there are any repairs to the ship that I could do? My business is construction and I would like to get involved in this way."

Brad smiled happily at Nik. "Thank you, Nik, that's great. We need people who are good craftsmen. You can meet with Piet and the others on the sun deck at noon. They want to remodel the solar panels so that we have a little electricity again."

"That's easy, I've done something like it before."

Nik left the bridge contentedly. Today he wasn't longing for a drink. He felt like working. Since it was early in the morning and most were still asleep, he decided to take a spin around the ship and see for himself what needed to be repaired.



Joana was already awake with the first rays of sunshine and sneaked out of the cabin quietly with Sina. Arriving at the dog pen, she saw Tom leaning against a post and her heart raced.

“I've been waiting for you. Archie is still asleep. He went to bed late and is likely to continue to slumber for a while. I finally had to see you alone again.” Tom wrapped his arms around Joana and held her tenderly. “Today I'm going to talk to him. I don't want to have a secret anymore and I want to show my love for you openly. We just belong together. Even if we might have to deal with a lot of resistance, it wouldn't change anything. I've realized that and feel it deep in my heart. Joana, you're the one who belongs to me and no one else. You entirely changed my life from the first second I saw you and I'm infinitely grateful for that. Do you want to live with me, dearest?” Tom looked into her dark green eyes, where a thousand stars sparkled.

Joana smiled at him and simply answered, “Yes.” She then gently took his face into her hands and kissed him with a love and dedication that made Tom dizzy. They both melted in that first kiss and could feel how they became one. After what seemed to them to be an eternity, they broke away from each other.

Tom sat down on a bench and pulled Joana into his arms. They remained tightly wrapped together and looked out to sea. “You know, Tom, I would never have asked you to leave Lisa and give up your previous family life because I know how much they all mean to you. Nevertheless, I would be the happiest person in the world if we spent our lives together. I have believed for a long time that we are meant for each other. Even if that might sound a bit theatrical, that's my deepest, inner feeling.” She lovingly caressed his cheek.

“If someone had predicted something like this to me a few months ago, I would have laughed at him, frankly, and asked if he'd watched too many kitsch movies. I have also become aware that there has always been an unquenchable longing buried within me, the longing for perfection. And now, with you, for the first time in my life, I feel like I'm complete. This gives me such a deep inner peace that sometimes I can't believe it myself. At the

same time, I'm still shaking when I get near you," whispered Tom and gently placed his head on Joana's shoulder. "My God, I am so glad we finally found each other again."

"Again?" Joana looked at him questioning.

"Yeah, it seems to me like it's not the first time." Tom laughed. "It must have been quite a long time ago, otherwise I would remember because my memory is damn good."

"I'm sooo glad you can spot this." Joana breathed a sigh of relief. "There are things that can be difficult to convey if the other lacks the appropriate perception. What luck you see more than most. I've held back because I wasn't sure how far you've woken up. I'm just tired of repeatedly giving tutoring to the men in my life and then they still don't understand me because they're completely elsewhere in their spiritual or even personal development. I have been yearning for so long to finally meet the one who swims on my wavelength. I've always noticed more than others and I've tried in all my relationships to adapt, to make myself small to fit in. But that never worked, of course. As the relationship with Nik failed, I decided I just wanted to get together with a man who can share my view of things.

"And then you came along and the magnetism was so great that I couldn't even decide anything anymore. I'm just merged with you and to my great delight, I'm a long way from adapting or playing small. I'm as present and clear as I've never been in my life. That was already the case before I met you, but now it has become much more, much stronger, much more radiant."

"I think I can feel it. I'm not sure I understand what you mean, though. A lot has gone wrong on our blue planet, especially between men and women over the last couple of thousand years. The men have oppressed and debased women, on the one hand out of selfishness, but on the other hand because they are afraid of the great power and strength they hold. They have responded to this with violence and later with contempt. It has nothing to do with true masculinity in my eyes. Feelings, spirituality and sensitivity were dismissed as fantasies or weakness. This has caused a lot of calamities. The world is totally out of balance. If we don't learn to live in harmony and be mindful with each other and with nature again, we will get into a lot of trouble." Tom's gaze darkened.

"I would say we are already." Joana pointed to the sea with her hand. "The storm we experienced was far from normal. Nothing works anymore, and we have started to feel differently. Our behaviour and perception are changing. It is, of course, in the eye of the beholder, but this is certainly a situation with

an incalculable outcome and we are completely on our own. In any case, it is a major challenge that we face. Oddly, it doesn't scare or worry me. On the contrary, it feels surprisingly right. And apart from the sad deaths, I even enjoy it.”

“Me too.” Tom stared thoughtfully at the deep blue water. “Just sometimes I reproach myself that I put Archie in this situation.”

“It wasn't predictable,” Joana reminded him, then they fell silent.

“May I kiss you again?” Tom asked in a loving voice.

“Yes please.” Joana delicately entwined her arms around his neck and then they merged as if there was nothing else in the world.

Time stood still, and it was as if they heard angelic choirs singing. When they came back, Joana looked Tom deep into his iris-blue eyes, which now shone even more intensely.

“Now I can tell you. I am convinced to the core that we have a common mission in this life.”

“Well, now it's going to be exciting. Let me hear.” Tom gazed at her curiously.

“It's something that has been working in me for a long time,” Joana started and moved a red curl out of her face. “For more than two years now, my inner voice has been telling me that it is my life purpose to start a community. A community where people live together on a level of high awareness and in harmony with nature. A spiritual community that largely takes care of itself and grows its own food. It is almost like a priesthood, a service to Mother Earth and humanity, and a place where all animals are safe, respected and loved. For a long time, I thought Nik was the one I was going to build all that up with, but I had to admit to myself, little by little and painfully, that this wasn't the case. Finally, I stood there with my ideas and visions all by myself again. Still, I was always sure I would create this project with a partner, with the person who belongs to me at the soul level and with whom it just fits. Then you came and now we're sitting on this ship, this *Dragon Queen*, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. If this isn't a spectacular prelude.” Joana had to laugh and Tom happily joined in.

“Ever since I started taking an interest in boys and later men, I've been carrying this inner image of you in me. A lover with bright blue eyes and dark, long hair, even if they are now silver-coloured. Tom, I'm so grateful we met. What do you think about my vision?”

Tom grabbed her hand while tears kicked into his eyes. “Your words touch

me in the deepest depths of my soul and make a long-forgotten melody sound in me. They bring back memories that were hidden deep inside me. It might seem odd, but I feel like a sleeper being reactivated right now. Joana, what are you doing to me?”

“I’ve woken you up.” Joana kissed him devotedly.

“Waking up could hardly be nicer,” Tom whispered in her ear, holding her tightly in his arm.

After a while, he meant, “I think it’s time to look in on Archie. When he’s awake, I’ll talk to him.” Tom stood up.

“Good luck.” Joana also rose. “I’m sure you’ll find the right words. Look, he’s coming. I’ll just say hello for a moment and then I’ll leave you alone.”

“Hey, you two. I thought I’d find you here, Dad.” Archie grinned broadly and jumped into the dog area with Puschel.

“Hey Archie, see you later. I’m going to have breakfast now.”

“Today we’re helping build the solar panel, so I have little free time anyway, but we can have dinner together,” Archie replied while he was playing with the dogs.

“That’s what we’ll do. Have a great day.” Joana called Sina and headed to the restaurant.



As she walked around the corner, Sina gleefully jumped toward a deck chair. Joana was truly surprised when she spotted Nik there. “What are you doing here? You are rarely up at this time.”

“I heard your conversation.” Nik turned to her sadly.

“That wasn’t meant for your ears.” Joana wasn’t exactly happy about this circumstance. “But at least you know now.”

“I knew before,” Nik muttered quietly. “But it wasn’t clear to me how deeply connected you both already are. That’s what really hit me. We were never so intimate with each other.”

Joana sat down with him. “Yes, that’s true, and I suffered a lot because I always longed for it. But in hindsight, I can see that we just didn’t match well and, if I may put it that way, weren’t made for each other either.

With Tom, it’s very different. It just falls all into place without us having to

change or do anything about it. This is a whole new experience and frankly, it's wonderful. As for you and me, let's be friends, please, Nik. You will always have a place in my heart, but I cannot and do not want to live with you and this has nothing to do with Tom, it would also be the case without him."

"I understand," Nik whispered, barely audible. "It just hurts me to see you with another man, but I also know you're right. We don't fit together as lovers. It's just not easy, to be honest."

"I will always be there for you, Nik. You are like my brother and that won't change, even if I'm sometimes angry and disappointed."

"You have a big heart, Joana." Nik looked at her with pain in his eyes. "I wish you luck."

He then got up and walked away with his back bent. Joana looked after him for a long time. Tears ran down her face.



When Katie woke up, it was already 11 am. She jumped out of bed and immediately went for a cool shower. "I must have been quite tired," she mused, while getting dressed.

Clothes weren't that important to her anymore, but she was glad to find her bright red favourite shorts were clean. Joana had washed them for her. No sooner was she dressed, there was a knock on her cabin door.

"All good with you?" Bashan stood in front of her, beaming.

"Yep," Katie replied, realising her heart had started pounding wildly. "I just want to have a little something to eat before we start the solar panels. Are you coming along?"

"My pleasure. I have already had breakfast, but I'm happy to keep you company. Our kitchen service today has conjured up a wonderful juice, which you have to try."

"Then let's go." Katie went ahead with big steps. "Maybe we can still meet Joana, who wanted to have breakfast with us today. Unfortunately, it is already a little late. We'll see."

Bashan followed her and struggled to tear his gaze off her red shorts. They suited her too well. "You look magnificent again," he remarked as they entered the restaurant.

"Thank you." Katie was delighted with the compliment. She then spotted

Joana sitting alone at a table and headed towards her.

"How good you are here. I thought it wasn't going to happen anymore." Joana smiled at them with joy.

"Is everything okay with you?" asked Katie. "You look a little agitated."

"I had a very intimate conversation with Tom today and then it turned out that Nik was listening to us," Joana replied.

"Oh," Katie grinned. "That's not exactly nice."

"However," Joana sipped on her fresh juice. "Now at least he knows exactly where he stands. Some just choose the hard way. I can't help it. Let's talk about the Inner Earth. We don't have much time left before your job starts."

"Piet just told us we're starting at one o'clock. He wants to look up a few more things beforehand," Bashan let her know.

"Great, then we have an hour more." Joana was thrilled. "Katie told me you're an emissary of the Inner Earth. I've never met anyone like that. Could you tell more about it please?" She sat there with sparkling eyes.

Bashan took a sip from his coffee mug and then he began his story. "When I was a young boy, I would often visit my grandmother and also spend the majority of my holidays with her. Granny was a mysterious and remarkable woman. She had a huge garden full of medicinal herbs and rare plants and she prepared healing potions from them, which she sold to the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. It was amazing. She could live off what she grew in her garden and the sale of her remedies. Her husband had fallen in the First World War and she had never been interested in another man again.

"When we sat together in the evening, she told me exciting stories of a world inside the Earth. But it wasn't until I got older, when I understood that what she told me wasn't a fantasy, but her own experiences and the truth. If I asked my mum about it, she was embarrassed and dodged the question. She didn't want to talk about it, but my grandma left me a small, handwritten book in which she had noted down everything I needed to know to fulfil my destiny."

"Fascinating." Joana leaned back relaxed.

"May we ask what's in the book?" Katie inquired.

Bashan nodded. "Definitely! It has to do with you as well, my dear."

"How could she know about me?" Katie was perplexed.

"She didn't know your name, of course, but she described you accurately and

already told me as a child that I would meet you one day. I'd just forgotten about it over the years. When I packed my suitcase for this trip, the book fell off of the shelf right in front of my feet and that's when I knew I had to take it, and that something was going to happen.”



“Lalalalaland iiiiii sisisisisight, lalalalaland iiiiii sisisisight!” Mariah yelled, as she was standing guard on the look-out.

Everyone rushed excitedly on deck. Brad climbed up to Mariah in no time with another pair of binoculars. “I see a strip of coast,” he shouted enthusiastically. “It is still very far away, but by the evening we may have reached it, if the wind continues to blow as before.”

Everybody cheered, jumped up and fell into each other's arms laughing and crying. A huge tension dissipated. Tom came to Joana and put his arms around her from behind. “I spoke to him and he took it very well. He said he sort of knew anyway. I just had to promise him that I will always be nice and loving to Lisa and that I will be there for her when she needs me. Isn't that remarkable? No idea where he got that maturity from. He wasn't even particularly affected.”

Joana put her hands on his. “My God, I'm more than glad he reacted so well to it and now it looks like we can go ashore soon and then finally know where we are. I'm totally excited.”

Brad came down from the look-out. “Tonight, we will have solid ground under our feet again,” he reported, gleefully. “We just have to stay on course. I'll see if I can make radio contact.” He ran back to the bridge and everyone followed him. He then tried to make radio contact, but the devices remained dead. Nothing happened. “It doesn't work!” he realized disappointed. “We're going to have to be patient until tonight, then we'll know more.”

That, however, didn't weaken the boisterous mood. Everyone was talking wildly and the lack of contact was quickly forgotten. Brad was the only one who was worried about this, but he didn't want to spoil the joy of the others and so he kept this to himself.

Jane, who had noticed the shadow on his face, took his arm. “We'll know more soon.”

Brad looked at her gratefully and nodded. Never had he experienced such closeness and such a wordless understanding with another human being. He wasn't sure at times if this was a dream or reality.

Piet came to the bridge to pick up Katie, Bashan and Archie. "Let's get our job done," was his terse comment.

"Probably it's better to be busy anyway, otherwise the day will be very, very long." Katie shrugged her shoulders.

Archie took Puschel on his arm and ran behind Piet. "See you later, Dad and then we can go ashore," he shouted.



Tom and Joana looked after them laughing. Then Tom put his arm around Joana.

"Nik listened to our conversation this morning," Joana let him know.

"Well, those are fine manners." Tom reacted indignantly, but then he had to giggle. "Now he's at least up to date and you don't need to think about what you're telling him anymore."

Joana grinned. "That's what I told myself. We talked about it briefly, but now there's nothing left to say and that's a good thing."

Tom nodded. "You see, my sunshine, things are starting to simplify. I feel like a new era has dawned. Do you sense the same?"

"Now you say it, definitely yes! Somehow everything is different and apart from our uncertain situation, all seems to me new, fresh and at the same time coherent. I can't describe it any other way yet. It's like things should be this way. I also feel more and more that my thinking and my perception are changing and my emotions are different as well. They are deeper, brighter and also more direct. Perhaps you could also say 'honest', although I was far from dishonest before. At the same time, they are gentler, more positive and more loving. That's special. What about you? Do you also get the impression that you are changing?"

"Well." Tom reached for her hand. "You're not allowed to laugh at me, but I've been dreaming the same dream over and over again for days. It started when I was still home. I dream of an ancient seaside city where I live and work as a priest and builder of sacred geometry. These dreams are becoming more and more concrete and for the past two days you have also appeared in them."

"What am I doing?" Joana inquired curiously.

"You don't think my imagination is going over the top?" Tom asked, relieved.

“Not at all, so get on with it. What am I in your dreams?” Joana got very excited.

“You are my partner and also a priestess. You live and work in the holy temple of the Earth keepers and are responsible for the welfare of animals and nature. We both belong to the highest priest's caste there.

“In the beginning, everything was good in those dreams, but they're starting to change. It's like a great calamity is brewing. When I wake up, I am sweat-bathed, completely shaken up and often can't fall asleep for a long time. It's all so incredibly realistic. What do you think of it?” Tom said insecure.

“Have you ever heard of Atlantis?” Joana looked him straight in the eye and hers were greener than they had ever been before. In them, golden stars danced.

Tom got dizzy again and his knees softened. “I have to sit down.” He was quite pale in the face.

“Are you alright?” Joana asked, worried.

“I think so. It was just like you brought millennia-old energies back to life in me and I can't quite classify them. I only know Atlantis is a legend of a sunken continent, but what does this have to do with us and why does it shake me so much when you talk about this?”

Joana looked at him for a long time and Tom felt himself melt under her gaze. It was as if he was dissolving into a sense of eternity and love.



“We'll talk about it later. I would say your son needs you right now.”

No sooner had Joana said that, when Archie appeared and with a bloody knee.

“How did you know?” Tom was now completely puzzled.

“Intuition.” Joana stood up to meet Archie. “What happened to you?” she inquired compassionately.

“Oh, nothing too bad,” Archie bravely responded. “I stumbled across a bar and Piet thinks I should go to see Rose and have the wound disinfected.”

“That's a good idea! We're coming with you,” Tom decided.

Joana and Tom each grabbed one of Archie's arms to support his weight so he didn't have to use his injured knee.

“Are we a new family now?” Archie asked bluntly.

Tom turned red and Joana had to laugh.

“In a way, at least if you want us to be,” she responded. “But of course, I’m not your mom. You already have one and a very good one too.”

“That’s indeed true, and I do miss her.”



They fell silent as they had reached the hospital ward. While Tom held the door open for them, Joana saw with a side glance how much their brief conversation had touched him.

“Well, what happened here?” Rose pointed her hand at the examination table and Archie lay down on it.

“I wanted to help Piet, and in the process, I stumbled so Piet sent me to see you.” Archie shrugged slightly as Rose carefully cleaned the cut.

“You did the right thing to come here!” Rose wrapped a bandage around the knee. “The wound is quite deep, but if you keep it clean, it will heal quickly.”

“No problem.” Archie jumped off the lounge relieved. “Can I get back to Piet now?” Rose nodded and the boy happily ran away.

“He has dealt with the whole situation remarkably well,” Rose expressed with relief.

“Yes, it looks like what happened is hardly weighing on him. I’m very happy about it,” Tom confirmed. “Even at night he is completely relaxed and sleeps deeply and soundly.”

“We adults keep making life difficult for ourselves by thinking far too much. Luckily, children and adolescents are still unencumbered. It’s therefore much easier for them to simply be in the here and now and to enjoy it,” Joana commented.

“Yes, we can learn some things from them and in general I have the impression that today’s children are superior to us in many things. Just how they handle computers and mobile phones, we can only watch and be amazed.” Tom reached for Joana’s hand.

Noticing Rose’s critical gaze, he calmly explained. “I love her, and Archie already knows. It’s no longer a secret.”

“Oh.” Rose was completely flabbergasted.

Tom laughed. “Yes, there are sometimes surprises and miracles and this is both and much more.”

He turned to the door and Joana followed him wordlessly. There were tears in her eyes. Tom had once again caused her heart to beat wildly in her chest.

The self-evident nature with which he stood by his love made her feel truly accepted and carried her to seventh heaven. For the first time, she became slightly dizzy. Joana pulled Tom into a deck chair and kissed him intimately with a tenderness that comes from an open heart.

“Joana, you're playing with my mind and body. I am feeling so much love, I can barely stand it.” Tom was gasping for air and holding her tenderly. “Can you please repeat that?”

“Sure.” Joana's lips once again fondled his mouth, while the world around them seemed to stand still.



Katie struggled to focus on working with the solar panels. Even the prospect of having more power to cook and light available again soon could barely keep her on track. She was so excited because of the land sighting that everything swirled in her. She played with the thought of leaving the ship and just flying back home. Perhaps she could invite Bashan to accompany her. And then she was extremely eager to learn what Bashan's grandmother had said about her.

The work dragged on, but after what felt like infinitely long hours, Piet announced, “Well done people, we'll do the rest tomorrow. I hope to be able to get some spare parts on land. That would make everything much easier. We will meet after the landing in case nothing comes of it.”

Katie hopped up and down in front of Bashan like a young child. “I can't wait for it anymore,” she laughed. “Can you please tell me now what your grandma said about me?”

Bashan looked at her amused. “I don't think I have any other choice.” He grinned. “Come on, we can get something to drink and sit on the sun deck. From there, we can also see the progress we are making towards land. We are getting closer and closer and I can already see the outlines of the coast.”

“Brilliant.” Katie was pleased for now. They got glasses of cold water and made themselves comfortable on a couple of loungers.

They had barely sat down when Katie looked impatiently at Bashan. He

carefully pulled a small, red book from his shirt and began his story. “My grandmother told me the following over and over again and also wrote it down. I’ll read it to you: ‘My beloved grandson. Maybe you have often wondered what is different about you compared to your fellow human beings and I would like to unravel this mystery now. The most important thing you need to know is, you weren’t born on the Earth’s surface, but inside the Earth, in a city called Gomilo. Your mother never liked to talk about it because she lost her husband, who is your father, there. It broke her heart and that’s why, after his death, she followed me to the surface of the Earth to raise you.

She was very shaken when I told her that I had also been a widow for many years. Having decided to stay, I helped her build a new life. The man you thought was your father wasn’t your biological father, but he was a good person and always took good care of you, too. You couldn’t have had a better father. However, your mother couldn’t talk about it, so you’re only now learning about it.

You, my grandson, are a direct descendant of the Atlanteans, who at the time when Atlantis went down, retreated to live inside the Earth until the time was right to go back to the surface. As I left the Inner Earth to accomplish my service to humanity, it was prophesied that you would come to me and grow up under my care, which then happened. My responsibility was to prepare you as best as possible for your life’s mission and to impart the old knowledge to you. Knowing that as a child you wouldn’t remember everything, I told you, I wrote it down in this book. Take good care of it, you’re still going to need it.”

“Wow,” Katie was impressed and looked at Bashan with big eyes. “Hardly anyone has such a story to share. Have you read the whole book?”

“Not yet, only up to a certain point, where the instruction is that I should only continue reading after I have met the woman previously described as my companion. But listen for yourself.”

“The prophecy says that in middle age you will meet a woman who is tall and slim and has red hair. You will get to know her in exceptional circumstances and you will fall in love with each other. She is the woman with whom you will return to the interior of the Earth. Both of you are ambassadors who will mediate between the inner and outer Earth and thus help to reshape the world and society on the Earth’s surface. The old world will be destroyed by a major storm and nothing will be as it once was. But many like you will survive and it will be your job to create a better world.”

Bashan looked at Katie, who sat quietly in her chair with tears running down

her face. "I've always wondered what my true mission is here on this planet. Everyone around me seemed to know what they wanted to do and what the point of their lives is, only I could never quite get excited about anything. I've always thought something was wrong with me." She sobbed. "And now you're reading something like this to me."

"Should I stop?" Bashan asked, considerate.

"No way." Katie had to laugh. "It's the best thing I've ever heard in my entire life and you can't even imagine how happy it's making me." Katie took his hand. "Are you sure I'm the one this is about?"

"Let's continue." Bashan started reading again in a calm voice. "Well, you may be wondering how you'll know you've found the right woman. There are three signs of this. The first thing is, she smells of roses. The second thing is, she has a little birthmark on her left thigh that looks like a tree and the third and most important sign, she takes your heart by storm and makes you feel like you've arrived.' When I saw you in your shorts this morning, I could see that mark. It is a symbol of the tree of life and now take a look at what I have on my left shoulder." Bashan turned and pulled up his T-shirt at his back.

Katie got hot and cold. "It looks like mine and I once considered getting rid of it." Then she was speechless. She stared at Bashan open-mouthed.

He got up and knelt in front of her. "Do you agree it's you now?"

Katie nodded hesitantly. "But I have to get used to the whole idea first. Is there more in the book about who I am and why I have this task?"

Bashan nodded and reached for the book again. "This woman is also a direct descendant of the Atlanteans, but she won't begin to remember until she meets you. She is the heir to the throne of an old, royal lineage. She is a princess who was born in the Inner Earth and then raised on the Earth's surface by foster parents. This may seem heartless to you, but at this time it was the only way to give her the socialisation she needed to prepare for her task. Her parents will still be alive when she hears this and are waiting for her to come home and take the throne when it's the right time. It's your job to get her safely there and give her protection and all the support she needs. You are her companion, her lover and her servant when it is of need."

"I can't believe it. That's crazy," Katie gasped. "How do you feel about that?"

"It's an honour." Bashan laughed, bent his head and kissed her hand.

"I will protect you with my life if need be and my heart is yours anyway."

Now it was Bashan, who had tears glistening in his eyes. He got up and then sat next to her again.

“I have to digest all this.” Katie was entirely overwhelmed. “This is really deep and unfathomable information.”

“I also thought that when I first read it. I wasn't sure at the beginning if it was just my grandmother's imagination. Now you can imagine what this did to me when I met you. It's truly hard to believe, and it goes further.”

“That has to wait.” Katie gently stopped him. “Let me process this message for a while and then we can read more. I think I want to lie down now.”

“Do you want to come with me to my cabin and rest in my arms?” Bashan asked in his calm manner and with a lot of tenderness in his voice.

“I can't resist that.” Katie laughed, and they stood up.



The day was coming to an end. Meanwhile, they were close enough to the coast to perceive details. They could recognise homes and fields, but there was not a single light.

Brad was very troubled by this and decided to convene a meeting. He rang the bell which was the newly agreed signal for spontaneous gatherings, and everyone flocked on deck.

“I guess you've noticed it,” Brad opened the conversation.

“None of the houses has light,” Archie reacted and his eyelids fluttered.

Brad nodded and continued. “That's exactly what worries me. I can't understand it and we still don't have radio contact either. Do you agree we should be cautious and wait until we can see more tomorrow morning?”

A murmur went through the ranks.

“I suggest we vote on it,” Joana spoke up after a while.

Everyone nodded.

“So, who's in favour of us waiting until tomorrow?” She looked questioningly around the group. Almost all raised their hands. “And who is in favour of us leaving today?”

Joana counted four hands. One of them belonged to Nik.

“I would say the clear majority prefers to disembark tomorrow. Can those

who would like to go tonight agree with it for now?”

All but Nik said yes.

“What about you Nik?” Joana wanted to know.

“All good,” he assured.

Joana had a strange feeling in her stomach from his response but paid no further heed to it. She was too preoccupied with the question of why no lights could be seen.

“Let's have dinner and go to sleep early. Tomorrow is an important day,” Brad recommended.

The assembly disbanded. A subdued mood spread rapidly over the entire ship, like a big grey cloud. Joana went for supper with Tom and Archie. Katie, Bashan, Brad and Jane also joined them.

“Something is completely out of alignment, I can sense it,” Jane mentioned.

Katie and Joana nodded. They felt the same.

“Who knows what happened on land during the storm? Perhaps there are major power outages,” Bashan surmised.

“Yes, that may well be. Solar storms can destroy the entire energy and satellite system,” Archie pointed out.

“We just have to wait until tomorrow, then we'll know what's going on. Speculation doesn't get us any further here,” Joana interjected.

When they finished eating, Katie took Joana aside. “I will stay with Bashan from now until further notice,” she happily informed her and Joana was able to see how much in love she was.

She gave Katie a big hug. “How beautiful for you. You look totally happy.”

“I am and I do have a lot to report to you, but it must wait until tomorrow. I want to sort it out in my mind first.” Katie beamed.

“Then let's catch up when we're back. Who knows what's going to happen, but we'll find time for us. I want to know what's making you shine so brightly.” Joana smiled. “Have a wonderful night.”

“You, too.” Katie waved at her.



Joana had to laugh. “We'll see.” She then got Sina and went with her to the

dog space, where Tom and Archie were already waiting. "I was hoping to meet you here," she said, gladly.

"Puschel is already so looking forward to running again," Archie informed her.

"He and Sina can finally play together properly; it's going to be great," he stated with delight. "And then we can call Mom."

Tom and Joana just looked at each other, but both remained silent. Archie didn't notice.

"Katie is now sleeping in Bashan's cabin." Joana sat down on the comfortable bench. "That opens up completely new possibilities." Tom gazed at her in a questioning and yearning way. "You are always welcome," Joana warmly invited him.

Tom started shaking again and had to sit down next to her. "I'll see what I can do. It may be too early to confront Archie with this."

"Yes, I agree." Joana sneezed.

"Are you sick?" Tom asked anxiously.

"All's good, I'm just a little cold. It's time to go to bed and I'm exhausted," Joana answered gently.

Tom gave her a kiss on the cheek. "If Archie is asleep, I will look in on you. Sweet dreams, my angel."

Joana got up. "Good night." She made her way to her cabin with Sina.



Jane and Brad had also returned early to Brad's room.

"I can see you're very worried." Jane started the conversation and dropped into one of the comfy armchairs. Brad sat down opposite her. He seemed very serious.

"However," he confirmed in an occupied voice. "I am the captain of this ship and still responsible for the safety and lives of my passengers. What if I put them in danger with this landing? We don't know what to expect."

"Yes, you are the captain, but all except Archie are of legal age and old enough to decide for themselves what risks they are taking. No one is forcing them to go ashore and maybe everything is much more harmless than we fear," Jane pointed out.

“Well, of course, it could be fine.” Brad tried to relax. “Let's have some rest, I need to be fit tomorrow.”

“Hopefully, you'll find a little peace in my arms.” Jane got up and went to the bathroom. Brad followed her.

Ten minutes later, they were lying in bed. Jane lovingly put her arms around him and Brad was instantly in the land of dreams. “He's completely overwhelmed,” Jane mused. Then her eyes fell shut, too.



Katie and Bashan both sat on Bashan's large double bed. On the bedside table, seven candles burned and spread a romantic light. Between them lay the book. “Should I read on?” Bashan asked.

“No,” Katie denied decisively. “I'd rather you tell me something about your life.” Bashan's hair shimmered golden in the candlelight. He wore it loose and looked like an angel.

“I'm more than happy to do that,” he replied kindly. “What do you want to know? You can ask anything.”

She gave him an encouraging smile. “Let's start with your childhood.”

Bashan leaned his back against the wall. “As a young boy, I played alone in the woods and imagined that I lived there in a small village. I built tree huts and talked to elves and dwarves. But I didn't tell anyone, because I was embarrassed. At night, I kept dreaming of a white city that you could only reach via a secret tunnel. To enter, you had to use a complex code. Once I forgot what it was and the guards sent me back home. Today I understand it was lucid dreaming, and that I was actually there at night. It's amazing, but I can still remember the details. There was a royal palace. This was a special and sacred place and the king served the people and not the other way around. Nor was he a ruler as you know it. He was more of a patron responsible for the welfare of this city-state. He had been elected by the people. Once I had an audience with him and he asked me to find his daughter and bring her back. Weird, I had pushed that aside altogether. I promised him I would and felt like a knight in shining armour for days. Later I forgot about it. How amazing that I remember all this now.”

“We are so wise as children and then we become more and more twisted and depraved in this world. Our natural instincts and abilities are restrained, even thwarted, and what remains is, in the end, a rather miserable remnant of our formerly great self.” Katie stared pensively into the flames of the two candles

standing right in front of her. The longer she did so, the more they merged into one, bright flame.

“Yes, so many lose who they can truly be, but thankfully not so with everyone. At the end of the day, they didn't get us. The secret rulers on this planet are simply not omnipotent.” Bashan stood up and opened the window.

Cool and fresh air wafted through the room. Katie shivered.

“Should I close the window again?”

“No, no, fresh air is good,” Katie stated.

“Then I better keep you warm,” Bashan suggested, sitting behind her so he could hug her.

Katie leaned back against his chest and closed her eyes. “This feels good.” She sighed.

“It's gorgeous to hold you in my arms,” Bashan whispered in her ear. They sat in this position for quite a while, listening to the even pounding of the waves.

“Do you think we should sleep soon?” muttered Katie, who was already drifting off.

“May I keep holding you?” Bashan inquired softly.

“Nothing better than that,” Katie retorted.



Joana showered and then snuggled into her cosy bed. She was at the same time tired and restless. Through the open window, she could hear the ocean and the longer she listened, the calmer she became. She had almost fallen asleep, when the door quietly opened and Tom stuck his head in the room.

“Are you still awake?” he whispered.

“Now I am,” Joana replied with a laugh. “I wasn't sure if you were going to come, that's why I didn't wait for you.”

“If I say I'm coming, I do. I'm not one of those people who make hollow promises.”

Joana sat up. “You smell good,” she noted.

“I've just showered,” Tom stammered. He couldn't turn his gaze off her. The moonlight fell through the window exactly on her face and she looked so

gorgeous and almost angelic that he just wanted to keep her forever in his arms.

“Everything okay?” The thin strip of Joana’s silk nightgown slipped over her shoulder.

“If you don't immediately pull the blanket over your head, I’m going to straight away climb into your bed and never let go of you.” Tom took a deep breath.

Joana lifted her duvet and made a welcoming hand gesture. “I do have a lot of room here for both of us. There are quite a few advantages to being on a luxury ship.”

Tom took off his T-shirt and jeans and stood in his blue underpants in front of her bed.

“What a magnificent example of a man,” Joana thought. He had grown perfectly straight, was well-muscled and super-slim. His blue eyes sparkled in the moonlight like sapphires. “I can hardly believe this person has stepped into my life.”

Joana felt unfathomable gratitude rising into her and she became infinitely warm around her heart. When Tom took her in his arms, it was beating so wildly that she got almost scared.

Sensing her heartbeat, Tom took her hand and placed it on his heart so she could feel it beating just as violently as hers. “It seems we are a unity.”

Tom smiled and around his mouth the fine and friendly wrinkles lit up that she loved so much. Joana felt like she was in a trance and wide awake at the same time. As awake and alive as never before in her life. And she felt completely accepted and safe.

They lay quietly nestled together for what felt like an eternity, just feeling each other’s breath and body. Nothing else existed in this divine moment as their souls and hearts communicated in complete harmony.

“Have you experienced anything like this before?” Tom finally asked.

“Yes,” Joana replied.

Tom looked at her in disappointment. “With Nik?” In his voice was an undertone of jealousy.

Joana laughed. “No, my beloved. With you, a long, long time ago. When you got into my bed just now, it was like a déjà vu and abruptly the memory came back.”

“The memory of what?” Tom's voice now sounded distinctly relieved, and he looked at her, shaken up.

“The memory of our life together in Atlantis,” Joana revealed. “It matches your dreams exactly. I can remember better and better, how we worked and lived there together. We were, as you dreamed, both high priests and I came from Lemuria to Atlantis to be there with you and to work. At the time, we knew we were twin flames and had a common task. The bad and unforgivable thing was that we and the other priests went too far and experimented with forces that we weren't able to control and that ultimately led to the demise of Atlantis.”

“What happened to us when Atlantis went down?” Tom wanted to know.

“As far as I can remember, you died shortly before as a result of radiation and I was taken to a safe place with a broken heart. I had to leave everything, including my animals, behind. We both paid a heavy price for our megalomania and condemned ourselves harder than others did for it. At the time, we vowed not to get back together until we had learned our lessons and worked off our guilt. We also separated from our spiritual powers and our creative and healing powers, thus lived a very limited existence throughout the millennia. As I said, the price was high.”

Joana paused. Tom didn't respond.

“Do you think I'm crazy?” Joana asked after a while.

“If you had told me this a few months ago, I would have answered ‘yes’ without hesitation. But after all that has happened and what is going on, especially within me, the answer is ‘no’ I don't think you're crazy. I believe you have more access to buried knowledge than most people. All that you have told me triggers a deep resonance and a great sadness in me. How could we possibly have made that happen? We should have known better.”

“Looks like we didn't know any better Tom. We wanted to achieve great things at that time and just went too far in the process. Thank goodness, the guilt has now been erased, otherwise, we wouldn't be here in one bed together now. That's the good news and you can't even imagine how happy it makes me.” Joana cuddled up to him.

“But, I can,” Tom tenderly said. “I feel the same way. And I would say that I am just one of the happiest people on this planet right now.”

“I'm totally in agreement.” Joana bent over him and kissed him in a way that completely took his breath away. And again, the world sank around them

while they bathed in an ocean of love.

“If we don't sleep soon, it will be bright before we've even closed an eye.” Tom had to expend all his strength to pull himself together. “I better go back to Archie now.”

“See you soon.” Joana stroked his cheek. Tom stood up, quickly dressed and left the room. “My goodness,” Joana thought. “We just kissed and already it was thousands of times more intense than anything I've experienced before. What will happen when we fully indulge in physical love?”

She still had Tom's smell in her nose and her lips could feel his kisses. After a while, she curled up and moved amazingly quickly over into the world of dreams. Her face shimmered gently in the moonlight and her mouth showed a happy smile.

By the time the morning dawned, Joana was already up. She had only slept a little but felt completely awake and full of energy. She pinned such high hopes on that day. There was a slight restlessness in her that drove her to stop by Nik. His bed was untouched and there was no sign of him. Joana didn't wonder. She had secretly expected it. When she went to the dog area with Sina, she noticed that one of the small wooden lifeboats was missing.

“Oh, Nik.” Joana was upset. “Why do you always have to act out of line?” She knew this time she couldn't keep him out of trouble. He was on his own. Joana went to the kitchen a short time later, where she had registered for morning service. Sina lay outside in the rising sun and watched her through the kitchen door.



Nik had only briefly walked into his cabin after the meeting and retrieved his jacket, a water bottle and his pocket knife. He didn't see in the slightest reason why he should comply with the majority decision. After all, he was a free person and could do whatever he wanted. And he wished to go ashore to feel solid ground under his feet again. He was yearning for vodka and to wash down the whole silly journey and forget about it. Onboard, the alcohol had run out, and he had been sitting craving a drink for a few hours.

Nik remained on deck until the lights had gone out in the cabins. He waited until the guard on the viewing platform was being changed so they wouldn't see him leave. He then lowered the smallest boat down into the sea.

“I can manage this easily alone,” he told himself for courage. The sea was calm and he could clearly see the coast. He rowed hardily and after about an

hour he had made it to a beach. He was glad to walk on land.



That morning, everyone was up early. After breakfast together, they convened for another meeting. Once all were gathered, Brad stood up and spoke in a loud voice. "You already know, something is wrong. We didn't see a single light along the coast last night, although we were able to spot homes in the evening. This is probably not a good sign. I can't tell you what it means, but I would ask you to think carefully whether you truly want to disembark or would prefer to stay on the ship, at least until we have clarified what is happening. If you still want to come along, you are welcome, of course, to do so. We're going to fit in the boats in groups by ten people. Who wants to come along?"

All hands lifted. Brad had to laugh, and the others tuned in. "We seem to have a good shot of adventurous spirit in our blood, so let's get ready. Make sure you have sturdy footwear for walking."

"One moment please," Joana intervened. "I have to share something with you. As it stands, I presume Nik made landfall last night. Anyway, he's gone, and a boat is missing."

Brad couldn't hide his annoyance. "Why does he always have to do everything according to his head? Now we're lacking a boat and we need to search for him."

