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20 milligrams of hellebore is fatal for a person. This quantity corresponds to a few grams of the dried root. Minutes after a poisonous dose has been ingested, a prickly, burning sensation arises in the mouth and throat. There is a drop in body temperature and an ice-cold feeling sets in.

OLLE MATSSON, Everything is poison: deadly substances and their role in history

*Vienna, April 1792*

The street was dark and dirty. The buildings became lower and more rickety every few yards I walked. Now and then the blazing of fires from barrels and buckets cast a pale glow on the faces of the sorry souls huddling together to stay warm. “*Herr pater, herr pater*!” they called out to me, although I openly wore my Norwegian clericals. There was a smell of charred meat and sewage. I was freezing in my thin cape. Nödlgasse 17. Still a few hundred yards further. I hurried on between rubbish and barrels, put my head down every time someone called out, gripped the ebony shaft of my cane tighter: it had defended me against flocks of wolves in Valdres. It ought to be capable of seeing off any Austrian thieves. It was twenty years since I had been abroad. All the talk of art and grandeur: exaggerated.

I opened the gate to number 17.

A dilapidated, foul-smelling building three stories high.

The walls of the stairwell were covered in scrawled abuse: *Jesuit swine. Get out swindler priest.* And on the first landing: *It stinks here*. Below that someone had added in capital letters, *That’s you, whore.*

The steps groaned beneath me. A drunken couple lumbered past me down the stairs with their faces turned away. I stopped at the top. One door. No sign. I knocked. No answer. I knocked harder. Finally, I pushed the door open.

The room was almost bare. Except for a bed in the corner there was not one decoration, not one piece of furniture. Not even a crucifix, I thought. But on a shelf above the bed, I saw something I recognised: a conch shell. The room smelled of coal. An elderly nun by the bed turned. I bowed, introduced myself from a distance; she curtsied, as though expecting me, and disappeared into the adjacent room, closing the door behind her.

I edged closer.

The bed had once been yellow, but the paint had peeled off and the headboard was cracked. The poor light made it difficult to see. At first, I could only discern blankets and throws. I leaned forward.

Then I saw the face.

So small against the pillow as to be hardly anything: some wisps of hair, a nose, emaciated cheeks. The features of someone I did not know. An old man. Very old.

I cleared my throat.

He opened his eyes.

It was him. I stood there tongue-tied. ‘Professor Hell?’ I said eventually. ‘It’s Borchgrevink. From Norway. Your assistant. Do you remember me? The passage of Venus?’

Maximilian Hell struggled to focus. I was no longer in doubt: it really was him. The thin lips, the forehead. He smiled. It took some time before he spoke. ‘The student – is it – you?’ he said. He stopped, drew a breath: ‘Borgre – Borchra—’

‘Borchgrevink.’

He smiled again: ‘You’ve grown old.’

‘Thank you,’ I said stupidly. ‘You look well.’

He looked at me, obviously trying to fix his gaze, because he was blinking. ‘My sight is almost gone,’ he said, as though reading my thoughts. ‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes,’ I said, surprised.

‘I haven’t. For twelve years. But I drink a lot of tea.’

‘You did the same twenty-two years ago.’

He studied me. ‘Why have you come?’

I met his gaze, hesitated, felt a lump in my chest. Not necessarily because he had grown old – or that I had, that was bad enough, but more because of the fact that time passed. Where did it all go? ‘I had to see you again,’ I lied.

He sighed, nodded at the edge of the bed.

I sat down. Cleared my throat. ‘Sajnovics?’

‘Dead.’ He looked at me. ‘Hanged himself.’

‘Hanged himself –? I felt silent joy.

‘So it goes. God rest his soul.’ The old man took a deep breath.

I searched for something to say. There was so much. I had prepared a thousand things. But it was as though I had something stuck in my throat. No sound came. Suddenly I was startled by the sound of smashing glass; a stone had been thrown through the bottom of the window from outside and it rolled across the floor.

The old man raised his hand: ‘Boyish pranks,’ he said, ‘I have asked them to leave be.’

I suddenly regretted having come. Seven weeks on the road. I got to my feet.

‘You want something,’ he said abruptly.

I hesitated, heard the sound of a cart from the street. Someone shouting in the distance. “There was something I never got an answer to back then,’ I said. ‘It has tormented me all these years. To be honest that is the only reason I came.’ I looked at him. ‘May I ask you one single, crucial question?’

