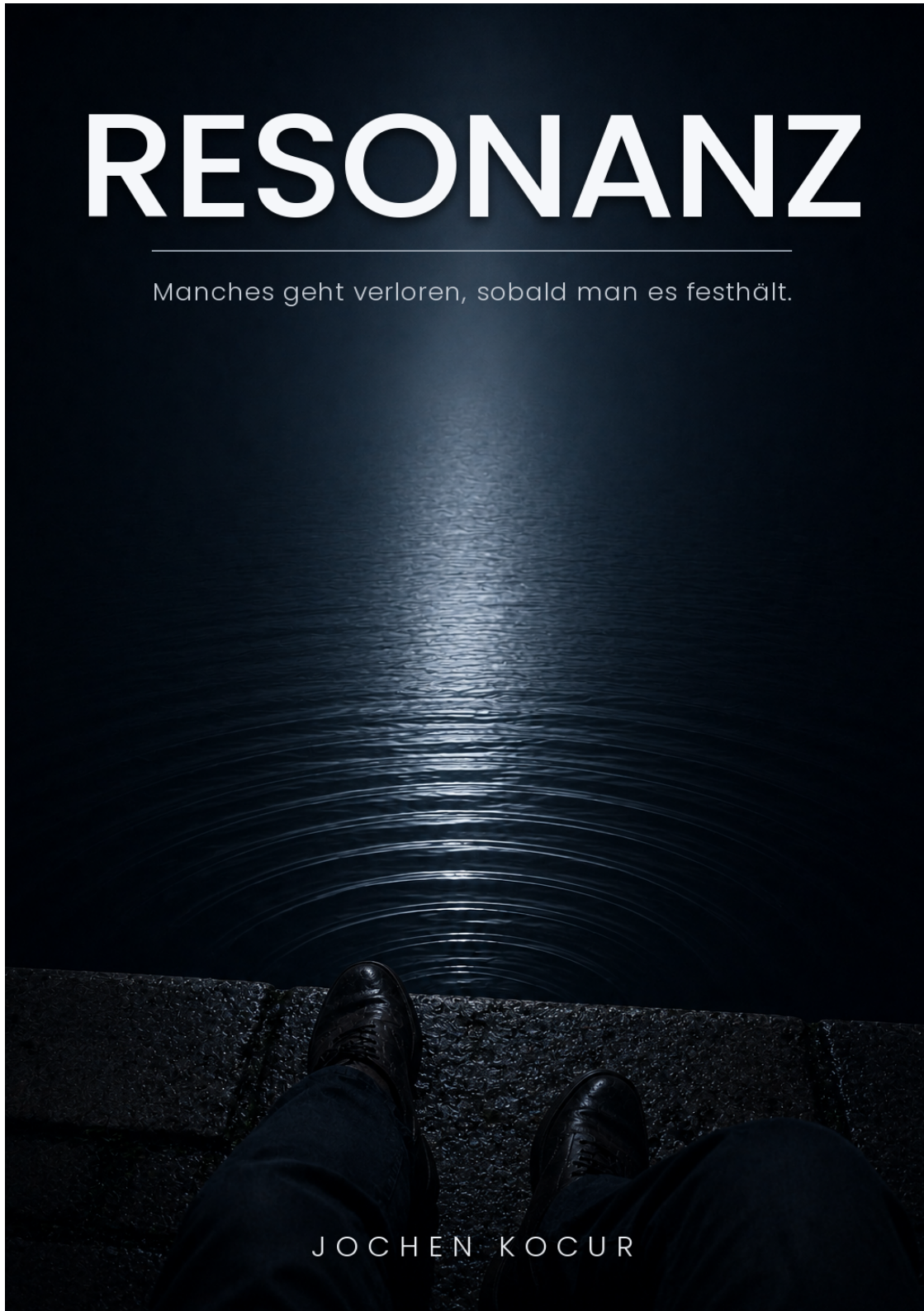


RESONANZ

Manches geht verloren, sobald man es festhält.



JOCHEN KOCUR

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Prologue

Lübeck, 1372

The water had been standing in the cellar for three days. Not deep—two fingers, perhaps—and it had not yet reached the sacks. That morning, Hinrik Falkner had laid additional planks across the low wooden supports and dragged the rye onto them. It would be enough, provided the Trave rose no further. He had no intention of relying on that.

Twelve sacks had to be carried upstairs. The day after tomorrow, they were to be taken to the harbour. A merchant had purchased the rye for a cog due to sail with the tide, calling first at Rostock. If the grain took on moisture before then, Hinrik would not only lose part of the cargo; he would also be held accountable for it.

He placed the lantern on a barrel, pulled the first sack from the planks and heaved it onto his shoulder. The linen was cold but dry, and as he climbed the first steps, he felt the weight all the way down into his hip. Beneath the load, the old staircase groaned deep within its joints. Hinrik knew the sound and shifted his footing without thinking.

Above him, Lübeck was alive. From the harbour on the Trave came the creaking of cogs between the houses. Rigging struck against masts, men called to one another across the water, iron-rimmed wheels rolled over the cobbles, and somewhere a barrel was being hauled across wooden boards.

Then a bell sounded.

A second answered from farther away, and for several breaths their voices hung over the alleys and warehouses, over the cranes beside the water and the ships on the Trave. Hinrik barely listened. He had known this rhythm since he was old enough to walk, just as he knew the smells carried through the city on the wind: tar and smoke, fish, wet rope,

grain and salt. On some days, there was something foreign among them—pepper, perhaps, or one of those spices from countries whose names Hinrik knew from cargo manifests, though he had never set foot upon their soil.

Upstairs, he lowered the sack onto the floorboards beside the wall, straightened and rubbed his shoulder.

Eleven more.

The second sack was heavier. The coarse linen underneath had already taken on damp, although the rye itself still seemed dry. Hinrik cursed beneath his breath, pulled the sack from the planks and needed a second attempt before he could work one arm far enough underneath to lift it onto his shoulder.

As he climbed the stairs again, he noticed nothing.

Only on his next descent, when he reached the final step into the cellar, did he see the light.

Something gleamed between the stones at the bottom of the wall, just above the water.

Hinrik stopped and took the lantern from the barrel. The mortar had crumbled from the joints in several places, and the water had left dark marks across the masonry, some old, others fresh. The house had stood long enough to have witnessed more floods than he had, and whenever the Trave rose, the water found its way through places that appeared dry and solid in summer.

He crouched down.

Silver, he thought, and the idea was so absurd that he almost laughed. Silver did not lie inside cellar walls, and certainly not in a Lübeck cellar belonging to the Falkners.

When he brought the lantern closer, the shimmer disappeared. He drew it back and thought he saw it again, though suddenly he was no longer certain. Wet stone, water and poor light could show a man many things if he stared at them long enough.