"No, we don't have to," Bashan stated. "We will just look to see if we encounter him and if not, we can then decide on how to proceed. Right now, we have more important things to do than take care of a self-centred egoist."

The others nodded in agreement and Joana just shrugged her shoulders resigned.

"One boat will have to go twice." Brad hummed grimly. "Who volunteers to wait?"

Joana, Tom, Archie, Jane, Mariah, Katie and Bashan raised their hands.

"We'll row back and forth," Piet offered, pointing to himself and Ken.

"OK, then let's go." Brad headed to the boats and everyone followed him.

"Are the dogs allowed to go along?" Archie wanted to know.

"Yes," Joana replied. "That's why we're in the last boat, then there's room for them."

“Great.” Archie beamed, but he was still limping.

“That knee doesn't exactly look healed yet,” Joana mused. “When we're back, Rose should look at that again.”

“Does your knee hurt a lot?” she turned to the boy.

“It's not too bad,” Archie fought off bravely. “The knee is slightly swollen and I can't bend it well. But now we have to go.”

They retrieved their belongings and watched as the other boats reached the shore one by one.

There was a small port there so they could dock. After what felt like an endless time, Piet and Ken came back. They climbed into the boat and Tom and Joana absailed the dogs. Then finally they were off.

“Have you seen anything?” Archie questioned.

“Not much,” Piet reported. “There are a few boats in the harbour, but there was no one to be seen. The others are waiting for us. We also found Nik's boat, but no trace of him.”

Tom noticed Joana tearing up and took her hand. “We will find him for sure,” he whispered into her ear.

“I hope so.” A shadow scurried over Joana's face.



And then they were in port. The others had waited patiently.

“We'll go towards the small town. It looks like the residents have fled. I have no idea why.” Brad sounded troubled as he took the lead.

“Maybe, they were afraid of a tsunami,” Archie mused. “A pole shift can trigger a mega-tsunami.”

“Perhaps you're right, but possibly we'll never find out what was truly going on here,” Brad responded.

They set off and, in a short space of time, reached the town, which was spookily empty.

“There's a supermarket. Should we get something to eat?” Archie asked. He was always hungry.

“Yeah, let's at least take a look in,” Brad suggested. They approached the building. The doors were open, and it didn't smell particularly good.

“Apparently people have been away longer than a couple of days and the fresh food has rotted,” Tom suspected.

And that's exactly how it was. As they walked through the market, rats were everywhere and scurried under the shelves. They hadn't left much of the fresh produce and it stank from their faeces and urine.

Joana and Katie became nauseous. They looked at each other.

“We'll wait outside,” they said at the same moment and Jane joined them too. Relieved they waited in the warm sun for their companions. After a while, they all came back.

“It's not very appetising,” Bashan recounted. “But the canned food and some other things are okay to be used. We will stock up before we get back on board. This will significantly increase our supplies.”

“We tried to find out where we are,” Katie reported. “The language is Spanish, but we couldn't discover a place name. In any case, it is only a small town. Basically, it's this street here and the rest are apartment buildings in small alleyways, all quite simple and southern style. I guess we're somewhere in South America, but where, we can't quite say. Perhaps we will find more clues. Let's take a look around.”

At that moment, loud music rang out from a bar on the opposite side of the street. Everyone ran as fast as they could across the road. When they stormed into the bar, they suddenly stopped. At the counter, there was a single guest, and that was Nik with a glass in his hand. In the corner, an old music box chimed.

“Well, look who's here?” he prattled.

Tom clenched his fist in his pocket. He had to work hard to master himself so as not to punch him in the face. It made him incredibly angry, how irresponsible Nik's behaviour was. And even more upsetting was the thought Joana had endured him for far too long.

Tom took a deep breath, turned around and walked out. Then something strange happened. Everyone else did exactly the same thing. They wordlessly left the bar.

As they stood outside again, Brad suggested, “Let's go. I can't say about you, but I don't have energy or space for anything like this.”

The others nodded and went back to the supermarket together. They got everything they might need and took it down to the boats in shopping carts.



When they arrived at the port, they couldn't believe their eyes. Nik stood wide-legged in the middle of the jetty. "I just wanted to tell you, I'm not going on board again," he confidently proclaimed. "I'll wait here until people come back or I'll fix a car and make my way home. I've had enough of sea voyages."

"No worries, Nik, we wish you the best of luck," Bashan meant without emotion.

"Bye, Nik, take care." Joana breathed a last kiss on his emaciated cheek, then she got into the boat too.

Soon they were on their way to the ship. The sea became increasingly wild, but with vigorous rowing, they reached the *Dragon Queen* before dark.

Back on board, no one was in the mood to talk. "Let's have dinner and then go to sleep," Jane suggested. "We can decide tomorrow on how to proceed. I personally have to process this situation for myself first."

"Yes, I'm the same," Joana agreed. After a simple meal, everyone retreated to their cabins.

Joana didn't feel like being alone. "Can I stay with Sina in your cabin tonight?" she asked Tom and Archie.

"Of course," Archie spontaneously replied generously. "Dad has a big bed; you'd easily fit in as well."

Joana and Tom stifled a grin and Joana replied earnestly, "Thank you, I appreciate the offer. I'll just go get my pyjamas and will be right back."

Tom looked after her. While he was slightly downcast by the day's experiences, the prospect of being able to sleep all night with Joana in his arms definitely lifted his spirits. "I think it's very nice of you to agree that Joana is allowed to stay with us," he turned to Archie.

"No problem," the boy answered as a matter of course. "She belongs to the family now and who wants to be alone after such a day?"

"You are right." Tom looked at him gratefully.

When Joana returned, Tom and Archie were already in bed. She quickly scurried into the bathroom and then slipped under the blanket with Tom.

Tom turned off the light. "Good night, son," he said, but Archie had already fallen asleep. Tom took Joana in his arms. "I love you," he whispered softly.

“And I love you,” Joana replied. Then they cuddled up to each other and fell asleep, exhausted.

As the new morning dawned, Brad was first on his feet.

Jane was still tired but decided to get up with him. “I’ll make us breakfast, dearest,” he offered and already he was out the door.

Jane looked after him in amazement. Something like this was new. Until now, he had always allowed himself to be served. Jane smiled and took a shower.

Afterwards, she already felt much better. She hadn’t told Brad, but she had been in constant pain in the heart area for several days and sometimes she had the impression of not getting enough air.

“If I only had my medicinal herbs,” she thought. “I would certainly be better quickly.” She would continue to say nothing to Brad, because he already had enough worries. If she wasn’t well, she simply claimed she was tired and wanted to rest. That had worked very well so far. Brad hadn’t raised any suspicions. Jane carefully put on her makeup, covering up the deep shadows under her eyes. “The others don’t look much better either,” she comforted herself, but deep down she knew that wasn’t true.

Brad came back with delicious smelling bread and fresh coffee. “I brought you some of the jam we found yesterday,” he remarked, kindly.

“What do you think of the situation?” Jane began without hesitation.

Brad looked at her with concern. “To be honest, I’m perplexed,” he confessed. “We can still only guess where we are and probably, we’ll never work out what happened to the people. I will propose at the meeting that we disembark one more time, stock up on everything we may need and then set sail again. Not much is going to happen here, I’m afraid. That’s what my male intuition tells me.”

“Oh, there is male intuition?” Jane quipped. “I always thought intuition was feminine.”

“So far, that may have been the case, but things seem to be changing,” Brad smiled. “Yes, I have noticed that too and I believe they are turning for the better, at least in terms of dealing with each other. It looks like everyone is becoming more sensitive and loving.”

Jane stirred her coffee thoughtfully. “Something seems to be transforming us.”

“We’re going to watch it.” Brad jumped up. “It’s time for the meeting. Do

you hear the bell?"

Jane also stood up. She was slightly dizzy, but she didn't let anything be noticed. "Let's do it," she spoke in a firm voice.



On deck, almost everyone was gathered. "I hope you guys got over the shock of yesterday a little bit," Brad opened the conversation.

"My suggestion is that we go ashore again and take everything that can be of benefit to us. If we still don't meet anyone or can't make radio or other contact with the rest of the world, I would advise that we sail on. Staying for longer will only use unnecessarily our supplies and as it stands, we will still need them urgently. How do you see the situation?"

"I think you're right," Tom spoke up. "If we wait too long, we may regret that later. Our supplies are limited and therefore also our time, whether that suits us or not."

The others nodded in agreement.

"Let's vote," Joana suggested. "Who is in favour of us sailing as soon as possible?"

All hands lifted.

"That's very clear." Then her face darkened.

"What do we do with Nik?" she asked helplessly. "We can't just leave him behind."

"Nik is grown up and old enough to decide what he wants to do and what he doesn't," Bashan objected.

"We can once again offer to him to come back on board, but if he doesn't want to, then we should let him have his will," he suggested.

"Let's vote on it, too," he continued. "Who agrees to my proposal?"

Everyone raised their hands, except Tom and Joana.

"What about you guys?" Bashan inquired.

"I'm against it," Joana's attitude was unequivocal. "I would like to talk to him again."

"And I'm abstaining." Tom looked unhappy. "But I would also be more comfortable if he were coming with us."

Joana gazed at him gratefully.

“Who is coming ashore?” Brad wanted to know. Enough people were quickly found and Tom, as well as Joana, were amongst them.

“We will go three in a boat. Then we have enough room for provisions on the return trip,” Brad ordered.

“May I come with you as well?” Archie was eager to go on land again.

“For sure and also the dogs. Who knows when they can let off steam next time.” Tom looked at him fondly.

“How is your knee doing?” Joana inquired.

“Oh, it hardly hurts anymore,” he fought off. “We don't have time for it now. I'll go to see Rose when we're back.”

“Promise?” demanded Joana.

“Promise,” Archie confirmed. They set off and climbed into the boats. Ken also joined them. Archie felt like he was in an adventure movie.



As soon as they were onshore, he ran off with Puschel to further explore the area.

Joana went in search of Nik with Sina. Eventually, she found him asleep in a hotel room. Joana opened the window. His strong body odour and the stench of alcohol made her nauseous.

“What are you doing here?” Nik was amazed. “And shut the curtains, it's too bright.”

Joana ignored him. She sat down in the armchair by the window.

“Nik, we're going to sail in an hour and I want you to come with us. It's very uncertain what's going to happen to you if you stay. Maybe you're going to die lonely.”

“Nonsense,” Nik claimed. “I'm exactly aware of what I'm doing and I've also already found a car to fix. Soon enough, I'm heading out. I'll be home long before you, Joana.” Nik laughed. “Don't worry about me.” He tickled Sina's head.

“Are you sure?” Joana's voice trembled slightly.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “You are acquainted with me well enough to know

you can't convince me.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Joana sounded sad. “I just hope your stubbornness doesn't cost you your life this time. I wish you luck.” Joana stood up and tears glistened in her eyes. “We've got to get going now.”

“You can come with me,” offered Nik and looked at her, questioningly.

Joana shook her head. “No way, Nik.” She left the room and ran out of the hotel all the way to the harbour. When she arrived there breathless, the others were already waiting for her.

“We were just coming to look for you.” Tom gazed at her compassionately.

“Let's go,” Joana demanded in a determined voice.

“So, Nik isn't coming?” Archie inquired.

“No.” Joana turned around and walked to the boat. Tom gave him a sign not to ask further.



Once on the ship, they hoisted the food, tools and spare parts for the rigging and machinery on board. “Set the sails, we're off again,” Brad commanded a short time later.

They sailed along the coast at a safe distance from shore. A light wind was blowing, which was moving the ship forward quickly.

“I'm going to lie down for a while. I have a terrible headache,” Joana told Tom.

“We'll look in on you later. Rest well, my sweetheart.” Tom kissed her on the forehead.

Joana went into her cabin and pulled the blanket over her head. She just wanted to sleep.

“Dad, look what I brought.” Archie proudly pulled a meter out of his pocket.

“What is that?” reacted Tom, interested.

“You won't believe it, but this is a super Geiger counter. I've always wanted to have one like this, but they were too expensive. I found that one in an abandoned house.”

“Does it work?” Tom took the device.

“Sure.” Archie expertly demonstrated it to him. “No need to worry,

everything is in the green area, but you never know where we're going to end up." He put the Geiger counter back in the bag.

Tom looked at him impressed. "You've quite grown up," he remarked.

Archie laughed. "I'm going to see Rose now so she can look at my knee. Since I went swimming on the beach, it hurts quite a bit."

"You were swimming with that injury?" Tom was horrified. "I'm coming with you! Let's hurry."

When Rose removed the bandage, she exclaimed, startled, "Archie, what did you do with your knee? It's completely inflamed."

"He went swimming with it!" Tom told her concerned.

"That wasn't a good idea, boy! Now I can only give you antibiotics and hope that helps."

"I'm allergic to antibiotics," Archie noted subdued.

"Then we have a problem," Rose stated seriously. "We can only disinfect your knee and pray it heals on its own."

"Is that all? Can't you do anything else for him?" Tom was upset.

"Unfortunately, no. We are not equipped for something like this. Normally we can request help via radio when needed and we are never at sea for more than a week. But now everything is different. I'm truly sorry." Rose disinfected the knee as best she could. Archie didn't make a sound.

"I'm scared for my leg," he confided to Tom when they were back in their cabin.

"What do you think of resting and laying down for a while?" Tom tried to calm him down, but he too was far from relaxed with the situation. "We'll ask Joana and Jane afterwards. Maybe they have an idea what else we can do so that your knee is healthy again soon."

Archie lay down on his bed, closed his eyes and didn't say a word. He looked pale and tired. Tom was now extremely worried. "We need a hospital," he thought desperately. He then sat silently next to Archie's bed in the comfy armchair and stared out the window.

Joana found him there asleep sitting upright when she entered the cabin a few hours later. Tom woke up. "What's going on?" Joana asked quietly. Archie seemed to be asleep.

"His knee is badly inflamed," Tom whispered. "We need a hospital."

Joana seated herself on the armrest. “We can ask Jane if she has anything for him, but even that is likely to be difficult because she can't collect herbs here.”

“I know.” The worry wrinkles on Tom's forehead got even deeper. “Archie went swimming and as a result, the wound became inflamed. I don't want to know what dirt he got in there.”

“I took the bandage off while swimming and put it back on after,” Archie reported out of his bunk. Tom and Joana had to smile.

“Apparently, the water wasn't that clean,” Joana assumed.

“It looked very clear,” Archie professed.

“Be that as it may, now that you are awake, let's look out for Jane. Maybe she has a miracle cure,” Tom suggested.



Archie climbed out of his bed. He limped significantly. Puschel and Sina didn't mind that in the slightest. They happily jumped around him.

After a brief visit to the dog pen, they found Jane on the bridge. She sat next to Brad on a high chair.

Joana immediately noticed she had black rings under her eyes. Even the carefully applied makeup couldn't hide that from her. Plus, she looked very pale in the face.

“Maybe she's not sleeping enough,” Joana thought.

“Hello Jane,” Archie started in his direct way. “My knee is inflamed, and Rose can't help me anymore. Do you have any medicine or herbs for me?”

“Unfortunately, no, my darling,” Jane looked at him, distressed.

“I couldn't take herbs with me on the journey and there was no opportunity to collect new. Maybe we can find some when we go back to shore.”

Archie gazed at her in disappointment. “You were my last hope,” he spoke quietly.

Tom's heart was bleeding. He felt so helpless and had an incredibly guilty conscience.

“With all that's been going on here really no one could have guessed this might happen,” Joana meant as if she had read his thoughts.

Tom looked at her gratefully. “Thank you for reminding me of that.”

Joana stroked over his arm. "What do you think about having dinner?" she suggested. "It was a long day and a hot meal would certainly do us all good."



The others nodded and so they made their way to the restaurant. There was a little surprise waiting for them. Mariah had donned her beautiful long golden coloured dress and sat at the piano with her hair pinned up. She looked ravishing. Standing proudly next to her, Piet announced, "Mariah is giving a concert after dinner tonight. We thought a bit of entertainment might cheer us up."

Everyone clapped enthusiastically.

Archie stared at Mariah with his mouth open. "She's so gorgeous, can I be near her?"

"But clearly." Tom was glad Archie had found some distraction. "Sit and I'll bring you something to eat."

Archie seemed to glow from the inside out. There was no escaping the fact that he was totally in love with the girl.

"He is slowly becoming a young man," Joana remarked, turning to Tom.

"What do you mean?" Tom responded bewildered. "For me, he's still the little boy."

"Look at him!" Joana laughed. "I would say he is in the process of becoming an adolescent who is falling in love for the first time in his life."

Tom stared at Archie in bafflement. "True," he then confirmed. "Who would have thought so."

They sat down at a table with Katie and Bashan. "Well, my Royal Highness, how are you?" Joana inquired and laughed at Katie. She was so glad to see her friend happy and radiant.

"Outstanding," Katie replied. "Can I tell Tom what you read to me?" she asked Bashan.

"Why not? He will find out anyway." Bashan also looked infinitely happy. "The book says that I am a princess from inside the Earth and that my parents still live there and are waiting for me. I was raised on the crust by foster parents and Bashan's job is to bring me back to my true family so I can take the line of the throne. What do you think of that?" Katie gazed at him eagerly and burst into resounding laughter.

It was obvious that Tom was completely bemused and had no idea what to make of this story.

“For Tom, this is all new,” Joana grinned. “But for me, too, it's quite puzzling on what's going on here. It's like we're suddenly in a different dimension where incredible things happen, and different rules prevail.”

“I feel the same,” Bashan spoke out his impression.

Then the conversation was interrupted because Mariah started her concert. Her hands swirled across the keys in rousing harmonies and her voice sounded as full as never before. Joana could sense she was playing for Archie. She was able to perceive the connection between their two hearts energetically. It was a divine light but also a strong bond at the same time. “They are destined for each other,” went through her mind.

The concert lasted almost an hour and after an extensive round of applause, there was a salutary silence that no one wanted to disturb. Since it was already relatively late, everyone gradually dispersed and retreated to their cabin.

“I'm going to stay with Archie tonight,” Tom let Joana know as they got up.

“Yes, he needs you. Hopefully, his knee will be back to health soon.” Joana was hiding in her warm, blue jacket. A fresh breeze had come up, carrying the *Dragon Queen* quickly through the waves. “I'm excited to see where the wind takes us. Sleep well, see you tomorrow.”



Joana walked away with Sina. Tom stared after her for a long time. He was still confused and deeply troubled by Archie's leg. Soon he looked out for his son and spotted him holding hands with Mariah, engrossed in deep conversation. “My kid's grown up indeed.” Tom still couldn't believe it.

Hesitant, he joined the two of them. “Hi,” he interrupted. They looked at him with dreamy eyes. “I thought it was time to go to bed and wanted to ask if you're coming along?” Tom was astonished to find that he was slightly unsure.

“Yes, I'll come right away,” Archie replied. “I just want to take Mariah to her cabin,” he explained earnestly.

Tom nodded. “See you then. Your concert was wonderful,” he said to Mariah.

“Thank you,” she answered, not stuttering for the first time.

Tom took his jacket and left.

When Archie also entered the cabin a while later, Tom had almost fallen asleep, but he was awake again when Archie turned on a small light.

“Oh, I didn't want to bother you,” he apologised.

“No problem. Can it be that you are in love?” Tom cautiously inquired.

“Mariah has conquered my heart,” Archie stated simply.

“I am pleased. Are you happy?” His father smiled at him.

“She's good for me,” he answered.

“I got the impression that you were doing Mariah good, too. When she said thank you today, she was able to speak quite normally,” Tom noted in a warm voice.

“When we're together, she doesn't stutter.” Archie sat down and unwrapped the bandage from his knee.

Tom jumped out of bed in horror. “My God, that got a lot worse!” he gasped.

“That's why I had to turn on the light. It hurts a lot.” Archie groaned quietly.

“What can we do?” Tom was distraught. “I will apply again the disinfectant ointment that Rose gave me. Unfortunately, there is nothing more we can do.” Archie gazed at Tom sadly. “It doesn't look good, Dad.”

Tom was incredibly miserable. “We'll go straight to Rose in the morning.” He tried to give his voice a positive sound, but it failed.

“Don't worry,” Archie appeased him. “After all, it's my fault. I really shouldn't have gone swimming.”

That blew Tom over. He was just glad Archie was turning out the light at that moment so he couldn't see his tears.



“I want to know now what's wrong with you!” Brad sat in front of Jane in the captain's cabin on the sofa holding her hands. “Do you truly think you can hide from me if you're not well?” He looked at her indignantly.

“I preferred to,” Jane replied with a weak voice.

“So, what's going on?” Brad inquired insistently.

“It's my heart,” she hesitantly confessed.

“What about your heart?” Jane could hear the fear in his words.

“I have been in pain in the heart area for some time and I have problems getting air. That's all I can tell you. If only I had my herbs, then I would certainly be doing well again soon. Don't worry, it will be okay.” Jane smiled bravely at him.

Brad felt his stomach contract. “We'll go to Rose as soon as it gets light. I want her to check you over.”

She nodded. “If it calms you down.”

Brad pulled Jane into his arms. “I haven't told you yet, but I love you more than my life. I need you. Without you, my life would be empty and my heart cold.”

Jane held him. “I will be with you as long as I live and I'll still be in your heart after that,” she assured him. “Let's go to sleep, it's already late.” She gently freed herself from his hands.

Brad didn't really want to let her go, but he pulled himself together. No sooner had they laid down, when Jane fell into a troubled sleep. But Brad lay awake for a long time, listening to her breathe and wanting to hug her again. The fear, which had slammed into his stomach like a fist, had a firm grip on him and wouldn't let him go.



The morning dawned and Tom was still awake. He hadn't slept all night. Archie had constantly rolled back and forth. Tom was feeling guilty. He got up and put himself in the cold shower, but even that didn't help. He just felt horrible. With Archie finally sleeping soundly, he quietly slipped from the cabin and walked to the dog area. Maybe Joana was already up. But the dog pen was abandoned and no sign of his new love. Tom considered whether to visit her, but he didn't like to wake her.

He went to the sun deck and, to his surprise, found Brad sitting there. “Can't you sleep either?” he inquired.

“Jane has problems with her heart,” Brad immediately spoke. “I'm very worried. Once she's up, we'll go to see Rose.”

“Well, then we can meet there again.” Tom sat down next to him.

Brad gazed at him questioning.

“Archie's knee doesn't look at all good and I'm scared it won't heal,” Tom

explained.

“That sounds dangerous too.” Brad blinked into the rising sun.

“Seems like we desperately need a hospital. Rose is simply not equipped to handle all of this. But she's an outstanding doctor. Did you know that she voluntarily worked with soldiers and the civilian population in the Kosovo conflict?”

Tom was impressed. “Frankly, I hadn't expected that.”

“You can get the wrong impression about people.” Brad stood up. “I have to look for Jane.”

Tom, too, got ready to leave. “And I'm going to take Archie to the doctor now. Until later and good luck for Jane.”

The two walked away in opposite directions.



When Tom entered his cabin, Archie was awake, but he didn't like to get up.

“It hurts too much,” he lamented. Tom pulled back the duvet. What he saw, took his breath away. Archie's leg had turned blue to the foot and was bright red above the knee. “I'm getting Rose,” and already he was out the door. He ran to Rose's cabin and hammered at her door.

Rose opened, sleepy. “What happened?” she asked alarmed.

“Archie's knee. Can you please come and look at it?”

Something in Tom's voice prompted her not to ask any more questions. “I'll be with you in five minutes.” Rose closed the door.

Tom continued to run to Joana and stormed into her cabin. “Archie's leg is all blue.”

Joana stared at him in horror. She jumped out of bed. “I'll be with you in ten minutes.”

Tom hurried away wordlessly. Joana got dressed in no time and took Sina quickly to the dog pen. Then she ran to Tom and Archie. By the time she got there, Rose was already examining Archie's leg. She looked pale and her eyelids twitched nervously as she finished.

“It's very, very serious,” she explained in a toneless voice. “If we don't take the leg off above the knee, you can die of blood poisoning, Archie. The tissue of your lower leg has almost died, that's why the leg there is black and blue.”

I have rarely seen poisoning progress so quickly. I am more than sorry, but we must make a decision today and act as soon as possible. It's about your life, Archie!"

Joana and Tom froze as if to ice. The sheer horror took their breath away, and they didn't know what to say.

"I already knew it all night." Archie's voice was weak but determined. "Let's get it done as soon as possible and I don't want pity. That doesn't help me."

Joana had to sit down. "You're incredibly strong, Archie, I admire you," she remarked, quietly.

Tom had tears running down his face. "Is there no other option?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Rose sat down, too. "It's cruel, but the answer is no," she firmly stated. "And I'm going to need someone to assist me. I can't do this on my own."

"Can you please do that, Dad? I trust you, just like Rose." Archie looked at him, pleading.

Tom just nodded and ran outside. Joana stroked Archie over the head and went after him.

She found him shaking and crying hysterically, with his hands clasped tightly onto the guard rail. "Please leave me alone," he snapped at her.

Joana withdrew from him wordlessly and went back to Archie in the cabin. "He needs a moment," she meant tersely. "Can I do something for you, Archie?"

"If you pay attention to dad and Puschel, that's enough."

"Where does he gather such strength and that amazing attitude?" Joana mused and grabbed Puschel. "I'll take him to Sina, then the two can spend the day together and when you are awake again, Puschel can be with you." She left the cabin with the little dog.



Arriving at the dog space, she too burst into tears. Sobbing, she dropped onto the bench. But after a few minutes, she tightened her shoulders, straightened up and rose. Then she went with decisive steps to Tom, who was still at the guard rail. "Tom," she gently approached him. "Let's go. Archie needs us now." Tom squinted at her from red eyes. There was such deep sadness and despair in his gaze that it almost tore Joana's heart. "We will make it." She

took Tom's hands, and sent him all her strength.

"You're right. How can I run away?" Tom straightened up as well. They rushed back to Archie.

Archie was still lying in his bed and Rose was sitting next to him. "We're here," Tom grabbed Archie's hand. "Whatever we need to do, I'm ready."

A glimmer of relief scurried across the boy's face. "Rose explained to me what she's going to do. She puts me under narcotics and then she has to saw my leg off right above the knee."

Now Archie burst into tears. Joana felt her heart was going to break. But she pulled herself together, sat down on the edge of Archie's bed and grabbed his other hand.

"You know, Archie, I'm quite sure we're all going to learn to live with it and the most important thing is, we keep you, don't you think? We're with you no matter what and we'll watch out for you, I promise you. I'm sure you'll be able to walk again one day, though maybe differently than before. You're infinitely strong. It's a terrible misfortune, but we'll all grow from it and we're going to get through this together. Archie, we can do this!"

"I'm just glad you're here and not mum," the boy muttered.

Archie looked gratefully at Joana. She could barely stand this.

"I'm ready now, can you please let Mariah know that I'm undergoing surgery?"

Joana nodded and swallowed her tears down.

"I'll get Brad and then we'll carry you to the infirmary." Tom tried to be brave.

"Give me half an hour to prepare everything and ask Brad if he can support us as well. It's always important to have a third party as a reserve." Rose got up and left the room.



"You can search for Brad, I'll stay with Archie," Joana offered.

Tom was happy to be able to escape for a moment. He rushed to the bridge, but there was no Brad. He ran to the captain's cabin and knocked quietly. Jane opened the door.

"Oh Tom, Brad told me Archie's leg got worse. How is he doing?"

“The leg must be amputated – immediately! Tom couldn't suppress a sob. Again, the tears ran down his face uncontrollably.

“Rose asks if Brad can assist us?”

Jane was deeply shocked, but she didn't show it and asked Tom in. “I don't think Brad is the right person for this. He can't stand the sight of blood. I will support you. I worked as a midwife for many years. However, I'm not sure you are capable of assisting Rose either.”

She looked at Tom in doubt. “It's not my intention to make it worse, but the bone gets sawed through properly and you hear that too. Do you think you can bear this?”

Tom went white. “Honestly, no,” he confessed crushed. “And I can't stand blood either. But Archie is my son. He needs me. I have to do it.”

“Let's go to Rose and talk to her about it,” Jane suggested. They made their way to the infirmary, where the doctor was almost finished with the surgical preparations.

“Jane will be third in the bunch,” Tom started the conversation, then he had to sit down. His blood pressure dropped, and he felt faint. Rose gave him a few medicinal drops and slowly the colour returned to his face.

“I suggest you and I perform the surgery and Tom stays with Joana in the side room. If we need help, they can step in. It doesn't do us any good if Tom passes out during the procedure. He can stay with Archie until he has fallen asleep and also be there when he wakes up. I think that's the better solution,” Jane proposed.

Rose agreed with her. “We need to make it as safe as possible,” she affirmed.

Tom was relieved. “Should we bring him now?” he inquired.

“Yes, let's start,” Rose decided.

Jane stayed with Rose and Tom was looking for Brad. He found him on his way to the bridge. “Can you help us carry Archie to the hospital?” Tom asked. “His leg needs to be amputated.”

“Oh my god.” Brad was completely devastated. “Sure, I can help carry him.” He left everything as it was and followed Tom deeply affected.



For Joana, it was self-evident she was going along. They carried Archie into the infirmary and placed him on the operating table. Only the syringe to help

him relax and sleep could be seen.

After everyone had put on a face mask and sterilised their hands, Rose asked, "Are you ready, Archie? Can we start?" The boy nodded bravely and Rose put the needle of the syringe into a vein on his hand. The anaesthetic worked in seconds.

Rose instructed Tom and Joana to walk into the neighbouring room and close the door. Joana sat in a chair very pale in the face. Tom sat down next to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," Joana nodded resolutely. "It's just the shock."

"I've already had some drops to stabilise my blood pressure, otherwise I'd be on the ground," Tom confessed. "Do you want any? Rose pushed them into my hand in case I needed them again."

Joana reached for the bottle and took a few drops. Then they sat next to each other and remained silent, each deep in their thoughts. After a while, they heard the noise. Joana ran to the sink and had to vomit. Tom was struggling for breath. It was a quiet, constant sawing, and it seemed like it went on for an eternity. Joana was shaking all over her body.

Tom wanted to stand up and hold her in his arms, but his legs failed him. He could only look at her stunned. Joana sat down on the floor and breathed deeply. She didn't have the strength to get up yet and was still feeling terribly nauseous. Suddenly, she recalled putting rescue drops in her bag earlier in the morning. She pulled out the vial, opened it and took a high dose. After a few minutes, she realised she was slowly recovering. She got up and staggered to Tom. "Please take a few drops of this too, it will help you," she whispered weakly.

Tom gazed at her gratefully. After what felt like an endless period, Jane finally opened the door.

"You can come in now. The operation went well, and he is asleep. He will wake up in two to three hours." Jane seemed completely exhausted and Rose was also very wan.

"Unfortunately, we had to take half the thigh away as well, the inflammation was already too advanced. But it looks good so far. Archie will stay in the infirmary for the next two weeks and then the wound should have healed quite well," she informed them.

Tom sneaked to Archie's bed and carefully lifted the duvet. He shook

violently and almost fell over. There wasn't much left of Archie's leg.

VII



Katie woke up late in Bashan's arms. They had spent a wonderful night. As soon as she moved, Bashan opened his eyes. It felt so good to have him so close to her.

"Good morning, my darling," he greeted her tenderly. "Have you slept well?"

"Wonderfully." Katie delicately kissed him on the mouth. "I felt completely protected and loved."

"That's how it should be." Bashan seemed to be in heaven. "May I continue to kiss you?"

"No. That has to wait. I am assigned to the kitchen service and I have a feeling that it is time to show up there," Katie denied but then she kissed him again intimately. Eventually, she freed herself from his arms and climbed out of bed. "Let's see after my service."

"Just as you wish, your Highness," Bashan also stood up. His hair was sticking up in all directions.

Katie burst in loud laughter. "You look like you've exploded," she giggled.

Bashan gazed in the mirror and had to laugh as well. "A cold shower is obviously needed," he decided. Katie followed him into the bathroom and after a quick wash she was on her way.



In the kitchen, she saw only shocked faces and Mariah was sitting on a chair crying. "What's happened?" she inquired, dismayed.

"The they hahahaha aampuputated Aaaarchies leleleleg." Mariah sobbed.

“What?” Katie suddenly felt sick. “That's a nightmare. When was that?”

“An hour ago,” Piet explained to her. “If they had waited longer, he would probably have died of blood poisoning.”

“Where's Joana?” asked Katie.

“She's with Tom at Archie's, he'll wake up soon.” Piet rubbed his hand over his stubbled chin. “At the moment, all they can do is wait and see how he feels when he comes back to consciousness.”

“Oh my God, this really shouldn't have occurred,” Katie was deeply distraught.

“We can be grateful if he survives,” Piet remarked. “It's a drama, but it could be much worse.”

“That's how you see it?” Katie looked at him in amazement. “Let's do our job, after that we have time to take care of the three of them.”

The others nodded and they worked silently until everything was ready. Katie was the first to leave the kitchen. Mariah followed her. “Lelet's gggo to Aarchie,” she stuttered. Katie took her arm and together they set off.



Jane didn't feel good at all. The operation had taken a long time and was the worst she had ever experienced in her life. She had strong pains in the heart area. Breathing got hard for her again, and she was glad she was no longer needed. Silently, she retreated to her cabin. When she got there, she felt dizzy, then she lost consciousness and crashed to the ground. She didn't know how long she had been lying there when Brad gently picked her up and put her to bed.

“Don't move, I'll get Rose,” he ordered tensely and was immediately on his way to get the doctor. After a few minutes, he came back with the physician.

“What's going on, Jane?” she asked, worried.

“My heart.” Jane closed her eyes.

Rose took her stethoscope and listened to her chest. “It sounds like your heart is weakened and it beats irregularly.” She sounded deeply troubled. “You overexerted yourself. If I had known this, I would never have let you assist with the surgery.”

“That's why I didn't tell you before.” Jane smiled her magical smile. “We both know that I was the best person to assist you,” she affirmed. “Honestly, I'm

glad I was there, and that we got through it so well. I can rest now.”

“Sorry, my dear, I can't make an accurate diagnosis. To do so we would need a hospital and the appropriate equipment,” Rose apologized. “For the moment I can only ask you to spare yourself and lie down and rest as much as possible. Maybe Brad can watch out for you a little bit.”

Brad nodded. “Sure, I will. For today you are to stay in bed and I'll bring you something to eat and drink.”

Rose smiled. “That's a good place to start.”

Jane didn't disagree with either. She truly didn't feel like getting up.



When Katie and Mariah arrived at the infirmary, the door was slightly open. Katie cautiously stuck her head in the room, but this one was empty. Archie lay in the adjoining room. “Joana,” Katie called to her quietly.

Joana opened the door and came over to them.

“How is he?” Katie couldn't stop tears streaming down her face.

“He's still asleep, but he'll wake up soon,” Joana whispered. The colour had returned to her face, and she felt significantly better.

“Can we do anything?” Katie asked helplessly.

“Not at the moment. When he awakes, he's going to be in pain and we don't know how he will react. It would be nice if you were close. Maybe he wants to see Mariah, or we need support. And please, pull yourself together when you see him. It's bad enough for him already. What he needs now is rest, encouragement and support, no tears and no whining.”

“I understand,” Katie and Mariah spoke at the same time. Katie wiped her sleeve across her cheek.

Joana smiled wearily. “And can you please take care of the dogs? They've been in the play area for hours. I don't know yet when I'll have time for them again. I'll let you know if there's anything new.”

Katie and Mariah nodded and Joana took slow strides back to Archie and Tom. It was obvious how much the situation weighed on her shoulders.

“What a misfortune,” Katie thought as she headed out to the dog pen with Mariah.



After another hour of anxious waiting, Archie opened his eyes. He wasn't fully awake yet and was struggling to regain consciousness. Tom cooled his forehead with a wet cloth. Then the memory came back. Archie ripped off the duvet and stared at his leg. And then he screamed. He screamed so loudly that it could be heard all over the ship.

Rose reached for a sedative injection. Tom knocked it out of her hand. "No," he declared determinedly. "Archie has a right to shout out his pain. We're not going to make him be quiet."

He sat down on the bed with Archie and held him tightly in his arms. Joana ran outside. She was in tears. Although she tried to be strong, she couldn't help herself but be devastated. Gradually, Archie calmed down, but his scream resonated in her ears for a long time. After working up her courage to do so, she returned to the hospital room.

Tom was deathly pale and had deep shadows under his eyes. He was shaking all over his body. Joana barely felt better. But it was all about Archie now. They set about propping him up and making him comfortable. Joana sat down on the other side of his bed and took his hand. Tom did the same and so they stayed there facing Archie's pain together. Very, very slowly, it seemed that Archie's soul pain was spreading evenly across them all. At first, it felt unbearable, but then it became less and less.

"Do you feel this too?" Archie asked in amazement. "I can hardly believe it, but I already feel much better and the pain is subsiding."

Joana and Tom nodded, lacking the words to describe how they felt. Silently they kept sitting there until Archie fell asleep again. But this time there was a slight rosy shimmer lying on his face and he looked peaceful.

Joana stood up cautiously and stretched out. The day was already coming to an end. "I hope we are over the worst," she remarked, exhausted. "Do you want me to get you something to eat?" she offered gently stroking Tom over his arm.

He shook his head. "Thank you for being here for us," he whispered in an uncertain voice. "If you weren't here, I wouldn't know how to handle it at all." He looked at her tearfully.

"You would have done it without me, as you had too, but I'm glad I was there and I'll stay. And even though you don't feel like anything to eat right now, I'll get you something and then we can put up a camp bed so we can take

turns keeping watch. How about you take over the first half of the night and I do the second?"

Tom shook his head again. "Rose will keep looking in on us and I'll stay with Archie all night, my darling, but for a bed, I'd be grateful. I would very much like to lie down. My back hurts unbearably and I'm nauseous and dizzy."



"I'll be back soon." Joana walked out of the door and found she too was struggling with dizziness, but she pulled herself together and headed out. First, she looked for Katie who had Sina with her and had been waiting restlessly.

"I will never forget Archie's scream," she stammered and Bashan, who was with her, nodded.

"He's asleep now. Tom will stay with him. Can you get a camp bed for him and put it up in the hospital room?" Joana turned to the captain.

"Sure." Bashan jumped up. "I'll do it right now." Already he had left the room.

Joana sat down next to Katie and stroked Sina's head. "Can you take care of her over the next few days?"

"Of course, and Puschel is with Mariah. She will look after him until Archie is able to get around."