*Washington, March 2, 1882.*

*Dear Professor Mohn,*

*I write to you on account of your participation in the Norwegian North Sea expedition of four years past. I have read with interest your reflections on Father Maximilian Hell’s scandalised journey to Vardø in 1769. I have until now accepted all censure of Hell, his scientific work, his results, his deception and his attempts to conceal it. Subscribed to the prevailing truth that he was a liar, a forger, a traitor to all the principals we hold high. His life insignificant and his end wretched.*

*However, by pure chance, some months ago I came into possession of the papers left behind by an unknown member of the expedition, a failed theologian by the name Jens Finne Borchgrevink. Are you familiar with his extraordinary account?*

*I have learned that during the Norwegian North Sea expedition in 1878 you visited Vardø and reputedly found the remains of Hell’s observatory. He is said to have constructed it down by the seashore, exposed to the wind and high tide. Why there? They already found themselves on one of the most pitiless places on the globe. Ought not Hell have listened to the Norwegian Borchgrevink? And what of the third participant of the expedition, the Hungarian Sajnovics? Had he already succumbed to the initial phases of his tragic fate? I expect there is differing opinions regarding this. I do not know how much information you are in possession of. The curious thing is that I like Hell; he was a saint, a scientist, a warrior for the great truth. But why did he choose to deceive the entire world?*

*I tell you, dear professor, there is something amiss here. And it raises frightful perspectives.*

*Yours respectfully,*

*Simon Newcomb*

*Astronomer*

*United States Naval Observatory*

**PART 1**

The Assistant

OLD FRIENDS

*Trondhjem, February 1768*

There is only one thing in this world worse than enemies. Friends. Old friends are the worst. They hold you fast in who you were. Tonning, for instance. A flat, gaunt face. Furtive laughter. But in the midst of this: ingenuous eyes, like two shiny tarns on a scorched open expanse.

‘Cheers, Borchgrevink.’

I raised my glass.

‘I think you look wan?’

‘I am not.’

‘Cheers, gentlemen,’ he repeated, ‘Norway’s future.’

Everyone toasted.

Parelius refilled the glasses. Holck laughed. Irgens leaned over the edge of the table and spewed in the bucket the serving girl had just placed there. We were celebrating his appointment as pastor in Hitra. He was to depart in just two days. Tonning called him the lily of the North. For ten days, Irgens had been preparing his Munkvoll finds from six months ago, but the only ones still of reasonable quality were a buttercup, the skeleton of an otter and two *Digitalis Purpurea*. ‘What if you began to prepare the finds as soon as they were made?’ Tonning said.

‘I shall.’

‘In Hitra you’ll find less of nearly everything. Poorer soil.’

‘But more fertile women.’

Everyone laughed. The girl brought new tankards. Judge Mølmann was sitting at the table over from us, so cupshotten that his wig had slipped halfway off. Two gentlemen were in the process of loosening the strings on his waistcoat, one resembled a falcon, with a pointy, unpleasant face. Their table was also full. Someone was singing. Pipe smoke was heavy below the ceiling.

It was the last Saturday of the month. Another frosty night in Trondhjem. Out on the waterfront the moored coasters swayed in the icy swell but inside the tavern it was warm. Too warm. I drained the tankard. Looked around at my friends. We were celebrating them as well. Holck had just been appointed new librarian at the Academy of Science, Parelius had taken charge over the collection of natural rarities and Tonning had had his doctorate printed by Pelt in Copenhagen: *Rariora Norvegiae*. With a dedication to – nauseatingly – Princess Sophie Magdalene.

‘How’s the position of assistant going?’ Tonning eyed me over his glass.

‘I’m not an assistant any longer. I’m an amanuensibus.’

‘Well, that’s much of a muchness.’

‘It is not. I have great responsibility now. Good prospects. I’m Gunnerus’ man in charge.’

Tonning laughed. ‘In charge of what? Collecting shells? Get away while there’s still time.’

‘I like it, my good man.’

‘What does your father say?’

‘He’s threatening to withhold funds if I don’t soon become a priest.’

‘Ho ho.’

‘But he would not dare.’

‘Good for you. Pass the pork.’

Holck threw him a half-eaten bone, blue with mould; Tonning gnawed at it like an animal.