“Ole Narr.” — Old fool.

Hinrik muttered the words more to himself than to the room, returned the lantern to the barrel and took up the next sack. He carried it upstairs and, when he came back, forced himself not to look at the wall.

He placed the rye beside the other sacks, went down again and reached for the next one. This time, however, his hand remained resting on the coarse linen.

Something troubled him.

Hinrik knew silver. Every man in Lübeck who dealt in goods knew silver. He knew what a coin looked like beneath a poor lantern. He knew tin and lead, tarnished copper and iron that had lain in water until scarcely anything remained but rust.

What he had seen down there was none of those things.

He left the sack where it was, took the lantern and returned to the wall.

The gleam was still there.

Something had gathered inside a washed-out joint between two stones, no larger than a coin. It appeared liquid, yet did not lie like water, and its surface scarcely caught the flicker of the lantern.

Hinrik leaned closer.

A narrow glimmer lay within the joint, barely wider than a thread. When he raised the lantern, it vanished. Hinrik paused and lowered the light again.

The silver returned.

He moved the lantern slowly to one side. The gleam did not follow the light. It remained in the same place; only its outline changed.

Hinrik stepped closer.

Moisture, he thought. Mortar. Perhaps something in the stone.

He knew of no deposit that looked like this.

His free hand rose. A few finger-widths from the joint, he stopped. The air there felt cooler than in the rest of the cellar. Perhaps it was only the water behind the masonry.

Hinrik withdrew his hand.

The sacks could wait.

He took the stairs two at a time. Upstairs, his wife was sitting at the table. Dried roots, yarrow and a bundle of juniper lay before her. With a small knife, she was cutting a root into thin slices and placing them beside the mortar.

Hinrik stopped in the doorway.

Runa looked up, and although he searched for words, he could find none that would not have sounded foolish.

Something in the way he stood must have been enough for her. She laid the knife aside, rose and walked past him towards the cellar stairs. When she reached him, she placed a hand on his shoulder for a moment.

Hinrik felt the warmth of her fingers through the coarse linen of his shirt. His breathing steadied, and the tension that had settled between his shoulders during his last visit to the cellar eased a little.

Runa removed her hand and went down, slowly and deliberately, without hesitation.

Beneath her weight, the same staircase sounded different. From one of the middle steps came a high, drawn-out note from the old timber. It faded only when she lowered her foot to the next.

Hinrik remained at the top and watched the lantern light pass across her face as her gaze moved over the planks and sacks, across the shallow water and finally towards the wall. Then she saw it.

Hinrik did not notice the change in her face. He saw it in her right hand, which lifted slightly away from her body without reaching for anything.

He had seen her like this before: beside a feverish child, beside a woman whose labour had gone on too long, and once outside their house, hours before a storm swept in from the Baltic.

People came to Runa when herbs and experience could do more than waiting. Some came because of pain; others because a child would not sleep, because a cow refused to eat, or because Runa noticed things in the sky, in animals and in a person's behaviour that others passed without seeing.

From her mother, she had learned another word for it: *Völva*, an ancient Norse name for a seer and healer.

Hinrik had never asked how far back that line reached. She had told him only once that daughters received the gift from their mothers, and that it had always been so, since the beginning of time.

She had said nothing more, and Hinrik had learned that some questions were not to be asked twice.

Now she stood motionless in the water.

"Sühst du dat?" — Do you see it? Hinrik asked quietly.

Runa did not answer. She moved closer, until Hinrik reached instinctively for the banister.

"Nich anröhren." — Don't touch it.

She stopped in front of the joint. Her right hand rose a little, the fingers open, as though she were testing the air between herself and the wall.

At first, there was only the coolness of the cellar.

Then something changed.

It was not a draught. Runa would have recognised a draught. The sensation reached her fingertips first, moved slowly into her palm and from there continued up her arm. Her breathing deepened without her intending it to, and for a moment she became unusually aware of her own heartbeat.

Not faster. Nor stronger.

Only as though there were suddenly more space than before between one beat and the next.

Runa remained still.

A faint movement passed through the water around her shoes. A shallow ring separated from her feet and travelled between the planks. A moment later, a second followed, weaker than the first.

Hinrik was watching the joint.

Runa was watching her hand.

Neither of them noticed the rings.

By then, the sensation had reached her chest. Something within her body urged her to increase the distance between herself and the wall, yet it was not fear.

Runa knew fear.

She had held people through fever, stopped bleeding and witnessed births during which, at some point, everyone in the room had fallen silent.

This feeling was different.

It reminded her of the seconds before a violent storm, when the sea outside was still calm, yet something in the air already knew what force was approaching the coast.

She lowered her hand.

"Wat is dat?" — What is it? Hinrik asked.

Runa looked at the joint once more, then took the lantern from him. She raised it closer to the wall, slowly changed the angle and watched the silvery gleam grow fainter.

"Dat Licht." — The light, she said at last.

Hinrik descended another step.

"Licht?" — Light?

"Fuchtigheit in 'n Steen. Kalk, villicht Solt." — Damp in the stone. Mortar, perhaps salt.

Runa moved the lantern slightly to one side. The gleam was now barely visible.

“Mit Water dorvör süht manches anners ut, as dat is.” —
With water in front of it, many a thing looks different from what it is.

Hinrik studied the place. The explanation was unusual, but not impossible.

“Un dat Sülver?” — And the silver?

Runa held his gaze for a moment too long.

“Dor weer keen Sülver.” — There was no silver.

Hinrik did not entirely believe her, but he knew his wife well enough to understand that she would say no more. He went back down and carried the remaining rye upstairs. With the first sack, he looked towards the wall. With the second, he placed the lantern nearer the joint. At some point, he touched the stone with two fingers.

He found nothing but cold, damp mortar.

By the time the final sack lay upstairs, the light beyond the small windows had already grown flat. From the harbour came the voices of men finishing their work for the day, and outside, a heavy cart rolled through the alley while somewhere above the rooftops a bell struck the hour.

Lübeck had taken no notice of what had happened in the Falkners' cellar.

Hinrik washed his hands and did not speak of it again.

Neither did Runa.

That night, she awoke.

Hinrik lay beside her, his breathing deep and even. At first, Runa remained where she was and listened to the house: to the timber working in the beams, the wind passing over the roof tiles and the distant water against the quay.

Beneath those familiar sounds, she thought she could make out something else—a faint rhythm that was there for a moment, then vanished as soon as she concentrated on it.

She sat up and waited.