"How good it is to have friends." Joana struggled to keep her eyes open. "I think I need to lie down a little bit now, too. Could you please get Tom something to eat?"

Katie stood up. "Come on, I'll accompany you to our cabin and then I'll take care of Tom." She hooked an arm under the swaying Joana.

"I gave them all my strength," Joana told her.

"I didn't expect it any other way." Katie looked at her with great respect. "It's strange, but you are almost like a small family."

"Yes, that's true," Joana muttered while undressing and crawling into her bed. "Tell Tom I'll sleep a bit and will look in on them later. And thank you, Katie."

"Sleep well, lovely." Katie quietly pulled the door shut behind her.

When she arrived at Tom and Archie's, they were both lying asleep in their

beds. She silently placed the tray on a small side board and left the room.



She then scurried to Bashan's cabin, where he surprised her with dinner.

“I thought to myself you could also need a little strengthening.” He reached out to her.

Katie was touched. Bashan had filled the round, low table with all sorts of delicacies and a candle spread a warm light. “How wonderful.” Grateful, she let herself fall into one of the comfortable armchairs. “And after this, we go to sleep. I'm completely done.”

“Me, too,” Bashan agreed with her. “Too many deep feelings today, they are even too much for the strongest man around.” They enjoyed their meal and then cuddled up in bed comfortably together.

Joana awoke in the middle of the night. She got up and dressed. She then quickly rushed to the infirmary. The door to Archie's room was a little open and through the gap fell a glimmer of light. Archie and Tom were awake, and Tom was in the process of giving some sips of tea to Archie.

“I'm hungry,” she heard Archie say.

“And I.” Joana entered the room.

The two looked at her with delight. Tom kissed her on the cheek. He got Archie a plate ready and pointed to the table. “Look, a good fairy has brought us so much to eat that there's enough for all of us.”

“I haven't eaten anything since yesterday.” Joana reached for a slice of bread.

“How good that at least the supermarket wasn't entirely empty.” Archie's voice sounded pleasingly strong and cheerful. “Otherwise I wouldn't have sausages now. Speaking of which, where's Puschel?”

“Mariah's taking care of him, so he's in good hands. Unfortunately, he's not allowed into the infirmary, but once you're out of here, he'll be back with you,” Joana informed him.

“How is she doing? How did she take the news?” the boy inquired cautiously.

“She, like all of us, was shocked, but she's doing well. She would like to visit you tomorrow.”

“I don't think she'll want to be friends with a cripple,” Archie reacted rudely, pushing the half-empty plate away.

“You know, Archie,” Tom intervened. “We should talk about all this in peace once you've recovered. Our lives will be a little different from now on, and maybe you should leave it to Mariah, whether she still likes you or not. How about we finish eating and then sleep again? Tomorrow is a new day and everything may look very different.”

“My leg will still be off,” Archie remarked sadly, but he emptied his plate.

After the joint meal, Joana said goodbye. “I'll come with breakfast in the morning,” she offered. Tom and Archie nodded. “Sleep well, both of you, and get a bit better, Archie.”

Joana got up and left. She was still very exhausted and glad to go back to bed. Upon leaving the room, she met Rose, who came to examine Archie.

“You look like you belong in bed straight away.” Rose gazed at her compassionately.

“Just on the way.” Joana smiled faintly. She didn't even have the strength for a conversation anymore.



Jane had been rolling back and forth uneasily throughout the night. She could barely get air, and the pain in her chest was still unchanged. Brad, too, had slept very little. As soon as it was light, he jumped out of bed.

“I'd love to go on deck now and sit down in a deck chair,” Jane asked. “Can you help me?”

Brad helped her get up and supported her walking to the sun deck. She was slow and moved insecurely step by step, breathing heavily. Brad was sick with worry.

“What else can I do for you?” He wrapped her in a blanket.

“A warm tea would be wonderful.” Jane tried to smile, but she was too weak. “The fresh air will do me good,” she reassured.

Brad handed her a tea and sat down next to her. “I'm going to keep you company. Today I am only available for you and for Archie if he needs me.”

“That's nice.” Jane closed her eyes. Brad took her hand and held it.

Joana, too, was on her feet early. Sina had spent the night with her, and so she now went to the dog area. How empty it felt without Archie, Tom and Puschel. She left Sina there and headed to the kitchen. Here she was immediately bombarded with questions.

“How is Archie doing?” everybody wanted to know.

“Well so far, I can't say any more at the moment.” Joana quickly got some breakfast together and left.



When she arrived at Tom's and Archie's room, Archie was still asleep, but Tom was awake. “How are you?” she lovingly explored.

“Surprisingly good given the circumstances. I'd like to shower and put on fresh clothes while he's still asleep. Are you okay to look after him?”

“Certainly.” Joana hugged him. “Take your time.”

Tom disappeared. Joana made his bed and then sat down on the only free chair in the room. She looked at Archie, who slept peacefully, and then she stared out to sea from the porthole. “How much longer will it take before we can finally get ashore?” she mused. “I can't wait to have solid ground under my feet again.” She could see through the ship's window the distant coastal strip. Still, they sailed along the coast looking for signs of life and civilisation, but all they saw was uninhabited land. It was a distressing situation.

After a while, Tom came back and sat down on his bed. Joana seated herself next to him and rested her head against his shoulder. Tom buried his face in her long, red hair. “I love you,” he whispered.

Joana felt his heartbeat.

“It's damn tough, but we're going to make it because you're with us.”

Joana put her arms around him. “We will make it because you are strong,” she gave back convincingly. “We will lead Archie on a positive path from the start. He will learn to live a good life with this disability. Even if it's a drama, we're not our bodies. Our bodies are just the vehicle we move with here on this planet. They are the vessel for our soul. And for us, learning, along with Archie, not to identify too much with the body, is a tall order. In these circumstances, we will all grow spiritually. But of course, it's the hardest for Archie because he pays the price. Still, I don't think anything happens for nothing. Everything has its reason in our soul plan and it's the soul that creates the circumstances in which it can grow and develop best,” she shared her perspective.

“I've never looked at it like that.” Tom was thoughtful. “Can you explain this in more detail?”

Joana drank some of her tea. “It took me a long time to truly remember, and many others helped me with this by providing their memories on the internet and in books,” Joana recounted. “What we learn at school about history is only a small excerpt of the all-encompassing truth and also a very limited view, just like the theory of evolution which is sold to the people by those in power. There have been many high cultures before us, and some were much more developed than we are today. Just look at the pyramids scattered around the world. To this day no man can explain how they have layered up these tremendously huge blocks of stone. Some are so big and heavy that even today we couldn't move them with our machines to where they were installed a long time ago.”

Tom looked at her with a lost look and Joana stopped. “Talk on,” he encouraged her.

“Or how do we justify the vast numbers of unknown flying objects spotted all over the world? In my opinion, we aren't alone in this universe and there are many things we can't explain yet. We are all beings of light. Our souls have manifested themselves here on Earth in physical bodies to have certain experiences and to ultimately support the Earth in ascending into the fifth dimension and becoming a part of the galactic community. The Earth plays an important role in this process and is in a key position, but the explanation for this would go too far at the moment. What's important to us now is that we help Archie remember who he is and what task he has in this life, in this incarnation. The kids of today are different from us.”

Tom nodded. “I've noticed that.”

“Compared to them, we are, so to speak, outdated models,” Joana continued. “Many of them are highly spiritual beings who incarnated here for the first time and have very different energies and abilities available than we do. They remember where they came from and what their mission is, or they've been here more often and come back to lift the world out of its old ways and up to a higher level of consciousness. They are often very wise.”

Tom didn't speak at all for quite a while. Finally, he reasoned, “These thoughts are new to me, but they have a strong resonance deep inside me. It's like I've always known it and now I'm starting to rediscover this knowledge in myself. It's very confusing.” Tom looked a little perplexed.

Joana smiled lovingly at him. “Give yourself time, sweetheart,” she calmed him down tenderly. “I've been dealing with these things more or less my whole life. You just had other things to do, and now a new chapter is yet beginning in all of our lives.”

“What chapter?” Archie wanted to know.

Joana and Tom had been so engrossed in their conversation that they hadn't noticed he had woken up. Tom jumped up. “How are you?”

“My leg hurts even though it's no longer there,” Archie lamented. “But I can stand it.”

“You're so incredibly brave. And the new chapter is our future, whatever it will look like. Are you hungry?” Joana asked.

“Of course,” Archie replied. “Can I have an orange juice?” She made him a sandwich with his beloved sausages.

Archie shouted, “No sausages please and no meat.”

Tom looked at him in wonder. “What's going on? That was always your favourite food.”

The boy shook. “As soon as I think of meat, I'm getting very nauseous.” He seemed amazed as well.

Joana put jam on his bread. “Is this better?”

Archie immediately started eating. No sooner had he finished, when Rose appeared at the foot of his bed. “How do you feel, Archie?” she kindly inquired.

“So far it's okay,” he answered. “But I have phantom pain.”

“I want to look at the wound, can you stand that?” Rose pulled back the duvet.

Archie nodded.

The doctor slowly took the bandage off. Joana and Tom went pale, but Archie remained impressively calm. He looked at the stump and declared out of his deepest, inner conviction. “It will regrow, I know it.”

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

“Maybe it would be good not to fixate on it,” Rose cautiously disagreed.

Archie looked at her with a knowing look and just stated, “You're going to see it. I've read about it on the internet and I'm sure it's possible.”

Joana sat down next to him and glanced at the stump. “I've heard about it, too. Who knows? Maybe miracles can come true.”

Archie gazed at her gratefully.

“Anyway, the wound looks good. If it continues to heal like this, you will soon be able to leave the hospital ward,” Rose noted with relief.

“When?” Archie was already impatient. “Puschel needs me.”

“Maybe in a week, but of course that would be very early after this operation and you would have to stay in bed in your cabin for another week.”

“I can live with that.” Archie smiled bravely.

“Mariah and Katie, by the way, have asked if they can visit you,” Rose recalled.

“Yes, they are welcome. What about Jane?” Archie then wanted to know. “After all, she helped with my surgery and saved my life.”

“How do you know?” Tom turned deep red.

“It's all good, Dad,” Archie appeased him. “I had already thought you couldn't do it.”

“But how did you find out?” Tom wondered. “Jane entered the room when you were already under anaesthesia.”

“Oh, I left my body during the surgery and I levitated over it,” Archie recounted. “By doing that I could see everything. I also know that Rose had wanted to cut off the leg further down and that she put a tissue sample under the microscope. Then she said she feels like a criminal because she sawed my leg off.”

Now Rose went pale. “That's true,” she confirmed in an uncertain voice.

“I told you.” Archie got suddenly restless. “I have to pee,” he reported.

“We have a bedpan.” Rose covered the wound. She then pushed the pan under the boy's buttocks.

“We are waiting in the adjoining room. Call us when you're done, then Tom can pick it up and help you. Are you OK with that?”

Archie nodded.



Outside the door, Tom reasoned, “That's unbelievable. What's going on here?”

“I would say it's a development of consciousness and a big shift. Our perception is increasing,” Joana surmised.

“The whole thing is a little scary to me,” Rose commented. “I only know of something like this from the movies.”

“So do I.” Tom nodded.

“I’m just happy with how Archie reacts. It’s great.” Joana switched the subject. Tom and Rose agreed.

“Dad,” Archie shouted. “You can come.”



Tom returned to the room and Joana accompanied Rose. She wanted to search for Mariah and Katie and look after Jane.

When she arrived at the captain’s cabin, she knocked carefully on the door. Brad opened.

“How is she doing?” Joana inquired quietly.

“I just put her to bed,” Brad replied. “She’s asleep now, but the night was bad. The heart pain hasn’t gotten any better and she can’t breathe properly. I’m very worried. How is Archie?”

“He amazes us all,” Joana reported. “The boy is handling this situation magnificently, and the wound seems to heal well, provided that after this short time one can speak of healing.”

“Well, that’s good news at least.” Brad took a step back. “I need to look after Jane now,” he apologised.

“Give her my love when she awakes.” Joana turned away.

She heard barking at the dog area and walked over, hoping to find Katie there. To her delight, she found both Katie and Mariah playing with the dogs.

“What about Archie?” was the only question.

“You can visit him briefly this afternoon. He’s doing incredibly well.” Joana hugged Sina and then returned to Archie and Tom.

“Katie and Mariah are very keen to see you later if you want,” she told Archie, who was beaming like the sun.

“Can you help me wash, comb my hair and get me fresh clothes?” he asked.

“For sure. I brought you fresh pyjamas anyway, I’d just forgotten.” Tom helped Archie to wash and eventually he lay slightly exhausted but content and clean in his bed.

"I can't do that much yet," the boy noted in astonishment. "Best, I'll sleep until my visitors arrive."

Tom pulled the curtains. "Do you like to be alone?"

Archie nodded. "I'll sleep anyway. You can look in on me from time to time."



Tom and Joana quietly left the cabin. They, too, were still deeply exhausted. "Let's grab some fresh air and soak up some sun on the deck," Joana suggested. Tom agreed, and they sat down in two cosy loungers. After a short time, they were dozing.

Mariah and Katie woke the two of them from their slumber as they arrived with coffee, hot chocolate and cakes on their way to Archie. Tom jumped up. "What time is it?"

"Exactly 3:30 pm," Katie retorted.

Joana was on her legs in two seconds. "Let's go. Oh my God, he has been alone for three hours."

Tom almost ran ahead. When they arrived at the cabin, Archie was still asleep.

The moment they entered the room, he opened his eyes. As soon as he saw Mariah, he began to glow. She went to his bed and kissed him on the forehead.

"I think we're just going to disturb here," Joana whispered.

"Looks like it," Katie agreed.

Loudly, she said, "Hi Archie, so good to see you. How are you?"

"Already much better," Archie replied, and then again looked at Mariah, who had sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. "When I see Mariah, I'm always fine," he smiled.

"We brought coffee, hot chocolate and freshly baked cakes. Do you want something and do you need help?" Katie stepped closer.

"A piece of cake and a chocolate drink would be great." Archie straightened up.

Mariah nodded. "Fofofor meme too."

Katie provided for them and then offered something to Joana and Tom, too, but they weren't hungry. Tom only took a coffee and Joana preferred water.

Katie grabbed a small slice of cake.

When they finished eating, Joana remarked, "I think we'll leave you alone for a while and look after the dogs."

"How is Puschel doing?" Archie inquired.

"Very good," Mariah reported.

"Is he with you all the time?" Archie wanted to know.

Mariah nodded.

"That's good." Archie only had eyes for Mariah and Mariah looked at Archie while the three adults tactfully retreated.



They sailed on and on along the coast, looking out for inhabited land. A week after his surgery, Archie was already able to leave the hospital ward. He was very happy to be back in his cabin. The reunion with Puschel was poignant. The little dog almost got a heart attack jumping around like mad. He was so pleased to see his owner and was reluctant to leave Archie's side in the following days. The only one who could take him to the dog pen was Mariah.

One morning, a loud call woke all the *Dragon Queen's* passengers. "I see houses," Bashan's voice vibrated down from the crow's nest.

Bashan excitedly pointed in one direction. But they were so far from the land one could only see faint outlines, even with binoculars.

"We're going to get closer to the coast. In a few hours, we'll know more," Brad promised.

The mood was much more restrained this time. Everybody still hadn't forgotten the shock of finding the abandoned village. Tom, who had early work on deck, ran to Archie. "Have you heard, son? Bashan has discovered houses."

"That's a good thing," Archie rejoiced. "Today, I'm also allowed to get up and use my crutches for the first time."

"True." Tom had completely forgotten that in the excitement. "Should I help you and get them?"

"Please." Archie sounded immensely relieved.

Tom helped him get up, wash and get dressed. Archie was quite shaky on his healthy leg. "It's no longer strong." He sounded disappointed. "And my arms

neither.”

“That's going to change quickly.” Tom tried to comfort him. “We're just starting slowly. Come on, I'll help you all the way to the restaurant. The others will be glad to see you again.”

“Do you think so?” Archie was unsure.

“I know it,” Tom assured him. “They told me.”

When Tom and Archie entered the restaurant, there was a huge surprise waiting for them. Everyone was there, and they had decorated an extra table for Archie.

Mariah played the piano, and everybody clapped as he entered the room. Archie was completely overwhelmed. He hadn't expected this. Tom stood with tears in his eyes. He hadn't known about it either. “Who organised this?” He turned to Joana.

“Katie, Mariah and I.” She laughed happily. “We had to give Archie a worthy welcome. He so deserves it, don't you think?”

Tom took her in his arms and kissed her. “I love you with all my heart.”

“And I love you,” Joana replied.

Then they sat down at the table with the others. There wasn't much to eat. Supplies had slowly become scarcer, but all were happy with fresh bread, margarine and honey or jam. Coffee and tea were still available.

Mariah's concert made this breakfast a special experience. She played and sang songs no one had heard before that told about a new world and a better life. “She sings what I've been dreaming about for a long time,” Joana noted. “Isn't that amazing?”

“She sings of our future,” Archie proudly proclaimed.

“Where did she learn about it?” Joana wondered. “She simply knows, just like me,” Archie countered.

“That's good and makes me happy.” Joana smiled at Archie and he smiled back. In his eyes lay a wisdom and calm that touched Joana deeply.



After breakfast, Archie asked, “I need to rest, can you please take me back?” Tom walked him slowly back to the cabin. As Archie lay on the small sofa, he remarked, “Jane wasn't there. What's wrong with her?”

“She's still sick, my darling,” Tom replied sadly. “She has problems with her heart.”

“Can I visit her?” Archie wanted to know.

“Let's wait 'til landfall.” Tom looked out of the porthole. Slowly, the contours of the coast emerged sharper.

Suddenly, a quiet but haunting clacking sound rang out. “What the hell is that?” Tom yelled.

“Damn,” Archie shouted. “That's the Geiger counter. I turned it on yesterday because I wanted to try something and now it's reporting radioactive radiation.”

“Are you sure it works properly?” Tom was horrified.

“It was new and unused and I programmed it the way it was on the instruction manual and the test worked.” Archie got worried. “It's there in the closet. Can you give it to me?” Tom pulled the device off the shelf with care and handed it to his son. “The radioactivity is in the lower range. But if it continues to rise, it will damage our health.” Archie's voice sounded serious.

“I'll get Brad.” Tom disappeared.

When he came back with the captain a while later, the boy was sitting tensely on the sofa. Brad sat down next to him and looked at the device. “I know the brand,” he stated. “It is one of the best and the devices are very reliable and accurate. Where did you get that from, Archie?”

“I found it in one of the houses next to the supermarket when we were ashore,” Archie reported. “It looks like the radioactivity has something to do with us approaching the coast.”

“This is indeed very serious.” Brad was deeply concerned. “Can I take the device on the bridge?”

“Sure.” Archie nodded.



Brad stood up wordlessly and left the room. His throat felt tight. Once on the bridge, he placed the Geiger counter right in front of him. Within the next three hours, the counter reported a steadily rising radiation, as they came closer to the coast. Brad rang the bell.

As if everyone had just been waiting for it, passengers flocked together in no time and gathered in the restaurant. Archie was also among them. “As it

stands, we have a new problem,” Brad opened the gathering. “Archie's Geiger counter clearly indicates that we have radioactivity in the atmosphere here and it rises the closer we approach the coast. We are already just below the benchmark which is classified as harmful to health. What do you propose?”

For a moment there was distraught silence, then Joana came forward. “The way I see it, we have no choice but to move away from the coast again. I have no desire to get radiation poisoning.”

Most of the others nodded.

“Let's vote who is in favour of us withdrawing from the coast,” Tom suggested. Only two were against it; everyone else agreed. “I regard this as a majority decision,” Brad found. “Finally, it's about our health and our lives.”

“But what if the Geiger counter doesn't work properly?” Piet objected. He was one of those opposed to the withdrawal.

“The risk is too high,” Bashan firmly warned. “If we move away from the coast now and the radioactivity gets weaker, we know the counter is working.”

Piet nodded. “Maybe you're right. Let's give it a go. We can still return.”

Brad walked to the bridge and steered the ship by his own hand away from the coast. Luckily, a good breeze was blowing, allowing them to pick up speed quickly. He could only think of Jane. How much he had hoped to be able to bring her ashore and to a hospital. Her condition hadn't improved since she collapsed.

Brad clutched the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles stood out white, but he didn't even notice it.

“Oh, Brad, I was also hoping we would find a hospital for her.” Joana stepped next to him.

“Honestly, I'm very scared she's dying and the only thing I can do is watch it. But I also know that I must not risk all of our lives to save her. It's so cruel.” Brad was distraught and struggled with tears. He was the second who had voted to continue approaching the coast.

Joana was deeply sad. “It's unbearable to feel so helpless and not be able to do anything. With a hospital, we could have saved Archie's leg, too.”

“We are simply very dependent on civilisation,” Brad replied as he slowly pulled himself together.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Joana agreed and felt powerless. She looked out at the open sea and a dark horizon. “Don't say we'll get a storm again,” she shuddered.

“That's the next problem.” Brad's eyebrows pulled together.

“It looks like something is brewing over us all day. I had planned to wait for it in a secure haven, but that probably won't happen as well.”

“Great.” Joana sounded slightly sarcastic. “And I was already worried it was going to be a boring day.



The time passed, and the wind picked up. By evening, the waves were already three meters high and the *Dragon Queen* started dancing through the water mountains again.

Brad noted, relieved, that the radioactivity subsided the further away they got from the coast, but he still felt miserable. The mood on board was also at ground zero.

Hardly anyone appeared for dinner. Joana, Tom, Bashan and Katie sat almost alone in the restaurant, but they too had no appetite. They drank tea and talked. The howl of the wind grew louder and louder.

“I don't feel so good.” Katie was pale and had her long hair tucked up. As a result, she looked very aristocratic. Bashan kept gazing at her.

“She truly is a beauty,” Joana thought. “And her face looks so soft and feminine.” When she got up to go to the toilet, Katie followed her.

“I'm pregnant,” she announced without hesitation as soon as they were alone.

“What? How do you know?” Joana got quite excited.

“I could sense it from the moment it happened.” Katie laughed.

“And how are you feeling about it?” Joana asked cautiously.

“Just wonderful,” Katie gushed. “It's all well and good.”

“I am happy. Does Bashan already know?” Joana hugged her enthusiastically.

“Not yet. I wanted to tell you first.” Katie kissed Joana on the cheek.

“That honours me,” Joana rejoiced.

“I'll tell him soon.” Katie walked to the door. “Are you coming?”

Joana followed her absentmindedly. Back at the table, she could barely focus on the conversation and Tom looked at her puzzled a few times. "I'll tell you later," she whispered.

Due to the bad weather conditions, it got dark early, and the wind blew increasingly stormy. "Can I sleep in your cabin tonight again?" Joana asked tentatively.

"I don't think Archie has anything against it." Tom protectively put his arm around her shoulders as they walked to the cabin.

When they got there, Mariah was lying with Archie on his bed and he held her tightly.

"She's scared of a new storm," Archie explained.

"That makes two of us," Joana laughed. "I feel the same way."

"Can Mariah please stay with us tonight?" Archie demanded directly.

Tom grinned. "I wanted to ask you the same thing about Joana."

"No problem." Archie was generous as always.

"I also think we shouldn't send Mariah back to her cabin, but we need to let Piet know, otherwise he might be worried." Joana sat down on the sofa.

"That's what I'm going to do and I'll take the dogs at the same time to the dog room. The deck area doesn't seem safe to me anymore," Tom offered.



He left the cabin, with Sina and even Puschel willingly following him. Quickly he took them below deck and then walked to Piet's cabin.

To his great astonishment, he also found Rose there. The two sat at the table with a bottle of red wine from the supermarket and appeared to be having a great chat.

"I hope I don't disturb you." Tom was slightly embarrassed.

"But of course not," Piet replied with an unfamiliar friendliness.

"I just wanted to ask if it's OK that Mariah stays with us tonight. She doesn't want to be alone in her cabin and Joana is there, too."

"No worries," Piet responded. He didn't seem keen to talk to Tom any longer. Rose said nothing at all.

"Then have a nice evening." Tom closed the door and walked back to his

cabin. "Rose was at Piet's," he whispered to Joana as they lay in bed. He was overjoyed to hold her closely, and she smelled, as always, decidedly good. She had applied the perfume that Tom liked most on her. "They are doing the right thing," Joana cuddled with him. "Who wants to be alone in such a situation?"

"True." Tom kissed her on the neck. "Sleep well, my angel. If we're lucky, the storm will be over again tomorrow morning."

"Hopefully," Joana muttered sleepily.



Unfortunately, the next morning started with a violent thunderstorm and the waves only got higher. Brad had spent all night at the wheel and was weary. Since Jessie's death, he hadn't had anyone to whom he felt confident to safely sail the *Dragon Queen* in such bad weather. That's why he pulled himself together. The ship lurched violently, and it brought up unpleasant memories in him. Brad bravely steered up and down the waves. Except for him, there was no man on the bridge. Jane, who had always been with him in the big storm, lay completely debilitated in bed. The wild sea didn't do her any good at all. Brad felt overwhelmed and lonely, infinitely lonely. The fate of his passengers weighed heavily on his shoulders. He knew if he made a mistake, they were all lost.

And then something came towards the ship that made the blood in his veins freeze. It was the most gigantic wave he had ever seen in his life. It was as tall as a huge mountain, deep blue and seemed to glow from the inside out. Brad was paralysed. Clutching the steering wheel, he stared at the glittering monster. His head was nearly empty and only a single thought hammered in his mind. "This is the end!"

The wave came closer at a frenzied speed and suddenly Brad awoke from his torpor. "I have to somehow get up the ridge of the wave obliquely, then maybe we have a chance," he told himself. Desperately, he tried to steer the ship into the right position as far as possible, but the *Dragon Queen* was too slow. It was impossible to manoeuvre the long sailing yacht in such a short time. They were still at the foot of the wave when it broke right over the ship. Brad closed his eyes, but he still held on to the steering wheel. His thoughts were suspended, but then something unbelievable happened. An absolute silence spread around him and in him as well. "Am I dead?" he wondered.

He felt a burning pain in his hands and opened his eyes. His hands were bloody from gripping the wheel so tightly, but he didn't care. Brad no longer

knew what to think. Mysteriously the *Dragon Queen* was gliding silently through a huge wave tunnel. The glow he had previously perceived was now a bright white light, and the ship seemed to be steered by ghost hands.

“This must be a hallucination.” He tried to explain the impossible to himself. He had heard about drowning people having hallucinations. But the ride through the tunnel continued. “No man can drown for such a long time,” Brad realized slowly. He looked through the window at the bow of the ship and suddenly he saw dolphins again. They swam and happily jumped in front of the ship as if it was the most natural thing in the world and it seemed to him that they knew the way.

Brad took a deep breath. He let go of the steering wheel, which he still clutched tightly, wiped the blood off his hands and ran outside. Here too, except for a quiet, melodic buzz, it was perfectly silent. Brad rang the bell. The wave had to have captured the ship very early in the morning because everyone still seemed to be asleep. They gradually came out of their cabins and no sooner were they on deck, than they stared at what was before them and gasped with amazement. Everyone looked so startled that Brad had to laugh.

“What is this?” Katie yelled. “Brad, where are we?”

“If only I knew that.” Brad shrugged. Now everybody surrounded their captain as they continued to gape at the blue tunnel. “A monster wave broke over the ship and then we were in this tunnel. I have no idea what that means,” Brad explained to them.

Tom arrived with Archie a moment later. “Wow, a wormhole,” called Archie excitedly.

Now everyone was gazing at Archie.

“What do you mean by that?” Tom inquired, incomprehendingly.

“Wormholes are tunnels that connect different levels of time and consciousness,” Archie patiently explained. “I thought you knew.”

Tom looked at him with wide eyes. “This is all new to me,” he muttered.

“I know these tunnels from my dreams,” Archie recounted. “I’ve travelled in them many times before. If you don’t specify exactly where you want to go, they will take you to where you can learn the most and where the next stage of development is best reached.”

“What stage of development?” Tom asked, irritated.

“We are talking about the development of our consciousness. What else?” Archie told him.

“All right.” Tom looked so puzzled Joana had to laugh.

“I would say your son is a lot ahead of you in terms of consciousness,” she remarked amused.

Joana enjoyed the trip in the time tunnel. She was enchanted by the dazzling colours that glistened in it, all shades of blue and green and, unlike some of the others, she felt perfectly safe.

“Aren’t you afraid?” Tom wondered, who saw how comfortable she was.

“No, not at all,” Joana responded. “I’m enjoying it.”

Tom still was perplexed. He had no idea what to make of it. There could be no such thing, his mind told him that, but apparently it existed after all, as it was right before his eyes. Understanding this was impossible for him. He just couldn’t fathom how to put all the pieces of what he was seeing and being told by Archie together.

“Can you take me to the bow? I would like to be there when we arrive. You can put me in a deck chair,” Archie interrupted his thoughts.

“I’m joining you,” Joana decided.

“Me too,” Katie shouted. She also felt great.

Tom was concerned. “Isn’t that too dangerous?” he objected. “Who knows what happens next?”

“Nobody,” Katie happily countered. “But don’t worry, all’s good right now. Come on, let’s go.”

Reluctantly, Tom helped Archie to move forward to the bow where they all sat in a row in their sun loungers, watching the dolphins. Now he couldn’t help but enjoy this magical spectacle.

“It all feels safe so far,” he realized in surprise and the white light was also having a calming effect on him.

Time didn’t seem to exist in the wormhole. They glided through it, surrounded by a breath of eternity. There was no sky, no sun, there was just water around them and this wonderful white light, a light in which the whole light spectrum seemed to be contained.

Joana knew this was a sacred moment. She felt blessed. They sat hour after hour and couldn’t tear themselves away from what surrounded them. This

experience made them forget everything else.

No man could ultimately tell how long they had sailed through the wave tunnel. It seemed to be endlessly long and at the same time only a single moment, but at some point, they began to recognise a difference at the end of the tunnel. As they approached, they could distinguish it was daylight.



Suddenly they were out and again back on the open sea. Joana looked around, but all that could be seen was smooth water. Only a few foam crowns behind the ship still testified to the magic wave.

A light breeze was blowing, playing with the sails, and inviting them to sail on. Again, the bell rang. "I can't explain all this and I don't understand it," Brad's voice sounded brittle. "But we survived this transition and are now wherever. I have no idea. As we can see, though, we are still on the open sea and since our supplies won't last forever, I suggest we sail to where west used to be, the direction of the setting sun. Basically, the course doesn't matter. The only important thing is that we have one. Unfortunately, I can't suggest anything better at the moment."

"I think we don't have too many other options," Bashan spoke up. "After all, we still have provisions for two weeks and in that time, we can sail quite far." The others agreed. "Then let's get to work," Brad decided. The gathering dispersed.

Brad was so tired he could barely stand up. After handing over command, he retreated to his cabin. He stepped in quietly. Jane still seemed to be asleep. He had a quick shower, slipped into his pyjamas, and lay down next to her.

Although Brad was dead-weary, he was wide awake again within seconds. Jane's breath was very shallow and irregular, and she repeatedly gasped for air. A thin saliva thread ran out of her mouth.

"Jane!" yelled Brad horrified. "What is happening to you?" She gave no answer, and it was only now that Brad became aware that she wasn't conscious. She was white as chalk. Brad jumped out of bed and ran off to get Rose. When he came back with the doctor, the situation was unchanged.

"I hope she didn't have a stroke or heart attack." Rose sounded concerned. She checked her pulse and listened to it, then gave her a strong medication.

After a while, Jane opened her eyes. "I think I fainted," she whispered in a weak voice.

“My darling, how are you?” Brad was close to tears.

“I just have to rest.” Jane's eyes fell shut again, but this time she breathed deeply and evenly and the colour had also returned to her face.

“Let her sleep,” Rose recommended. “I'll do another ECG and will then look in on her every hour.”

“Thank you, Rose.” Brad sat down while she was setting up the portable machine.

“Nothing out of the ordinary to report, but her heart is very weak and beats irregularly. She needs rest now. When she's awake, we will see how it is again. It's best to lie down next to her and you can both recover,” Rose suggested.

She then quietly left the room.

Brad lay down and carefully took Jane in his arms. He closed his eyes. He, too, needed desperately to sleep.



Joana, Tom, and Archie were still on deck. They had gone to the dog area and after a while, Mariah turned up there with sandwiches. Now they all four sat together, eating, watching the sea and the dogs play.

“Somehow, the colours here are different,” Tom noted.

“Yes, they are more intense and seem to shine a lot more. I've noticed that too,” Joana remarked. “Even the air feels much softer and somehow more energetic.”

“I honestly don't understand anything anymore,” Tom confessed. “This is too confusing for me. Do you also think we're in a different time or dimension now?” He looked at Joana, questioningly.

She gave him a kiss on the mouth. “It doesn't make any sense to worry. It's how it is, and we'll know soon enough. In any case, I have the feeling that a new life is just beginning, which no longer has much to do with our old one and that is already unbelievable, don't you think?”

Tom nodded. “I'm truly excited to see what's coming.”

Joana pointed at the dolphins who were still escorting the ship. “I can hear them talking again.” She laughed. “They say that they will bring us safely to our new home and that there is a wonderful mission waiting for us. Do you see the big dolphin jumping up again and again? This is Shana, my dolphin.”

“How do you know that?” Tom's confusion grew even greater.

“I can feel it and besides, she told me,” Joana explained to him happily.



Katie and Bashan luckily had their day off.

“Should we sit down on the sun deck and read further in your book?” Katie suggested. “We can then keep our eyes open of what’s around us. Maybe we'll see something that gives us some information about where we are.”

“That's a great idea,” Bashan agreed. “I'll go and get the book and you can look for a comfortable spot for us.”

“Wonderful! See you soon.” Katie strolled away towards the sun deck.

When Bashan came back with the book, he looked worried. “What's going on?” Katie asked alarmed.

“I met Rose. Jane is getting worse and worse and today she was unconscious when Brad found her. We can't help her here on board.”

“Oh no, I was hoping she would slowly get better. She is such a wonderful person.” Katie would have loved a miracle to help Jane back to her feet.

“Unfortunately, we can only send her positive thoughts and strength,” she realized in frustration.

“That's quite something,” Bashan remarked. “This, too, is a form of support.”

“I just hope it's enough.” Katie had a bad feeling.

“Let's get on with the book,” Bashan changed the subject.

“Alright.” She looked at him curiously. “I'm burning to learn what's next.”

Bashan began to read. “Now, that I am writing these lines, there is no telling under what circumstances you will get to know her, but it will be special times and you will experience a change of your consciousness level. Without this, you cannot fulfil your task and the king's daughter can't return home. Through a special event, you will be lifted from the third to the fifth dimension. You will see and know it by the fact that something very extraordinary is happening and when you arrive in the fifth dimension, you will find that all colours are more intense and luminous and that the air seems to be energised in a mysterious way.”

“Unbelievable,” Katie interrupted him. “It seems she knew this was going to

happen?”

“I wouldn't be surprised.” Bashan took her in his arms.

Then he read on. “At the same time that you are ascending to the fifth dimension, the lady of your heart will become pregnant. She will be carrying a girl. Her name is Ivy, which means fidelity.”

Katie turned red.

Bashan looked at her with huge eyes. “Don't tell me you're pregnant.”

“Would that be bad?” Katie inquired cautiously.

“Quite the opposite! That would be the best thing that could happen, but now please tell me.” Bashan couldn't wait.

“It happened on the first night we spent together. I knew right away, even at the moment of conception. But since I couldn't take a pregnancy test here, there was, of course, no evidence apart from my inner knowledge. Now I didn't get my period and whether you believe it or not, I can already feel her, her soul at least.”

Katie gazed in Bashan's eyes and she saw so much love in them, that she became warm around her heart.

“We're going to be a wonderful family,” he gushed. “Ivy is a decidedly beautiful name, don't you think?”

“So, then she's called Ivy.” Katie laughed happily.

Bashan kissed her tenderly. “What kind of a lucky devil am I?” he cheered.

“Let's read on. I'd like to know if she's writing more about Ivy,” Katie demanded.

“After that news?” Bashan responded amazed.

Katie nodded decisively and so Bashan continued.

“Ivy will be a special child from the start. She will have specific powers and abilities that distinguish her from others even in infancy. She will need your full support to develop all the potential she holds. Don't be concerned if she behaves differently than other children. She's aware of what she's doing. It's just important that you, as her parents, stand behind her and promote her abilities. She will let you know what she needs. Ivy will later when she has grown up, play an important role in the evolution of planet Earth. Your job is to make her strong and prepare her for this.” Bashan stopped, confused. “What does she mean by that?”

“No idea, but maybe she’ll write some more about it.” Katie closed her eyes. “I’m tired,” she reasoned.

“Then you have to rest. Especially now that you’re pregnant, you have to spare yourself.”

Katie laughed. “So far, I still feel quite normal, but I barely slept last night. The storm kept me awake. I’m so glad it’s over and that everything went well.”

“As you see it,” Bashan observed. “We don’t have a clue where we are, but at least we are alive and that’s worth a lot.”

Then he read on. “Your daughter will live with you in the Earth’s interior for a while. She will be prepared there for her mission. When the time comes, you have to let her go, even if it breaks your heart. So, enjoy the relatively short time you’ll have with Ivy.”

He stopped.

“I don’t like that at all.” Katie opened her eyes.

“That doesn’t please me either.” Bashan frowned. “But so far she hasn’t even been born. Maybe we should just take it one step at a time.”

“I think I’ve found out enough for today,” Katie stated.

“So do I.” Bashan laughed. “It’s also slowly getting dark and I’m ready for dinner.”

“I’m with you!” Katie stood up. “In all the excitement today, I’ve completely forgotten to eat anything at all. When we’ve eaten, I just want to go straight to bed.”

“Sounds good.” Bashan took her arm, and they headed out together toward the restaurant where nearly everyone else was already gathered.



There was a cheerful atmosphere and to their great delight, they saw Jane sitting next to Brad. She looked pale and fragile, but she sat upright. Katie immediately headed towards her.

“Jane, what a joy to see you here.” She seated herself next to her. “Are you feeling better?”

“To be honest, not really, but I just had to get among people again. Loneliness is not for me. I just get into a mess. I’m going to eat a little

something light, then I'll lie down again. But it's like medicine to me. I've missed you all." Jane smiled.

"We've missed you too," Katie professed. "Oh dear, we didn't want to disturb you, that's why we stayed away."

"I would have preferred daily visits a thousand times," Jane responded.