I got to my feet. The room was spinning. ‘I want to hold a speech for you, gentlemen,’ I began, ‘for all the number ones, for all the good people in this world, for the best, for us around this table!’

‘Hear, hear,’ They thumped on the table.

‘I have a gloomy foreboding,’ I continued, taking a sip of a new beer. ‘At some time in the future the number ones will disappear. They will be defeated by our arch enemies: the number twos!’

‘Yes!’ Irgens shouted.

‘We who have chosen the scientific path,’ I went on, ‘we are – we have – we shall – ’

‘Get to the point, Norway’s worst orator.’

That was the last thing I remember clearly. After that only fragments: my speech about reaching new heights, Holck’s thick lips, Parelius drooling, Irgens continuously shouting something. And the entire time, that nasty, slimy look in the eye of my friend Tonning.

Friend?

He struck my tankard with his own. ‘Everyone here is a member of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters. Myself, Parelius, Irgens and Holck. But not you. Not Borchgrevink.’

‘I will be at the next election.’

‘That’s what you said last year.’

I fell silent. Stared at Tonning.

He was the bishop’s favourite. In the space of a year, he had completely supplanted me; it was he the bishop sent botanising to Møre, he the bishop gave responsibility to for important reports, he the bishop made enthusiastic mention of in his correspondence with Linné. It was Tonning this and Tonning that. I should have said something, done something. Protested.

But I behaved as though nothing had happened.

That was my strategy. I thought: if I just sit quietly in my hole, it will pass. New drinks came to the table, the lamp burned down without us noticing.

Afterwards we staggered out into the dirty snow.

Parelius disappeared. Holck met a woman. Irgens turned and went back.

I saw Tonning’s back going up Kremmerstredet.

Shouted his name.

He stopped, turned around, his eyes were crossed.

‘Have you touched her?’ I asked.

‘Touched who?’

‘Lovisa.’

‘You’re drunk.’

‘Answer.’

‘You’re drunk, Borchgrevink.’

‘Answer me.’

‘Barely. A hand up the skirt. Nothing more.’

I seized him by the throat.

‘Dry as moss. Come on, only joking.’

‘We’re engaged. If you touch her, I’ll kill you.’

I threw him into a snowdrift. He lay there calling out.

I tottered homeward, frozen, hungry.

Stopped in Ilevollen.

I still had the keys to the collection of natural rarities.

I let myself in, lit the lamp.

The collection was not large but had been well-filled long ago. I had, during the last trip with Bishop Gunnerus, added to the holdings: minerals, snails, flowers, coral, crustaceans, and tunicates. I had already catalogued much of it. The objects had been placed in sealed glass jars, filled with spirits and labelled. Jars, cases, containers, boxes all stacked atop each other – an entire nature reserve, the most distinctly Norwegian kinds of stone and marine animals. The zoology of Norway. The fauna of Norway. For ten years I had crept and crawled over large parts of Trøndelagen and Nordland, cut flowers for the herbaria, anatomised fish and mammals, stuffed woodcocks and auks. This was the result. Norway’s foremost assemblage of natural objects, a collection one had to go to Uppsala or Copenhagen to find its equal. Compiled by me, Trondhjem’s second best *botanicus*. Cliff faces. Ice-covered inlets. Endless rowing trips, many times putting my life at risk.

And where had it got me?

Parelius had taken over as head of the collection. Tonning had taken the rest.

I stood on tiptoe and stretched up to take hold of a jar containing a hermit crab, held it up to the light; it floated around in the spirits, protruding eyes, drooping claws.

Then I noticed the letter.

It was on the small marble table beneath the spirit glasses, where the bishop usually placed mail for me.

At first, I just looked at it. Walked around the table. I thought I recognised the missive but told myself: it’s a normal letter. Lovisa for instance would have folded the paper in a similar way. It might be from her. She had not replied to me for six months and three days.

But part of me knew it was not from Lovisa. Part of me knew exactly what it was.

I leaned forward. Turned the letter over – and let go as though I had been burned.

Father.

I stood there for an unpleasant moment. Knew what it was about. Knew that if I opened it I was finished.

My heart pounded.

I looked at the shelves around me, listened for footsteps in the corridor. A gust of wind struck the old building, causing some paint to sprinkle from the ceiling.