When it returned, she knew it lay below her.
Runa rose. She wore only the long linen shift in which she had slept, and when she reached for the lantern, she left her shoes behind. Hinrik did not stir.
She opened the door and went barefoot down the stairs.
On the final step, she stopped.
The cold of the cellar settled over her skin at once. The thin linen offered little protection, and when she placed one foot in the water, the cold bit all the way to her ankle.
Runa showed no reaction.
She lowered her other foot into the water and waited for her body to grow accustomed to it.
The water lay still between the planks.
In the same joint Hinrik had shown her that afternoon, the silvery gleam was visible once more.
Runa raised the lantern and altered its angle, just as she had done in front of Hinrik. She moved the light to the right, then lowered it until the shadow of the masonry passed across the spot.
The gleam remained.
She moved closer.
The cold water shifted around her bare feet, and at first there was nothing but the cellar, the smell of wet timber and mortar, and the warmth of the lantern in her hand.
Then the fine hairs on her forearms rose.
Runa stopped. She waited until her skin grew smooth again, then lifted her right hand.
Slowly, she extended her fingers towards the wall.
A ring travelled through the water from her feet.
Runa watched it. It moved between the planks, evenly and farther than the slight movement of her body should have carried it. She remained still until it disappeared into the darkness, then turned her attention back to the joint.
Her hand moved on.

This time, the sensation began in her fingertips. Neither warmth nor cold, but rather the absence of both. It settled into her palm and slowly travelled up her arm. At the same time, Runa realised that she could barely feel the water around her feet. Only moments before, the cold had bitten into her toes; now she knew only that she was standing there.

She could have withdrawn her hand.

Instead, she reduced the distance between herself and the wall.

A second ring separated from her feet. This time, she did not look down.

The closer her fingers came to the damp stone, the more her perception of the space began to change. Not the wall. Not the light.

The distance itself seemed to shift, as though there were less space between her hand and the stone than her eyes told her. Beneath her heartbeat, that other rhythm emerged—calm and perfectly even. With every beat it grew clearer, until Runa was no longer certain which of the two she was actually perceiving.

The hairs on her arms rose again.

This time, the reaction travelled farther: across her shoulders, up the back of her neck and beneath her hair. Her skin was cold, yet deep within her chest a warmth began to spread, slow and heavy, while her bare feet in the water lost all sense of temperature.

Her fingertips were now only a finger's breadth from the stone.

Runa moved closer.

Something changed within her body.

It was not like being startled. It came from somewhere deeper, faster than thought—a certainty without image or voice.

Her stomach tightened. The muscles in her legs tensed, and for a single moment she had the sense that she was not standing before a damp cellar wall, but at a boundary whose other side she could not see.

Her hand moved a little farther.

Then Runa tore it back.

The second ring broke against the planks.

All at once, the cold bit into her bare feet again. Runa drew in a sharp breath.

The water was water once more, the wall damp stone, and behind the lantern glass the flame shifted in the draught.

She stood motionless and looked at her hand.

Her fingers were not trembling.

But the hairs on her arms had still not fully settled.

Only after several breaths did she crouch down.

Her mother had taught her to observe things before they were given a name: the taste of the air before snow, the behaviour of birds before severe weather, the warmth of skin before fever came, and that brief pause in a person's gaze which sometimes revealed more than words.

Her mother had never promised that this would give her answers. Only that one had to wait until an observation repeated itself.

In the lantern light, the place appeared narrow, scarcely more than a fine silvery seam in the damp mortar.

Runa considered the wooden cup beside the barrel, then the iron fittings on the storage frames. Both seemed unsuitable, though she could not have said why.

Her gaze settled on the lantern, on the glass shielding the flame from the damp cellar air.

The next morning, she would obtain glass.

It was raining again when Hinrik left for the harbour.

Runa waited until he had disappeared at the end of the alley, then took her cloak and bought two small phials made of

thick glass, along with two corks and some pitch. One would have been enough, but her mother had taught her early never to entrust an unknown thing to a single vessel. She held the phials up to the light before putting them away. The glass was not clear. Small bubbles were trapped within it, and one of the phials was slightly crooked at the neck. It would suffice.

That evening, she returned to the cellar.

This time she wore shoes. She placed the lantern on one of the wooden supports and sat down before the joint.

The silvery seam was still there, narrow within the damp mortar, as though nothing had changed since the night before.

Runa took one of the phials and held it close to the wall. The glass was cold between her fingers. She waited for a while, turned the vessel, lowered its opening and watched the narrow place in the stone.

Nothing happened.

After some time, she set the phial beside her and placed her hands in her lap, between her thighs, as her mother had shown her while milking in winter.

Back then, Runa had barely been strong enough to carry the pail alone. Whenever her fingers grew stiff in the cold, her mother had looked at her and told her not to work against it. Warm your hands first.

Then continue.

Runa sat that way for a while, studying the joint.

She thought of her mother and of something else she had often said: an unknown thing had to be given time to reveal itself. Those who sought an explanation too soon often ended by seeing only what they had expected to find.

When warmth had returned to her fingers, Runa picked up the phial.

She enclosed the glass between both hands and slowly brought its opening towards the silvery seam without touching the wall.

Her breathing remained calm.

As she exhaled, her breath passed over her fingers and the cold glass, clouding it milky white before her mouth.

Something moved within the joint.

Runa raised her eyes.

At one point, the silvery seam had widened. Only slightly—scarcely more than the width of a hair.

She waited until the glass cleared again, then brought it a little closer.

With her next breath, the surface misted once more. This time, she saw the silvery edge begin to move slowly across the stone.

Runa stopped moving the phial.

She sat quietly before the wall and allowed her breath to pass over the glass, steadily, without breathing more forcefully or altering the distance.

With each breath, the silvery seam moved a little farther, until it reached the rim of the vessel and remained there for a moment.

Runa held perfectly still.

Only with her next exhalation did a narrow strand draw itself over the rim. It slid down the inside of the glass and gathered at the bottom of the phial.

Runa kept her eyes upon it.

She had touched nothing, pushed nothing, loosened nothing from the joint. Yet some of the silvery substance now lay within the glass.

She remembered her mother's hand upon her arm whenever, as a child, she had moved too quickly.

Do not grasp.

First see what a thing does.

Runa waited and continued to breathe.

The process repeated itself, slowly enough that between one movement and the next it was scarcely possible to tell whether anything was happening at all. The silvery seam grew narrower while a small quantity gathered at the bottom of the vessel.

The glass clouded beneath Runa's breath and cleared again, clouded and cleared once more, until the process became a quiet alternation that she eventually did nothing but watch. When no more came, she drew the phial back.

She held it against the lantern light and slowly turned it between her fingers. The silver moved across the bottom, heavier than water, yet fluid.

Runa placed the vessel beside her and took up the second phial.

Once again, she first rested her hands in her lap and waited until warmth had returned to her fingers. Then she brought the glass towards what remained of the silvery seam.

It took longer this time.

Only after her breath had clouded the glass several times did movement return to the joint.

Runa changed nothing. She remained seated, held the vessel and breathed until the last visible trace had slowly passed over the rim and into the second phial.