"You can have that." Katie smiled at her cordially. "We'll just tell everyone that from now on you're receiving visitors. I'm sure you'll have a lot of guests."

"That would be nice." Jane looked tired and Katie couldn't stop herself from the feeling that Jane had asked for farewell visits, but she said nothing.

After dinner, Brad took Jane back to her cabin.

"You should go back to the others love," she urged him.

"Oh no, my sweetheart, I'm staying here with you. I've barely seen you in the last few days and I want to spend as much time with you as possible."

"That won't be much anymore," Jane thought, but she kept that to herself. Instead, she whispered, "Brad O'Brien, I love you and I will always be with you no matter what happens."

They snuggled up on the bed together and lit the last candle they had left.

Jane loved candlelight and Brad was glad it softened her face. He took her in his arms and just held her



"Are Joana and Mariah staying with us again tonight?" Archie turned to Tom.

"I'm not sure. Would you like them to?"

"Yes," Archie nodded. "We don't know where we are, we should look after them."

"You are right." Tom smiled. "Should we ask them?"

Archie blushed. Tom looked generously over it. He was glad the boy handled his new life situation so confidently. He admired him and wondered where he took the strength from.

Tom had been secretly building a kind of wooden leg for Archie. It was almost finished, so he wanted to show it to him the next day. He just wasn't sure how his son would take it.

Tom had been talking to Joana about it and they both felt it was worth a try. Although it wasn't a modern prosthetic, Archie would hopefully find it easier to walk and wouldn't have to rely on his two crutches in the long run.

"Archie asks if you ladies are staying with us again tonight?" he invited Joana and Mariah.

"I would be honoured." Joana looked at Tom in love.

Tom wanted to carry her away and take her to a place where they could be alone and undisturbed. His whole body burned with desire for her.

Joana felt the same. "Our time will come," she whispered. "Unfortunately, we still have to be a little patient."

Tom's gaze became soft and dark at the same time. "But I hope it comes soon. I wish nothing more than to spend many, many nights with you."

"I'm so looking forward to it." Joana kissed him on the forehead.

The spot, gently caressed by her lips, vibrated long after. Tom was constantly surprised by how extremely his body kept reacting to Joana's touches.

As they later lay in bed, such a strong sense of tenderness and love came over him that he literally began to burn internally. It was both scary and overwhelmingly beautiful.

Even though Tom was terribly tired, he didn't feel like sleeping. The events of the day had shaken him up a lot. Although everything seemed fine so far, he was very worried and most troubled by Jane's health. Tom felt hugely guilty that he hadn't assisted with the surgery himself. If Jane hadn't overexerted herself, she would certainly be much better off now.

Joana moved her body and opened her eyes.

"She had to do it," she spoke quietly.

Tom shrugged. "Who?" he asked.

"Jane," Joana replied. "She knew this was the last good deed she could do. She saved Archie's life, and it means a lot to her."

"But for that, she is now dying." Tom sobbed and Joana could feel the tears running down his cheeks. "She would have lived longer if she hadn't exhausted herself. It was too much."

Joana took Tom in her arms and held him tightly. "What is going on here is not for the faint-hearted or cowards," she continued gently. "This is about life and death, and that is why death is part of it, however unjust and cruel it

may seem to us. We all only have a certain amount of time on this planet and when it expires, we die. Unfortunately, my intuition tells me this is the case with Jane, even if we will miss her terribly.”

“So, you don't think I'll be to blame for her death?” Tom noted, stalling.

“Are you crazy? Not at all,” Joana denied resolutely. “Everything happened exactly as it was meant to. Go to Jane and talk to her. She'll confirm it to you.”

“Yeah, you're right, I will. That's what I have to do, otherwise, I would reproach myself all my life. I just hope she shares your opinion.” Tom slowly felt a little calmer.

“For sure sweetheart, she will.” Joana was still holding him. “Let's rest now,” she suggested. Tomorrow is a new day.”

Tom nodded and wrapped his arms around her. Soon they fell asleep.



The next morning began with another surprise. Brad, who had barely slept with concern for Jane the previous night, was already on the bridge before sunrise. The sea was calm, but when the sun rose, it appeared not from where was normally east, but to the west and its colour was not orange but a deep pink. Brad was in a state where nothing could dumbfound him anymore. His only regret was that he didn't have a camera. He would have liked to capture this play of colours made of the blue-green glowing sea and the pink sun, which at the same time sprayed golden sparks on the surface of the water. The air was pleasant and fresh and somehow Brad felt energised. If only he could give some of his strength to Jane. It was incredibly hard for him to witness how much she was suffering. Brad wiped a tear from his eye.

Then he thought of Archie. He admired the boy for how he handled his handicap and he wondered if he had the strength to behave that way. He wasn't sure. Brad tried to grasp a clear thought and think about where to steer the ship. But his mind was just empty. However, he felt his heart all the more and it seemed to burn in the pain and fear for Jane. Brad didn't know which way to sail. He decided to keep the course on what used to be west.



Joana awoke in Tom's arms. He had been holding her all night. She tried to release herself carefully without waking him, but hardly did her breath change than Tom was already awake. He looked her in the eye and gave her the most

loving smile in the world.

“Good morning, dearest.” He kissed her tenderly.

“Good morning.” Joana couldn’t hold her feet still. “Let’s get up and see what it looks like outside.” She got up. “After all, we are in a new world.”

Tom laughed. “Sure.”

He jumped out of bed and they went to the bathroom together. Archie and Mariah were still asleep. After a refreshingly cold shower, they set off on deck with the dogs. Joana and Tom were overwhelmed when they saw the pink sun.

“You won’t believe it,” Joana remarked breathlessly. “But I know that sun. I’ve seen this before in a previous life. As the day progresses, it gets brighter and brighter until it’s almost white and then, towards the afternoon, it turns more and more golden and ultimately sinks, like a golden ball, into the sea. You’ll see.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” Tom noted dryly. “Can you remember when you saw this sun?”

“Yes, it was in the Lemurian time,” Joana replied without thinking. “And on my home planet, Venus, the sun has a very similar colour, only it’s colours are the opposite. In the morning they are golden, in the evening pink and when it sets, they are blood-red, just gorgeous.” She raved about it. In her eyes appeared an expression of longing.

“How come you remember all this?” Tom gazed at her, questioningly.

“The memories have come back over the years and are now quite clear.” Joana moved toward the dog pen. They sat down on the bench and watched the animals play. “Look, there are the dolphins.” Joana pointed her arm towards the stern. And indeed, an entire school once again accompanied the ship. Their powerful, silver bodies dazzled in the sun.

“I think today is a good day to introduce Archie to his prosthesis, what do you think?” Tom mused.

“Yes, let’s try. I hope he’ll be delighted.” Joana put her arm around his slim hips. “The dolphins say again, we should follow them. Do you think I can make this clear to the others without them thinking of me as crazy?” Joana looked lovingly at the beautiful creatures.

“Maybe you should just take that risk. During the storm they also listened to you.” Tom put his arm around her shoulders. “Whatever they think, I’m with

you and I'll stand by you and behind you," he whispered into her ear.

Joana felt her heart bounce and get quite warm. "Do you know how good that feels?" She cuddled him. "It's the first time in my life that I've been with a man who really supports me and who's complete with me. This is truly a godsend."

"That's how I feel about you too." Tom kissed her hair. "Before you existed, I didn't even know I could feel this way about a woman. It is a miracle, and it does me so good. I know I can tell you everything, show myself wholly and open my heart completely. I believe that this is how it should always be between man and woman, trust, love, acceptance, even more love and a whole sea full of tenderness and respect."

Joana laughed. "You get truly poetic."

Tom nodded. "I've been feeling this way since I've met you, my angel. Oh, I still have to tell you what I dreamed of last night, by the way. Maybe that has something to do with memories."

Joana looked at him eagerly.

"I dreamed again that I was a builder. A builder of sacred geometry and this time I was given a numerical code which is the key to all life and natural forms. Joana, when we create buildings according to this code, we are in tune with the Universe and in absolute harmony with the Creator. Can you imagine what it would be like to live and work in such buildings and how much strength and clarity they could give?" Tom's voice was overlapped with enthusiasm.

Joana sat up straight. Shivers ran all over her body. "Tom," she stated, very touched. "You are actually starting to remember. In Atlantis, you were one of the greatest builders of sacred geometry. If you remember this, we can anchor it back on this planet through your knowledge. That would be so salutary and, of course, incredibly good for us."

Tom looked at her and his gaze seemed to come from afar. "I'm going to write it down," he stood up. "Best to do so now before I forget anything."

Joana rose, too. "Yes, do that! We should also look in on Archie and Mariah."

They walked back to the cabin accompanied by the dogs. Archie and Mariah were up and already waiting for them. "Good morning, beautiful ones," Tom greeted them warmly. "Archie, we have a little gift for you and if you give me five minutes to write something down, I'll get it."

Archie agreed. After Tom finished his records, he went outside and then came back with the home-made prosthetic.

"I know there are better ones," he apologised. "But that's all I can build for you at the moment."

Archie looked at him with tears in his eyes. He then wordlessly grabbed the wooden leg and strapped it on. "It fits," he noted quietly and tried to get up. Mariah supported him and he made his first steps. Then he took the prosthesis off again.

After a while of silence, he said. "Thank you, Dad. I think if I practice, I can walk soon without my crutches. Once the stump has completely healed, I will use it. It's only temporary anyway until my leg has grown back."

Tom embraced him wordlessly. Only Joana could see the tears running down his face. She, too, had to swallow heavily. "I hope it helps you a bit," he finally managed to speak in a raucous voice, wiping away his tears.

"After breakfast, I want to visit Jane," Archie announced.

"I'm sure she'll be very happy about that!" Joana opened the cabin door. "Let's go."



The others followed her. When they arrived at the restaurant, almost everyone was gathered and excitedly discussing where they were. The sun was shining brightly, and the water was almost emerald green. It looked like paradise. They sat down with Katie and Bashan at the table.

"Did you tell him?" Joana whispered in Katie's ear.

Katie nodded and began to shine. "Her name is Ivy," she whispered back.

"I like the name." Joana was thrilled. "Are you coming to see Jane after breakfast?" she asked aloud.

"Yes," answered Katie. "Bashan is going to be working on sail repair, so he can't come along."

"Tom can't either. He has re-entered the service for the first time since Archie's illness. I think that's a good thing."

Tom nodded. "I already have a bad conscience towards the community, and I am so grateful that everyone supported us so much."

"That was a matter of course for us," Bashan reacted. "We're just happy that

Archie is getting along so well with the situation. Many admire him for it."

"I wonder why you're all so worried." Archie laughed. "My leg will soon be back as it should be."

"I wish for you that will happen with all my heart," Bashan replied, but he looked sceptical.



After breakfast, everyone dispersed and went about their duties. Archie, Joana and Katie headed to see Jane.

When they arrived at the captain's cabin, the door was wide open. Jane sat in one of the pretty, cosy armchairs, having a small table with a cup of tea in front of her.

"Just come in," she invited them. "I am so happy to see you. Archie, my boy, how are you?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you." Archie dropped into the other armchair that Joana had pushed forward for him. "I'm fine. But how are you?"

"My heart isn't going to grow back, unfortunately, and at the moment it doesn't look like it's recovering," Jane explained to him candidly and honestly.

"Is it because you helped with my surgery?" Archie inquired without hesitation.

Jane looked at him in horror. "No, no, it has nothing to do with it. I haven't been well for a long time and the storms and our current situation haven't exactly strengthened my health," she assured him. "I'm grateful to have been part of your surgery. It was a terrible task, but at the same time, it was also a great honour for me because we were able to save your life. That's the only thing that matters, Archie."

"I'm glad you say that." Archie looked at her thankfully. Then they were all silent for a while.

"This is an extraordinary time. We have all been put to the test, but I think we are doing quite well with it," Joana continued the conversation.

"Jane, do you have to die?" Archie asked bluntly.

"It looks quite likely," Jane countered just as directly.

Joana and Katie shrugged together, but Archie reacted quite calmly. "I thought so, but I wanted to ask you. Do you know where you'll go after your

death?”

“Oh, I'm going to look for a nice spot in heaven and watch you from there.” Jane's voice wavered a bit.

“When I leave my body, I will go back to my home planet,” Archie explained, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Joana and Katie marvelled. “Do you remember which planet you are from?” Joana was curious.

“Sure,” Archie recounted. “I come from the Pleiades. Although I can't recall all the details at the moment, I'm sure that I'm from there and Mariah comes from the same place as well.”

“Have you talked about it?” Now Katie jumped in.

“No, but I know it,” Archie affirmed.

“I can't tell you where I'm from,” Jane mused. “But I'm not afraid of dying. I would have only liked to have been with you for a longer time.”

“Maybe you still will.” Archie gazed at her hopefully.

“Yes, maybe.” Jane looked tired. “You have to go now. I need to rest,” she apologised.

The three rose immediately. “See you again soon,” they bit farewell and left Jane looking after them with a wistful smile.

“It makes me truly sad to see Jane like that,” Katie reasoned as they made their way to the sun deck.

“Me too,” Joana replied. “Nevertheless, we all have our time and when it's over, it is over. That's why we should make good use of it. We never know how much time we have.”

“True,” Katie confirmed. They sat down with Archie in the comfy sun loungers and enjoyed the warm sun on their skin. The calm and warmth made them sleepy. After a while, they all dozed off.

When Joana opened her eyes again, she found that it was freezing cold. The sun could no longer be seen and instead, dark clouds piled up in the sky. An icy wind blew. The others also awoke shivering. “We'd better go below deck,” Joana suggested. “I'll take the dogs quickly to the dog area, then I'll come and join you.”



Archie and Katie agreed. They got up and started making their way below. Joana hurried to reach the dog pen. No sooner had she got there when Tom showed up. He looked worried. "Brad says it seems like we're going to get another storm."

Joana stared at him horrified. "Not again." They went together to the bridge. "Is Archie safe?" Joana was concerned.

"Yes, he's already below deck with Katie. They are playing cards with Mariah," Tom reassured her.

Once on the bridge, they gazed into Brad's grey face. "Are you OK?" Joana inquired.

"Yes, as far as I can be in these circumstances." His voice was flat.

"I understand. This is so tough," Joana remarked compassionately.

"It's starting again." Brad's gaze was dark. Joana and Tom peered at the bow of the ship and what they saw left them with no doubt that it wasn't going well.

The colour of the sea had changed to a deep black. Right in front of them, a huge bad weather front built up. One could literally watch the waves get higher by the minute.

"What are we going to do now?" Joana's voice shook with fear.

"We'll sail and pray." Brad clutched the steering wheel. It had gone dark suddenly but no one could tell what time it was. There were no more working clocks on board and so they could only estimate time from the position of the sun, stars and the moon, but even that didn't work properly anymore. "I just hope it doesn't take too long," Brad noted. "My strength won't last forever."

"We will briefly go to let Archie know where we'll be, then we'll come back and stay with you," Tom suggested.

"That would be great. I would be truly grateful for your company," Brad admitted, relieved.

Joana and Tom headed out and were soon back with coffee and sandwiches.

"Well, at least we're not going to starve," Brad smiled thankfully. "Can you please look in on Jane again? I'm very worried about her."

"Of course!" Joana replied and left the bridge again with Tom. Jane slept deeply, and they decided not to wake her. She looked so relaxed and peaceful.

Quietly, they pulled the door shut and walked back to the captain.

“She sleeps,” Joana reported. “And she breathes very deeply and evenly.”

“That's good.” Brad sighed. “That's not happening often anymore. Mostly, she breathes heavily and throws herself back and forth uneasily. Not a great way to rest.” He poured himself a coffee. “It's an absolute nightmare to see the people you love the most suffer like this. I feel so helpless.”

“I know that feeling now, too,” Tom said empathically. Then they stared silently into the darkness, everyone deep in their own thoughts. Hour after hour passed, and the storm got stronger and stronger. Miraculously, Brad managed to master the monster waves safely.

“We should have followed the dolphins,” Joana thought, but she didn't mention it because it was too late for that now. After a time that seemed like an eternity to them, there was suddenly a violent bang. Joana and Tom jumped up terrified. “What was that?” Joana yelled. The ship tilted dangerously to the side.

“Damn,” Brad swore. “I'm afraid we've run upon a rock.”

Outside, it was pitch dark. Brad fixed the steering wheel and reached for the last still working flashlight. “I better go and have a look if I can spot anything.” He opened the door.

“I'll come along and secure you,” Tom offered immediately.

Joana knew she couldn't stop him from doing so. “Be careful, please,” she asked trying to get her trembling under control. The two disappeared wordlessly into the darkness.

Joana was scared and her throat tightened so she could barely breathe. She closed her eyes, focused on exhaling, and put both hands on her heart. Slowly, she realised she became calmer. The ship was no longer moving. It seemed to be stuck.

Joana noted with relief that dawning was appearing on the horizon. Not much longer now and they would be able to see in daylight what had happened. It was as if her whole life so far was running like a movie just in front of her inner eye.

Suddenly, she was inwardly flooded by a warm, golden light. It brightened her mind, warmed her heart and abruptly she was perfectly calm. She could sense that it was now about letting go of the old and starting something new. Whatever it would look like, it felt good and right. Joana breathed deeply into

that feeling and it spread like a wave throughout her body, in every cell, yes in every fibre of her being. She had no sense of time, but she noticed it was getting brighter and brighter outside.



Eventually, she ventured out on the deck. Many of the passengers had already gathered at the bow. It towered high out of the water and the *Dragon Queen* hung at a slant, like on a hook. Relieved, she found that land could be seen in a distance of less than a kilometre. A cliff towered jade green and majestic into the sea.

“Oh, my goodness,” Joana thought. “How are we supposed to climb up there?” But she quickly relaxed again. Somehow, she knew they had to leave the ship. Although the wind still blew vigorously, the sea seemed to calm down slowly. She joined the others.

“We probably ran up on a big rock and are stuck.” Tom came to her. “As it stands, the low tide saved us. That's the good news. The bad news is that the ship has a big hole in the hull. As soon as the tide gets higher, it will fill with water and probably sink.”

Tom was pale and nervous, but Joana smiled and spoke calmly. “It is time to leave the ship. What do you think, how long do we have?”

“Maximum five hours.” Tom looked at her in amazement. “You don't seem to be too worried.”

“No, not anymore.” Joana was breathing deeply. “I feel as serene and clear as I've ever felt in my life. Let's ring the bell. We need to convene a meeting.”

Tom rang the bell, but almost all the passengers were gathered anyway. Only Brad was missing. He couldn't endure it anymore and was now back at Jane's side. “Brad is caring for Jane. I hope you are sympathetic to that. Plus, he's totally exhausted and needs time to rest,” Joana explained. A murmur went through the ranks, but none complained. Then she took the floor again.

“Good morning, everyone. As you've probably noticed, our ship has run upon a reef. What perhaps not everyone knows yet is that it has a hole in the hull. Currently, we have a low tide, but in a few hours, the water level will rise again and then the ship might sink. The danger is great. The water here seems to be very deep and the rock we're sitting on is apparently huge. We suggest we row ashore with the lifeboats. While it doesn't look exactly easy, it's our only chance. We can only take what is necessary. Some food, containers for drinking water and some clothes. If you have a backpack or a small travel

bag, you can bring that. A backpack would be better though, as we'll probably have to climb. We also need knives and ropes. Nothing more can be taken. What are your thoughts? We have about five hours and would have to use all boats twice before everyone is ashore, so there's no time to waste."

Everybody agreed. "OK, it's best to pack your stuff now and then get back on deck as soon as possible. The sooner we set off, the better." The gathering ended. All immediately disappeared into their cabins.

"Let's get our things and can you find ropes and knives?" Joana asked Tom. "I'm going to see Brad and Jane."

Tom nodded. "Can you take care of Archie and Mariah later?"

"Of course," Joana replied. They rushed away in different directions.



When Joana arrived at the captain's cabin, her pace slowed automatically, but she gave herself a jolt and entered resolutely. Brad sat slumped on the bed, holding Jane in his arms. She looked so pale and tired. "We have to leave the ship, everything is organised. Are you ready?"

"Yes. I've spoken to Jane. We're going to give it a go. I'll have to carry her, but I don't care. Maybe we'll find help on land." Tears glistened in his eyes, but then he straightened up. "I will prepare everything and then I'll be with you."

"Not necessary," Joana reassured him. "Just take care of Jane. Do you want to transfer with the first group or the next?"

"The second," Jane spoke out, her voice sounding incredibly weak.

"Then I'll let you know when it's time. It is best to rest until then. You will need all your strength."



Joana left the cabin looking for Mariah and Archie. They were already on deck. Archie had thickly bandaged his leg stump and strapped his prosthesis in. "I'll take the crutches with me, too," he decided. "Who knows how far we'll have to walk?"

Joana gave him a smile. "You are great. Do you want to leave with the first group?" Archie and Mariah agreed.

Tom came to her. "The water is contaminated with sharks. It's teeming with

triangular fins.”

“What?” Joana stared in fear at the still high waves and the small boats by comparison. Sharks aroused archaic anxieties in her.

“It doesn't help,” Tom reacted. “We have no choice. Bashan and I will go with the first group and then row a boat back. Piet will stay ashore with the others and look for an opportunity to climb up the cliff. We have identified a grotto with the field glasses, in which there seems to be hardly any water at the moment. It's the only place we can get ashore. We need luck, Joana. If we can't get up from the grotto, we're lost.”

“This is an adventure.” Joana leaned on him. “It's going to go well, I'm sure.”

“Hopefully.” Tom kissed her like it was the last time. His eyes were of such a deep, bright blue that Joana would have liked to submerge in them. But she tore loose.

“Let's do it,” she purposefully demanded. “Time is running out.” They helped the others who had already started abseiling. The lifeboats danced like nutshells in the still agitated sea.

In the first boat to depart, Archie and Puschel, Mariah, Piet, Rose, Katie and Bashan squatted amongst some of the others. With determination, they rowed off and fought their way through the sea swells. The other boats followed. They moved forward amazingly quickly. Joana watched their progress with the binoculars while Sina sat next to her, whimpering quietly.

“We're going soon,” Joana reassured her. “We'll see them all again.” She stroked Sina's head, but the pooch didn't want to come to rest. Then the boats docked in the grotto.

Brad arrived on deck with Jane. He carried her like a child in his arms and she appeared to have lost quite a bit of weight.

“Hey, you two.” Joana tried to sound cheerful. “They're in the grotto now. So far, everything seems to have gone well.”

No sooner had she finished her sentence, when the boats appeared on the water again. Joana could see through the binoculars that Tom and Bashan were rowing hard against the physical forces of the sea. It seemed to take ages for them to reach the ship. Both were very exhausted.

“The current is extremely strong,” Tom breathlessly reported. “We had to row like crazy and even then, we worried we wouldn't make it back.”

Joana hugged the two of them. “Now others can take over and you can rest.”



The second group was smaller than the first, but it took them quite a while to get Jane in one of the small boats. Joana had to hold Sina, who barked at the sharks and would have preferably jumped overboard to scare them away. She felt Joana's anxiety, who didn't speak a word throughout the crossing. She focused her thoughts on the fact that they would arrive safely in the grotto. Brad and Jane also remained silent.

“We're going right back to where we dropped the first group. Hopefully, they have found a way up. After all, it wasn't dark in the grotto, I could see that much and that's a good sign,” Tom reported.

The waves got higher with the rising tide and the boat progressed slowly. After a period that seemed endless to Joana, they arrived at the grotto and got out of the boat. The water reached up to their thighs.

“When we were first here, the water just went up to our knees.” Tom was terrified. “I would say we don't have much time.”

“Hello, where are you?” he shouted loudly. There was no reply. “Let's go to the grotto and look for it. We may have an hour left,” Tom urged.

They set off. Tom and Brad carried Jane. They made slow progress. There was a slight twilight in the grotto, but the deeper they walked into it, the brighter it got. Eventually, at some distance, they saw a cone of light that seemed to shine from the ceiling to the floor. The water was now up to their hips. The marks on the walls left no doubt it would rise even higher. When they arrived at the cone of light, they found a rope hanging down from the ceiling and while stepping into the beam and looking up, they saw sunlight and Mariah's head. She bent over the hole and excitedly made signs that they should climb up.

“Brad and Jane first,” Joana suggested.

They strapped Jane into a safety vest and harness normally used in sailing to get up the rigging. Then she was carefully hoisted up. It wasn't easy to get her over the edge as she was too weak to help, but after a while, they succeeded. Soon enough, the seat came back down and Brad floated upwards. Little by little, everyone was brought safely up until only Joana, Sina and Tom were left.

“You go first and I'll follow with Sina,” Tom offered.

“How are we just supposed to get her up?” Joana was distraught.

“I’m going to tie her to me. The harness allows for that easily and I promise you I’ll hold on to her.”

The water kept rising and Joana had to stop herself thinking about the sharks. She put on the strap and was already on the trip to the top. Tom had pulled Sina and himself to safety on a ledge, while the water seemed to pour in more quickly. When the rope came down again, he wasn’t able to grasp it. He had to get back into the water to reach it. Tom had just arrived back on the rock, when he saw a big fin heading towards him.

“That was close.” He turned to Sina, securing himself and the dog as best he could. Then he gave a hand sign that he was ready. “We had better disappear from here,” he whispered, holding Sina firmly in his arms. When they got to the top and Tom had solid ground under his feet, he realised how exhausted he was. He was dizzy and stars danced in front of his eyes. With his last bit of strength, he dragged himself to the others, who sat on a plateau and stared out to sea. Joana knelt next to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you,” she spoke from the bottom of her heart.

“Was a pleasure to me,” Tom gallantly replied. He preferred to keep to himself the encounter with the fin.

“Well, that was quite dangerous.” Archie dropped to the ground next to them.

“You can say that, son, but it went well again.” Tom patted him on the shoulder.

“Almost.” Archie pointed his head over to Brad, who held a lifeless body in his arms.

“Is she dead?” Tom was horrified.

“No, but she lost consciousness when they pulled her up,” Archie told them sadly. “Rose has given her a heart massage and a syringe of medication, but she can’t do more for her.”

“This is so cruel.” Joana felt her heart get heavy. She knew that for Jane, the journey was ending here.

VIII



Leaving the ship had taken a good part of the day. Everyone was exhausted, and many were still in shock. They spent several hours deliberating how to proceed. As dusk fell, they were still sitting on the plateau, too tired to explore the area. Luckily, even after sunset, it was still pleasantly warm. They had enough drinking water, but only a little to eat.

However, no one was really hungry anyway. The situation they had to deal with was too worrying and uncertain. Jane continued to be unconscious, and her breathing remained flat and irregular.

Joana, Tom, Mariah, and Archie laid down next to each other to sleep. Sina and Puschel stayed right next to them. Joana lay on her back cuddled up to Tom, looking into the starry sky.

“Are you sleeping?” she asked quietly.

“No,” he whispered back. “My body is worn out, but my mind is wide awake.”

“I’m the same,” Joana replied. “Now it’s going to be truly exciting. I only know about such situations from the cinema.”

“Watching was always enough for me.” Tom’s voice lacked confidence.

“I would love to act in a movie, but that probably has to wait.” Joana smiled.

“If Jane wasn’t doing so badly, I’d be considerably more comfortable,” Tom continued. “What do I do when she dies and I haven’t talked to her yet?” he said, dejected.

“That’s what your son already did for you,” Joana reassured him.

“How?” Tom was surprised.

“He asked her exactly about that. It was a remarkable conversation and Jane was very clear that her condition has nothing to do with the surgery. Katie was also there.” Joana kissed him on the cheek.

“You are without guilt, my love, please don't reproach yourself anymore. I don't think Jane will live much longer. We will soon have to say goodbye to her,” Joana concluded sadly. “Maybe, we should try to sleep a bit,” she suggested. “We will need plenty of strength for tomorrow.”

“Yes, you're right.” Tom put his arm protectively around her, then they fell silent.



The new day greeted them with a wonderful, pink sunrise. Joana got up and looked at the spot where the *Dragon Queen* had run aground. The ship was gone.

Brad hadn't slept much at all as he anxiously listened to every breath Jane took. As the sun rose, she opened her eyes and looked at him with a glow that no longer appeared to be of this world.

“It's time to bid farewell,” came barely audibly from her lips. “Dearest, I won't be able to go with the rest of you. I'll stay and leave my body soon the way the Indians used to. I will die here in this place, my love.”

“No way am I going to leave you behind,” Brad disagreed. “Please, let me carry you.”

“You'll have to walk far. I saw it last night in a lucid dream. You can't carry me all the way and neither can the others,” Jane told him gently.

Brad looked at her with tearful eyes. “Then I'll stay with you until you're better,” he stammered helplessly.

“I won't be better off again. My time has come. I'm so grateful for the wonderful hours we spent together, Brad. Without you, my life would have only been half as beautiful. Before I started this journey, my doctor warned me it could be my last. It was worthwhile, my beloved, it was so worth it.”

She then lost consciousness again, but this time her face looked relaxed and peaceful. Brad knew internally that he would never talk to her again. He took her in his arms as he sobbed and buried his face in her hair, which still smelled good.

His sobbing had woken the others, and they surrounded the two of them with compassion.

"I can't save Jane," Rose admitted, deeply affected after having examined her one more time. "We don't have the right medication and her heart is getting weaker and weaker. We can only wait and see."

"Unfortunately, we must leave soon," Bashan stated, concerned. "We can't stay here on the plateau. We have to go off to find food and water. Can we transport Jane? We could take turns carrying her."

Rose shook her head worryingly. "Every effort is too much for her heart. She has to lie quite calm and even. Honestly, I see little chance."

It was obvious how hard it was for her not to be able to help Jane. "I suggest you go off and Brad and I remain with Jane," the doctor offered.

Brad shook his head decisively. "No Rose, I want you to go with the others. Jane certainly wouldn't let you stay here."

"He's right Rose," Bashan agreed with him. "You can't do anything for Jane anymore, but for us, you can still be a great help. It's horrible, but that's the reality. Once we've found what we need, some of us can come back here and then we'll see. You can have the rest of the drinking water."

"All right." Brad nodded. "It's best you leave straight away. We'll meet again."



They turned away and set off, but everyone had a queasy feeling in their bellies. It didn't feel right to leave Jane and Brad behind, but they had no choice. Soon they left the plateau and oriented themselves at the sun's position. The terrain was initially dry, stony, and rough. They could see that it was made of volcanic rock, but there was already incipient vegetation everywhere.

After wandering through this landscape for half a day, the area changed. It became greener and lush and the terrain became slightly hilly. From initially low shrubs lining their path, the bushes became taller and eventually, they were wandering between beautiful trees that looked like a mixture of birch and eucalyptus trees. They exuded a pleasantly fresh, slightly floral smell.

The ground was covered with rich green grass and in between flowers bloomed that they had never seen before. Tom paused fascinated in front of a large plant with red flowers on giant stems. "I know them from my dreams," he called out stunned. "This is a medicinal plant."

Joana just looked at him and he knew she fully understood. Then they continued on their way. Suddenly the dogs took off excitedly, and they heard them barking wildly in the distance. They followed them and, after a few minutes, came to an enchanted looking forest lake filled with crystal clear water. They could look down to the ground, which was covered with round, white-gold stones. "It's as if we are in a fairy tale," Joana remarked.

Katie knelt to dip her hands in the water, while the dogs were already drinking greedily. The long hike had made everyone thirsty. She scooped water with her hands and drank a few sips. "You have to try that," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I've never drunk water that tastes so good and is so beneficial. It's like new strength is being instilled in me."

The others also knelt and gave it a trial.

"It's a bit like a magic potion," Archie judged.

Joana was impressed. "I think I'd like to take a bath. Who is going to join me?" She took off her shoes and jumped into the water fully dressed. "So at least everything gets a little cleaner." She laughed and swam out to deeper water.

Almost everyone followed her lead. They bathed and frolicked for a long time, happy as children. It was like everything was being washed off them, all the worries, all the heaviness and their past. When they came back to shore, they lay in the warm grass to be dried by the sun. Everyone felt considerably better and had gained new courage to face life.

"I'm hungry." Archie came forward after they had rested in the sunlight for a while.

"Me too." Joana sat up. Judging by the state of the sun, it was already late afternoon. "We really should look around for something edible."

Tom got up. "What do you think about setting off in both directions around the lake in pairs and then meet here again? We should stay within call distance and if someone finds something, they can give a signal to the others."

Everyone agreed and so they swarmed out.

Tom took Joana's hand while being magnetically attracted to a group of trees that looked like a cathedral. As they approached, they saw that the trees actually formed a kind of gate or passageway and they walked through. Before their eyes, a small, round glade was revealed, which was bathed in the last sunlight. Both could feel they were in a sacred place. They slowly walked into the middle of the circle where a stone altar was waiting for them, on which

lay fresh, deep red flowers, that were the ones Tom had dreamed of and they were carefully arranged in the form of an eight on a snow-white, round marble slab. "This is the symbol of infinity and also of twin flames," Joana whispered.

Tom looked at her, questioning. "Let us pray that we have a happy, shared life and can return home together after we've fulfilled our mission," Joana invited him.

"I don't know what to say," Tom confessed in a subdued voice.

"You don't need words," Joana explained to him. "Just imagine it and feel it in your heart."

Tom nodded. They knelt in front of the altar for a while before rising and silently, hand in hand, left the magical place. Joana could sense the bond between their hearts and the connection of their souls. It was the most beautiful and uplifting experience she had ever had in life.

"Do you feel it too?" she asked Tom.

"If you mean our bond, the answer is YES," he confirmed.

Joana nodded with tears of happiness in her eyes.



"If we don't find something to eat soon, I will die of hunger," Tom proclaimed, completely unromantically, as they moved back towards the lake. "Let's see what lies behind that hill."

They walked towards a small knoll. When they got to the top, they spotted Mariah and Archie, who were collecting something that looked like walnuts.

"Great, you are here," Archie called with delight. "We found something to eat. It tastes like a mixture of nut and fruit and is very nutritious. If you eat four pieces of it, you're full."

"How do you know it's not toxic?" Tom was suspicious.

"I'm trusting my intuition," Archie laughed.

Joana peeled one of the nut fruits and tasted them. "Wow, that's really good." She reached for the next one, peeled it and offered it to Sina. The dog, too, seemed to like the fruit.

"Puschel has also eaten two," Archie reported. "While not the best dog food, it's better than nothing."

Tom, as well, now tried the sweet, nutty something and was impressed. "Together with the water, we have all we need to survive. The trees are full of them."

"True," Archie replied. "But only the fruits on the ground are ripe. Those on the tree taste sour."

Luckily, the whole ground was covered, and they eagerly picked up what they could carry. Then they made their way back to the lake. Joana noticed Archie was limping more than before.

"What about your leg? Does the prosthesis irritate your stump?" Archie nodded, but he said nothing. When they arrived at the agreed meeting point, Joana went to find Rose. "Can you please look at Archie's leg?" she asked.

Rose immediately came along. They went to Archie, who sat against a tree trunk and was about to take off the prosthesis. A bloody bandage emerged, which he carefully removed. The skin at the leg stump was heavily reddened and broken in some places. "I have to disinfect it." Rose opened her bag.

"Does that hurt?" Archie asked.

"Maybe minor, but it's important and after that, I'll bandage it again. It would be better if you don't use the prosthesis for a few days so the skin can regenerate. Do you think you can only walk with the crutches?"

Archie looked sceptically at her. "That's going to be tough. Even with the prosthesis and the crutches, it's hard to keep up with you, but only with crutches, I'll be even slower. I'm going to talk to my leg and I've found some herbs that I'll eat right away. They will help heal the skin."

"How do you know the herbs?" Joana was flabbergasted.

"From my dreams," Archie explained.

"That's very interesting. You have to tell me more about that when we have time." Joana sat down next to him.

"My pleasure," the boy returned.

The others, too, gradually came back. Katie and Bashan had found wild carrots. They were small but very tasty and Piet came back with something reminiscent of dried figs. They spread their treasures on the lakeside and enjoyed the fresh meal. It was a good feeling to have solid ground under their feet again, but also to have plenty of water and food. Even the dogs seemed to be happy with it. Dusk arrived, and the sun disappeared golden on the horizon.

"Time to decide on how to proceed. I suggest we stay and some of us go back tomorrow and get Brad and Jane. She can recover here until we have found a better place." Joana looked around the group.

"I believe that's the only right and meaningful thing we can do at the moment," Bashan agreed.

The others nodded.

"I'm up to return to them tomorrow," Tom offered. Bashan, Ken and Piet also came forward to join him.



The evening was like the previous one, pleasantly warm, and so no one felt cold. When the sun had set, everyone lay down to sleep. Joana was lying in Tom's arms and Mariah had cuddled up to Archie. The two were already inseparable.

Joana had almost fallen asleep when a strange sound that seemed to come from far away made her wide awake. "Do you hear that too?" She jumped up.

"What?" came back sleepily.

"It sounds like drumming." She woke the others. "Listen!"

The others sat up and harkened intently in the darkness.

"It sounds like huge drums being used at a ceremony," Ken stated. "I know the sound of some of those from my trip to Japan."

They continued to listen and realised there was a certain rhythm.

"Well it seems like we're not alone here," Rose remarked.

They tried to figure out which direction the drumming was coming from, and after some time they were sure it came from the coastal region.

"We should check tomorrow if we can find them." Katie's voice sounded enthusiastic and tired at the same time.

"Yes, you, Mariah and I could go." Joana was suddenly not tired at all.

"I suggest we sleep now and tomorrow morning we'll see." Rose lay down again. Like most, she had built herself a bed of soft grass and leaves. The others did the same.

Joana struggled to lie still, but she didn't want to bother Tom. She looked

into the starry sky and listened to the drums. The sky seemed closer here and the stars bigger. She didn't know much about the stars, but she could still recognise something like unknown constellations. The largest had the shape of a heart.

"I'm not comfortable with the thought of you three women going off alone tomorrow," Tom whispered.

Joana laughed. "I didn't expect you would be," she answered quietly. "But we have Sina with us and maybe a few others will decide to join us overnight."

"Hopefully." Tom kissed her intimately. "We still need you and especially I do. Our story has only just begun."

"I'm totally with you," Joana appeased him. "No matter what we do tomorrow, we'll be careful. I don't plan to kick myself out of the game on this adventure."

"Then I am reassured." Now Tom had to laugh. They cuddled up to each other and finally fell asleep.



The next morning started with a drizzle, but it was still warm. "Could be worse," Archie noted. He wrapped the bandage off his leg and a glow appeared on his face. "I knew it," he shouted happily.