But if I did not open the letter? If I just left it there? If I pushed it behind the hermit crab jar and left it, to gather dust, crumble, disappear?

I hesitated.

Maybe that was a bad strategy.

But it was a plan, a possibility, a hope.

I pushed it behind the hermit crab jar.

Then I grabbed the jar, opened the top, fished out the crab and drank the spirits.

I put the jar back, blew out the lamp and closed the door behind me.

A TEMPTING OFFER

*Vienna, September 1767*

If St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna was at the centre of a clock, the old Imperial and Royal Observatory would be at exactly half past one, 631 steps in an easterly direction from the main entrance of the church. In 1767 it would have taken a healthy, well-fed, young infantry soldier four and a half minutes to walk this stretch on a clear day. If however one was a tired, middle-aged, unsteady court astronomer with diminishing lung capacity, it took twelve. As long as no work was being carried out on the road in Wollzeile. And there inevitably was. The royal and imperial court astronomer had therefore given up walking that distance ages ago. He asked the carriage to collect him on the corner of Graben, after he was finished his large Kaiserschmarrn with cream, and they went by way of Rotenturm at a gentle pace uphill towards Lugeck.

Maximilian Hell liked to think of the world in circles.

The first circle followed the little hand at the centre of the imperial city: the Jesuit Church, the Anker Clock, Kohlmarkt, Pestsäule and back to the imperial observatory. Maximilian Hell’s professional world. The other circle followed the big hand: Budapest, Graz, Brno and Schemnitz – Maximilian Hell’s life horizon. Within this circle, stretching in a radius of 250km from the centre of Vienna, he had lived his entire life. Except for a short stay in Cluj in Romania and four less successful visits to his second cousin in Karlovac, Hell had never crossed this almost invisible boundary. He had not seen the sea. He had not seen the Alps. He had never been in beautiful Italy. He had never visited Paris or London. He had no dislike for foreign languages and cultures, not by any means. He was simply not horizontal in his orientation. He was vertical. Everything Professor Maximilian Hell was interested in was located above him. And not primarily related to the Almighty, although he was of course interested in that also. But about universum, our own solar system, that sparkling myriad of fixed stars and planets that faded into a cosmos that he had been mapping meticulously for three decades: eclipses, nebulae, occultations, comets – and publishing the precise results in Europe’s most respected astronomical periodical, *Ephemerides Astronomicae*. His own publication.

Professor Hell’s life was as orderly as the orbit of a planet.

He arose at precisely the same time every day, ate the same tart, spent an exact number of hours in the office adjacent to the observatory. Ate the same lunch: a *suppentopf* or a *tafelspitz*, had another *kaiserschmarrn*, this time without cream, followed by a nap and a walk of 732 paces around the observatory. And then, finally, after nightfall, one of the assistants cranked aside the roof sheet on the big polished, wooden dome. The cold air streamed into the circular room. Hell pulled his velvet cloak tighter around his throat, donned two mint-green gloves, flipped Marinoni’s refractor in place, and could finally gaze upon his beloved space, which at that time of year unfolded like a night violet over the old, darkened city.

One such moment was enough to give life meaning.

When six hours later, shivering with cold, he crept under the blankets in his cell home in *Unteres Jesuitenplätzl*, Hell was happy.

‘What three things do you want most in life?’ his father had asked a few days before his death.

Hell had thought about it for a while. ‘Insight. Of the world within. And the worlds without. And results.’

He had attained both. Loyala’s spiritual exercises ensured he was always mentally balanced, as was every good Jesuit. The star observatory supplied the external. Few could imagine how beautiful it was to see, for example, something as simple as Jupiter’s moons through a ten-foot refractor. But as regards results, things had been so-so. Pater Hell had long since accepted that his work in the main was not only to interpret his own observations but especially those of other people, who sent messengers to him on an almost weekly basis from all over the Hapsburg Empire. He was a compiler. A chronicler. A glorified clerk. Yes, even though he was undoubtedly one of the spearheads in the Jesuit empire of reason, which in Europe alone consisted of over 600 colleges and universities, as well as a few dozen larger astronomic observatories, he lacked that final little piece that would raise him up where he believed he belonged. At the top. Pater Hell’s world was about overview, classification, control. He loved intellectual challenges but hated surprises. He was five feet and eight inches in height. The worst thing that could happen, was a knock on the door.