Afterwards, she sealed both vessels with their corks and secured them with pitch.

The first phial contained slightly more than the second.

Runa placed them side by side and studied them in the lantern light.

She did not know why it had worked.

And she did not try to give it a name.

Over the days that followed, life returned to normal—at least outwardly.

As agreed, the rye was taken to the harbour and loaded onto the cog bound first for Rostock. The Trave receded, the water withdrew from the cellars, and before long the alleys were once again filled chiefly with the smells of smoke, horses, fish and refuse from the market.

Hinrik had no reason to go down into the cellar again, and he did not mention the silver.

Runa was grateful for that.

She kept the two phials in a small wooden chest, hidden beneath linen cloths and dried herbs, in a place where her daughter ordinarily had no business looking.

On the third evening, mother and daughter sat together at the table.

Runa was sorting dried leaves while Liv struggled with a needle, attempting for what seemed the hundredth time to pass a thread through its eye.

She was eight years old and had the Falkners' pale blue eyes—the same eyes Runa had seen in the face of her own mother. Liv's long lashes sometimes made her appear more serious than she was, particularly when she was concentrating and drew her brow slightly together.

When the thread slipped past the eye for the fifth time, Runa pushed her herbs a little to one side and watched her daughter.

"Du beweegst de Nadel." — You're moving the needle.

Liv did not look up.

"Ik do dat nich." — I'm not.

"Doch." — You are.

The girl then held the needle demonstratively still and moved only the thread.

This time, she succeeded.

A satisfied smile appeared on her face, but it did not remain for long. Her attention suddenly shifted.

Runa watched as Liv looked past her, first towards the wall, then slowly along the shelf until her eyes came to rest on the small chest.

“Wat is dor?” — What is there? Runa asked.

Liv did not answer at once.

She seemed neither frightened nor surprised, but attentive, as though trying to perceive something lying just beyond the reach of her senses.

At last, she said that she did not know.

Runa followed her gaze. The chest stood closed in its place, the linen draped over it, and nothing on the outside suggested that it contained anything other than the items Runa kept for her work.

“Hest du wat sehn?” — Did you see something?

Liv shook her head.

“Worüm kiekst du denn dorhen?” — Then why are you looking over there?

The girl thought for a moment without taking her eyes from the chest.

“Wiel dor wat is.” — Because there is something there.

Runa kept her hands resting on the table.

“Wat schall dor sien?” — What is supposed to be there?

Now Liv looked at her mother, and her face held the peculiar incomprehension of a child who cannot understand why an adult is asking about something that is perfectly obvious.

“Dat, wat du nerrn funnen hest.” — The thing you found downstairs.

Runa felt the muscles in her neck tighten.

She asked Liv whether Hinrik had spoken to her about it or whether she had gone into the cellar herself, but the girl denied both.

She did not look as though she had been caught doing something wrong. There was no defiance in her gaze, nor any attempt to conceal the truth.

“Woher weetst du dat denn?” — Then how do you know?
Liv looked back at the needle between her fingers and seemed to consider for some time how to explain something that, to her, apparently required no explanation.

“Wiel dat di funnen hett.” — Because it found you.

At first, Runa said nothing.

She studied her daughter and tried to determine whether the words were merely a child’s fancy, or whether Liv had truly perceived something she herself did not understand.

The girl held her gaze for a while, then looked back towards the chest.

“Dörv ik dat sehn?” — May I see it?

“Nee.” — No.

“Worüm nich?” — Why not?

Runa had no simple answer.

She could have claimed that the silver was dangerous, but she did not know that. Nor could she say that it was harmless.

For years, people had come to her because she knew how to distinguish between experience, observation and fear.

Now her own daughter sat before her, and for the first time, that knowledge was not enough.

“Wiel ik nich weet, wat dat is.” — Because I don’t know what it is.

Liv accepted the answer without appearing convinced. She looked once more towards the chest, then back at her mother.

“Aver dat is nich böös.” — But it isn’t evil.

Runa ran her thumb along the edge of a dried leaf and remained silent.

She knew of things people feared merely because they were unfamiliar, and of others that appeared friendly and familiar until one came too close. She did not know to which kind

the silver belonged, and that troubled her more than anything she had seen in the cellar.

Hinrik came home late the following evening.

Liv heard him before Runa did, leapt from the bench and ran to the door before he had fully drawn back the bolt. He had barely placed one foot across the threshold when she threw herself at him. He caught her with one arm while trying to close the door behind him with the other.

"Vader, du büst laat." — Father, you're late.

Hinrik lifted her a little higher.

"Denn mutt ik mi woll verlopen hebben." — Then I must have lost my way.

Liv regarded him with that mixture of doubt and amusement he particularly loved in her.

"Du kennst doch den Weg." — But you know the way.

Hinrik furrowed his brow as though giving the matter serious thought.

"Vundaag leeg en Kogge ut Reval midden in de Straat." —

Today, a cog from Reval was lying in the middle of the street.

"En Kogge?" — A cog?

"Dwars." — Sideways.

Liv narrowed her eyes.

"Du flunkerst." — You're making that up.

"Moder seggt dat ok jümmers." — Mother always says that too.

Runa was cutting carrots for the stew and looked across at them.

"Wiel du dor slecht in büst." — Because you're bad at it.

Hinrik set Liv down and removed his coat. His daughter was already studying the board in front of Runa, and both parents recognised the look at the same moment.

"Nee." — No, Runa said before Liv had even asked.

Liv frowned.

"Ik heff nix seggt." — I didn't say anything.

"Dat musst du ok nich." — You didn't have to.

"Bloots een." — Just one.

"Later." — Later.

Liv turned to Hinrik for support, but he immediately raised both hands.

"Dor meng ik mi nich in." — I'm staying out of this.

"Bangbüx." — Coward, Runa said.

"En Mann mit Erfahrung." — A husband with experience.

Liv laughed, but reached for a carrot nonetheless and received a light tap on the fingers with the flat of the knife.

"Later." — Later, Runa repeated.

"Wannehr is later?" — When is later?

"Bi't Eten." — When we eat.

Liv considered this.

"Dat is later." — That is later.

Hinrik laughed, and this time Runa gave up trying to remain stern.

For a while, there was only family.

Hinrik told them about a broken loading boom and a merchant from Visby who had spent half the afternoon arguing over three damaged barrels of herring. Liv asked more questions than his story could bear, and Runa listened to them both while the knife moved steadily across the board.

Once, Liv's eyes met hers, and for a moment Runa thought she recognised something of her own mother in their pale blue. Not her face, nor even any particular expression, but that peculiar way of looking at something longer than other people did.

Over the following days, nothing happened to justify Runa's concern.