"What did you know?" Tom inquired.

"That my leg would heal overnight," Archie proudly reported.

Joana walked over to him. "May I see?" she inquired politely.

"But please." Archie stretched his leg stump towards her. It was indeed impressive. The redness had completely disappeared and the places where the skin had been damaged had almost healed.

"This is already a little miracle," Joana praised appreciatively.

"I'm going to use the crutches only today, then the skin will be completely fine tomorrow morning and I can strap on the prosthesis again. Today I'll stay here and build a shelter for Jane with a few of the others. She can't lie in the rain."

Joana tenderly brushed over his head. "That's an excellent idea. If Jane has a chance of recovery, it's here."

After a short breakfast, Tom, Ken, Bashan and Piet headed out. They had

filled their bottles with the wonderful water from the lake and carried some of the nut fruits in their luggage. It would take them at least half a day to get to Brad and Jane. Joana looked after them as they disappeared into the distance. Katie stood next to her.

“Do we want to leave as well?” She straightened up to her full size. Now she looked like a proper Amazonian.

“Yes, is Mariah coming along?” Joana wanted to know.

“She'd rather stay with Archie,” Katie reported.

“Anyone else who wants to accompany us?”

“They're all scared. It will probably be just us.” Katie grinned.

“I was expecting that,” Joana laughed. “Let's go before they come up with the idea of holding us back,” she suggested. They packed some food, as well as water and said goodbye only to Archie and Mariah. “We will be back by nightfall at the latest,” Joana promised.

Archie nodded. “Good luck,” he wished, and the two set off.



Brad had had a sleepless night. He had listened to every breath Jane took, who had been unconscious all along and breathing heavily. He had held and warmed her in his arms because her body felt so cold. As dusk set in, it started raining slightly. Brad was distraught. The plateau was bare and there was no protection against the moisture. He bent over her to shield her with his body.

That's when Jane opened her eyes. She looked at him with full consciousness and there was so much love in her gaze that Brad could barely stand it. She smiled. Then her head sank to the side, and she closed her eyes forever. Brad couldn't believe it. Although he had known it was going to happen, it was still incomprehensible to him at that moment. He just stayed seated, held Jane's body in his arms and tried to keep her from getting wet. This was how the four men found him when they finally arrived on the plateau after their long hike.

“That doesn't look good,” Bashan noted as they approached.

“We have to be very gentle with him.” Tom's voice sounded toneless.

In silence, they progressed until they stood right in front of Brad and Jane.

“She's dead,” Brad whispered in a teary-choked voice. “Today, early this morning, she left. What should I do now?”

Brad seemed completely lost and disoriented in his grief. The others sat down next to him. Tom handed him water. Brad drank greedily. He had used most of the water they had left him for Jane to cool her forehead and neck during the day.

“That's good,” he thanked them, feeling a little of his spirits returning.

“Would you like something to eat, too?” Tom offered. “We brought some fruit.”

Brad shook his head. The others didn't feel like food either.

“We could take Jane's body to the lake and bury her there,” Ken gently suggested.

“In any case, we can't leave her here.” Brad tenderly stroked her hair.

“We could take turns carrying her.” Bashan pulled a thin blanket from his backpack. “Rose gave me this. It's actually an isolation blanket, but we could wrap Jane in it and then carry her in pairs by taking her on our shoulders.”

Everyone, including Brad, agreed with that solution. “I would like to carry her by myself,” he apologised. “But I no longer have the strength.”

“That's fine, Brad,” Tom reassured compassionately. “We're here for that.”

They carefully wrapped Jane's body in the blanket and then Bashan and Ken took her on their shoulders. It wasn't easy to carry the body, but for all of them, it was a matter of course and so the men alternated every half hour and made the way back with small breaks at a fairly brisk pace. Just before dusk, they arrived back at the lake. Brad was struggling. He had tottered slightly in the last few kilometres but refused any support.



No sooner were they within sight of the camp when Archie came on his crutches towards them with joy. Then he abruptly stopped. Tom's heart hurt. He could physically feel his son's pain. Archie didn't move until they were with him, then tenderly he stroked his hand over Jane's wrapped body.

“We can put her in the shelter we built for her. There she can rest through the night and we will keep the death watch.”

He had tears in his eyes and Tom had to swallow hard too. Still, he was once again amazed and impressed by Archie's wisdom and dignity. His little boy had become a young man in no time.

They carried Jane to the shelter, and everyone came over. The five men were

completely spent, yet one by one, they jumped into the lake and felt much better and newly strengthened afterwards. They lay down on the soft grass on the shore and gratefully accepted the new nut fruits and something that looked like bananas but tasted slightly salty.

Only Brad still didn't like to eat anything. His stomach felt tight and his heart was so full of grief that he was unable to perceive anything around him. The captain closed his eyes. He just wanted to sleep. Tom wordlessly gave his companions a sign. They stood up quietly and left him alone. They silently went to the others and sat down with them in a circle.

After recalling their experiences, Tom inquired, "Where are Joana and Katie?"

"We don't know," Rose answered, worried.

Tom looked at Archie, who turned slightly red.

"I couldn't hold them back, but they promised to be here by dusk."

Just as he was saying that the sun was sinking on the horizon. Tom felt a mixture of anger and fear rising within himself. "I don't like this at all," he said aloud.

He looked helplessly at Bashan. "What are we going to do?"

They both knew they weren't able to look for the women in their condition. Bashan shrugged his shoulders apologetically. "Katie is pregnant, I just hope she doesn't overexert herself."

Everyone was joyfully surprised. Except for Tom, none had known about it. "Joana will be looking after her," assured Tom. "But who knows who they're meeting and what is happening to them?" He felt tense.



"I can tell you exactly." They suddenly heard Joana's voice from the darkness. The two women entered the circle. But they weren't alone. With them, as far as it was recognisable in the dark, two women and two men had come. They wore long, white robes, and all had very long, dark hair, which reached to their hips. Their facial features were aristocratic and fine and their bodies slim and straight in a majestic manner. They radiated an indescribable dignity.

"Wow." Archie was thrilled. "Who did you bring?"

Everybody stared at the charismatic figures.

"These are our new friends. They are, so to speak, relatives of Katie. Direct

descendants of the inhabitants of Agartha, the Inner Earth. May I introduce you to Jarod, Marvie, Celeste and Gemian.” She pointed her hand at the individuals, who bowed gracefully one after the other. “Usually, they speak Gaiaic, but our wonderful new friends here are interpreters, so they also speak our language.”

“Welcome ascended ones from the third dimension,” Gemian spoke out in his deep and melodic voice. “We have been expecting you.”

All eyes were on Gemian in amazement.

“How could you know we were coming?” Archie was puzzled.

“Our ambassadors, the dolphins, told us about you. They also made sure you were safely able to leave the ship and come ashore.”

“But the water was full of sharks,” Ken disagreed. “I haven't seen a single dolphin.”

“That was a mirage.” Marvie laughed in a bell-clear voice.

“What do you mean?” Tom looked irritated. “We saw sharks all around us.”

“They were actually dolphins,” Jarod enlightened them. His voice sounded like a deep bass and was warm and pleasant at the same time. “Here, in the fifth dimension, there are no predators, so no sharks. What you thought were sharks were projections of your fears.”

“Jane spoke of the water being full of dolphins,” Brad, who had remained silent since he had joined them, interjected thoughtfully. “I thought she was fantasising.”

“She was the only one free of fear,” Celeste gently intervened in a voice that sounded like music. “She had already detached herself so far from her body and earthly being that she could see the truth.”

“I'd also like to see the truth,” Archie wished.

“That will happen, my son, it will. Have a little patience. You will all have the opportunity to go through a personal cleansing process and after that, you will be able to know the truth.”

“Cool.” Archie was ready immediately. “What do we have to do and when do we start?”

“There is no rush, young man. First of all, we will stay here tonight and tomorrow morning we will pay our last tributes to Jane. Once she is buried, those who wish can come with us to our city and there you will be initiated.

Now let's rest. See you tomorrow.”

The four withdrew from the circle and disappeared in the darkness towards the tree cathedral. They left an agitated and slightly confused group behind. All eyes were now pinned to Joana and Katie, who sat relaxed against a tree trunk and watched the whole scenario, amused.

“Why are you laughing?” Bashan's voice sounded slightly infuriated.

“We're happy,” Katie retorted.

“We had the pleasure of hiking with our new friends for a few hours and they have already told us a lot,” Joana explained.

“How did you find them?” Tom wanted to know.

“We left right after you and we went towards the ocean, in the direction where we suspected to find last night's drummers. And we weren't wrong. It's not far from here to the coast. Then we walked along a beach for about four kilometres until we found a small town by the sea. There was an amazing welcome when we got there. We were greeted joyfully and taken to the palace of the supreme leaders. Goodness, we have never seen such a palace. Everything is made of white marble and gold and everywhere the most beautiful flowers bloom. People wear long, white robes and there is a heavenly calm and harmony. In the middle of the palace is a large atrium with a fountain. This fountain is called Oleyon and contains no water, but pure energy. It dazzles in a wide variety of colours that meet the needs of all those who are in the atrium. It's gorgeous and so soothing. We were allowed to rest there for an hour on beds that adapt to your body shape. After that, we felt like we were reborn. And everybody is so kind and relaxed, it's just heavenly. I think their favourite pastime is to laugh,” Joana gushed. “Imagine, the houses and buildings are all round, so the energy can circulate in them. Everything is built from natural and healthy materials. You can literally feel the houses breathing. You will see it for yourself tomorrow. But I have to lie down now, I'm dog-tired.”

Joana looked up to Katie, but she had already fallen asleep next to her. Bashan gently picked her up and carried her to their grass bed. Everyone else went to rest, too.

As Joana lay in Tom's arms, she was as happy and inspired as never before. “Tom, we're going to start a completely new life,” she enthused, then she fell asleep as well. Tom looked to Archie, but he, too, had already laid down with Mariah at his side. He closed his eyes. Inside of him everything was swirling. But after a while sleep also overcame him. He dreamed of a big, white city

with beautiful buildings, which all had organic shapes. There were only arches and rounded walls, nothing was straight, and the city was graceful and fairylike beautiful. Tom could perceive how life vibrated there. When he woke up in the morning, that vivid vibration still resonated in each of his cells. It felt incredibly good and energetic.

Joana was also feeling great when she opened her eyes. "I'll look out for our new friends." She jumped up and had already disappeared.



Tom smiled. He loved this woman with all his heart and with the full power of his soul. Since he had been with her, he felt as good, as sound and as loved as he could never have dreamed of. Soon he also got on his feet and went to the lake.

Brad was just coming out of the water. His emaciated torso shone in the sun.

"Are you doing reasonably well?" Tom asked.

"As far as possible," Brad replied. "I'm going to prepare Jane for the ceremony now. We'll burn her body. That is what she wanted. I have already collected the wood and built everything up." He pointed to the right where there was a giant pile of wood with a small scaffold on it.

"When did you do that?" Tom was impressed.

"I got up before daybreak. It wasn't hard because there's a lot of wood lying around everywhere and it's almost dry. I think it's going to burn well."

Tears stood his eyes again. Tom felt for him.

"Do you want me to help you?" he offered. Brad declined.

"These are my last few minutes with her. I'm going to wash her and make her look beautiful. However, you could give me a hand to build a stretcher and help carry Jane to the shore."

The two men silently built a simple stretcher which they tied together with a few ropes. Afterwards, they carried Jane's body to the funeral pyre and carefully bedded her on it. When they finished, Tom discreetly withdrew.

Brad tenderly washed Jane's body, then he put a pillow of grass under her head and combed her hair. Jane's face looked perfectly peaceful, a bit like she was asleep. All pain, tension and suffering had disappeared. "How beautiful you are." Brad kissed her on the forehead one last time. "Farewell, my darling, I'll see you again soon." He then stood up and waited for the others who

slowly gathered around him. The sun was already high in the sky and it was time to start the ceremony.



Joana was once again magically attracted to the Tree Cathedral, and she knew the four interpreters were expecting her. She approached it, determined.

Stepping through the 'gate', she heard an angelic chant. She saw Gemian, Celeste, Jarod and Marvie kneeling in front of the stone altar where the flowers still lay fresh. They sang a healing prayer. Joana could feel it. Jarod indicated to her with a hand sign to get closer and kneel with them. From the altar, a silver-blue light radiated and enveloped them all, like a protective layer. Joana listened to the singing, and it was as if she was immersing herself in the past.

Suddenly, she remembered the words, a language from very ancient times. It was an Atlantian mantra for healing Mother Earth and worshipping the sun. "La Ra Lama Sana Sun, Rana Mana Ana Dum," they repeated again and again. Joana was able to follow as her vibration frequency increased significantly. She felt full of life, light and unburdened.

"We were already awaiting you." Marvie greeted her with her sonorous voice, which seemed to swing even more after the prayer. Joana could have listened to her for hours. That voice was like medicine to her.

"Your voice will change as well," she predicted to Joana, as if she had perceived her thoughts. "By the way, we communicate mainly via telepathy," Marvie disclosed to her.

Joana was thrilled. "I'd better be careful what I think then," she laughed and felt incredibly clear.

"The control of one's thoughts and feelings is an important step on the way back to the holy priesthood," Gemian noted.

Again, an old memory was awakened in Joana. "I was pretty good at it," she spoke hesitantly and looked at Gemian, questioningly.

"You were one of the best," he confirmed. "You were a high priestess and spiritual leader of the highest rank."

Joana felt an abysmal sadness rising within herself. "Until the fall of Atlantis. In the process, we lost everything, including our powers and abilities," she whispered.

“It had to turn out that way,” Celeste stated.

“It was an important step and a valuable learning experience in the development history of Mother Earth and her inhabitants. Now it's time to get back everything you lost, that's why you found your twin flame again. It is time to reunite and complete your work before returning home together.”

Joana could feel the veracity of those words and her sadness gave way to deep gratitude and humility.

“Now go to the others,” Celeste instructed her. “They're waiting for you. You will lead the cremation ceremony. This is your first step back into your priesthood. We're going to be here. Come when you are ready to go with us.”

Joana stood up. She bowed and then made her way back.



On the shores of the lake, she was already expected. “We've never performed a fire ceremony like this before.”

Brad seemed lost. Joana stepped forward. Everyone was relieved she took the lead. “We need something from the air, from the earth, from the water and from the fire. We put that with Jane, so her body can reconnect with the four elements.”

They found a flower, a shell, a feather and a piece of volcanic rock and placed all this next to her mortal shell. Brad pulled a pack of matches out of his pocket.

“I rescued them from the ship, in case we needed them.” He could no longer hold back his tears.

“You know, Jane was the love of my life,” he started his farewell speech. “In the days when she wasn't well anymore, she kept telling me, please don't be sad if I can't travel to the end of this journey with you. The time I experienced on the ship was one of the most beautiful of my life and a good ending for me. So be comforted when I leave and remember the good times we had together.”

Brad's voice broke and he paused. Everyone felt with him. “I think we should do it the way she wanted us to. Please hold hands and let us say goodbye to her in a minute's silence. Jane was the most wonderful person I've ever met and if she hadn't supported me so much on board, I probably couldn't have done my job in the hard times and who knows if we'd be here now. Thank you, Jane, I will love you forever.”

Brad looked into the sad faces and they all took each other by the hand. After a quiet minute, Joana took over. "It's always very, very mournful when someone we've loved and cherished leaves us and we have to bid farewell, but it's also a sacred moment because it means a soul returns home. The lives we spend here in our bodies are just an outing and a blink of an eye compared to eternity. Receive this divine silence and wish her a good homecoming."

Then Joana instructed Brad to light a small fire first. She took four large branches and lit them from the flames, then she distributed them to Brad, Piet, Tom and Bashan. "Please now ignite the fire in the east, south, west and north," she instructed them. Soon the pile of wood flared up and burnt brightly. It took almost three hours, but then there was only a small, glimmering heap of ash left. Jane's body was completely gone except for some small fragments of bone.

"Now let's dig a hole and hand over the last remnants to Mother Earth," Joana continued the ritual. They dug a hole with their hands and sticks and then swept into it what was left of Jane's body with a branch.

Once done they closed the hole again with damp soil and put a memorial circle out of stones around the burial site. After the ceremony, everyone felt much better. Even Brad was under the impression that a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. It was now early afternoon. If they still wanted to hike to the city today, it was time to leave.



It was tough to watch how hard it was for Brad to tear himself away, but eventually, they were able to set off. They went to the cathedral of trees, where their new friends patiently waited.

"It's time to start your new life." Celeste smiled at them lovingly. She didn't say a word about the ceremony and everyone else didn't feel a need to talk about it either.

"How's your leg doing?" Joana gazed at Archie.

"It's perfectly fine again. I'll make it to the city easily, I'm just not so quick." He looked a bit worried.

"No problem, we'll all adjust to your pace." Joana put her arm around Archie's shoulders. Tom and several others who had also heard them nodded.

After a good hour, they reached the coast. Once there, everyone stopped as if rooted, overwhelmed by the sight presented to them. They had previously

walked through gently undulating terrain overgrown with all manner of trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers. Now they looked down from a small hill at one of the most beautiful beaches imaginable.

It was a four-kilometre long, white sandy beach, interspersed with large rocks and grottoes. The water was turquoise blue and seemed quite shallow at least on the shore. It was a symphony of the most intense shades of blue and green, immersed in warm, golden sunlight that acted like a balm to the soul. They wandered along a wide path above the beach, enjoying the stunning view. Tom took Joana's hand, and they both knew that at that moment their joint mission began.

After one more hour, they saw the small town emerge in the distance. It looked like a white circle on a green ground and huddled perfectly in the surrounding, hilly landscape. The closer they got, the more they could see that not only was the city circular but all the houses were also round or consisted of several curves.

“This is Marunda.” In Jarod's voice was an infinite amount of love. “A thousand people are living here and it is the largest city in this area, the metropolis. We believe that every town and every village, even every small community, has only a certain capacity for the population. Once this has been achieved, it will no longer be able to accommodate new residents. That's the way it is in Marunda at the moment. When new people come, like you, they first go through a cleansing and an exam, after which they are offered land, support and building materials. They can then build their own community and become part of the great collective. We all work together and help each other wherever possible. As a result, everything is so much easier and faster.”

Everyone listened carefully to him. “Does that mean we too have the opportunity to build our own community?” Katie inquired excitedly.

“That's exactly how it is,” Gemian nodded, confirming.

“And where?” Archie, as always, wanted to dig deeper.

“You will know that when the time is right,” Gemian laughed. “For now, it's up to you to prove that you are ready for such a challenge. It's almost dark already. When we arrive in the city, we will assign you different quarters where you can get clean and regenerate. Everything is taken care of. Tomorrow morning, when you are rested, we will meet you in the atrium and discuss the next steps.”



It was already dark when after another half-hour of walking, they finally arrived in the city. The streets were paved with white sandstone and everything was neat and very well maintained. There were no sidewalks because there were no cars or other motor-driven vehicles. Residents of the city walked or rode on large tricycles that had a small loading area at the back. All roads were brightly lit by street lamps. These emitted incredibly strong light, but it was still pleasant for the eyes. It was almost like daylight, just a little dimmed. The lamps looked like giant fireflies.

“How do you produce this light?” Bashan was intrigued.

“Our energy system is based on the principles of free energy,” Marvie explained. “We store sunlight in crystals and forward it from there or use it directly. These street lamps are crystals that were charged with sunlight during the day, which they emit at night. If you stayed up all night, you might realize that they glow less towards dawn, but it's still enough to be able to see everything. This technique is absolutely clean and doesn't harm the environment. It even increases the light quotient of our community.”

Everybody was very fond of this technology, especially Bashan and Joana, who had been thinking about this topic for a long time.

“I knew it worked!” Joana finally looked happy again.

“If you have the right crystals, it's a no-brainer.” Marvie laughed. “Energy, heat and light within the buildings work the same way.”

“Fantastic, that's how it should be.” Bashan also shone. “Can we learn to gain our energy in this way?” he asked with commitment.

“Yes, for sure.” Celeste smiled heartily.

As they wandered the streets, they were greeted kindly by many residents with the words “Selamat Balik” which meant “be welcome”. Joana noticed, amazed, that all the residents of the city apparently had extremely well-sounding voices.

For the night the new arrivals were housed across several homes near the atrium, which was in the centre of the city and brightly lit with pastel colours. Due to the different tints, which pulsed slightly, it looked like a living organism.

“Our homes are alive,” explained Celeste, who had picked up that thought. “They have souls and we talk to them like we do with living beings. They all have a name, too.”

“How wonderful. I have always given a name to the houses I have lived in and the houses have always taken good care of me,” Joana narrated.

“It's the same here.” Marvie looked at her happily.



Joana, Tom, Mariah, and Archie were assigned quarters together. They were to stay at Jarod's house. Their host opened the door and instructed them to take off their shoes. In the entrance stood a shelf with different-sized slippers made of a pleasant material that was similar to fabric but firmer.

They all found the appropriate size and Jarod subsequently led them through to a summer garden that was attached to the house and also round. They were invited to settle on comfortable loungers. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

A young woman offered them delicious fruits. “This is my daughter Siri.” Jarod introduced the young woman. “She will take care of you while you are here. Although she barely speaks your language, she knows what you need.”

“Selamat Balik. Siri smiled kindly. She, too, had the feel-good full voice.

“Selamat Balik,” the four guests replied almost as one and everyone had to laugh.

“As you rest, you can take it in turns to bathe. We also have fresh clothes for you. After that, there will be dinner and then soon it will be time to go to sleep,” Jarod continued.

Joana wondered how old Jarod might be.

“One hundred and twenty-four,” Jarod responded.

Joana, who was slowly getting used to having her thoughts read, asked in amazement. “How can this be?”

“We usually live to about one hundred and ninety years old,” Jarod enlightened her. “Our ancestors and our relatives living inside the Earth get even older. Some of them live to be six hundred and fifty years old and most are considerably larger than us too. We have adapted more to the life of the inhabitants of the Earth's surface.”

For Tom, it all seemed completely surreal.

“Don't worry, my friend.” Jarod turned to him now. “After a while, you will understand it better and get used to the fact that what was sold to you as truth for so long was only a small part of reality and was also peppered with

many falsehoods.”

“Seems like that.” Tom looked so confused that everyone had to laugh. He couldn't help but laugh along and felt a little better.

They went to bathe one by one and once fresh and clean, they dressed in the long, white robes common here and came back into the garden.

Joana felt like she was reborn. She had truly missed being able to get clean and to wear fresh clean clothes.

Tom stared at her, mesmerised because she looked immensely classy and attractive in the long robe. “That's her true nature,” shot through his head.

“Tomorrow morning, we will take you to our clothing storage. There you can choose what you need in the way of your outfit and you can use this service again whenever you like.”

“We have no money to compensate you for what you give to us,” Tom objected.

Jarod laughed. “We don't use money here,” he told him. “We live on everyone volunteering and contributing to the preservation of the community and to what we need to live. Through our work, we are mostly self-sufficient and for anything else we need, we exchange goods or assistance. There are social services and free work where everyone does what he or she does best, or likes most. This way all are satisfied, and the community is looked after.”

“I love that.” Archie was fascinated, and the others were as well.

“Then there should be no wars and no power struggles here,” Tom claimed.

“So it is,” Jarod confirmed. “We elect our leaders every year and their ultimate mission is to serve the good of all and the good of Mother Gaia. Leaders are elected by everyone at large gatherings by direct voting and must disclose and document their activities throughout the year. They are only allowed to stand for election if they are experts in the field they are applying for and if they have previously done some extra effort in terms of social work. They are also accessible to everybody at all times.”

“If we had had this system in our former world, it wouldn't be on the precipice as it is now.” Joana's voice sounded slightly wistful.

“The old world as you have known it no longer exists anymore. It was completely reshaped by a pole shift. At the same time, your consciousness has been transformed to a higher level. That's why you're here now. You

remember the three days of darkness and the violent storm you experienced. This storm was triggered by a huge solar storm and it has changed the Earth forever,” Jarod let them know.

“Can we never go back?” Archie was shocked.

“You can, but it would be very painful for you. Large parts of the Earth's surface are unfortunately completely devastated or flooded. Moreover, your vibration is now so high and fine-tuned you would no longer be able to cope in the old 3-D world with all its cruelties and lies.”

“I already didn't before.” Joana shook.

“Yes, some of you had slowly woken up in the old world and it hasn't always been easy for you. The good news is that from now on it will be much easier and more pleasant.”

“That's wonderful.” Joana sighed with relief.

She was both hopeful and sad. “But what about those we had to leave behind?”

“That depends entirely on their level of consciousness. Some live on destroyed earth, some have left their bodies to incarnate on another planet, a few are still living the same life as before, if their area weathered the storm with minimal damage, yes and many are working, like you and us, to build a new world.”

“But we didn't pick that.” Tom's voice sounded doubtful.

“Oh, you did.” Jarod laughed amused. “You just can't remember it, but that will come back as soon as you have gone through the cleansing rituals and initiations. You will all remember the soul contracts with which you entered this incarnation. Joana and Archie already do.”

The two nodded in agreement.

“I just didn't know I remembered,” Archie expressed. “I thought it was dreams and fantasies.”

“That's how it appeared to me at the beginning,” Joana confirmed.

“Yes, the boundary is fluid as we move in the subtle energies.” Jarod stood up.

Now Archie couldn't hold back his tears and Tom swallowed heavily too. “What about mom and Mira?” he asked sadly.

“I can't tell you, unfortunately, my son.” Jarod looked at him with regret. “It

depends on what level of consciousness they were at when the pole shift happened.”

“They were both not very conscious.” Tom brought out with difficulty.

“Does that mean they're dead?” Archie yelled and had sheer horror in his eyes.

“Probably we will never know that,” Jarod responded compassionately.

“Can't we do anything to find out?”

Everyone could feel Archie's pain and despair and Tom was devastated too.

Jarod shook his head. “Unfortunately, no,” he replied.

“We no longer have any contact with this level of consciousness and what it would mean for you to go back there, I have already explained. Sometimes the price of growth and development is very high. I'm truly sorry.” Jarod walked to the door. “I'll leave you alone for a while. Then you can talk about it,” he suggested.

“What are we supposed to do, Dad?” Archie's voice sounded hoarse.

“I'm afraid we're going to have to live with it,” Tom whispered. “We can't go back. How are we to find the way and how could we travel from one dimension to another?”

“I know you're right, but I find it hard to accept. I don't want to go back at all. But we can't let them down,” Archie pleaded.

“We don't even know if they're still alive,” Tom objected.

Joana and Mariah didn't say anything at first. They just looked at each other. Then Joana nodded to Mariah.

“Tom, Archie,” Mariah started gently. “Lisa and Mira are well. They are still living the same life as before. They got the news that the ship sank in the storm and they assume you drowned.”

“How do you know?” Archie was flabbergasted.

“I can see it.” Mariah hugged him. “They badly miss you, but they are doing well. I hope you can live with that.”

Archie remained silent for quite a while and Tom didn't say another word either. But then they both nodded. Joana took Tom's hand and held it quite tight. All together they shared the deep sadness and at the same time, they were aware that they were at a new beginning for themselves.



After a while, Jarod came back. "Dinner is ready, let's go in," he kindly invited them.

Their mood had settled down a bit, and they followed him. He led them into a large room with a round table which was hand-carved from a finely patterned, dark wood. The chairs were the same style, but each decorated with different motifs of flora and fauna. The table was covered with all sorts of bowls and plates that emanated an auspicious scent.

"Did Siri prepare this all by herself?" Joana enquired highly impressed.

Jarod nodded. "She's incredibly skilful and creative at conjuring up the most delicious food. Sit down and enjoy."

Siri, too, came into the room and ate with them. Despite their depressed mood, everyone was extremely hungry after their exhausting days of travel and hardship.

Siri had made a whole range of different vegetables, potatoes and sauces and it tasted decidedly delicious.

"Are there no meat or dairy products here?" Archie wanted to know after they had eaten all that they could.

"No," Jarod emphatically stated. "The animals are our friends and we respect and love them. There are no so-called farm animals here only pets. And anyone who wants to have an animal will receive training on the peculiarities and needs of the chosen breed and the individual animal beforehand. We also test and improve their animal communications capabilities if necessary, to ensure the two can communicate with each other. If someone can no longer keep an animal for special reasons, which is extremely rare, a committee looks for a new home for it. Animals have almost the same status as humans in our world."

"This will be entirely to your liking, dearest." Tom smiled.

"Indeed, you can surely say that." Joana blossomed. "You can't imagine the relief and how happy it makes me. It takes a big load off my shoulders. I have always felt terrible when I have had to witness the abuse and mass murders of our animal brothers and sisters without really being able to help. What a blessing that this is finally over."

Siri had stood up and came back with a slab of sweet fruit. "This is our dessert," Jarod reasoned. "As you can see, we live very healthily. We don't

eat sugar. Only natural sweetness is used in our households and we don't drink alcohol either.”

“My God, we’ve landed in paradise,” Joana cheered and everyone laughed happily and elated.



The evening passed by quickly and it was soon time to go to sleep. Only now did they realise how tired they were. Joana and Tom were given a shared sleeping space, Mariah was placed with Siri and Archie chose to sleep on one of the comfy loungers in the garden. In each of the sleeping chambers, which also served as resting and meditation rooms, were small versions of the energy fountain, which stood in the middle of the large atrium.

When Joana and Tom entered their space, the Oleyon's colour switched to pink and gold.

“These are the colours of unconditional love and divine flow. Gold is pure energy, power and awareness,” Jarod explained.

“Then we are in the right place here.” Tom looked at Joana tenderly. Jarod bowed and retreated. Joana dropped on the bed.

“Wow! It also seems to adapt to the needs of my body and supports me exactly where I need it. Come try it too,” she urged Tom.

Tom lay down carefully next to her. “Truly, this is unbelievable. Tomorrow I have to ask Jarod what material this mattress is made of.” Then he gazed at Joana who looked him straight in the eye. The world around them ceased to exist. There were only the two of them. “This is the first time we've truly been alone with each other.” Tom's voice sounded slightly shy.

“Yes, isn't that wonderful?” Joana kissed him passionately and full of love.

He sensed his heart starting to race and at the same time, he had the strange feeling that he was floating. Joana held him firm and tenderly. Tom felt like there was a short circuit in him and as if his whole system was completely suspended. Then it seemed that he was falling into a void and it was Joana who caught him up again. Joana was sensing exactly the same as what was going on in Tom because she was one with him and at the same time with herself. This was a new experience, surprising and joyful at once. After a while, Tom came back from the void and felt like he was reborn.

“I think I just died and was born again,” he revealed in a soft voice.

“Welcome to the club.” Joana laughed lovingly and tenderly. “It feels incredibly good, although it also seems a little scary, doesn't it?”

Tom nodded. Once again, he lacked the words to describe how he felt, still busy grasping what had just happened. He felt so completely different, like he never did before, so magnificent, relaxed, perfectly calm inside and he couldn't describe it other than wise and awakened. “I think the old Tom no longer exists,” he finally quietly remarked.

Joana nodded. “Looks like it,” she confirmed.

“And guess what? I find it absolutely natural,” Tom noted in amazement.

“We're going into a new era and a new life,” Joana reminded him. “There is not much we can take with us from the old world or our old ego. Not even our old fears and patterns of behaviour. None of this fits into this new age any more. I think we're going to have an amazing time here,” Joana mused.

“That's what I hope, my darling.” Tom buried his face tenderly in her delightfully scented, long, red hair.

“What do you think, should we undress?” Joana suggested after a while.

Tom blushed red. “You don't know how much I've been yearning for this moment.”

“I do.” Joana gently pulled Tom's robe over his head. “It's the same for me.”

“Did you know that this is our wedding night?” Tom asked deeply touched.

“Yes, my sweetheart, it's the holy wedding I've longed for all my life. The reunion of our hearts, our souls and our bodies.”

Tom nodded and now helped Joana take off her robe. Both were naked underneath and their sun-tanned skin shone in the glow of the energy fountain, which was the only source of light in the room and filled it with its pink and golden warm rays.

Tom explored Joana's body with all his senses. His eyes gazed with tenderness over her delicate, well-formed body. He explored all her curves and every angle with his hands and lips and inhaled her fragrance. Today she smelled of roses and sun.

Joana had her eyes closed and enjoyed Tom's caresses to the fullest. “I feel entirely loved and accepted,” she realized. Every cell of her body was vibrating as Tom stretched out beside her after a long, long time. His whole body was slightly shaking, too.

“I didn't know there could be so much love in my heart,” he whispered. “And you have the key to it. There's so much love in me that it almost hurts, but I also know it's the memory of times gone by. Our future knows no pain, at least not as far as you and I are concerned.”

Now it was Joana's turn to explore Tom's body. She did it with so much love and dedication that it touched Tom in his core. He had never experienced such intensity in his life and felt infinitely rich and at the same time light and lucid.

Tom could perceive Joana's heartbeat without touching her. “Do you feel my heartbeat too?” he asked.

“Yes, I've been feeling it already for a long time,” she let him know.

She gently stroked her fingertips over the defined muscles on his golden back. Working aboard the *Dragon Queen* had done Tom good and strengthened his body. Joana, too, was well muscled and considerably stronger than at any time in her life, thanks to the time spent on the ship. Now they lay next to each other and enjoyed feeling their naked bodies. They bathed in infinite love in the sea of eternity.

Then Tom started caressing Joana again. She returned his tenderness. It was like their bodies were talking to each other in their very own way and as if they had a common language. It was the language of pure love. They came closer and closer to each other until their bodies completely merged into one. Their souls reunited during the act to form the highest unity, and their hearts beat in unison. They experienced wings growing as they rose into divine realms together. They rose to the highest heights and dived to the deepest depths. They flew and hovered over things and eventually they ended up back in the here and now in a mutual embrace. They held one another and rested in each other's arms, feeling into what had happened and what had woven their two lives together once and for all.

They had gone from being a heavenly couple to a divine unity. A sacred unity nothing or no one could separate and they both sensed it without needing to talk about it. Their communication was without words and yet crystal clear. At dawn, they fell asleep, entwined tightly, endlessly happy and fulfilled. Their hearts were still beating in a coherence that would remain forever.

When Joana woke up, she had only slept for a few hours, but she was fresh and energised unlike she had ever been. Tenderly, she looked at Tom, who was peacefully slumbering next to her and still held her hand. Tom had felt her gaze in his sleep and opened his eyes.

“Good morning, my beautiful.” He beamed at her. His eyes were bluer than ever before and he, too, felt incredibly good. “Let’s get up,” he urged. “I want to explore our new world. The days belong to our work and our tasks, the nights to us and to love.”

Joana nodded. She saw it the same way. They jumped out of bed and decided to take a bath together.



Refreshed and clean, they soon joined the others, who were already sitting at the breakfast table and welcomed them in a happy mood.

“You look like you had a good night,” Jarod greeted them lovingly.

“Oh yeah,” both answered together, and everyone laughed.

The table was again covered with delicious fruits. Besides, there were various cereals and tempting scented, freshly baked bread.

“Everything is grown organically and left untreated,” Jarod commented. “We are proud of our farming methods, which we are refining all the time. Also, we talk to the plants and their Devas and sow and harvest to the rhythm of the Earth and the tides. This brings us rich yields and feeds us all very well,” he continued.

There were also various teas and fruit juices as well as soy and almond milk. It just tasted wonderful and gave everyone new strength and energy for the day. After breakfast, they thanked Siri. Then they made their way to the atrium, where they looked around as their friends gradually arrived. Everyone was cheerful and confident. They were now also dressed in the white robes. After all were gathered in the atrium, they were brought before the Council of the Six Sages.

Sitting in a row in six golden armchairs were three women and three men, who radiated a vibration of wisdom, goodness and light that filled the entire courtyard with a sovereign dignity. They greeted the newcomers all by their names and bowed to each individual.

“We are the Council of Sages. You will learn our names later when you have passed your cleansing rituals. Then you will be able to understand their meaning,” the lady on the far left proclaimed. She, too, had the full, well-sounding voice like the others they had met. “First, it is our task to enlighten and initiate you if that is what you want. Do you agree with that?” Everyone nodded and looked expectantly at the charismatic beings.

“Well,” the man sitting in the middle continued. “As you have already noticed, a lot is very different here than it was in your 3-D world. Last night you already learned a little about us. Your hosts were tasked with giving you all the same information so that you are all on an equal level of knowledge. The first and most important question now is, do you want to stay here and become part of our community?”

Again, everybody nodded without hesitation.

“That's good news. We hoped so, but we had to ask you, of course. We already knew you were coming. You are the last ones we are currently integrating here. All who'll come after you will not find us for the time being.

“We will ensure that this is done through energy protection. Our community consists only of selected souls. None of you is here by coincidence. Already before your birth, it was a fixed decision that when the time was right, you would ascend and help manifest New Earth and an advanced society here in this place. Welcome to the Golden Age. You have achieved what only some can do. We consider ourselves lucky to have you as part of our community.”

The remaining sages nodded approvingly, and the newcomers bowed gratefully.

“You have heard of the initiations already,” the man elaborated. “We now want to educate you about what it is all about. Let's start with the cleansing ritual. You will go through physical, emotional and mental cleansing. A good part of it you have already done through the time on the ship. What's coming next is ten days for body cleansing, which means you only eat water, tea, selected herbs, vegetables and fruit, bathe in the sea several times a day and end up going through a sweat lodge ritual for two days. You will remain silent all the time. Everyone sleeps alone in a specially built, simple hut and you spend the days in meditation and prayer. Do you feel ready for this?”

Again, all of them nodded straight away.

“Are there any questions?” he added.

Rose raised her hand hesitantly. “What if someone doesn't have the capacity to do this physically or psychologically?”

“Then the person can take a break and repeat the ritual whenever he or she feels strong enough. However, it starts all over again. Without this purification, you cannot become members of our community. You have to let go of the old before.”

No further questions were asked.

“Once you have undertaken the cleansing ritual, we will give each of you a task that will be a great challenge. It will help you to get beyond the old restrictive borders of yourself. You will learn at a given time what the task is. Once you have successfully managed and solved it, we will welcome you into our community with an initiation ritual and assign you land so that you can build your own village. We'll talk about that more when you get to this point.

“You will get all the support you need, so don't be concerned. Please, go now to the clothes storage. Choose some long robes and also shirts, pants, underwear and shoes that you like. There is enough of everything and you can go back there whenever you want. You have to do your laundry yourself, but there are machines for it, similar to those you have used before. It's not a big deal. When you are done, the rest of the day is at your leisure. You can explore the area, or rest just as you wish. Tomorrow you will build your huts on the beach and the day after tomorrow the cleansing begins. Be blessed.” The Six Sages rose and bowed. The newcomers did the same. Following that, they were dismissed. The assembly disbanded and everyone dispersed.



Tom, Joana, Katie and Bashan stayed in the atrium for a while. Comfortable benches were built around the Oleyon. They sat down and watched the play of colours of the fountain. Where they were seated, it was mainly blue and green.

“How are you?” Joana looked at Katie, who laughed.

“Dazzling! I rested thoroughly yesterday evening and now I feel strong and ready for anything, including the cleansing process and initiation. I'm only in my second month and so we are still in the early stages. I don't notice much physically yet and I feel like I have the energy to rip out trees.”

“She currently has more power than I do,” Bashan confirmed.

Joana was reassured.

Feeling relaxed, they sat there for a while, absorbing the soothing vibes of the fountain. When they had enough, they stood up.

“How about we take a little tour of the city after visiting the clothing store?” Tom suggested.

The others welcomed this proposal and so they started walking towards where they had been told the storage was situated.

IX



By the time they arrived at the clothes store, most of the others were already done with their selection. Everyone got a box on wheels made of a very light metal in which they put the clothes and shoes they had selected. The box could comfortably be pulled with a handle and also be used as a clothes rack. For the shoes, there was a linen bag that could be reshaped into a backpack. The shoes were woven from a firm, thick yarn, which was lightweight, as well as durable, and there were sandals of the same material. All clothing was light and made of natural fabrics. Even the warmer garments weren't particularly thick.

“We have developed a special process that allows us to condense matter. In this way, we can make warm clothes and sturdy shoes from the same source material as the other things. Everything is plant-based. From now on you will only wear vegetable fibres on the body and all colours are of natural origin. We have no chemicals here and no poisons,” explained Celeste, who helped them sort out what clothing they needed.

Joana and Katie, in particular, were extremely happy with this new form of attire. Finally, there were no more toxins on the body and the skin was able to breathe freely. They both chose a few beautiful and many practical garments and could have spent hours trying them on, but the sun showed it was already early afternoon. They tore themselves away and, after taking the chests to their quarters, set out to explore the city.

The first place they went was to visit the harbour. There were small wherries that looked like fishing boats but had no fishing nets and larger ones equipped with sails and, in some cases, engines. The water here, too, was crystal clear and turquoise green. They watched a large number of colourful

fish from the jetty, small and large, all of which happily swam together or moved in swarms. Also, there were some turtles. Joana was enchanted.

“I would love to go diving here and if it is true what we have been told, there should be no sharks. Who knows, maybe I can even swim with the dolphins.”

Tom put his arm around her delicate hip. “I would be keen to come along.” He laughed light-heartedly.

They encountered an old man with long, white hair working on one of the boats. He waved them over to him and they curiously stepped closer. “Welcome new friends,” he greeted them in their language, which later proved a little rusty but understandable. They introduced themselves to each other. The old man's name was Gundolf. “A long, long time ago, I used to live in your 3-D world,” he narrated. “Life is much better here. I maintain boats. If you want, come any time for a sail.”

“This is very gracious, thank you.” Bashan smiled at him with delight. “Who owns the boats?”

“They belong to everyone,” the old man explained. “Boats are common property. All can use them, just have to bring them back clean. Many boats are used for work, to collect algae and shells. But we never catch marine life. We are friends with the fish and everyone else, that's why they are so happy.” Gundolf gazed contentedly at the sea. “Always welcome to a boat trip, now have to go,” he said and set about leaving the jetty. They thanked him and looked after him thoughtfully.

“I have more and more the feeling of being in paradise.” Joana was blown away. “That's how I've always wanted it to be. Even as a young person, I had a dream of a settlement of colourful houses by the sea, in which everyone lives in peace and harmony with each other, with the animals and nature. And now take a look here.” She pointed from the harbour to the small town, which was a beautiful mix of colourful and white houses. With everything painted with natural colours, they fitted seamlessly into the gorgeous splendour of the landscape. It was a joy for the eyes and the mind. Joana felt her soul cheer.

“I didn't think something like this was possible,” Tom marvelled. “If anyone had told me about this last year, I would have just laughed and said, keep dreaming. It's such a gift to be here.” They strolled through the town, enjoying the quiet bustle and friendliness of the inhabitants.

“We will have to learn their language if we're going to become a part of the community,” Bashan noted.

"I've already thought so too," Katie agreed. "But it all sounds very alien. There is nothing to derive from any other language."

"We're going to manage this." Joana sounded determined. "In the worst-case scenario, it will take a while and it certainly won't be the only thing we'll have to learn."

They had arrived back at the atrium and the sun was slowly setting. "I think it's time to go to our quarters," Tom suggested. "Tomorrow morning, we'll have to get up early. We should all be well-rested." They said goodbye to Katie and Bashan and returned to Jarod's house in a great mood.



Joana wanted to take a bath. Tom, meanwhile, explored the garden. There he met Archie. "Have you seen Mariah?" Archie asked concerned. "I can't find her anywhere."

Tom shook his head. "Unfortunately, no, but maybe we should just wait a bit. I'm sure she'll reappear."

"She has been missing for three hours and she has barely spoken a word since we left the ship, not even with me. I'm really worried."

"Where did you last see her?" Tom inquired.

"On the beach," Archie replied. "We rested there, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, she was gone." Archie's face showed his anxiety.

"This is indeed a bit strange, after all, it's getting dark. I'm going to talk to Jarod. Maybe we should look for her."

"Thank you." Archie's voice resonated at the same time, relief and apprehension.



Tom went in search of Jarod. He found him in the living room, where he was setting the table with Siri. "Mariah has been missing since this afternoon," he informed him. "Archie is very worried, and it seems a bit strange to me as well. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

Jarod denied. "It's going dark very quickly now. Let's wait a little more. If she's not back soon, we'll go looking for her. There's nothing dangerous here, but if she goes to the cliffs at night, she could fall."

They finished the table and waited for a while, but Mariah remained missing.

"I'll send out a search party," Jarod finally decided. "Maybe you can go with Archie and be careful not to let anything happen to him. We won't be able to stop him coming with us."

Tom nodded, then headed out with Archie. Joana, Sina and Puschel accompanied them. They went to the beach again and searched the whole area. After a few hours, Tom suggested, exhausted, "Let's go back. Perhaps the others found her, or she returned on her own."

Back in the brightly lit interior of the atrium, they met all the searchers who had already gathered there. The search had been in vain. There was no sign of Mariah.

"Let's sleep for a few hours." Gemian finished the search. "If she's not back tomorrow morning, we will postpone the building of the huts and continue to search for her."

Everyone agreed, except for Archie. He desperately wanted to keep going.

Joana had already noticed on their way back from the beach that he limped again more strongly. Running in the sand had excoriated his leg again.

"Archie, please give your leg a few hours of rest," she gently asked. "We're all worried, but I'm sure Mariah knows what she's doing, even if we have no idea where she is and what happened to her."

Surprisingly, Archie agreed. "I don't know either, but I can feel she's well. Nevertheless, I want to find her as soon as possible." He followed her. They quickly went back to Jarod's house and fell into bed exhausted. Dinner remained untouched on the table.



The next day, Mariah was still missing. They searched all day and half the night but again without result, and so it went on for another three days. In the meantime, almost the entire city was involved in the search and everyone got to know each other more quickly through the joint action. What remained, though, was the concern for Mariah.

Archie meanwhile looked quite grey in the face and limped heavily. It was pretty obvious that he was in great pain, but when approached, he waved them off. "It's only temporary. When we have found her, I can rest and cure my skin. Now I don't have time for it." Still, he remained astonishingly calm and confident.

On the fifth day, as the helpers were about to move off again, Mariah came

running along the street. She looked a little pale, but she smiled, holding a small bottle. Archie limped towards her as quickly as he could and gave her a huge hug.

“Where were you?” he yelled at her. Tears ran down his face and he trembled all over his body. He held his girlfriend so tightly that she could barely catch a breath.

Mariah tried to get air as best she could and held Archie until he had settled to some extent. “I’m sooo sorry, Archie.” her voice sounded very tired. “I had to leave. They called me.”

“Who called you? Where have you been?” Archie wanted to know. He was so happy, that he didn’t even notice Mariah spoke normally. No verses, no stuttering, and that despite being excitedly surrounded by everyone.

“I went home,” Mariah explained. “I got called by my ancestors.”

“All right.” Archie continued to look at her without understanding.

“Can we please go to the atrium?” Mariah asked. “I’d love to sit down and have a drink. Then I’ll tell you the whole story.”

“Are you well?” Archie inquired, worried.

“Oh yes,” Mariah reassured him. “Then let’s go.”



Piet took Mariah’s arm. Otherwise, he said nothing. It wasn’t his way of showing great feelings, but anyone watching closely might have noticed that his hands were also shaking slightly and that his chin muscles were working strongly.

They made their way to the atrium and were greeted with big hellos from the town residents. Once in the atrium, they settled on the benches and Tom got something to drink for Mariah. She sat close to the Oleyon and seemed to soak up its energy. Then she cleared her voice, still clenching the small bottle.

All of a sudden, it was completely silent. Everybody looked at her eagerly.

“First, I would like to apologise to you.” She spoke in a crystal-clear voice and without the slightest stutter.

Joana noted in amazement that her voice sounded just as full as the Marunda residents.

“I know you and Archie in particular, were greatly concerned.” She gave him

a look full of love. “But I had no choice. Archie and I fell asleep on the beach and in the middle of a dream, my ancestors contacted me and instructed me to visit them inside the Earth immediately. I got up as if in a trance and wandered along the beach for hours until the sand changed colour from gold to black and high rocks appeared in front of me, at some distance. The sand was fantastically beautiful and sparkled in the sun. I'd never seen a black beach before. There I sat down, rested and looked up at the rocks. If you're not too close to them, you can see they have faces. They look like sleeping gods lying on their backs. I sat there for a long time and meditated. This way I was able to get in direct contact with my ancestors.”

Some looked at Mariah in doubt.

“What Mariah says is true,” Celeste confirmed. “She found one of our holiest places and visited it. We ourselves go there and meditate when we face big decisions or change. Continue my child,” she encouraged Mariah.

“The ancestors then instructed me to move forward and led me into the mountains. There I bathed in a hot spring and when I finished, I knew I could speak normally again. You hear it for yourself.”

Her friends nodded, impressed. It was obvious that Mariah had changed significantly. She was no longer the shy, quiet girl, but a gorgeous, young woman who radiated calmness and great dignity. Archie stared at her, mesmerised.

“After the bath, I was led into the interior of the mountain and wandered through a tunnel for what felt like an eternal length of time. It seemed quite natural to me to follow the path, and I wasn't scared at all. At one point I could spot something like daylight and walked towards it. Eventually, I stepped out of the tunnel and the first thing I saw were two suns. Yes, you heard right. In the sky, if you can call it that, two suns stood, and they were red rather than golden, but they shone brightly all day and bathed everything in a warm light.” A mystical glow glided across Mariah's face that seemed to come from far away.

“I was greeted by two sublime beings who told me that my ancestors had been waiting for me for a long time and that they were very happy to finally meet me. They invited me to take a seat in a kind of flying skiff, and then we glided silently through the air, just above the ground. They explained to me that this vehicle is powered by crystalline and solar energy and it floats on a kind of air cushion. It was very pleasant and completely silent. I was fascinated and enchanted. We travelled through a landscape of exquisite beauty. First, we drove through green valleys and forests, then the area slowly

turned into meadows and fields. There were no farm animals in the meadows, but all sorts of animals grazed together in peaceful harmony. Nothing was fenced off. It all seemed to follow an inner order.

“We ended up coming to a city similar to Marunda, but bigger, and all the buildings were white, taller and larger. God, I've never seen such elegance in my life. Again, the residents, who by the way are much taller than us, moved on these floating skiffs, or they walked. There were big and small vehicles. We hovered to a sacred site in the middle of a huge green area, which was laid out as an island on a lake.

“There were different temples and something like a large white church, which was also a meeting place. They led me through the temple complex and introduced me to various priests. Everyone blessed me, and already this took an old load off my shoulders. The further I went, the lighter and stronger I felt, and I suddenly realised I had returned home. I was in the centre of Agartha, the Inner Earth. In the end, they led me to the temple of healing. There I was allowed to bathe in the eternal fountain of youth and all karma was washed off me. You have no idea how good this feels. Then I was led to the High Priestess. She is a goddess and stunningly beautiful. A symbol of femininity, strong and delicate at the same time. Her name is Damara.”

Mariah interrupted herself. “Are you following me?” She looked around.

“We are making an effort to,” Tom was able to say, otherwise there was silence.

Celeste smiled at Mariah and indicated to her to move on.

“I was with the High Priestess again and again for three days and every time I got an inauguration. They were initiations for the priesthood entitlement. It was immediately clear to me that this is my way, without question.”

“Will you still be allowed to be with me if you are a priestess?” Archie couldn't hold back and elicited a smile from the bystanders.

“But yes,” Mariah assured. “All women priests are allowed to live as they like and they can also have children. They do their service in the temples or places for which they are called, and otherwise, they live a normal life.”

Archie was visibly relieved.

“After three days, Damara let me know that it was the time to return to you. She explained to me that I will live with you for quite a while before returning to Agartha and that they would call me from time to time to stay in the temples and learn. Then the two wonderful beings I met at the beginning

took me back to the tunnel and I wandered to the other end and along the beach until I was with you again. I hope you can forgive me. Next time I disappear, please don't worry about me. You now know where I will be and that it's safe and secure.”

She looked around, and there was a spark in her eyes that left no doubt about her words.

“What's in the bottle?” Archie was curious.

“Oh, that's for you, for your leg. It is a healing potion and I should give it to you when the time is right for it.”

“Is it for my leg to regrow?” Archie got quite excited again.

“I can't say that,” Mariah countered. “We'll see when it gets to that point.”

Archie was disappointed, but he was content with the response.

“I'm very tired,” Mariah stated. “Sorry but I need to repose.”

“I suggest we all do.” Jarod stood up. “Let's have this day off and tomorrow morning we start building the huts on the beach, no matter who is gone.”



Everyone laughed, and gradually the gathering dispersed in all directions. Piet couldn't resist accompanying Mariah all the way to her accommodation and making sure she wasn't short of anything. Then he, too, pulled out. Like Archie, he had had only a small amount of rest the past few days. They prepared a camp for Archie and Mariah in the garden, and after a bath, Mariah immediately fell asleep.

Archie treated his wound. It didn't look good and hurt. “Maybe I should start with the healing elixir already,” he pondered. With the pain hard to endure, he reached for the small bottle, which stood on the table next to the bed, and splashed a few drops on the inflamed stump. Relieved and surprised, he found that the pain abruptly subsided.

He carefully lay down next to Mariah, gently took her in his arms and listened to her breathe. Archie was overjoyed that she had returned healthy and well. His heart was full of gratitude and he felt something like humility towards life. However, he was also a little confused. He couldn't really understand what had happened to Mariah yet. Then he thought that next week was his fifteenth birthday. “Will we even celebrate this when we are in the cleansing phase?” he wondered as he fell into a slumber. Mariah and Archie slept all

day and all night.



The next morning, Joana was awake before dawn. She and Tom had also gone to bed early, indulging for hours in the joys of their physical love. They had repeatedly merged into one unit and at some point, fell asleep exhausted. Joana still felt as one with Tom. No sooner had she opened her eyes than Tom also woke up and gazed at her with love. He tenderly hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

“Are you doing well?”

Joana nodded. “I was never better in my entire life,” she replied. “Should we go swimming before breakfast?”

“A tempting thought!” Tom jumped out of bed and Joana followed him. They sneaked out of the house, accompanied only by the dogs, and made their way to the beach where they were rewarded with a stunning sunrise.

The sun formed a crimson road on the water. They bathed in this light, frolicked like children and swam towards the sun, surrounded by the colour of love. Eventually, they lay next to each other naked in the sand, letting the warm rays dry them. Their slender bodies shimmered in the soothing bath of pure light.

“I didn't know I could be so happy.” Joana sighed.

“I didn't either,” Tom agreed with her and a tear shimmered in the corner of his left eye.

“I think it's time to go back to the others,” Tom finally admonished.

They got dressed and happily set off. By the time they arrived at Jarod's house, everyone was already gathered at the breakfast table, which was loaded with a veritable splendour of colour from ripe fruit and juices.

“Cleaning starts today,” Jarod explained. “It won't take long to build the huts. Then this afternoon at the latest, you can move in there and then start your meditations directly.”

Archie and Mariah sat in harmony next to each other and nodded. Mariah wore a long, white robe and already appeared like a priestess. It was remarkable how much she had been changed by her time in Agarthā.

“Look at my leg.” Archie pulled up his trouser leg. The skin was rosy and healthy. No more trace of broken skin, or inflammation.

“How did you do that?” Tom was impressed.

“I used a few drops of Mariah's magical elixir from the small bottle on it yesterday morning and that's the result.”

“Unbelievable.” Joana was thrilled. Then it was time to build the huts. Everyone set off together, and the dogs ran happily around them. They, too, had amazingly quickly adapted to their new life, and they were making a very healthy and vital impression.



By the time they arrived at the beach, almost everyone else was already there. Only Brad and Piet were missing. They waited a while and eventually the two stragglers showed up, too. Jarod and Celeste presented the building material and instructed them how best to build the huts. They were round, with a roof of palm fronds and walls of bamboo pipe and twigs. It was indeed easy to build the shelters, and the work moved forward at a good pace. By the early afternoon, all the dwellings were finished and stood in a row on the beach. The entrances were built towards the sea, so you could see the crests of the waves breaking on the beach from the inside. The dwellings were a single room containing a mattress of moss and grass, a few blankets and a pillow. A truly spartan facility. Besides, there was a large jug of freshwater and a mug.

“Meals you will take together,” Celeste informed them. “We will bring them to the beach and you can gather in silence. Remember, from now on, you will have to remain silent for the next ten days. Are there any questions left?”

No one came forward.

“Then please go to your huts and meditate on the theme: Who am I and what is my mission in this life. We'll see you for dinner.”

With that, Celeste rose as well as the other leaders and went back to town. The future members of the new community, on the other hand, were spread along the beach in their meditation huts.

Katie felt exhausted. She had only partially participated in the search, but her pregnancy was now making itself felt. Bashan had helped to set her up a wonderfully comfortable dwelling and she gratefully retreated to it. It was good to lie down and just look out to sea. The waves weren't particularly high and she was delighted with the bright turquoise blue, which slowly turned darker and greener in the late afternoon sun.

“What an enchanting place.” Katie felt like she was in the Garden of Eden.

Happily, she listened to the sound of the waves and was able to track exactly how all her senses and the entire system slowly calmed and relaxed. She took a deep breath and put her hands on her stomach. Although she couldn't sense any movements yet, she felt the life that arose in her and was once again overwhelmed by this miracle. The rhythm of the waves was so comforting that after a while she fell asleep thinking about the question asked of them.

Soon she was dreaming that she was travelling with Bashan on one of those floating skiffs through an endlessly long tunnel to visit her parents in one of Agartha's largest and most important metropolises. She enjoyed the trip and felt safe and protected with him by her side and couldn't wait to meet her parents, who were already a few hundred years old.

The royal couple lived in an ivory palace with five golden towers, and the reunion was very moving. Katie felt such a deep love and bond with her biological parents that all the wounds and injuries she had suffered in her earthly life healed in no time and became forgiven and forgotten. She also noted that she was very like her mother, an aristocratic, tall woman with long, red hair who radiated an indescribable dignity and love. Her mother's name was Kiara and her father was called Angelus. They paid tribute to Katie's return with a colourful ceremony attended by the whole city and knighted Bashan out of thanks for bringing Katie back. With that, he too was included in the stand of the nobles. Just as they were about to tour the city, a gong ripped Katie out of her dream. It was time for dinner.

Everyone gathered in a circle around a bonfire. There were fruits, fresh, raw vegetables, juices, teas and water. After the meal, Celeste spoke, "I hope you have made progress with the answer to the questions of who you are and what your life's mission is. They are the only questions to meditate on in the next few days. You will go through memories, emotional processes and a deep, inner letting go. We advise you to drink a lot of water, walk along the beach and swim as much as possible, which supports cleansing. We wish you a good first night and will see you tomorrow."

With those words, she left the group to fend for themselves. They sat quietly together for quite some time and looked into the flames. Joana noted that it did her good to stay silent. Too much had happened in recent times and it was wonderful to have a break and have it all reviewed. When the fire had burned down, everyone went to their huts.

Joana, to her surprise, wasn't tired at all. She felt wide awake, yet absolutely calm and peaceful inside. She listened to the rolling of the waves and let this sound gently lull her. Sina slept outside her hut and shrugged her paws while

she was dreaming. Joana loved it when the dog made these quiet, high growling noises in her sleep. She closed her eyes and relived the whole odyssey of her life that lay behind her, and she remembered how she had felt the day before leaving for the cruise. At this time, she had been a very different person than she was now, with new thoughts and feelings. Joana felt uplifted and liberated, for which she was infinitely grateful.

She was amazed at herself and how easy it was for her to accept her new reality. It was as if this development had always been destined for her, and now the time had come to take the appropriate action. The mission, for which she had prepared her whole life and the reason why she had incarnated once more on Earth. Joana could feel herself connecting with vibrant energies that gave her back her strength and wisdom, which she had lost many incarnations ago. That night, Joana dreamed of Avalon for the first time.



The days of fasting and cleansing passed in a flash. Celeste and Jarod were delighted at how all newcomers dealt with the challenge of silence and meditation and how they had developed positively. Their auras became brighter and brighter each day, for they purified not only their bodies but also their minds and psyches. Some spent sleepless nights working on releasing the past. The more ballast and old limiting beliefs they let go, the clearer their spirit became and with it their memory of the true history of humanity, came back step by step.

On the morning of day nine, Jarod and Celeste declared that it was time to build the sweat lodges. They instructed them exactly what to do and around midday, two large sweat lodges embellished the beach, one for the women and one for the men. The first ceremony began in the early afternoon. Silence still applied. Celeste accompanied the women, and Jarod went with the men. The sweat lodges were far enough apart so that they could neither see nor hear each other.

“You will spend tonight, as much time as possible, in the sweat lodge,” was the instruction for both groups. “This is the ultimate cleansing. We will burn special herbs to help you do this, and we encourage you to dive into the sea at regular intervals to cleanse and cool your body. This will make the process much easier for you. Don't worry, there are no sharks or other dangerous creatures here. You are absolutely safe in the ocean.”

The first few moments in the sweat lodge were unbearably hot. Joana felt like

her skin was going to burn, and she had trouble breathing. The humidity was immensely high as Celeste regularly poured herbal water on the glowing stones. Joana gazed worriedly at Katie, but she sat quite relaxed in her seat, smiling at her reassuringly. Then the big sweating started. The sweat ran unstopably from their bodies, which increased the humidity even further. The air was filled by the aroma of sweating bodies, but the herbs spread a fresh scent, so it continued to smell pleasant. Slowly, breathing became easier.

Joana ran outside after half an hour and jumped into the sea. It felt so good to cool her hot body and wash off anything that came out of her pores. When she returned, the procedure was much more endurable, yet she took a bath several times during the night. During the last one, in the emerging twilight of dawn, she had a distinct sense of being completely pure inside. It felt great and uplifting.

“Now please lie down and rest. We will continue around noon,” was the next instruction Celeste gave them. “You are now cleansed. The closing ceremony will be about developing visions and seeing what awaits you in the future and what your life tasks are.”

Still, in silence, everyone went to their huts and lay down. Joana dozed off in no time. Her sleep was deep and dreamless, but she awoke long before the gong sounded. Her body was fresh, recovered and felt as light as a feather. She went to the ocean and took an extensive bath, after which she let herself dry in the warm midday sun. Just as she finished dressing, the gong rang out and along with the others, she made her way back to the sweat lodge.

This time, Joana was extremely excited and longing for the ceremony to begin. She couldn't wait to indulge in her visions, but Celeste instructed them to sit down in a circle outside the sweat lodge and hold hands. In the middle, she had laid a pile of stones.

“Let us pray and ask our ancestors and our highest spiritual leaders for their support and guidance,” she spoke solemnly. “Just imagine you can communicate with them in spirit and ask them for their help,” Celeste explained. “You don't need to know their names at the moment. It is enough for you just to call them.”

Joana closed her eyes and called in energetically her spiritual leaders and her ancestors. For her, this was nothing new, because she had done so many times before, but she could sense that it was something quite unusual for Mariah and Katie. Still, everyone bravely did as they were told.

“Very good,” praised Celeste after a while. “Now go to the sweat lodge and

ask for the highest visions of yourself and your life's mission and take a close look. You will get a lot of valuable information.”

She went ahead to the hut and poured a new herbal brew over the hot stones. This time it smelled very different and Joana got a little dizzy, but it was enjoyable. She closed her eyes and waited.

At first, nothing happened, and she just sat there for quite a while. Then she could feel her consciousness being pulled from her body. She could see herself from above sitting in the hut. Everything looked quite normal, but in the next moment, she was in a different dimension. Her perception was crystal clear and she could discern she was on a mountain so high it was sticking up into the clouds. She stood on a plateau from where she could peer over the world. In the beginning, she wasn't quite sure what she was seeing, but then the picture became more and more unambiguous and understandable.

She saw her future and she could perceive her higher self, which was working through her earthly existence for her highest good. She could tell her body had changed. The carbon base had changed into a crystalline structure, and this made the body lighter as a result. Her feelings and thoughts were different, too. They were positive and full of joy. All of a sudden, Joana was expecting only the best, and it was impressive to see what her life would be like.

Joana also saw the place where she and her friends would live. It was indeed called Avalon, and she experienced it as a thriving community. Avalon would be a small village with a hundred and forty inhabitants of all ages and it was meant to be located near the coast in a green, sprawling valley, surrounded and protected by rolling hills with an unobstructed view of the sea. The valley itself consisted of forest and meadows, through which a small river meandered. There was also a large lake fed by an underground spring, its shore overgrown with reeds and lilies. Joana could even smell their scent.

The landscape was picturesque, at the same time lovely and powerful. Not far from the lake stood the first houses. Each of them had a spacious garden, where herbs and flowers grew. Some also had fruit trees. The houses were colourful and all single story. They adorned the landscape and looked from afar like the rosettes of a large flower.

The village itself was arranged in a circular form around a central village square. There was a large, white temple, shaped like a shell, which was also used as a meeting place on the edge of the central plaza. Joana could feel the peace and harmony that emanated from this place.

Then Joana changed dimensions again and found herself surrounded by her spiritual leaders, her teachers, and her ancestors. They led her in front of a large, gold-rimmed mirror and instructed her to gaze at the reflection. Joana stepped in front of the mirror and looked at herself, but she didn't spot what she usually saw.

Instead, she detected her higher self and that she was a radiant being of light and of divine origin. Her body was surrounded by a pure white light and a lucent dark blue. She could see and sense her entire aura and all her energy bodies.

Then Serapis Bey, the sacred keeper of the white ray, stepped next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. He was one of her masters. Joana already knew him from many previous meditations, but never before had she met him like that.

“Can you now realise how great and powerful you are and what sublime beauty your soul and spirit hold?” he asked her with a smile.

Joana nodded. Tears of joy and gratitude ran across her face.

“Basically, you already know your life's mission,” the Master continued. “But we'll define it again for you and give you some instructions. As you've known for a long time, you're the keeper of Avalon. You are responsible for manifesting this place in the new world and making sure it continues to exist when you leave this planet. You also know this is your last incarnation here and that your days are numbered. You'll spend many more fulfilled and happy years on Gaia, but when it's time to leave, there will be no going back.

“Therefore, be picky and conscious of what you will do with your time left because it is very precious. You are one of the members in your new community who are the most spiritually developed and therefore you will help others awaken as well. Your exam will be your initiation to spiritual mastery. If you successfully pass it, you will become a divine master. The end of your initiation will be a sacred ceremony where you get back the master dignity you lost in Atlantis. You will know when it is time for it and what holy place you have to visit.”

Serapis Bey bowed to her and all the other masters, angels and spirit guides did the same. Joana, too, bowed deeply and in awe.

Then the vision ended and Joana found herself back in her body. She felt strangely heavy and inflexible after her foray into the spiritual world. Joana opened her eyes. Hours must have passed. Except for her, only Katie was still in the sweat lodge and she looked as if she too had experienced

impressive things. Joana nodded to her and crawled outside.



It was dark, silent, and the sky full of stars.

She went to the sea and swam far out, something she wouldn't normally do on her own, but this time she wasn't scared. She felt safe for the first time in her life, and that was an incredibly good feeling.

When she finally returned, she was in absolute peace with herself and the world, her heart wide open and she felt full of strength and love.

Waiting on the shore was Tom. He came towards her and she could sense her heart race.

“Oh my dear, how I've missed you.” He gave her a big hug.

They stood in the knee-high water, the waves washing around their legs, and while they kept kissing time ceased to exist. Everything was here and now, and only that mattered.

Eventually, they heard voices calling for them and saw Archie coming along the beach.

“We're here,” shouted Tom. They tore away from each other and waded out of the water, where they were greeted by the others.

Bashan shone a torch in their faces.

“You look like you've both met an angel,” Mariah stated.

“Yes, that's how you could describe it.” Tom laughed.

“I would say it was more God,” Joana reached for Tom's hand.

“What do you think of a feast under the stars?” Katie asked.

“That sounds great.” Tom was trying to find the way back to reality.

“Then let's go. The table is already set,” Archie revealed.



They walked along the beach towards a large bonfire. All those who had taken part in the sweat lodge ritual were gathered and many of the city's residents had also come. The tables were loaded with delicious fruits, fresh salads and fried vegetables. There were potatoes, rice and bread. Joana only now realised how hungry she was. She had eaten next to nothing for the past two days.

“Before we settle down for dinner, let's extend a warm welcome to our new friends. All have successfully gone through the cleansing ritual, coping with the first part of the initiation into our consciousness and community. Congratulations.” Jarod raised a glass filled with delicious, red berry juice and everyone else did the same.

After toasting each other, they went to the big table. Joana wasn't the only one who was starving.

The others also loaded their plates with food. The mood was exuberant and cheerful and everyone was chatting happily.

Only Brad stayed alone and introverted a little away from the hustle and bustle. Joana sat down next to him. “Would you like to come and join us?” she invited him gently.

“No,” Brad gruffly declined. “I'm missing her too much. She would have loved this happening and enjoyed this feast. She would be so happy here and she deserved it.”

“Yes, she would have,” Joana lovingly agreed. Then they remained seated together in silence for quite a while. “I'm sure she's fine,” Joana finally remarked.

“I know.” Brad's voice was full of pain. “But being without her feels terrible. The time with her was the crowning glory of my life.” He stood up. “Thank you, Joana, for coming over to me. I'll go to my hut now and lie down. Tomorrow is a new day.”

Joana rose, too. “Sleep well, see you tomorrow!”

She looked after Brad, who slumped over to his cabin. Then she straightened up and went to Tom. “I'm not sure he's getting over losing Jane,” she mentioned to him.

“I'm also concerned,” Tom replied. “But soul pain takes its time and we can't do anything but be there if he needs us. I feel so sorry for him. Brad is a great guy, and he saved all of our lives. We wouldn't have experienced all this without him.”

“Our trip has demanded great sacrifice from some people. We can say that we got away unscathed, except for Archie of course.” Joana leaned against Tom's shoulder.

After the fire burned down, it was time to go to sleep. Almost everybody wanted to spend another night in their huts on the beach.

“Do we go to my place or yours?” Tom grinned.

“I would suggest we go to yours first, get your bed and then we stay at mine. It's a dream to be there at night and look out to sea.” Joana laughed.

They set off. Soon Tom's bedding was set up next to Joana's, and they had a cosy natural bed.

As they lay next to each other listening to the waves, Tom whispered, “I can still sense your heartbeat and that's even though I'm not touching you. Isn't that amazing?”

“You'll hardly be surprised, but it's the same for me.” Joana grabbed his hand. “Sometimes it seems like we only have one heart and that feels a bit strange to me. I have never been so close to someone and at the same time fully self-reliant and completely myself.”

Tom pressed Joana's hand tenderly.

“You are the best that has ever happened to me in all my lives,” he seriously proclaimed.

“You too,” Joana replied and they could both feel the truth and depth of that statement.

“Would you like sleeping in my arms?” Tom offered lovingly.

Joana cuddled up to him. “In your arms, I feel absolutely safe and secure,” she mused as she fell asleep.

Tom covered her up with care, then he, too, closed his eyes.



In the late morning of the next day, everyone gathered in the atrium. It was time to learn what their initiation tasks were going to be. After everybody found a place, there was an expectant silence. Celeste and Jarod stepped forward.

“Welcome, loved ones,” they greeted the group. “Today we have the honour of telling you what is coming next. The exams will all take place tomorrow, mostly in the day, but in some cases, at night. Please step forward individually when we call your names and listen to what you have to do.”

They called them one by one and explained their challenge to them.

When Tom went, he had quite damp hands and felt excited, like a little schoolboy.

“Tom, you will spend tomorrow and tomorrow night in a cave. The cave will be half-submerged by the tides from tomorrow evening, so you’ll only be able to leave it in the morning. It’s safe and there is enough oxygen as well. This cave is a sacred place. People can see their past there and learn who they truly are. Are you ready to do that?”

Tom nodded resolutely. He felt a bit queasy, but he knew there was no way back.

Then it was Archie's turn. He had become a young man in the course of the cleansing, having reached his fifteenth birthday. Upright he stood proudly in front of Jarod and Celeste. His dark, almost black hair was now shoulder length and gleaming in the sun.

“We apologise for not celebrating your birthday,” Celeste began. “We haven't forgotten you and will make up for it once the initiations are complete.”

“No problem.” Archie laughed. “Birthdays have never mattered to me.”

Celeste smiled. She had great sympathy for this brave, young man.

“You will watch over the entrance of the cave where your father will spend his time and sit high above the sea in the rocks, looking out at the sea. Your task is to connect with the power of the sun and water. You are already spiritually well developed and therefore we ask you to wait for a personal message from your spiritual leaders and write it into your heart. Are you ready to do that?”

Archie nodded and bowed deeply. He then moved aside to make way for Joana.

Joana stepped forward and bowed as well. “Your job will be to spend a night alone in the forest, even without Sina,” she was told.

Joana swallowed. She was terribly scared of being in the dark.

“Are you ready for this?” Celeste asked. “It's the last fear in you that needs to be looked at and let go.”

Joana nodded and bowed again.

Then Katie got her instructions.

“We want you to take a little hike,” Jarod explained to her. “Do you see the high mountain there in the distance? Since you are pregnant, we will take you to its foot. Your challenge is to wander up the mountain. When you arrive at the top of the plateau, you will find a spring and a small lake. It is the water of life that bubbles from this source. Please bathe in this lake first and then

fill a small bottle with the water from the spring. You have to find your way back to us alone. If you keep moving, you can be back by sundown. Are you ready to do that?"

Katie nodded and bowed.

Then Bashan was called.

You already know what your mission is, don't you?" Celeste inquired.

"I'm going to watch out for Katie," Bashan promptly replied.

Jarod smiled. "That's it. You will follow her at every turn, but in such a way that she doesn't see or otherwise sense you. It is important for her that she does this task all by herself. Your obligation is to step back completely behind her and overcome your ego, which still wants to perform its own exploits. Are you ready to do that?"

Bashan nodded and bowed.

Last but not least, Mariah, Rose, Brad, Ken and Piet stood in front of the Six Sages.

"You get a joint assignment," Celeste began. "I'm sure you have already seen the isle which is some distance from our beach. Your task is to build a raft and sail over to this island. There, the priestess Mariah will collect medicinal plants. She will know which ones she needs. Once she has collected the herbs, you'll return. If you're back before dark, it will be easy. But if you sail later, you can get into a strong current that pulls you out to open sea. It's important that you work together perfectly as a team and don't waste a second. Are you ready to do that?"

The five nodded and bowed, too.

After everyone was back in their seats, Jarod spoke. "You now know your challenges. Please keep quiet about this. Spend the day in inner contemplation, prepare for your tasks and give your bodies a rest. You may not talk about your initiations until you have passed through them."



The meeting was at an end. Gradually, everyone dispersed in silence. Tom and his partner also decided to spend the day apart and in quiet contemplation. Joana went back to her hut on the beach and lay down again. Her body demanded a pause, and she was happy to just look at the water and listen to the sound of the sea.

Tom, on the other hand, was restless. He took a long hike along the shore and enjoyed moving. Little by little, he relaxed again and his agitated spirit slowly calmed down. He only returned at sunset and after a light meal, everyone went to sleep early.

With the first rays of sunshine, they were up and ready to go. Tom and Archie were instructed as to where they would find their places and set off. Katie and Bashan were taken separately to the sacred mountain and Ken, Brad, Rose, Mariah and Piet began building the raft. Only Joana had been free throughout the day. She wouldn't visit her place in the forest until dusk.

While Tom and Archie took their seats and Katie and Bashan began hiking up the mountain, the raft construction started on the beach. Joana watched from some distance. The float consisted of four thick, four-metre-long logs tied together in the water and a small sail attached to a short mast.

“Not exactly suitable for circumnavigation,” Joana thought, but the island wasn't far from the coast and the sea calm. There was just a light wind blowing. The vehicle also had a rudder and was equipped with two paddles.

After three hours of diligent work, they were ready to leave. Joana watched in amazement how well the self-built watercraft was steered and sailed towards its destination with the wind. She remained seated on the beach leaning against a tree trunk and followed the trip. After about an hour, they had arrived. What then happened there, Joana couldn't tell. The distance was too far.



It was noon, and the sun stood high in the sky. Katie wiped the sweat off her forehead. She had almost reached the mountain's plateau and felt exhausted. As she climbed higher, she could spot the described lake in front of her. Its colour was of a deep blue and it was heavenly beautiful. This gave Katie a new strength. She went on with determined steps. Arriving on the shore of the lake, she felt enchanted. The water was so clear she could accurately spot every little stone and fish. She sensed this was indeed a sacred site. First, she headed to the spring and quenched her thirst. The water had an incredible effect. She was refreshed and empowered within seconds. Yes, she felt as healthy and powerful as she had never been before. It was just fantastic.