Liv played in the alley, reluctantly helped with the work around the house and waited for Hinrik in the afternoon whenever she knew he was due back from the harbour.

Twice, Runa saw her pass the chest without slowing. Once, Liv even stood directly in front of it while taking something from the shelf and paid it no discernible attention.

Runa began to wonder whether she was the one attaching too much significance to the discovery, although she still checked the phials every evening.

Each time, the silver lay motionless at the bottom.

Six days later, she was summoned to Mengstraße early in the morning.

A woman whose first child Runa had already delivered had been in labour since the night before, and the neighbour who came to fetch her said at the door that something was wrong this time.

Runa asked only a few questions, took her basket and placed inside it what she was likely to need.

Hinrik had been at the harbour since early morning. Liv sat at the table shelling peas when Runa stopped in front of her and explained that she did not know when she would return. The girl was to remain in the house until Hinrik came home, and she was not to touch any of Runa's things.

Liv looked up a moment too late.

Runa noticed. She knelt before her and enclosed the small hands within her own.

"Liv, du lettst de Kist to. Verstahst du mi?" — Liv, you will leave the chest closed. Do you understand me?

"Jo, Moder." — Yes, Mother.

Runa held her gaze for another moment.

She could have taken the phials with her, but the thought of carrying them through the streets of Lübeck and into the house of a labouring woman felt as wrong as so many other things had since she found the silver.

Nor was there any sensible reason to send for Hinrik at the harbour or secure the chest more firmly. Liv was eight years old, not four, and she understood what a prohibition meant.

Runa brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Ik bün vör den Avend wedder dor." — I'll be back before evening.

"Verspraken?" — Promise?

"Verspraken." — Promise.

After Runa had gone, Liv continued shelling the peas.

She tried to count them, lost her place at forty-seven and began again from the beginning. On her second attempt, she got farther, until a cart rumbled through the alley outside and she once again forgot which number she had reached.

After that, she abandoned the counting.

One pod tore open too forcefully, and three peas sprang out.

Two of them fell onto the floorboards.

"Verflixt." — Drat.

Liv looked immediately towards the door and grinned.

She had learned the word from Hinrik, and Mother did not like it.

One pea lay beneath the table; the other had rolled as far as the wall. Liv crawled after them, picked up both and noticed the chest.

It stood where it always stood, the leather strap across its lid, the linen visible at one corner.

Liv returned to the table.

Mother had said no. That should have settled the matter.

She took the next pod and opened it more carefully, then another, and another. At some point, she realised that she was holding an unopened pod between her fingers and looking towards the chest.

She continued working.

A little later, she looked again.

There was nothing to see. The chest was closed. Even so, her gaze lingered upon it for a moment before she turned back to the peas.

Outside, someone called for a carter. A wheel struck hard against the cobbles, and voices receded towards the harbour. Liv gathered the shelled peas together in the bowl and picked up the next pod.

Then she put it down again.

“Moder hett nee seggt.” — Mother said no.

She remained seated for another moment.

Finally, she stood.

“Bloots kieken.” — Just to look.

Liv went to the chest and stopped in front of it.

She listened briefly towards the door, although she knew Runa would not suddenly return. Then she loosened the strap, raised the lid and pushed the linen aside.

The two phials lay beneath it.

Liv knew small bottles from Runa’s work. Some contained oils, others tinctures or dried things whose names she did not know.

These two looked different.

The glass was thick and uneven, with tiny bubbles trapped inside it, and at the bottom lay the silvery substance Runa had hidden.

Liv took out one of the phials.

She held it towards the light and slowly turned it. The silver flowed along the bottom of the vessel and gathered again at its lowest point.

Liv tilted the phial back.

The silver returned.

A smile appeared on her face.

“Dor büst du jo.” — There you are.

She studied the vessel for a while longer.

Nothing else happened.

Eventually, her thumb moved across the dark pitch around the neck of the phial. Runa had pressed it carefully around the cork.

Liv tried to work her fingernail beneath it, then stopped at once.

Mother had not said that she was not allowed to open the phial. She had said that she was to leave the chest closed. Liv knew perfectly well that this was not a particularly good distinction.

Nevertheless, she sat down on the floor and held the phial between her knees.

The cork did not move on her first attempt. On the second, the pitch cracked along one side.

The dry snap startled Liv, and she looked towards the door. No one came.

She pulled more carefully until the cork came free.

Liv held it in one hand and the open phial in the other.

First, she smelled the vessel.

Nothing.

No herbs, no metal, not even the bitterness that clung to some of Runa's tinctures.

Then she smelled the cork.

There was scarcely anything there either.

She turned it between her fingers, replaced it experimentally and pulled it free once more. As she did so, the phial in her other hand tilted slightly to one side.

Liv immediately righted it.

The silver still lay at the bottom.

Something damp glistened on her forefinger.

There was so little that she did not notice it.

Liv replaced the cork and pressed it firmly into place. Then she tried to push the broken pitch back over the opening with her fingers. It resisted and would not close as smoothly as before.

She rubbed one eye, returned to her task and finally pressed the last small gap together with her thumbnail.

One of her long eyelashes remained caught in the pitch.

Liv inspected her work.

From a distance, it looked tidy enough.

She placed the phial beside the second one, drew the linen over them and closed the chest. She fastened the strap exactly as Runa had left it, and only after looking at it twice was she satisfied.

Then she returned to the table.

The peas were still waiting for her.

Beside them lay a carrot left over from the previous day. Liv remembered the evening with Hinrik and the way Runa had tapped her fingers with the knife.

She looked towards the door, grinned and took the carrot.

"Bloots een." — Just one.

She rubbed some of the earth from it against her dress and bit into it.

The crack was loud in the silent room.

Liv ate the carrot, sat down in front of the bowl again and picked up the next pod. After a short while, she had forgotten that she had ever left the table.

When Runa returned before nightfall, she found her daughter still sitting with the peas.

The bowl was almost full, several empty pods lay on the floor, and Liv sat on the bench with her legs drawn up, trying to open a particularly small pod with her thumbnail. Runa set down the basket, kissed the top of her head and looked into the bowl.

"Hest du allens maakt?" — Have you done everything?

Liv nodded.

"Meist." — Almost.

Runa studied the bowl for another moment.

"Meist." — Almost, she repeated, and began removing the items from her basket.

Bread, a piece of cheese, two small onions.

She set water to heat and prepared the meal while the dry snapping of pods resumed behind her. Before long, it became part of the sounds of the house, together with the wood in the stove and the muffled voices from the alley. Only when Runa gathered the empty pods from the table did she see the bitten carrot.

It lay near the edge, no more than a short piece remaining. Runa picked it up, and Liv looked at her immediately.

"Bloots een?" — Just one?

Liv pressed her lips together.

Runa could not help smiling. She placed what remained of the carrot beside the cutting board and brushed a hand over her daughter's hair as she passed.