Katie stripped off her clothes and slowly moved into the cold wet. She didn't want to destroy the silence and harmony that prevailed here. For a while she let herself drift in the lake and then washed her whole body, but she knew she didn't have endless time and therefore pulled her clothes over her still

damp body after the bath. This would help to keep her cool on the return path. She then filled the small bottle, drank a few more sips of the miraculous water and made her way back with new momentum.

Bashan had followed Katie at a safe distance. He didn't let her out of his sight for a second. Hardly had she left the lakeside when he also took a short bath and absorbed the healing effect. After drinking from the spring water, he was again on the road, following Katie on her way home. At first, he had indeed struggled with this task, as it seemed very easy for him. But meanwhile, he was having a lot of fun following his love and making sure she couldn't spot him. He was grateful to be allowed to provide for her safety.

The sun was sinking fast when Katie could see the city on the horizon.

"I think I'll be on the road for a few more hours," she suspected, but she still was strong. Nor did the thought of travelling the last part of her path in darkness worry her. Since drinking the water, she had felt almost invincible. She marched briskly on and was looking forward to being back with Bashan soon.



Tom had already spent almost all day in the cave and nothing had happened. Thank God it was dry and warm and the cave was quite spacious. He could stand up fully in it and the part which wouldn't be underwater at high tide measured about four by five square metres.

"At least I don't need to have to deal with claustrophobia." Tom tried to calm himself down, but the sound of the incoming water made him nervous. "Tomorrow morning it's all over and I'm hopefully smarter." He focused on his breath.

From his place on the rocks, Archie could see the beach and also the small island to which his companions had sailed. He had watched how they had approached the isle and then walked away. Now he was waiting for them to sail back towards the beach, but although the sun slowly sank deeper, no man could be seen far and wide.

Mariah had taken a long time to find the right plants. They had wandered all over the island and she had searched in many places in vain. At last, she got them all together. They were medicinal plants for Archie's leg. By the time they arrived at the beach, it was just before dusk and one of the tree trunks had detached from the ropes. It took Piet and Brad nearly an hour to get the raft back together. With the last daylight, they set sail. They had travelled half

the distance when they got into the strong current Jarod had warned them about. Their vehicle began to rotate around itself and swayed ominously.

Archie screamed up in horror and would have preferred to have jumped headfirst into the sea, but he knew he was too far away and with his amputated leg he couldn't swim well. He had no choice but to helplessly watch the tragedy that occurred in front of his eyes.

Joana, who had fallen asleep on the beach, was startled by the loud shouts of her friends in distress at sea. She ran with some others to the shore, where a rescue team was already about to let a larger boat into the water, powered by a crystal engine. No sooner were they on the way than the raft flipped over and everyone fell into the water, Joana froze as it suddenly occurred to her, that Mariah couldn't swim.

Archie was beside himself. He couldn't tell from this distance what was happening in detail, but he was fearing for Mariah's life.

What no one had been able to see from afar was that the mast had hit Mariah on the head when the raft was knocked over. She was drifting unconscious on the surface and about to sink. Brad immediately swam towards her, keeping her head above water. He was injured himself and had a deep cut to his stomach from a long nail that had ripped into him when the mast broke out of its anchorage.

Brad felt the blood running out of his body, but he didn't care. He just wanted to save Mariah's life. Everything else didn't count at that moment. The lifeboat was still a long way off and not particularly fast. By the time they finally arrived, a quarter of an hour had passed and the overturned watercraft floated far out into the ocean. Brad held onto one of the tree trunks with one hand and with the other hand, he kept Mariah on the surface. He had lost all sense of time and was freezing cold. Brad knew he had lost a lot of blood and could perceive his life force waning.

The surrounding sea was coloured red. By the time the rescuers finally approached the site of the accident, Brad had completely exhausted himself. Mariah slowly regained consciousness.

“You have to hold on by yourself now,” he groaned with the last of his willpower. “They're going to save you right away.”

He then let go and sank into the depths. Flabbergasted, Mariah stared at the spot where he had just spoken to her.

Brad didn't just let go of Mariah and the tree trunk. He let go of his whole

life. He sank deeper and deeper. The current tore him away underwater, but he didn't make the slightest attempt to go against it. He saw Jane's face in front of him, radiantly beautiful and she gazed lovingly at him. Brad just wanted to be with her. While his body drowned with a smile on his lips, his mind and soul rose and reunited with his beloved in the realm of eternity.

The helper crew couldn't watch all this due to the increasing darkness and so they first collected the others who drifted helplessly in the ocean. Mariah was the last to be pulled from the water. She was shocked, but also calm.

“He wanted to leave,” she said, while they searched for Brad in vain for an hour, but the sea had swallowed him. Eventually, the boat with the four rescued drove back to the beach.



It was pitch dark by now. Archie knew he couldn't leave his location without running the risk of crashing or breaking his bones. His concern for Mariah made him completely miserable. Inside of him, a storm raged. But then something strange happened. The boy had an apparition. A giant angel appeared right in front of him and his light was luminous and golden. Archie was completely perplexed. He stared at the angel and found in amazement that he could communicate with him.

“She is safe and unharmed,” the angel spoke in a deep voice, chasing a shiver down Archie's back.

“Who are you?” he finally asked.

“I am Archangel Haniel, which means 'The Grace of God' and I am your guardian angel. It was planned that we get to know each other under happier circumstances, but today is the day for which it is destined that I step into your life. I will accompany you from now on if you will allow it.”

“It is a great honour,” Archie replied with reverence. “Is everything truly OK with Mariah?”

The angel nodded. “She's doing well. All but Brad survived. He is now back in our realm, where he was eagerly awaited by his mistress.”

“Oh.” Archie was lacking words.

“I come to convey to you today the gift of clairvoyance and special healing powers.” Haniel changed the subject. “You know that you have carried these gifts within you from birth and now you have the opportunity to use these skills knowingly if you wish to.”

“Can I see the future then?” Archie inquired.

“Under certain conditions, yes,” Haniel replied. “You'll be able to foresee in some cases if you put yourself in a trance. We're going to teach you how to do so.”

“I'm already familiar with that,” Archie replied. “I always did it when I was little. It's quite easy.”

Archie's fresh manner elicited a smile from the angel. “Are you ready to accept these gifts?” he asked.

“Yes.” Archie nodded.

“We will guide you when the time comes. You are not alone in this and can ask us for advice and assistance at any time.”

“It's good to have some support in the beginning. Will I become a priest?” Archie wanted to know.

“No, you are destined to become a great healer and seer. You will be needed as well on the surface of the Earth as in the Earth's interior, and you will walk between the worlds when you are ready. But first, with Mariah's help, you will heal your leg. It will be very painful at the beginning and the healing will only start slowly, but after a while, it will get better and better and you will be able to watch your leg regrow.”

“I don't mind pain if I can just get my leg back.” Archie became quite excited. “When can we start?”

“Soon, my son,” Haniel appeased him. “We ask you for a little patience. When you're ready, we will get in touch with you.”

With these words, the angel disappeared and dissolved into nothingness before Archie's eyes, while he stared into the dark night and the luminous starry sky



Joana struggled to tear herself off the beach. Brad's death had deeply touched her, though it wasn't a surprise. She assured herself that everyone else was well, then got ready to go to the place in the woods that Jarod had described to her. She tied Sina up in her cabin and put a large bowl of water next to her. “Tonight, you have to stay here, my darling.” She said goodbye to the dog, then she set off.

Actually, she should have been there before dusk, but the tragedy had

overridden the schedule. Now she had to make more of an effort to find her way, but Jarod's description had been so good that she discovered the path to the small clearing even in the dark. She had taken a blanket and a bottle of water with her.

When she arrived, an owl screamed and just then the full moon became visible in the sky. This made the clearing almost as bright as day and bathed everything in silver light. It was perfectly quiet and only here and there could be heard a rustling of a small animal. Joana was uneasy. She didn't know what that night would entail and slowly her fear of ghosts rose in her.

During the day, Joana was able to handle her high sensitivity well, but at night it still scared her sometimes. She sat down under a tree on her blanket. It was, as always, pleasantly warm and a light wind was whispering in the branches. She took a deep breath and looked around. Deep inside, she knew she was safe and protected here, and that her fear was only present on the surface of her consciousness. Something to look at and let go of. Joana was aware that she was on her way to mastery and that included mastering her feelings in every situation of life and being able to stay centred.

“Easier said than done,” she mused and was already struggling when a bunny jumped out of the bushes into the clearing. She ordered herself to relax and enjoy the spectacle the little bunny offered her. He was joined by his friends and together they played exuberantly in the soft light of the moon. They fought, jumped and ran around.

“Aren't they lovely?” Joana heard a voice in her head and shrugged again. Right in front of her in the bushes, a little fire swirled around. Somehow, she realised that the voice in her head belonged to that light. Joana forced herself to take a deep breath.

“Yes,” she replied mentally. “Who are you?”

“I am a forest fairy and live here,” the voice countered. The little light now buzzed up and down in front of her face.

“You don't need to be afraid,” the nature spirit assured her. “Everything is safe here.”

Joana had to laugh. “Thank you, that calms me down a bit.”

“The greatest beings are dwarfs and trolls,” the forest fairy revealed to her. “And they are much smaller than you.”

Joana breathed a sigh of relief. “That sounds good,” she stated. “What about ghosts?” she inquired.

“Oh, there are many of them, but they're all good ones,” the fairy explained.

A shiver ran over Joana's back.

“When you're ready, I can let you see them. For 'normal' people they are not visible,” the fairy offered.

Joana hesitated, but then she overcame her fear. After all, this was her initiation into a new community and it was about a new life and regaining her master's dignity. That made it indeed necessary to grow beyond old borders and fears. She couldn't say anything, because all of a sudden, her mouth was completely dry.

The fairy sent a purple beam of light directly to her third eye and straight away a little troll stood in front of Joana. He was about fifty centimetres tall.

“Welcome to our world.” The burly guy greeted her with an astonishingly deep voice and then ran away busily.

Joana was enchanted and completely entranced. She sat there and stared at the colourful goings-on. “You didn't expect this?” asked a voice close to her and an old man with long, white hair wearing a floor-length, bright robe sat down next to her. Strangely, he wasn't scary at all to Joana. On the contrary, he was very friendly.

“I'm what you would call a ghost. I lived in this place before the ages of time and return here again and again on special occasions. I am Basaldur, in my lifetime wizard and healer.”

“I'm very honoured.” Joana bowed. “Is this a special occasion today?” she then wanted to know.

“Oh yes,” assured Basaldur. “Today is the initiation of the Guardian of Avalon. We've been waiting for your arrival.”

Those words touched Joana in the deepest depths of her heart, making a melody sound in her that had been hushed for a long, long time.

“The memories are coming back, aren't they?” Basaldur looked at her intently.

Joana struggled with tears. “It is necessary to complete what we were no longer allowed to complete at the time of Atlantis,” she finally stammered.

“So it is,” Basaldur confirmed. “And today you are prepared and have learned your lessons over endless lives. This time, everything will go well.”

“It has to,” Joana reinforced. “I can't go through it all again. It was damn

tough.”

“I’m aware of this.” Basaldur nodded. “And I have the joy of telling you that’s not going to happen under any circumstances. You’re ready, Joana, ready for your last big task here on this planet and for your way home. You didn’t just meet Tom by coincidence. You have arranged yourselves because the time was right for this and because you were ready to take this path.”

Now the tears ran uncontrollably down Joana’s face. They were tears of gratitude and joy. “I’ve longed for it,” she whispered.

“Your time is now,” Basaldur spoke softly. He then dissolved with a bow right in front of her eyes, leaving Joana to her feelings.

“We’re all glad you’re finally here.” The little forest fairy buzzed around. “My name, by the way, is Arabella.”

“What a pretty name.” Joana took a deep breath and slowly regained her composure. “Why are you glad I’m here?” she inquired after a while.

“You have the ability to sense us and get in touch with us,” Arabella enlightened her. “We invite you to come back to our clearing again and again if you need comfort or advice. We are always there for you and also if you just drop by on a visit, we will, of course, be very happy.”

“This is very friendly. I am honoured.” Joana smiled gratefully at the little shining light.

“Stretch out your hand,” Arabella asked her.

Joana did as she was called and the little light landed on her palm.

Barely had it landed, than it took shape.

It appeared the most gorgeous fairy with long, black hair and a dark green dress crisscrossed by gold threads. Her shoes, too, were golden and she had wings of the same colour as her dress and rimmed with gold.

“My God, you are beautiful,” Joana marvelled.

Arabella laughed. “We fairies are all beautiful,” she shared with Joana. “That’s in our nature.” Then she flew off again. “It will soon get bright,” she remarked.

“What? Already?” Joana was really surprised.

“You can stay right here, by the way,” the fairy continued. “Your initiation ceremony will take place in this clearing.”

"I'd like that." Joana stretched herself. "It's a beautiful spot."

"It's a sacred place," Arabella corrected. "Long ago, the temples of an earlier, highly developed civilisation stood here and their energies are still very effective. That's why you were sent here. These forces have activated your energy centres and all your spiritual potential. You should rest a lot over the next few days to give your body the opportunity to incorporate all of this and rebalance itself."

"Thank you." Joana sighed. "I indeed have to process this all first."

"Rest now for a little bit and just enjoy our world," the fairy suggested. "From now on you can see us at all times and you will be amazed that we live everywhere."

"I'm truly looking forward to that." Joana leaned relaxed against the tree trunk. She was no longer afraid and relished sitting quietly in the darkness watching the activities of the small people. As the sun rose, Arabella led her to a creek that rippled along the edge of the clearing and instructed her to undress and wash her entire body.

When she finished, to her surprise, she found someone had provided a new, long, white robe for her there. It looked like the style Basaldur had worn and had a wide dark red sash. She put it on and it fit her perfectly. With that, she was ready for the ceremony.

The rising sun had bathed the whole clearing in crimson light. Arabella showed her the way to a wonderful altar of moss-green stone. Joana knelt in front of it, surrounded by the inhabitants of the holy place. Just behind the altar lay a huge, almost white rock, on whose surface the emblem of a glowing sun appeared. A number code shot through Joana's head. A golden row of numbers lit up in front of her inner eye and she could feel that was the key to all the harmonious forms of life. No sooner had she perceived this than the sun began to rotate clockwise on the rock, faster and faster.

Eventually, the light channelled into a white-gold beam that streamed straight into Joana's heart. Joana raised her arms and stretched them toward the sky. She opened her heart wide to these divine energies and could perceive how they completely transformed her entire being within a few seconds. She knew she had regained her master's dignity, and that this time it was forever.



Tom had spent all night in the cave and hadn't noticed or heard anything that had happened outside. He had been able to tell by the water level what time

it was. Little had occurred by the high tide. Tom had been too preoccupied with his fear that the water could flood the whole cave and he would drown. When the water began to retreat again, he slowly relaxed. Suddenly he could see that his inner attitude towards life to date had always been to worry about what could happen or go wrong. As a result, he had ruined a lot of nice situations and also missed many good opportunities.

Now Tom's life played out in front of his inner eye like a movie and at the same time, he felt he was being freed from the past. To his horror, however, the film didn't stop at his birth but continued to run backwards through all his past lives on Earth and there were quite a few.

The film ran incredibly fast. Still, Tom could grasp everything clearly, even if he knew he wouldn't be able to memorise everything. The further the film ran backwards, the more liberated and assured Tom felt. He saw himself as a brave warrior in bloody battles, a mother of various children, a farmer, a merchant and much more. The only thing that always stayed the same was his eyes. Tom had lost all sense of time. He was completely focused on his history and the deep cleansing process that took place. He had never felt such an intense feeling of healing and becoming whole, which came along with tears and emotions of supreme happiness.

At one point, the film slowed down and Tom could tell from the landscape and architecture in which the scenes were playing that he had arrived in Atlantis.

Tom knew instinctively that this had been the start of his earthly career and this time he was able to see what he had already experienced in his dreams in a fragmentary way and what Joana had also talked about. He relived his time in Atlantis as a priest and builder of Sacred Geometry and he lived through the greatest times and ultimately the crash and doom of Atlantis.

He reviewed his agonising death and again felt the hell of absolute despair and repentance. It was unbearable to watch Joana in her suffering and how they were violently torn apart by his death. When he relived his self-condemnation and how he had renounced his powers and wisdom, he again felt the nothingness he faced when Atlantis was lost and he had also had to leave Joana.

“Never again.” It came like a moan from the bottom of his soul. Tom had the impression he was breaking apart again as he experienced all the hardship he had to go through to work his way back into a dignified, earthly existence after this event. He was struggling for air. His throat was tight, his heart raced wildly and he was alternately boiling hot and freezing cold. He focused on

his breath and tried to calm down, but his heart rate continued to be out of control.

Then suddenly a dolphin appeared in front of him in the water of the cave and ripped Tom out of his emotional chaos. "Everything is going to be fine." The dolphin spoke in a melodic voice and Tom was no longer sure if he had now completely lost his mind. "No, no," the dolphin asserted. "You're not crazy. Your perception has expanded, and that's why you can talk to me now and of course with all the other animals," he added.

"Oh." Tom couldn't think of anything more to say. His mind felt suspended. "Who are you?" he inquired after a while.

"I am a messenger of the Elohim. These are high-ranking angels," the dolphin explained when he saw his blank looking face. "They sent me to give you a message. Do you want to hear it?"

"Please," Tom answered. He realized that nothing could surprise him anymore.

"The message is as follows."

The dolphin came out of the water even further and Tom admired his shiny, powerful body.

"It's time for you to forgive yourself for what happened in Atlantis. The spiritual world tells you that from today all your karma has been taken from you. You are free to now gradually regain access to your full powers and abilities. It's time to remind yourself that you are a master and have a mission. You couldn't fulfil your task in Atlantis back then, but now is the time to do so. You must now accomplish what you originally came to Earth for and what you have prepared for in endless reincarnations. Now is your turn, Tom."

Tom looked at the dolphin with his eyes wide. He could feel that it was speaking the truth, however fantastic it might seem. "What's my mission?" Tom asked.

The dolphin laughed. "You know it," he replied, diving off.

"Come back," Tom shouted and would have preferred to have swum after him, but the dolphin had disappeared. Tom felt like he had been in a deep trance.

He just sat there and watched the water recede further and further until the way out was finally clear again. Tom knew his stay in the cave had ended. He

got up and left his initiation site. As he came out of the cave, the sun rose beautifully over the sea, dipping everything in her warm, pink light.

Tom felt an infinite amount of love in himself and he felt free and light-hearted. All worries, all doubts, all hesitation and his deep, inner insecurity had fallen away from him. Feelings of happiness shot through his body. Suddenly, he knew what his mission was.



"Tom, Tom," Archie screamed and approached him as fast as his limping would allow him. "We have to go back immediately. There has been an accident. Brad is dead and I have to take care of Mariah."

Tom stared at Archie. "How do you know?" he wondered.

"I saw it and then an angel told me. Come on, we've to go."

Archie limped along the beach as fast as he could. Tom ran behind him. He asked no further questions. It was all too much for him and he couldn't believe Brad was dead.

By the time they reached the beach of the city, it was completely deserted.

"They're in the houses still sleeping." Archie kept rushing until he stood outside their host's house.

Jarod opened the door. "I have been waiting for you," he welcomed them.

"Where is she and how is she doing?" gasped Archie, breathless.

"She sleeps and given the circumstances, she is doing well." Jarod didn't seem at all surprised that Archie already knew everything. Archie headed past him into the house.

"Is Brad really dead?" Tom inquired.

"He saved Mariah's life and drowned in the process." Jarod told Tom what had happened.

Tom was visibly shaken.

"Everyone else is okay," Jarod continued. "It may sound heartless, or strange to you, but Brad's time here with us was up. Basically, he had already left when Jane died. Brad's last mission on Earth was to bring you here to this place, and he did so with flying colours. We all have our responsibilities here that we have come to accomplish. Once this has happened, we go home again, to the other side of the veil and to God."

Tom nodded. "I can understand that, even if it still feels unusual."

"You will quickly get used to your expanded consciousness," Jarod assured him. "But now have a shower and then it's already time for the initiation ceremony."



Tom followed Jarod into the house in silence. In the shower, he once again felt like he was washing off his whole past and he felt infinitely better. An hour later, everyone, including Sina and Puschel, were ready to set off and gathered in the atrium. From there, they made their way to the clearing. It was a huge procession. Almost half the city joined them to attend the ceremony.

By the time they arrived at the sacred site, the sun was already high in the sky. Joana met them there. The long, white robe caressed her delicate physique and her red hair sparkled in the sunshine. Tom was captivated by the sight of her. She had the charisma of a goddess. Joana's facial features were soft and relaxed and she looked amazingly happy.

"She's happy on her own, she's shining from within," Tom thought.

Joana had never felt so good. She rested completely within herself and was full of peace and love.

"How awesome can life be?" She laughed, kissing Tom on the cheek.



He took her hand, and they went together with the other aspirants to the middle of the circle that the inhabitants of the city had formed around them and where the Six Sages, including Celeste and Jarod, were already waiting for them. "Welcome to our community," Jarod solemnly proclaimed. "I have the joy of informing you that you have all successfully gone through your initiations and have proved worthy of belonging to our community if you so wish. Is there anyone who doesn't want that?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Good," Jarod smiled. "That's what we hoped. The last part of your inauguration and the final inclusion in our circle will now happen in this ceremony. You will be called one by one to come forward. Everyone will get an energy transfer that raises and expands your consciousness many times over and opens your energy centres to the extent that is possible according

to your level of development. After that, you will also be able to understand and speak our language. You won't need any more interpreters.”

The priests and priestesses had brought two large bowls. They set them up so there was enough room in between to kneel on a mat, then they lit the contents of the vessels. It was a magical fire. The flames burned in a deep blue-violet colour. Now the new members were called forward individually and told to kneel.

The priests and priestesses had also brought their huge drums. It was these drums that had pointed the way to the city for the castaways when they arrived on the mainland. They now began to beat them powerfully and their tone went through the whole body and made every single cell vibrate. The Six Sages had lined up in two rows. The women stood in front of the flames, the men behind them. If someone knelt, they held their hands over that person together and then the energy transfer took place, each lasting about ten minutes.

When it was Joana's turn to kneel, she could feel exactly how the high energy lifted her vibration even further. She felt like she was flying and at the same time firmly connected to Earth. She could have spent hours in that energy bath. Far too quickly, it was over. After her, it was Tom's big moment, who was the last to be initiated. Then it was over. The ritual had taken a full four hours.

Diligent hands, meanwhile, had set up a huge buffet in the shade of the trees and all were now invited to enjoy and celebrate. Emblazoned above the feast was a large sign that read, “Welcome, dear friends and Happy Birthday, Archie.” There was music, singing and lots of good conversations.

The newcomers were overjoyed to finally understand the language of the community and to be able to interact with the city's original residents. The celebration lasted all day and Joana and her companions learned a great deal about the life that was now waiting for them. Towards evening, they cleaned up and headed home. Barely had they arrived, when they fell into their beds. That night everyone dreamed the same dream, the dream of their lives in Avalon.

X



A new day dawned and the moment Joana opened her eyes, she knew her old life was irretrievably over. She had arrived in the fifth dimension and there was no way back. Joana glanced at Tom, who slept peacefully next to her. He still looked exhausted even in his sleep. As always, when Joana started thinking, he woke up immediately and smiled tenderly at her.

“Good morning, my beautiful.” He kissed her gently on the mouth.

“How do you feel?” Joana lay down on his belly so she could look him closely in the face.

“Wow.” Tom surrounded her with his arms and legs. “It’s still very early days, we have a lot of time,” he whispered.

“What luck.” Joana laughed and then they gave themselves to the joys of love. They completely merged and became united again in a space and time which celebrated its origin in eternity. Every time Joana and Tom indulged in physical love, it was a sacred act. Both experienced in addition to their lust and joy, deep gratitude and indescribable feelings of happiness. When they finally let go of each other, they felt like they were reborn.

Much later they decided to get up and arrived just in time for breakfast. Siri had put in even more effort this time.

“This is your farewell meal,” Jarod let them know. “Today we are off to your new homeland. It’s about two hours away from here so it doesn’t make sense to commute daily. Well at least not for now, but we are working on teleportation opportunities. There is a good amount of work ahead of you.

You are now well prepared to build your own village and community. We will support you with everything you need. There will be food, building materials, tools, seeds, animals to help you work the land, clothes and gradually everything you deem necessary for the interior decoration. You've probably noticed that our houses are quite simple. Since the weather here is warm and friendly all year round, except for a few exceptions, we live outside most of the time. Our winter, if you want to call it that, lasts about three months, which means temperatures are between fifteen and twenty degrees during the day.

It's a little colder at night. During this time, we warm our homes with a system that stores solar heat in crystals, which then gradually release the heat. You will see that this is a very pleasant warmth and also get the heating system from us before winter."

"How come you can make all this available to us without pay?" wondered Tom, who hadn't completely broken away from the thinking of the old world.

Jarod laughed. "We are a community and you are now part of that," he explained patiently. "Every member helps us to do well. On average, everyone works four to six hours a day, doing what they like to do and are best at. It is voluntary and an honour for all of us to contribute to this for the benefit of the community. Also, everyone still works four hours a week in the so-called community service. These are tasks that no one wants to do exclusively, but that have to be done on a regular basis. You will find out what this will be with you. It's a little different in every collective. We don't have private property. Everything belongs to everyone. Everybody is responsible for this as well, and there is no envy or greed.

Of course, there are things that belong to you, so to speak, like your house or your clothes or your animals, but that means you are responsible for it. For example, if you want to move to another area, if a place is vacant, then you can either move into a house that someone has moved out of or build yourself a new one with the help of the community. The house is then yours again and the one you left will be given to someone else. We act the same way with all other items. It is only for animals, of course, that it is different, because they are our sisters and brothers. If someone no longer wants, or can no longer care for an animal, they must find an adequate home for it and seek their consent to do so. But that hardly happens. Life is so much easier without money and is infinitely more fun. You've probably noticed that we're all happy and very creative here."

"I noticed that," Tom confirmed thoughtfully. "God, I think we still have a

lot to learn.”

“You have, but this will happen quickly,” Jarod reassured him. “On the one hand, your consciousness has already changed. You have now woken up. On the other hand, you have us as counsellors and support. In the fifth dimension, everything is a lot easier and goes on much faster, even building. You will see.”

Joana took a deep breath. The thought of building an entire village intimidated her enormously. She couldn't even imagine building a house, but Tom was blossoming on it. He was greatly inspired by the idea of building a home for Archie, Joana and himself with his own hands. He had always been interested in architecture and ecological building and what he had seen here in the houses completely thrilled him and surpassed his wildest ideas about what was possible many times over. How exciting to be able to try his ideas now.

“There are no limits,” Jarod continued. “Neither in terms of the time you need nor in terms of the materials you would like to use. We value harmony with nature, creativity, a healthy life, beauty and quality. Everything you create is an asset to the whole community. I hope that suits you.”

The four nodded.

“Let's leave soon.” Jarod stood up.

“Grab your stuff and then we can go straight away. On the beach, there is a ship waiting for you, which is already equipped with everything you need in the first instance. It's powered by a crystal engine, so you're independent of the wind. You can keep it and use it to fetch supplies and later to bring parts of your crops here and exchange them for goods. There are some residents in the city who would like to join your community. You will get to know them in the next few weeks and then you can decide who to take in. We'll start in an hour.”



“I can feel her and she talks to me, oh my Goddess,” Katie called on their way to the ship.

Bashan looked at her, questioningly. Then he got it. “What does she say?” he wanted to know.

“She says we should build a house on the edge of the village where the forest starts and she wants a room of her own from the beginning. We're supposed

to paint it light blue.”

“Well, those are clear instructions,” Bashan laughed. “It bodes well.”

“Her voice sounds like a silver bell and it's still thin, but already getting stronger,” Katie let him know.

“Really?” Bashan marvelled. “Are you sure you don't imagine all this?” Bashan affectionately hugged her and gently stroked over her stomach.

Katie shook her head. “No, no, it's all very clear. She says she's looking forward to spending time with us.”

“I'm also looking forward to spending time with her, but I'll enjoy having only you for a while yet. When she's born, everything will be different.”

By then they had arrived at the beach and strolled towards the small harbour and the crowd which had already gathered at one of the jetties.

A heavily loaded, large barge lying deep in the water was already waiting for them.

“Will we still fit on it?” Katie asked, concern written on her face.

“No problem.” She got the answer from Celeste. “Your weight will make no difference. Jarod and I will ride with you and show you the way. We will also explain to you what you have onboard and how best to use it. Don't worry, it's all fine.”



In total, there were twenty-two people. Not everyone who had left the *Dragon Queen* alive was with them, as some had chosen to stay in the city. They had swapped places with those who would rather join the new community. But Piet, Rose, Ken, Archie, Mariah, Katie, Bashan, Tom and Joana were on board. They couldn't wait to get to know their future home.

“Tom,” Archie started seriously once they had set off. “I have to tell you something.”

Tom looked at his son, questioningly.

“Mariah and I won't be staying with you for long. We have decided to live in the city for a while. Mariah wants to attend the priestess seminary there and serve in one of the temples and I'll go to a school to learn the art of medicine. We're only coming along for a couple of weeks to be sure everything is going well, then we plan to go back to town. But we will visit you regularly. There are many holidays and we would love to spend them in Avalon.”

Tom visibly shrunk. He felt like something was being ripped out of his heart.

“It isn't so bad.” Archie tried to calm him down. “We’ll see each other quite often and you can come to the city.”

“You know, Archie.” Tom was highly affected. “You're only just fifteen years old and we've been through a lot. This farewell comes as a bit of a surprise. I'm not even sure if I can agree with this idea.”

“You will have to,” stated Archie. “It's my way and my destiny. The angel told me and I feel it deep inside me. You can't stop me.”

Tom looked at him sadly. “I'm aware of that, my son, but you'll recognize that it's not easy for me and that I still feel responsible for you.”

“But you have Joana now,” Archie interjected.

“That's true, of course,” Tom nodded. “Nevertheless, this is a story in itself and yet has nothing to do with you and me, with our father and son story.”

“Joana is my spare mother,” Archie noted dryly. “She is now part of the family. It has something to do with her, too.”

“Have you told her yet?” Tom inquired.

“No.” Archie shook his head. “I wanted to talk to you first. I'll tell her tonight and I'm sure she'll understand.”

“What am I going to understand?” asked Joana, who showed up at that very moment and joined them.

“That I won't live with you for the time being, but in the city to go to school there and learn the art of healing,” Archie informed her.

“That comes a bit out of the blue.” She settled on a little stool next to Tom. “What does your father say about that?”

“He's not exactly thrilled, but I'm convinced you'll get the idea,” Archie confidently spoke.

“I think I do,” Joana hesitantly replied. “But I'm honestly not sure I feel good about it. So much has happened and you're still so young, Archie. I have to talk about this with Tom.”

“You can discuss it as much as you like.” Archie reacted with disappointment and slightly defiant. “But I will do it anyway, no matter what you come up with. It is the law here that from the age of fifteen everyone can do what they decide is right as long as it doesn't harm them or others and that certainly does not apply to my project.”

Joana got up and put her arm around his shoulders. "It's just happening so fast," she appeased the young man. "Give us a little time to get used to it."

"Well." Archie sounded much more conciliatory.

"Kids just grow up too quickly," Tom noted, then they sat down next to each other and looked curiously at where the trip might take them this time.

They glided silently for a good two hours along the coast and seemed to sail towards the sun before the ship anchored in a small bay. The water here was emerald green on a mile-long sandy beach edged by some giant trees, that exuded a fresh, slightly floral scent and had large deep purple flowers. Joana was enchanted.

Some people lowered amphibious vehicles into the water, which were powered by a crystal motor and could also drive ashore. They looked like a boat when on water but wheels appeared as they touched the land. These so-called 'hydromobiles' were large enough to transport up to ten people. The sea was calm and crystal clear. Joana could spot large, red starfish at the bottom.



The crafts glided gently and silently up the beach. The dogs had jumped off as they reached the land and now ran excitedly alongside the vehicles barking.

"I didn't even know Puschel could run that fast." Mariah laughed. She sat next to Archie, and the two held hands. They looked so in love and happy it was a pleasure to gaze at them.

"I think they're truly meant for each other." Joana glanced at Tom. "Even if they are still too young to live together. I'm sure they'll wait."

Tom nodded. "I agree," he gave back. "What luck the two of them can spend their whole lives together." He put his arm around her slender waist.

"We also have enough time," Joana smiled.

"I hope so," Tom replied.



They left the beach and drove through a gently undulating landscape of meadows and trees. Finally, they moved up a small ridge and arrived at a grassy knoll. Joana's heart took a leap of joy. In front of them lay exactly the valley that she had seen in the sweat lodge.

"We're home, Tom, this is Avalon," she called from the deepest depth of her soul and her heart was filled with so much love that it seemed to flow over. They approached the loveliest valley imaginable. It had every shade of green and flowers were blooming all over the place, while the earth looked black and rich.

Everyone was so excited they spontaneously clapped their hands and greeted their new home with a big round of applause. Jarod and Celeste had to laugh and you could see how glad they were that everyone liked their new home so much. Nearby was a clear freshwater lake, supplied by a small river that meandered through the valley just as in Joana's vision. They stopped their vehicles at the bank.

"You will never be short of water here," Celeste explained. "The river is fed by several springs that come from the mountains. It is very good water and full of vitality. Take a sip and try it."

All of them knelt and tried the water. It actually tasted delicious and seemed very refreshing and invigorating after the long drive. Once they had rested, they wandered around the valley. It was early afternoon, and the sun was shining warm and bright from the sky. "It's time for us to unload the ship, at least to the extent that we can build the tent city today. Some can stay here and the strongest should come along and help bring the essentials for the first night to shore," Jarod suggested after the tour.

Joana, Mariah, Archie and Katie stayed by the lake, while Tom, Bashan and Ken made their way back to the beach along with a few others and Jarod. Celeste remained with the women and Archie.

"How is your leg doing, Archie?" she inquired.

"It hurts. Since Mariah regularly bathes it with a brew from the herbs of the small island, it has started to grow back and the healing water she brought is speeding up the process. You can't see anything yet, but I can feel it. Soon the change will be visible."

Celeste didn't seem surprised at this response in any way. "Yes, it can take quite a long time for it to fully regrow," she confirmed as if that were the most natural thing in the world.

The others marvelled.

"Then it's really true?" Katie still had doubts.

"Oh yes," Celeste replied. "You just forgot how to do this. The density of the third dimension, the many poisons and all the radiation exposure from

the technical devices had fogged your senses. It had been different for us and this is why we have our complete healing powers at our disposal. This will happen for you too now. You'll see it soon on Archie.”

“That would truly be a miracle,” Katie reasoned.

“Let's collect wood for the night and make a fire.” Celeste stood up, and the others followed her example. Soon they had built up a stately pile with enough wood as a reserve. The first flames were hardly lit when the amphibious crafts appeared with tents, beds and everything they would need for the first night in their new home. All the kitchen equipment came also, packed in large boxes. The residential tents were quickly set up and also the camp beds, tables and chairs.

By evening, everyone was busy making the temporary dwellings habitable, while Celeste, Jarod and Rose set up the kitchen and prepared dinner. They cooked a simple but nutritious and very tasty dish consisting of fried grains, vegetables, salad and sweet fruit. When it got dark, everyone was sitting around the big fire enjoying the hot meal. “How long do you think it will take for us to have houses to live in?” Joana felt a bit of forlornness rising within herself.

“Oh, this is going to happen much faster than you expect,” reassured Jarod, who had caught her mind. “You'll also have the hydromobiles, and it will take just a couple of hours either over the water or overland to drive into the city if you need anything. They are faster than the barge. So, it's not really far.”

“What if we need help? There are no phones here and no internet,” Joana continued to ask.

“You either send us thoughts, or you beat the big drum you will find in your luggage, in a certain rhythm. We will definitely hear that and then we'll be with you in no time. No one is alone here, Joana, even if we don't all live in the immediate vicinity. We are, nevertheless, mentally and emotionally connected. You'll soon notice that. Your mind is only too restless to realise it. Therefore, we recommend that you meditate at least thirty minutes a day from now on and let some of your activities become meditation or silent prayer. You'll see, it's all very simple.”

Joana was only halfway reassured, but she decided to let the matter go and get on her way and relax.

“A good decision.” Celeste smiled at her kindly.

“I still have to get used to that.” Joana laughed.

“It's just a sophisticated way of communicating,” Celeste explained. “I'm sure that once you have adjusted to it, you'll appreciate it. It makes a lot of things easier and it's a good feeling to know that everyone is honest with each other. There are no lies here.”

“I like that.” Tom threw some more wood on the fire. “I've always dreamed of such a way of communicating.”

Then it was time to go to sleep and everyone retreated to their temporary dwellings.



In the coming months, they began to build the first houses out of straw and clay and since every week other helpers came from the city, who at the same time brought the necessary building material, the new village was in fact created amazingly fast. No house looked like the other, but they had one thing in common, their round and oval shapes. The houses were blue, pink, orange, red, green and white and painted with soft natural tones. They huddled perfectly in the landscape in terms of colour and of their architecture.

Joana, to Tom's disappointment, had insisted on having a small house of her own. It was close to Tom's home, which was bigger and also had room for Archie and guests.

Tom's house was sea blue, while Joana's had the colour of a ripe apricot. Joana was still amazed at how easily the construction had taken place. She was infinitely happy in her new home and immensely grateful for it. Her house was built in the shape of an oval.

It consisted of a large room that served as a living area with a small open kitchenette integrated into it. It also had a bathroom and a separate toilet. The bedroom was made in the shape of a circle on one of the short sides of the oval and connected to the living area by a dressing room. At the back of the house bloomed a beautiful garden, which was generously laid out and in which she had planted flowers, some small fruit trees and herbs. Her favourite tree was a lemon tree, which was already a little bigger than the other ones and already carrying some fruit. It was a gift from Celeste.

Tom's house was also an oval but had three bedrooms built in the same style as in Joana's home. His garden consisted of a large lawn area and a spacious pond with goldfish. Archie had planted trees around the garden because Tom had gladly accepted Joana's proposal to create the gardens in this way.

Each of the buildings had its individual character. The interior of the buildings was also quite different. Joana had chosen colours of dark red, gold, lemon-white and orange, while Tom had opted for shades of white, blue and green.

Both houses had large, round windows which played with light and colour, making them feel very much alive. The windows had a special glass that darkened by itself in strong sunlight. This prevented the rooms from heating up too much in the summer. The ceilings were relatively high, giving the rooms a majestic feel as well as good air circulation.