"Help mi mit de Schalen." — Help me with the pods.

When Hinrik returned a little later, they heard him before he reached the door.

Liv jumped from the bench before the bolt moved and ran to meet him. Hinrik caught her and lifted her, although she immediately began pushing herself away from his shoulder.

"Vader, du rükst na Fisch." — Father, you smell of fish.

Hinrik held her away from him and gave her an indignant look.

"Dat nöömt man Hannel." — That is called commerce.

Liv pulled a face, whereupon he drew her close again and buried his nose in her hair until she laughed and tried to push him away.

Runa stood at the table cutting the last onion and watched them.

Later, they ate together.

Liv told them about a cat that had sat on the windowsill across the alley that afternoon, and Hinrik claimed it had probably been waiting for a cog to Bergen.

Liv explained with great patience that cats did not travel on cogs, whereupon Hinrik asked how she could know such a thing with such certainty.

Runa listened as she cut the bread.

When Liv reached for her cup, Runa stopped in the middle of the movement.

It had been nothing—nothing she could have named, at least.

For a moment, she had simply known that Liv was about to reach for the cup before the girl's hand had even left the table.

Runa set down the knife and watched as Liv drank and returned the cup to its place.

Hinrik was now telling them about a merchant from Visby whose servant had almost rolled two barrels of herring into the water at the quay. Liv laughed, and Runa laughed with her. For several minutes, she thought no more of it.

Then Liv reached for a piece of bread.

This time, Runa's fingers moved before Liv's hand touched the table.

It was scarcely a movement, only a slight tension in her hand, as though her body had begun something for a moment that did not belong to it.

Runa looked down at her fingers, then at Liv. But the girl was chewing and listening to Hinrik as though nothing had happened.

Runa took her cup and drank.

She said nothing.

Several minutes later, the spoon slipped from Liv's hand and struck the tabletop.

She stared at it in surprise, while Hinrik stopped in the middle of his sentence.

"Wat is?" — What is it?

Liv shook her head.

"Nix." — Nothing.

She picked up the spoon again.

Runa watched her fingers close around it.

"Noch eenmaal." — Again.

Liv looked at her.

"Wat?" — What?

Runa indicated the spoon.

"Nimm em." — Pick it up.

Hinrik said nothing more.

Liv reached for the spoon. Once her fingers had closed around the handle, Runa told her to put it down again. Then she extended a hand across the table.

"Kumm her." — Come here.

Liv slid from the bench and went to her.

Only as she crossed the few steps between them did Runa notice that her daughter was walking more slowly than usual. Not slowly enough for Hinrik to have noticed, perhaps not even slowly enough for Runa to have seen it on any other evening.

But she saw it now.

She took Liv's right hand.

Her fingers were cool.

"Frierst du?" — Are you cold?

Liv shook her head.

Runa placed two fingers against her wrist and waited.

The pulse was steady, neither fast nor slow, and at first she found nothing in it that should have held her attention.

Nevertheless, she continued counting.

Hinrik watched her from the other side of the table.

"Runa?"

She briefly raised her free hand.

Liv tugged gently against her fingers.

"Moder?" — Mother?

Runa began counting again.

The pulse did not stumble. It did not falter.
There was only an evenness between the beats that became increasingly noticeable because it did not change.
Liv looked at Hinrik, then back at her mother. She moved and spoke, yet beneath Runa's fingers the interval remained the same.
At last, Runa released her wrist.
"Sett di." — Sit down.
Liv returned to the bench.
Hinrik looked from one to the other.
"Wat is?" — What is it?
Runa was still looking at her daughter.
"Ik weet dat nich." — I don't know.
It was the truth.
She did not clear the table. Instead, she sat opposite Liv and asked whether she was cold, whether her stomach hurt, whether she had pain in her head or had gone outside that afternoon.
Liv denied all of it and grew a little more impatient with each question, until Runa finally fell silent and did nothing but look at her.
"Hest du vundaag wat nahmen, wat du nich nehmen schullst?" — Did you take something today that you weren't supposed to take?
Liv's gaze moved to the table.
The remains of the carrot still lay there.
Runa followed her eyes.
"De weet ik." — I know about that.
Liv said nothing.
It was only a small hesitation.
Runa had known it since her daughter's first lies, long before Liv understood that her face usually answered more quickly than her mouth.
Runa stood, but did not go to the chest immediately.

First, she stopped beside Liv, took her hand once more and turned it towards the candle. She examined the fingers, the nails and the lines of the palm.

There was no discolouration, no smell, nothing that did not belong there.

“*Liv.*”

The girl looked up at her.

“*Hest du de Kist opmaakt?*” — Did you open the chest?

Liv did not answer.

This time, Runa did not need one.

She went to the chest, knelt before it and loosened the leather strap. The linen lay almost exactly as she had placed it, and beneath it both phials stood where they had been.

At first glance, nothing had changed.

Runa took out the first phial and turned it in the light.

The pitch around its neck was no longer smooth. One section had been broken and pressed back into place.

She held the vessel in her hand and stared at the dark seam for a long moment.

Then she looked at her daughter.

Liv was still sitting on the bench with both hands pushed between her knees. She did not appear ill. Her skin was the same colour as before, her eyes were clear, and when Runa returned to the table with the phial, Liv’s gaze followed the vessel with a mixture of guilt and curiosity that, at any other time, would almost have been comical.

Runa placed the phial on the shelf beyond her daughter’s reach and sat down in front of her.

“*Hest du se opmaakt?*” — Did you open it?

Liv nodded.

“*Hest du dat Sülver anröht?*” — Did you touch the silver?

Liv thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“*Ik glööv nich.*” — I don’t think so.

Runa held her gaze.

"Du glöövst nich?" — You don't think so?

"Ik heff bloots roken." — I only smelled it.

"Woran?" — What did you smell?

"An de Viool. Un an'n Kork." — The phial. And the cork.

Runa took her hand again and smelled her fingers.

She found nothing. No metal, no herbs, nothing of the pitch and nothing she could associate with the silvery substance.

Liv patiently endured the examination until she finally asked whether she might continue eating.

Runa did not answer at once.

She knew poisons, spoiled food, fevers and the changes that came over a body before illness took hold. None of them matched the girl sitting before her.

Even so, a short while later she wrapped Liv in a blanket because her hands remained cool, gave her warm water and prepared a weak infusion.

Liv regarded it as though Runa had decided to punish her belatedly for opening the chest.

"Dat is bitter." — It's bitter.

"Drink." — Drink.

Liv took a small sip, pulled a face and looked towards Hinrik.

"Vader?" — Father?

Hinrik raised both hands.

"Dor meng ik mi nich in." — I'm staying out of this.

Despite everything, Runa had to smile.

Liv noticed and continued drinking with ostentatious reluctance.

During the first hour, very little happened.

Liv remained awake, answered Runa's questions and soon began complaining that her parents would not stop staring at her.

She had neither fever nor pain. She did not vomit and complained of neither dizziness nor nausea.

Runa examined her skin, looked into her eyes, listened to her breathing and found nothing that seemed to fit the condition she had sensed in her daughter since the meal.

Only the heartbeat drew her attention.

Not because it was too fast or too slow, but because the interval between each beat possessed an evenness that did not change.

Liv spoke, drank and turned towards Hinrik, yet beneath Runa's fingers the distance remained the same.

Runa released her hand.

Hinrik sat beside Liv and kept her feet warm beneath the blanket. For a while, he did nothing but watch Runa's face.

Finally, he asked:

"Is dat dat ut den Keller?" — Is it the thing from the cellar?

Runa looked up.

Since the afternoon, she had tried not to ask herself that very question, because there was still nothing between the broken pitch and her daughter's condition that allowed her to connect them with certainty.

Now the phial lay on the shelf, Liv sat between them, and Runa still knew no more than she had before.

„Ik weet dat nich.“ = Ich weiß es nicht.

Hinrik sah zur Viole.

„Aver du glöövst dat.“ = Aber du glaubst es.

Runa schwieg. Er wartete, dann sah er wieder zu ihr.

„Du hest seggt, dor weer nix.“ = Du hast gesagt, dort wäre nichts.

„Ik weet.“ = Ich weiß.

"Ik weet dat nich." — I don't know.

Hinrik looked towards the phial.

"Aver du glöövst dat." — But you believe it is.

Runa remained silent.

He waited, then looked back at her.

"Du hest seggt, dor weer nix." — You said there was nothing there.

"Ik weet." — I know.

Hinrik did not reply.

There was something in his face that Runa would rather have seen as anger, but he did not turn away from her. He merely drew Liv a little closer and arranged the blanket more carefully around her shoulders.

The evening continued, although none of them pretended any longer that it was an ordinary one.

The fire burned low, and Hinrik added more wood. Voices passed through the alley outside, and at some point Runa heard the sound of rigging striking against a mast on the Trave.

Liv grew tired, but remained responsive. Several times she closed her eyes for a few breaths, then opened them again whenever Hinrik moved or a cart passed over the cobbles outside.

Eventually, Liv reached for Runa's hand of her own accord. Runa took it.

For a while, she simply sat beside her without examining anything further. The small hand lay cool within her own, the fingers relaxed, and Runa slowly stroked the back of it with her thumb.

Only then did she become aware again of the even beat she had felt before.

This time, there was something else.

At first, she thought it was an illusion, the pressure of her own fingers or a movement passing from Liv's hand into hers.

But the longer she sat in stillness, the more clearly she understood that she knew this sensation.

She had felt it in the cellar that night, standing before the damp wall, when something beneath her own perception had assumed a rhythm she had been unable to name.

Runa slowly raised her head and looked at her daughter. Liv's eyes were open, watching her. She held Runa's gaze long enough for her to understand that the girl no longer wanted to know what was happening to her body.

She wanted to know something else.

"Sünd ji böös mit mi?" — Are you angry with me?

Hinrik answered at once.

"Nee, min Deern." — No, my girl.

Liv looked at Runa.

"Moder ok nich?" — Mother isn't either?

Runa stroked her thumb across Liv's hand.

She could have told her that she should not have gone to the chest, that she had disobeyed and opened something none of them understood.

None of that belonged between them now.

"Nee." — No.

Liv held her gaze.

"Heel nich?" — Not at all?

Runa shook her head.

"Heel nich." — Not at all.

Only then did some of the tension leave Liv's face.

She moved closer to Hinrik, who placed an arm around her, and for some time they sat that way at the table while Runa continued to hold her hand.

Gradually, Liv's breathing became shallower.

Not laboured and not uneven, but quieter, as though her body needed less and less of it.

At last, Hinrik lifted her onto his lap, and Liv allowed him to, although only a few hours earlier she had told him that she was far too old for such things.

Her head rested against his chest. Hinrik laid his cheek against her hair, and Runa drew her chair closer without releasing Liv's hand.

The girl remained awake.

Her gaze moved between her parents, attentive and calm, as though she were trying to read in their faces what neither of them could tell her.

Hinrik smiled whenever Liv looked at him.

At first, he still managed it.

Later, all that remained was a small movement around his mouth.

Runa no longer tried to discover what she had to do.

She had examined everything she knew, and none of it had given her an answer.

And so she sat before her daughter, held her hand and remained there.

After a while, Liv closed her eyes.

Several breaths later, she opened them again and looked first at Runa.

"Moder?" — Mother?

Runa leaned closer.

"Ik bün hier." — I'm here.

Liv turned her head towards Hinrik.

"Vader?" — Father?

He pressed his cheek more firmly against her hair.

"Ik bün ok hier, min Deern." — I'm here too, my girl.

Liv looked at him for a long time.

The pale blue of her eyes was unchanged, and Hinrik held her gaze until the small movement around his mouth disappeared.

He stroked her forehead and brushed back a strand of hair, just as he had done a hundred times before.

Then Liv looked at Runa again.

Runa knew that look.

She had seen it when Liv wanted to know something, when she did not believe an answer or when she was waiting for her mother to notice something that had long been obvious to her.

Now, none of those things were there.

Liv simply looked at her.

Beneath Runa's hand, that strange evenness remained. For a brief moment, the night in the cellar returned to her: her hand extended towards the stone, her fingers only a finger's breadth away, and that physical certainty which had made her draw back before she understood why.

Liv had not known that boundary.

"Moder, ik bün mööd." — Mother, I'm tired.

Runa stroked her thumb across Liv's fingers.

"Denn slaap." — Then sleep.

Liv continued to look at her.

Only after several breaths did she turn her eyes once more towards Hinrik. He bent down and kissed her forehead.

"Slaap, min Deern." — Sleep, my girl.

Liv looked at him, then back at Runa.

Her gaze remained there as her eyelids slowly grew heavy.

Runa wanted to say something. Something Liv could carry with her if she understood what was happening, or something perfectly ordinary if she did not.

She could find no words that were not smaller than the moment.

And so she said nothing.

She merely held her daughter's hand and remained within her gaze.

Liv breathed out, slowly and without effort.

Her eyes closed.

Runa felt one more heartbeat beneath her fingers and waited for the next, while Hinrik held Liv against his chest and the rigging struck against a mast outside.

The beat did not come.
Runa kept her fingers against Liv's wrist.
Long enough that Hinrik did not need to ask.
Only then did she notice the bowl of water behind her.
A single ring travelled across its surface and disappeared at the edge.