Tom had a fountain in his bathroom. The water flowed from there through the living area in an open channel, giving the rooms enough moisture and some cool freshness. The water was fed by a spring and was so clean that it served as drinking water at the same time. Joana had an Oleyon on her covered porch, which provided the entire house and garden with pleasant energy.

In all rooms, there were now large crystals, which were responsible for a permanent purification of the energies and would also provide heat in winter. They were placed to charge themselves through the sunlight and moonlight and got purified by a saltwater shower, meditation and the power of thought.

"You know, at first I found it really stupid that we don't live in one house," Tom remarked one evening as they sat on Joana's veranda enjoying the silence of the garden.

"But now I like this solution very much. Everyone still has their own kingdom and we can visit each other. This is much more exciting, interesting and at the same time much more relaxing. I notice more and more how good it is for me to have this freedom as well."

"We are so connected that if we lived together under one roof, we would entirely merge. I don't think that would be good for our relationship. A love like ours needs freedom for individual development and air to breathe," Joana replied.

"You're right, my sweetheart." Tom kissed her hand. "Something I particularly appreciate about you is your wisdom and prudence. It's fun to learn from you and your presence continues to be a blessing for me and a balm to my soul. You have lit a fire in my heart that will never extinguish again." He kissed her on the neck. "And I never dreamed that the physical union with a woman could be so uplifting and transformational. Our love life alone has turned me into another human being, or should I say a different

man.”

“That sounds exciting, tell me more about it,” encouraged Joana and looked at Tom fondly.

“It's not easy to explain, but from the first moment we indulged in each other, my sexuality and also my understanding of masculinity has slowly but steadily changed. When we sleep together, my orgasm takes place in my heart and soul and I feel like I'm one with you. It's more of an imploding into a blessed, shared pulsation and has nothing to do with the sex I knew before. Physical love has turned into something completely different. And it gets even better. Instead of sexual desire, there is devotion and adoration in me now and this is something absolutely new to me. It's a sacred feeling and, as I said, very uplifting. I can't think of any other word for this. My idea of being a man, too, has changed significantly.

“I used to always assume men had to be strong and have a solution for everything. Men must conquer the world and be potent in every situation of life. I've often felt guilty lying next to Lisa and just lacking energy for our love life. She never complained, but I know she suffered as a result. Focusing on my profession, I got exhausted in such a way that there was little room for others and I defined myself by my success. I thought I was a happy man. Today I can see, it was living under very limiting conditions that took a huge toll on me. That life wasn't truly fulfilled, even if I enjoyed it and loved my family and everything that had to do with it.

“Honestly, I couldn't go back into that life. With the construction of the village here and with you by my side, I feel so fulfilled and completely free for the first time in life. There are no more demands, only love, acceptance and an infinite number of creative possibilities. I enjoy finally living out my creativity and going through the world with an open heart.”

Tom stopped. Feelings of deep love flooded him and he felt an immense tenderness for his companion.

Joana put her left hand on his heart. “You built such a wonderful home for me,” she responded with gratitude and appreciation.

“It's so awesome to have you by my side and see how you thrive. You make my heart cheer and my soul sing its most beautiful and pure song. I don't know if you've realised it yet, but you're the builder of Avalon. You are creating the place that gives my soul the home she wanted here on Earth. Your respect and love make me shine and give me a new dignity. Thank you so much, sweetheart. Without you, I could only accomplish my mission half

as well.”

“Let's go inside,” Tom whispered. “I would like to feel you completely”



Katie and Bashan were living in a house on the edge of the forest that looked like a cathedral. It was painted bright white and had dark blue window frames set off with gold. They had chosen to have a shared bedroom and had a children's room and a guest room too.

The living area was also decorated with white, dark blue and gold colour. Katie had lots of plants in the house and in the part that was built like a tower, there bubbled a big Oleyon.

She was heavily pregnant by now, but still felt comfortable and fit. Her tall, slender body had barely changed except for a small ball in front of her stomach.

Bashan was by her side almost day and night and couldn't wait for Ivy's birth. He had made a cradle with his own hands, painted the children's room light blue and laid out a garden with lots of flowers and small trees.

The day Ivy was born began with a storm. Katie had already had a restless night as the labour pains set in. Bashan immediately ran up to Rose, who occupied a semi-detached house with Piet in the other half. Piet and Rose had become close friends and shared a garden. They were very happy with this solution.

Rose grabbed her doctor's bag and followed Bashan, who, like a little boy, hopped up and down next to her excitedly. Storm clouds raced across the sky and a strong wind swept through the village. But it wasn't cold as now and then, the sun beamed through the cracks in the cloud cover. There was something mystical about it. The light conditions were a mixture of grey, pink, gold and white.

Rose examined Katie. “It's going to take at least another six hours,” she estimated. “Please prepare everything, Bashan. When the contractions come every five minutes, let me know.”

When Rose had left, Katie asked, “Can you please get Joana? I would be glad if she stayed with us today.”

“Sure!” Bashan was relieved. He already felt overwhelmed with the situation and was so out of order he couldn't grasp a clear thought. He ran off immediately and was back after ten minutes.

“She’s coming right away,” he shouted. “And then she’ll stay until Ivy is born.”

“That’s good,” Katie groaned loudly. A contraction convulsed her body. “I didn’t think it would be so painful,” she whined.

Bashan knelt next to her and felt completely helpless. He was quite pale.

Katie had to laugh. “It’s just a birth, my heart.” She tried to calm him down. “All women say that once the baby is there, all the pain is forgotten. I suggest we just believe that now. Can you make me some tea?”

Bashan jumped up and disappeared into the kitchen. He soon came back with a steaming cup. He helped Katie so she could sit up. She sipped the hot liquid slowly. By the time she had emptied the cup, Joana was already standing in the room.

“Hi sweetness, how are you?” She greeted Katie with glowing eyes.

“Thank you, couldn’t be better.” Katie smiled bravely.

“I think it’s best to prepare everything, so when the time comes all we’ll have to do is boil the water,” Joana suggested. She got busy in the kitchen.

“I’m glad she’s here,” Katie admitted.

“At least she’s still able to think straight,” stated Bashan.

“So am I.” Katie laughed. “I just don’t want to get up anymore.” And again, the labour pains gripped her body.

After a while, Joana came back. “Everything’s ready,” she announced contentedly. “Ivy can come. I’m so excited to see what she looks like.”

Bashan and Joana got comfortable and entertained Katie as well as possible. The contractions gradually came at ever shorter intervals. When they had arrived at five minutes,

Bashan headed out for Rose. No sooner had he left the house when Katie had the next one. “I think it’s happening now,” she gasped.

Joana ran into the kitchen to heat the water. She then rushed back to Katie. “Please come quickly,” she prayed quietly.

Katie’s moans grew louder. She already was in severe pain. “It’s coming, it’s coming,” she yelled between two contractions.

Joana had taken away the duvet and supported Katie as best she could. Eventually, she squatted between her legs and then she saw the little head.

“There she is.” Joana suppressed a cry of rapture. “She’ll be out in a minute.”

After another heavy contraction, the whole little body came to light. Joana held Ivy as she left the birth canal. As soon as she was born, Joana gently wiped her mouth and nose and carefully placed her on Katie’s belly. Then she tenderly covered the tiny new earthly citizen with a warm blanket.

Ivy was relaxed and calm, breathing deeply and evenly. She looked at her mother from iris-blue eyes, which seemed to be coming from another sphere.

It was an indescribable moment. Joana could perceive that the room was filled with light and angelic beings, who were already at her side as her spirit guides from birth on. She was deeply touched and sat quite still next to Katie on the bed.

“She is so wonderful,” the proud mother whispered in love and completely exhausted.

Joana just nodded. At that moment, Bashan rushed into the room, followed by Rose.

“Oh my god.” He fell to his knees beside the bed and stroked Katie and Ivy in complete rapture.

Then Katie contracted again.

“This is the afterbirth.” Rose helped move the bloody mass out of Katie’s body and into a bowl. “Do you want to cut through the umbilical cord?” she offered Bashan. He reached reverently to the scissors she held up to him and carefully severed the cord. “Welcome to life, my little darling.” Tears of joy were running across his face.

Rose took care of the umbilical cord and then carefully picked up Ivy to wash her. When all blood and all the tallow was wiped off, she examined the baby, wrapped it in a soft, white blanket and carefully gave her back to her mother.

She then checked on Katie, who had weathered the birth very well.

“Everything is fine,” she expressed contentedly. “You can all rest now.”

Bashan brought another chair for Rose and then they all drank a hot tea that Joana had brewed. The room was still filled with golden light and Katie as well as Bashan seemed to float on the ceiling in total happiness.

Joana enjoyed the situation to the fullest and was infinitely grateful that everything had gone so well. As they merrily sat together, Tom silently stuck his head through the door. Joana waved him in.

"It's all good," she beamed.

"Wonderful." Tom stepped in.

"Then I can congratulate." He kissed Katie on the cheek and stroked Ivy over her head, which was covered with light red hair. "Hello little fire head," he greeted the newborn.

Ivy was still calm. She seemed to rest from the rigours of childbirth and had her eyes closed.

"I think it's time we left the young family to their own devices," Rose finally stated and stood up. She examined Ivy one more time and also took another look at Katie. "I would say you can safely go to sleep. Ivy will let you know when she's hungry and then you allow her to drink until she stops by herself," she instructed the young mother.

Joana and Tom said goodbye as well.

"See you tomorrow." Katie smiled happily.



As they stepped outside, Joana found in surprise that the weather had changed. There was the most beautiful sunshine, which bathed everything in the warm evening light. "Let's go to the beach," Joana suggested. The dogs, who had been patiently waiting for them, jumped around them exuberantly.

Puschel lived with Tom whilst Archie attended school in the city and spent only the weekends in Avalon. When they arrived at the beach, they experienced one of the most romantic sunsets imaginable. The sun coloured the whole ocean in golden light. Even the sandy beach appeared golden.

"Have you seen anything like this before?" Joana was mesmerised.

"Yes," Tom reasoned to her surprise. "In my dreams."

It was still pleasantly warm. They undressed and bathed in this splendour of beauty, swam out far and enjoyed the cool water.

Suddenly, Joana felt something touch her leg. She screamed in horror, but then she started laughing. Right in front of her, a dolphin jumped out of the water and performed the most beautiful feats.

"This is Shana," she shouted to Tom and then more and more dolphins joined, so they ended up swimming amongst a school of these adorable beings that accompanied them almost to the shore.

“Did you hear what they said?” Joana asked Tom as they lay next to each other naked in the sand.

“Unfortunately, not.” Tom stared into her magical eyes. “What was it?”

“I’ll tell you that when the time is right.”

Joana stroked gently over Tom's body with her fingertips. His thinking was abruptly suspended. The only thing he could still perceive and feel was his love for Joana. He gave himself entirely to these feelings. They loved each other to the rhythm of the waves and became one with the entire universe. While they lay closely together after a small eternity, the full moon stood brightly in the sky, shining a soft, silver light on everything.

After resting a bit, they jumped into the sea again and swam following the moonbeam on the surface of the water. Back on the shore, they again surrendered to physical union. When they later stood dressed on the shore, the first daylight dawned on the horizon. They made their way home, accompanied by the dogs, and prepared an extensive breakfast. Neither were tired in the slightest and they once again felt refreshed and full of energy.



After breakfast, Joana went to visit Katie. Tom strolled to the assembly, which he had been building in the heart of the village for a while, a large hall which was the shape of a shell and would be used for meditations, gatherings and cultural events. The centre of the village consisted of a large open square, lined with some buildings.

One of the buildings was already finished. It was the community house that, in addition to rooms for smaller gatherings and guest rooms, housed the communal kitchen. Here, three meals were offered a day where everyone could eat as much as they wanted. There were three female cooks and three male cooks who shared the services. Also, each villager helped in the kitchen for two hours a week. This way everyone was well catered for in culinary terms and had time to dedicate themselves to building the village and growing food. These activities have been at the forefront since their arrival.

The villagers had agreed to make sure that everyone had a house to live in and that the communal buildings were completed as the priority. After that, the goal was to maintain and optimise community care, while also having the time and space for their personal interests. The time flew by and many months had passed since they arrived in Avalon. By the day Ivy was born, the accommodation buildings were already all built and the ‘*Shell*’ as everyone

affectionately called the hall, was nearing completion. The farming team had created many fields, vegetable gardens and an edible forest where fruit and nut trees, berry bushes and some vegetables grew.

Everything thrived magnificently and the fine food from their first harvest had already been prepared in the kitchen. Twenty more people from the city had joined them. Some of these were experienced gardeners who had brought plants and seeds and incredible knowledge. Because the climate was mild, food could be grown all year round. It was almost stunning to watch how quickly the village took shape.



Three weeks after Ivy's birth, the *Shell* was completed and opened officially with a great ceremony and feast. Many guests had come from the city to take part in this celebration. Jarod and Celeste were among them and they had brought Archie and Mariah. Everyone enjoyed the event and the beauty of the construction, in which musicians gave their first concert. Mariah had the honour of inaugurating the grand piano. The acoustics were terrific.

The day after the festivities, Celeste took Joana by the arm. "Come along. We have a little surprise for you."

Joana curiously followed her outside. Celeste walked through the garden toward a meadow bordering Joana's property. Once they got there, Joana was speechless. She stared adoringly at two ponies that grazed peacefully there.

"We brought them with us as a gift for you." Celeste smiled. "Someone told us that having ponies has always been your heart's desire and these two here need a new home. Can you imagine taking them under your care?"

"Oh yes!" Joana was already with the two animals and welcomed them. She held her hand under their nostrils so that they could absorb her scent.

"The little one is called Yogi and the name of this young lady here is Ashanti."

Yogi was a really tiny pony, only as big as Sina, who made friends with the two of them straight away. He had a long white mane, a white tail and his fur was golden, so it shone in the sun. The other pony was considerably larger. It was a mare whose fur was the colour of dark sand, while her luscious mane and full tail were almost black, carrying a red shimmer.

Joana was completely enchanted. "Can I ride her?" she wanted to know.

"For sure," Celeste replied. "She will let you know when she's ready for it and what she likes. If you treat her well, which I assume you will, she will

safely carry you everywhere. The little one is used to running as a hand horse. He will be happy to follow you, too. We don't have fences around the meadows here. If the animals agree with you as their new guardian, they will voluntarily stay near you and this meadow here with the trees is big enough for them. All you have to do is build a shelter for them for the cold season. They have water in abundance.” Celeste pointed to the small creek which gently rippled its way through the juicy grass.

“Where do they come from and why do they need a new home?” Joana inquired.

“They have lived with an old woman who has come to the conclusion that someone younger can better care for them. We then got in touch with the animals and told them about you. They agreed to get to know you. And as it stands, they want to stay with you.”

“What a wonderful gift.” Joana hugged the two ponies intimately.

To take Yogi in her arms, she had to kneel.

“Welcome to my life, you beautiful angels.” She patted the two warmly, already loving them to the moon and back.

Tom watched the proceedings from afar and was delighted, as he could see how happy Joana was. It had been him who had told Celeste how much Joana loved ponies.

“Please let the old lady know that I am incredibly grateful for this gift and that the ponies will have the best home you can imagine,” Joana asked Celeste.

“I’ll do that.” Celeste turned. “It’s time for Jarod and me to head back to town. Archie and Mariah will stay here for a few more days. Archie hasn’t said anything yet, but he too has news for you.”

They left the ponies. Joana and the dogs escorted Celeste and Jarod to the village exit where a hydromobile was waiting for them. Then Joana went in search of Tom. She found him in his garden along with Archie and Mariah.

“Have you seen my ponies?” she gushed.

Tom laughed. “Yes, my sweetheart and we are glad for you. I was hoping to give you some joy, and it looks like it succeeded.”

“Then I owe you the ponies?” Joana hugged Tom gratefully and kissed him tenderly.

“Me and Archie.” Tom laughed. “He met the old lady and told me about it.

I then gave Celeste the hint, and it worked out. They're here.”

Joana kissed Archie on the cheek. “Thank you, thank you. You don't even know how happy you made me,” she shouted exuberantly.

Archie looked expectantly around. “There is something else that will surely please you. I was just waiting for the right moment to show it to you.” He rolled the pants up above his amputated leg and Joana and Tom screamed loudly.

“That's unfathomable!” Tom had jumped up and couldn't calm down at all. Archie's leg had actually started to regrow and he already had a knee again. Tom was beside himself with joy. “I can't believe it, I can't believe it, oh my God. How did you do that, Archie?” He sat down on the floor in front of Archie and touched the new knee in disbelief. “Does it hurt?”

“Not at the moment,” Archie reported. “But it's murderous pain in the phases where it regrows and the tissue reforms. What you see here has come about in the last two months. I haven't told you earlier because I first wanted to watch how it went.”

“Well, tell us how did you do it?” Joana was fully perplexed too.

“First, Mariah had given me the herbal potion from the island which I rubbed into my leg for a long time. In addition, I diluted the healing water she had brought back from the time she disappeared with spring water and drank a glass of it every day and also applied a few drops on my leg. Then my teachers have given me certain healing codes and prayers, which I apply daily and say out loud. I use the codes together with special healing gestures. All of this together, and my firm belief that it is possible, made it happen. Isn't that wonderful?”

“Fabulous,” Joana and Tom confirmed together.

“Now, it's enough to use my mental imagination, the healing codes and gestures to keep the healing progressing,” Archie proudly concluded.

Tom took Mariah's hand and kissed her. “We will be eternally grateful to you, my dear. What you did for Archie is a miracle.”

Mariah laughed joyfully. “It's a normal healing process, and he did most of it himself,” she gave back modestly. “I only provided the healing water and herbs. That wasn't much.”

“Without your help, the healing wouldn't have started yet.” Archie kissed Mariah on the mouth. “You are my guardian angel.” He spoke tenderly. “And

soon we will run through the sand together again.”

He looked so happy while saying this that Joana had tears in her eyes.

Tom lacked the words. He just couldn't believe it. Something had happened here that, in his understanding, could not happen at all and at the same time there was nothing better than this miracle. He sat pressing Joana's hand as if he desperately needed a safe hold.

Archie gazed at him lovingly.

“Do you understand now why it's so important for me to attend this school?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tom whispered. “It's just so hard for me to let you go.”

“I know.”

Archie seemed so wise and mature that Joana could only be amazed. This was no longer the little boy she had met at the start of the trip. This was a young man who had a pearl of wisdom and powers that were out of this world.

That's what Tom felt, too. He smiled at Archie and remarked, “My God, you are much further along than I will ever be.”

Archie laughed. “I am glad that you can see that. Then you will surely make out why I can no longer listen to you but must follow my own guidance.”

Tom nodded reluctantly. It hurt him to feel he had to let go of Archie even more.

Archie patted him on the shoulder. “Don't worry, Tom. I'm safe and protected and I know what I'm doing.”

Tom swallowed. “Give me a bit more time to get used to it,” he asked.



The day had passed as if in a second and it was time for dinner. The four made their way to the communal house. As the weather was warm, the windows of the dining room were open and a tantalising scent was already blowing towards them.

“There's something fried.” Mariah was delighted. “I like that the most.”

As they entered the room, almost everyone else was gathered. They took each other by the hand and formed a circle. This ritual was performed at lunchtime and in the evening. After the circle was complete, the chefs explained what

they had cooked. That was followed by a minute of silence that served to honour the work of the cooks and to thank Mother Nature for providing for them all so well. Joana loved the ritual. It was soothing and salutary to express appreciation and gratitude in this way.

Today there were fresh, fried mushrooms, vegetables, potatoes and mixed salad with various dressings to choose from. It was delicious and everyone had become accustomed to the vegan diet by now. Most certainly couldn't imagine eating animal products anymore. They loved the light and buzzing energy their new diet gave them and felt more powerful and stronger than ever.

When Joana looked around, she only gazed into healthy, shining faces and many appeared distinctly rejuvenated. When they were almost done eating, Katie and Bashan joined them. They had been delayed because Ivy had slept for too long.

The two sat down with Joana, Tom, Archie and Mariah. Joana immediately reported about Archie's leg. Bashan and Katie could hardly believe it, either. The whole thing culminated in the entire village surrounding Archie and everybody surveying the regrown knee in amazement. The evening ended in a joyful get-together, many only going home to sleep when it was well past midnight. Tom and Joana were one of the last to leave.

On the way to Tom's house, the weather changed all of a sudden. An icy wind swept through the streets, which was very unusual for this time of year and huge, dark clouds piled up in the sky.

"This reminds me of the time on the ship." Joana shuddered.

"Me too." Tom protectively put his arm around her shoulders. "But luckily this time we're on land and safe." He had to raise his voice a bit already because the wind was getting louder and louder.

They were glad when they reached home. "I should look for the ponies." Joana was concerned and restless.

"No way!" Tom decided energetically, although it normally wasn't his style to contradict her. "Let's go together tomorrow morning," he suggested. "Now in the dark you really can't do anything for them."

"I know you're right," Joana consented. "But I'm worried about them."

"It's only a few hours, then it gets bright. Please wait for the dawn," asked Tom.

Joana agreed for the moment. It was tempting to cuddle up to him in bed and leave the world to fend for itself. Archie had already disappeared into his room and Mariah had made herself comfortable in the guest room.

"I'll look in again on Archie." Tom made up his mind. "Will be back soon." Joana nodded and started undressing. Her lover quietly shut the door.



He then knocked on his son's.

"You can come in, Tom, I'm still awake," Archie invited him.

"How did you know it was me?" Tom was flabbergasted. "Mariah's knock sounds different and Joana wouldn't visit me around this time, at least not if nothing out of the ordinary was going on," Archie let him know.

"All right." Tom had to laugh. He loved the direct nature of his son. "Are you doing well?" he asked tenderly.

"Oh yes," Archie replied happily. "I'm missing Mariah. But we agreed that she sleeps in the guest room and we will stick to that when we sleep here."

"Do you sometimes stay together overnight when you're in town?" Tom inquired candidly.

"No, that's not allowed, but we meet during the day and in the evening as often as we can." Archie turned red to the tips of the hair.

"Are you already sleeping with each other?" This time it was Tom who was direct.

Archie blushed even more. "Dad!" he said, falling back into the childish address with the embarrassment.

"So, do you do it or don't you?" Tom insisted on an answer.

"We know what we need to do so that Mariah doesn't get pregnant in case you mean that." Archie was still reacting evasively.

Now Tom was completely gobsmacked for the second time that day. He hadn't expected that.

What followed was an intimate conversation between father and son, in which not only Archie answered Tom's questions, but vice versa. Archie listened intently to Tom who was delighted after the initial shock at bringing some secrets of physical love closer to his son.

The conversation with Archie had taken longer than Tom had thought. By the time he got back to his bedroom, it was already nearly dawn. He didn't turn on a light so as not to wake Joana and quietly undressed in the dark. Then he carefully slipped into bed but found it cold and empty. It was only now that he noticed that Sina had also disappeared.

“Damn,” Tom swore. “I should have known.”



Joana had been on alert for a long time, listening to the wind. The storm became more and more intense and had turned into a hurricane in no time. She couldn't endure it anymore and had finally stood up, got dressed and quietly left the house. She was aware that Tom wouldn't have let her go, but she had to look after the ponies. Barely had she stepped outside the door when she was almost knocked over by the wind. She looked worriedly at Sina, yet she fought her way forward bravely and seemed to have more grip with her four paws than herself. When they arrived at the pasture behind Joana's house, it was empty.

The ponies were gone! The wind howled and had already torn over some trees. Otherwise, not much could be seen, which was due to the darkness, but also to the dust and leaves that were swirling through the air.

Joana wondered about herself. She used to have a terrible fear in such situations, but since her night in the woods, these emotions had simply fallen away. Right next to them, another tree crashed down and she could feel the adrenaline shooting into her body. Still, she felt protected and strong. She took Sina on a leash to make sure nothing happened to her. “You have to help me,” she whispered in her ear. “You can find them.”

They fought their way forward and Joana saw no option but to trust her dog. She knew her own senses weren't enough to locate the ponies in this disaster. Sina confidently ran in front of her, sniffing at the ground once in a while, but she seemed more to follow an inner compass.

“Don't worry.” She suddenly heard a voice in her head and knew immediately that it was Sina. As if for confirmation, the dog looked at her. Joana loved her blue eyes. Then they went on and on.

It had to be a few hours. Sina had led her to an area she had never been before. Visibility was slowly getting better, and the storm had subsided a bit. Joana was exhausted and doubted if they would find the ponies. She knew Tom would be very worried and would be looking for her, but she couldn't

bring herself to turn back.

The terrain was rocky and slightly rugged. Between the rocks grew small trees, shrubs and grass. Just as Joana was considering whether they should give up after all, she heard a neighing. It came from a rock formation not far away. Joana and Sina ran off. In a valley they saw Ashanti standing. She seemed unscathed, but Yogi was nowhere to be seen. Joana ran even faster. Before she reached the mare, she slowed her pace so as not to scare her. Joana took a deep breath and calmly walked the last few metres towards the pony, while at the same time making soothing sounds. Ashanti pawed with the front leg.

“He's trapped.” Joana heard another voice in her head. “You have to help him.” Joana looked around. She knew the message came from Ashanti.

And suddenly she saw Yogi. He was jammed between two boulders. A tree had fallen over right in front of the rocks and blocked the exit. Joana first examined Ashanti, who, to her great relief, was healthy and well. She then climbed over the tree to Yogi. He, too, was thankfully unhurt, but completely beside himself. He kept trying to escape his prison. Joana wanted to pull the tree aside, but it was too heavy. She knew she had to act quickly if she wanted to prevent her little friend from getting injured after all. She took a closer look at the tree. It wasn't very large, and the trunk was relatively close to the ground, so she began to break off the twigs as best she could, close to the trunk, thus making a breach.

Then she simply sawed off the thicker branches with her pocket knife, which she always carried with her. No sooner was the gap big enough than Yogi jumped out of his dungeon with a huge leap. It looked like he was flying. Arriving on the other side, he shook and galloped, as quickly as he possibly could, to Ashanti, who excitedly nuzzled him. Joana wiped the sweat off her forehead and looked around her as it had become daylight.

She sat down, leaning her back against one of the rocks, and closed her eyes. She knew the ponies wouldn't run away, and she desperately needed a little break to draw strength for the journey back.



When she opened her eyes again after a while, the sun stood high in the sky. She must have fallen asleep. Joana jumped up. Sina had kept watch next to her and the ponies grazed peacefully some distance away. Not far from her spot, a spring gushed from one of the rocks. Joana quenched her thirst and Sina drank greedily too.

The storm had completely ceased, and it was pleasantly warm. Joana took Sina's leash, knotted the two ends together and then placed it around Ashanti's neck. She led her to a rock and climbed on her back. "Can you please carry me home?" she asked kindly but surely.

Ashanti was quite calm and relaxed as she mounted. She was easily steered by weight shifts and the leash around her neck. It was simple to make their way back. Sina and Yogi followed them. Despite the destruction wrought by the hurricane and the many fallen trees which she had to ride around, Joana enjoyed sitting on Ashanti's back to the fullest. The mare ran contentedly in a medium-fast stride and responded to the finest commands. Joana had always imagined it to be this way. She had ridden for many years in her childhood and had always dreamed of a horse of her own that she could ride in such a way.

It took them about two hours to see the range of hills surrounding Avalon. Joana urged Ashanti to trot, and they were now quickly approaching the ridge. When they arrived at the top of the crest, Joana stopped, shocked. Her breath halted and tears poured from her eyes. The storm had devastated the whole village. Some of the houses were destroyed by fallen trees and various roofs were uncovered. The fields and vegetable gardens were just a muddy area. The heavy rain had destroyed the entire harvest in one night. "Now I know why you ran away," she spoke in a brittle voice to the ponies.

She rode slowly down the slope and towards the centre. When she got there everyone was busy clearing up.

Mariah rushed towards her. "Where were you?" she asked reproachfully. "We've been looking for you everywhere and Tom is still on the road. He is quite sick with worry."

"I had to save the ponies," Joana replied kindly but short. "Where's Tom?"

"He went to the beach again." Mariah pointed in the direction.

Joana immediately rode off again. "Will be back soon," she shouted while galloping fast, with Yogi and Sina still following her.



After a short time, they had arrived at the shore. Joana could see Tom from a long distance away. "Can you manage this?" she asked Ashanti and the mare nodded her head as if confirmed. Then she galloped in Tom's direction on her own. Joana's heart cheered. This horse was exactly what she had wished for.

Tom had spotted them and ran towards them. As she got closer to him, she slowed Ashanti to a trot. When he saw her sitting on the horse like that, all his anger disappeared within seconds.

"Never do anything like that again," he whispered while Joana jumped off the horse's back and straight into his arms.

"I'm truly sorry," Joana apologised. "But you wouldn't have let me go and the ponies needed me. Yogi was trapped between two rocks and I had to free him."

"I shouldn't have left you alone." Tom's body was shaking. He was so relieved to see Joana healthy in front of him that tears ran down his face.

"Our houses are fine," he let her know after a while and wiped his eyes. "But the village is in a dire state. You will probably understand how great my fear was for you."

Joana nodded. "Is anyone hurt?" she inquired.

"Yes," Tom recounted. "Rose, of all people, caught it. A tree has fallen on the part of her home where her bedroom is located and buried her underneath. I don't know anymore, but she's alive. I then ran off to look for you while the others freed her."

"Poor Rose!" Joana was deeply affected. "Let's quickly go to the village and see where we can help," she suggested.

Tom lifted her back onto her pony. "You've been out all night, aren't you tired?" he asked, lovingly.

"All's good," Joana countered as they set off. "Sometimes there are just more important things than resting."

Once in the village, Tom headed straight to Rose and Piet. Meanwhile, Joana took the ponies back to their pasture, which, except for a few overturned trees and large pools of water left behind by the rain, had thankfully been spared the devastation.

"I hope this time you'll stay here," she said in goodbye. "I can't look for you every day."

She went with Sina to Rose's house, which seemed badly damaged. Almost the entire half she inhabited had been destroyed by the tree. Tom had seen her coming and opened Piet's door.

"She's here," he let her know and Joana stepped in.

“How is she doing?” she inquired.

“Archie is with her. Her leg is broken and she has a few abrasions, but otherwise, she has remained healthy,” Tom informed her while they walked into Piet's living room.

Rose was lying on the sofa. She looked a little pale but was in quite good condition, except for her fractured leg. “Isn't this remarkable?” she greeted Joana. “Now it's Archie who takes care of my leg.”

“We've just learned how to secure broken bones with a splint,” Archie laughed.

“This is a great opportunity to practice it right away. But we should bring her to the city as soon as possible where there are true miracle doctors,” he added, a little more seriously.

The day after the hurricane was a sad day. In the evening, the villagers gathered in the community hall and took stock. Half of the newly built houses were destroyed or damaged and the entire harvest was swept away by the hurricane.

“We should head to the city tomorrow and find out what damage the storm did there,” Bashan suggested.

Everyone agreed.

“If it looks the same there as here, hard times have come to us.” He was deeply troubled. “But we will see, maybe everything is in good order there and we'll come back with food, new plants, seeds and building materials.”

The gathering didn't last long. They were too exhausted and just wanted to sleep.

The next day, a delegation left Avalon. They had made Rose comfortable on a stretcher and taken her to the barge. There was nothing to do for those left behind but to wait and start the clean-up. The days went by and nothing happened.



On a chilly morning, when Joana had just started to restore one of the ruined cornfields with some of the others, she winced violently. She intuitively knew immediately that Nik had left his body. It had now been almost a year since she last saw him.

Nik had had big plans. He had wanted to get a car fixed as he was fed up

with adventure and wanted to go home. When he inspected the vehicles left behind closer, he'd found that none of them was longer fit to drive. All the electricity had been short-circuited, burnt and was irreparable. Too late, he had realised he couldn't leave this place unless he walked.

But Nik hadn't wanted to risk that, because it would have meant having to live without alcohol for a while. Instead, he had stayed in the hotel where he had been dwelling all along and got more and more bedraggled. If one room had become too dirty for him, which took quite a long time, he had simply moved to the next one. He had fed off what he had found in the hotel and the shops.

Amazingly, he had survived for many months, but at some point, all the supplies had been used up. What remained was a liquor store, which he had not yet completely left empty. Nik was then quickly increasingly decayed and finally ended in delirium.

The moment Nik died, he thought of Joana and she could feel it. She could clearly perceive how the last earthly bond between them tore. Joana wasn't sad. She was relieved and glad that Nik's torment had finally come to an end and she hoped for him that he would find his peace.



"Nik is dead," she told Tom in the evening.

He looked at her in complete amazement. "How do you know?"

"I can just feel it," Joana simply replied.

"You never spoke of him again," Tom thoughtfully opined.

"There was nothing more to say about it," Joana whispered and a tear glistened in the corner of her eye.

Tom took her hand and kissed her. "I love you," he breathed in her ear. "And I will be eternally grateful to Nik for inviting you on this cruise."

"So will I." Joana leaned her head against his shoulder. They looked out the window together into the velvet blue night. "Do you remember our love night on the beach, the day Ivy was born?" Joana asked after they sat quietly together for a long time.

"How could I ever forget that? It was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life," Tom returned in a soft voice.

"Do you also remember that I asked you if you understood what the dolphins

said?"

"Yes, you wanted to tell me when the time was right for that." Tom tenderly kissed her on the cheek.

"That's now." Joana gave him her most bright smile. "The dolphins announced the arrival of a new Earth citizen!"

"What do you mean by that?" Tom looked at her, questioningly.

"I'm pregnant," Joana solemnly proclaimed. "It's going to be a girl and her name is Lucia. We created her by the sea the night of the full moon."

Tom jumped up, lifted Joana and twirled her around in circles. "This is the most beautiful and best news I have ever received in my life," he cheered from the bottom of his heart. Overwhelmed and breathless, they embraced.

They knew others would continue what they had just started. The road had been long. They had given infinitely much and there was still a long way to go, but they had found what their souls had longed for all their life ... Avalon.

**About the
Avalon
Community
and
Amie San**

Become a member of the Avalon Community!

Let's create an energy field together that makes true miracles happen.

The great thing about writing is that it allows me to build a real relationship with my readers!

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Welcome to the world of Avalon!

Amie San



Did you like the book?

You can make a decisive contribution to its success!

Reviews are the most important thing when it comes to raising awareness of a book and spreading it.

My vision is that people all over the world read the Avalon books and that they light a fire in their hearts that helps to make the world a place where living is worthwhile and loving togetherness is a high priority again.

The fifth dimension is not a fantasy. It is already contained in the quantum field and many are already living it, if only partially. So much more is possible and can become our reality in a relatively short time if we make a clear decision and take the appropriate steps.

If you liked the book, I would be very grateful if you would give it a few minutes of your precious time and write a review that will help make *The Light of Avalon* shine everywhere.

It would be really great if you uploaded the review on one of these portals or even on several.

Amazon, Lulu, Barnes & Noble, Kobo.

Thank you so much,

Amie San



For me, writing is magic

I have always had big dreams and the older I get, the more I am able to achieve them. For several years now I have been living near the ocean in Byron Bay, Australia.

I have lived in many places, but the Byron Shire is really something special. The warm weather, the picturesque landscape, the fantastic light conditions, the many spiritual, environmentally conscious and awakened people and the extraordinary animal world, all come very close to the spirit of Avalon. When I got here, I thought I am a little closer to heaven, and it is still like that today.

It has always been important to me to inspire and accompany people in their awakening process and in fulfilling their life's mission. In Germany I had my own practice for hypnotherapy and coaching and worked for large companies in the field of health management.

Since I've been living in Down Under, besides my main work as an author, I have specialized in supporting people to use their full potential and their special gifts to make their dreams come true. I'm a psychic and a palm reader and work with people all over the world.

One of my favourite projects is to build the Avalon Sanctuary and create a place where people, animals and nature live in harmony.

If you are interested in a private session or would like to talk to me, please contact me via my website at:

<https://www.amiesan.com>

Sincerely,

Amie San



The Avalon Novels

AMIE  SAN



THE LIGHT
OF
AVALON

A B R O K E N H E A R T

B O O K T W O

The Light of Avalon, Book 2

A broken Heart

What happens if you lose the most precious thing in life, take the blame, and can't forgive yourself?

A tragic event completely throws Tom off track and destroys his zest for life. His soul mate, Joana has no choice but to let go of her true love and trust that he will find his way back to her. Dark clouds obliterate their happiness. The past casts shadows and takes its toll. When Tom collapses, fights for his life, and loses all his memory, they get to know the legendary world of Agartha which is hidden in the Inner Earth and experience mind-blowing mysteries. In his most difficult hours, Tom gets unexpected support and Joana doesn't leave his side. Will they master this ordeal and manage to save him and their love?

A broken Heart is the second book of the romantic fantasy series *The Light of Avalon*. If you like deep and extraordinary love stories in a mystical world which are about life and death, then you will love this soulful and exciting novel.

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THE LIGHT
OF
AVALON

FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

BOOK THREE

The Light of Avalon, Book 3

Fight for Freedom

The New Earth is threatened by dark powers and her residents have no other choice but to stand up to them bravely.

In the effort to save Gaia, Joana suffers a severe loss that almost breaks her heart. But there is no time for grief. Joana and her friends know that they can't conventionally fight Gaia's takeover. It quickly becomes clear that they must enlist the assistance of their star siblings and draw upon everything they have learned over the past several years to master this huge challenge with the use of extraordinary measures. Will they be able to find a solution and protect their paradise?

Fight for Freedom is the third book of the romantic fantasy series *The Light of Avalon* and it is about nothing less than true mastery. If you like exciting stories in which people live their full potential and ally themselves with the inhabitants of other planets, then you will enjoy this novel.

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Acknowledgements

Without my amazing friend Pam Lob, who was the first one editing my books and my awesome editor Susan Keillor, these books wouldn't exist.

With my first language being German it was quite a challenge for me to translate them into English and Pam went through every page and sentence and transferred my often funny expressions into proper English, so people could understand, what I wanted to say. I can't thank her enough for her outstanding support and encouragement.

Susan was the one who checked all grammar, spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, readability, tone, consistency, clarity, verb tense and syntax. She also explained to me why she changed things and taught me a lot. I am very grateful for her support.

These wonderful ladies made it possible that you can now enjoy my stories about Avalon worldwide.

I hope you like them as much as we do.

Sincerely,

Amie San