1 Before the storm

1.1 Rain on Concrete

The glass gave way beneath Colonel Duret's boot with a dry crack.

He did not stop.

Eight men followed him through the burnt-out street, far enough apart to reveal no formation, yet close enough to respond to a single signal. Rain ran across the asphalt between their boots, gathered in the broken concrete and drew lime dust from the ruins into narrow, pale streaks along the road. Duret pulled his hood tighter and checked the compass on his wrist.

Zero two three degrees. Wind from the north.

The radio remained silent.

Ahead of them, the target stood among the ruins: three storeys of concrete, an old defensive structure whose original purpose was barely recognisable beneath later alterations. On the second floor, a loose window struck against its frame.

Duret stopped and looked up.

The next gust of wind moved it again.

"Target confirmed," he said quietly.

Even as he spoke, two men behind him broke away to the left. One remained behind to secure the street, while the others closed in around Duret.

No further command was needed.

Their helmets were matt, and none of them wore insignia.

The Compagnie S  pia carried nothing that needed to be left behind in a place such as this.

Duret raised two fingers, and the team tightened its formation.

They reached the entrance before the window above them struck its frame for a third time.

The damp air on the ground floor held the stale smell of standing water, oil and burnt plastic.

An overturned examination couch blocked part of the way.

Above it, a dead monitor hung at an angle from its mounting, while melted remnants of insulation clung to the walls.

The room appeared empty, but not abandoned.

Duret checked the display on his wrist.

No signal.

The shielding was still active. From here, however, there was no way to determine whether it belonged to the building's original military structure or had been added later.

He activated the scanner.

With a low hum, a green grid spread across the walls, broke apart at the openings and reassembled beyond them.

Duret watched the calculation until three separate signatures emerged on the second floor.

No movement.

That would have been enough to secure the upper part of the building, but he allowed the scan to continue.

The grid passed back through the ground floor and moved across the surface beneath his feet.

There, the calculation faltered.

A second pass corrected the depth. A third tightened the grid.

Only then did the fourth signature appear.

Duret enlarged the section and waited for the depth calculation to finish.

Basement level.

That signal was motionless as well.

The display remained active while he signalled to the man beside him. Two more separated from the group and followed the others upstairs. Duret continued through the ground floor with the remaining men, searching for a way down.

Force was authorised only if the access point could not be secured by other means.

Duret left two men on the ground floor and led the rest into the long corridor towards the southern wing.

Above them, the ceiling had collapsed in several places.

Water fell from the upper storeys onto the concrete, gathered in shallow depressions and merged its steady dripping with the wind passing through a shattered skylight and moving a loose window frame farther along the corridor.

At times, the sounds could be heard separately. At others, they overlapped until, from a distance, it was almost impossible to tell which belonged to the building and which did not.

At each doorway, the men shifted their lines of sight without Duret having to intervene. The moment one passed an opening, the next had already covered the opposite side.

Their movements were practised and, for that very reason, almost inconspicuous.

In the dull beam of his weapon light, flaking plaster, warped frames and remnants of old paint passed before him, with dust between them that appeared for only seconds before disappearing again into the damp air.

Beneath Duret's hood, sweat ran down his temple. It stung his eyes whenever he blinked, but did not alter his pace.

Halfway along the corridor, Duret raised a fist.

The men stopped.

Ahead of them, a narrower passage branched south towards Room 8, the former main kitchen.

Up to that point, the plan was accurate.

What it did not show was the heavy steel door that had later been installed across the original passage, almost entirely filling it.

Duret checked the scanner.

The three signatures above them remained motionless. The fourth lay deeper, but its calculated position did not correspond with the basement entrance marked on the plan.

He stepped closer to the steel door and moved the light down its surface.

Water stood along the lower edge.

The target was located in the southern wing, inside Room 8, a former main kitchen.

Before Duret reached it, the smell changed.

Among the damp concrete, stale oil and burnt plastic lay something sweet. At first, it was so faint that it could barely be separated from the rest of the air.

With every step, it grew more distinct.

The steel door, installed long after the building had been constructed, did not lead into the basement as Duret had initially assumed. It opened into a narrow service passage running parallel to the southern wing.

On the scanner, the position of the fourth signature shifted in relation to his own until the building's geometry finally made sense.

The access point below had to lie beyond Room 8.

Duret signalled to the men behind him and continued.

The door to the former main kitchen stood open by a few centimetres.

Along its lower edge lay a dark trail, already diluted by rain-water from the corridor.

Duret crouched without touching it and passed the beam of his light across the stain.

Only then did he recognise what had mixed with the water. Blood.

He straightened and slowly pushed the door farther open with the barrel of his weapon.

The resistance did not come from the lock. Something on the other side was obstructing it.

After a few centimetres, it yielded, scraping across the floor, heavy enough that Duret had to increase the pressure.

The sweet smell grew stronger.

Light entered through the widening gap and at first revealed only an overturned chair, cables across the floor and the edge of a worktable.

Farther inside, a single indicator glowed.

Duret waited until his eyes had measured the depth of the room, then opened the door just wide enough to pass through.

Only on the other side did he see the body.

For a moment, his gaze remained fixed upon it because what lay before him did not fit the image his mind was trying to assemble from its separate forms.

Duret had seen the dead.

Many of them, and in many different states.

Here, he forced his attention onto the details: skin, cables, electrodes, the restraints fixed to the table and, between them, technical components whose purpose was not immediately apparent.

Nothing had been arranged by chance.

Nothing looked improvised.

He stepped back half a pace and pressed the back of his hand against his mouth.

By now, the sweet smell lay so heavily in the room that he could taste it on his tongue.

One controlled breath through his nose.
Then he lowered his hand and looked again.
In several places, the tissue had failed completely. Heat, pressure and gravity had continued what had been started before.
Only when Duret drew his gaze away from the body did the hum emerge from the other sounds.
Deep and steady, it passed through the room, perceived more through the floor than through his hearing.
A system was still operating.
He gave a brief signal with two fingers.
One man took the corridor, a second the door. The others spread out, keeping their distance from the table.
Duret waited until the access points were secure, then returned to the body and knelt beside the steel surface.
It had grown dull in several places, fine scratches running across it. In the beam of his light, traces of blood became visible, and between them electrodes, needles and slender lines whose arrangement could still be discerned even where something had shifted or torn loose during the final minutes.
Duret followed the connections with his eyes.
The distances had been set. The positions had been chosen.
No one had lost control here.
Someone had prepared, measured and waited for reactions.
Even the electrodes had not been placed where pain alone would have served their purpose.
His hand tightened around the grip of his weapon.
Only when he noticed the tension in his fingers did he loosen them again and look down at the body.
To the men who had worked here, Jason Kramer had not been an ordinary victim.
The room offered no indication of what, precisely, they had seen in him.
Duret knew only that Kramer could not remain here.