He felt, therefore, some trepidation when on this September afternoon in 1767 he was called to the meeting room adjacent to the observatory, It was a wet, chilly day, every minute had already been planned, and he was to eat dinner at van Swieten’s that same evening to boot. Matters did not improve when he saw the man who was waiting: a gentleman he had not previously met. Small, alert, and well-dressed. Hell could recognise vanity from miles away: a dandy, dressed in the old-fashioned manner: in green velvet, blue stockings and a wig so powdered a little cloud hung about his head. His lips were pink, almost feminine, and his cheeks were cut through with reddish capillaries, the noble sign of a merry drinker. But his German was first-rate. He was an emissary from one of Northern Europe’s smallest and least significant states, Denmark-Norway. And he had an offer to extend.

Hell asked him to take a seat. He studied with growing distaste the pale hands of the ambassador, a personal emissary, the man claimed, from King Christian VII, as he listened to his staccato voice. Why was it always the second-best who ended up in diplomacy?

At first Hell did not really take in what the man was saying. Then he suddenly felt as though a warm hand had come from below and seized him by the heart.

But this experience was by no means bothersome.

Because this man was not what he purported to be. Behind the studied gestures and the dull face Maximilian Hell was suddenly in no doubt about what he was looking at:

Fate.

DEAD SEAL

*Trondhjem, April 1768*

I will not use many words on myself. My father is a swine, my mother is dead. I was born in Røros, the flattest, coldest and most remote place in Norway. My beloved brother died in a tragic accident on the fjord in ’42. I was little, barely six years old. It was April, still ice floating, I have supressed the memory. But what of it? We can collect shells and cryptograms, anatomise basking sharks and stuff birds, but we can never bring back the dead.

In the year 1758 I gained a middling theological attestas in Copenhagen. That sealed my fate. I met the great Gunnerus, founder of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters in Trondhjem, bishop of half of Norway, the most influential academic north of Mjøsa. ‘You’re my man, Borchgrevink,’ he said to me.

I was flattered.

At this point the bishop could not tell the difference between a buttercup and bladderwrack. He wrote long incomprehensible theological treatises, that hardly anyone read, and even fewer understood, which soon secured him a substantial career. But then the bishop met the great Carl von Linné – name giver, master of cataloguing, the great genius of the Nordic region.

‘Do you know what name we hitherto have used for a common violet for example?’ Gunnerus asked me.

I shook my head.

‘*Viola floribus radicalibus corollatis abortientibus caulinis apetalis seminiferis*. One falls asleep before managing to say what one has plucked. Do you know what name Linné gives it? *Viola mirabilis*. End of story. All done. Species and genus. Isn’t it wonderful?’ He looked at me: “Come to Trondhjem, Borchgrevink, you and I shall classify the birds, animals, and flowers of Norway. You shall pluck and hunt, I shall catalogue. Together we will rise to the pinnacle of fame.’

And I rose.

And rose.

Until I rose no further.

It is strange is it not, how those who rise never notice when the fall begins? They think they are still on the way up. Only those on the bottom think they are always on top.

I was dismissed as chief of the collection of rarities.

And put in charge of the library.

The bishop called it a promotion. 6000 volumes. Draughty. Still no pay.

And the same work as before. But without responsibility.

I have nothing against books.

Not the contents anyway.

It was the library itself I disliked: the confinement, the cloying air, the pretensions of many of those represented there. I hated academic self-praise. The smell, the temperature, the silence. A tomb. I was at the opposite extreme: a practical man. I loved the high plain, the forest and the venerable Norwegian field under cultivation. I could gather, hunt and fish. I could find my bearings in the mountains. Never trust a man who cannot point out the four points of the compass right away. I was such a man, meant for something great. Or at least: greater. ‘Don’t worry,’ the bishop told me, ‘there will still be botanic and zoological work for you, even if your place of work is among our precious books.’

I sat at the little mahogany escritoire, as though at the bottom of a crypt, with the notebooks open beside me and the pens ready. Next to me was my travel herbarium, the only book I really loved, filled with dozens of dried flowers and plants, references, memories, an entire life. I would rather die than be separated from it. I picked up the latest mushroom to arrive. Felt its fungal lamellae against my fingertips. A vegan testicle.

I consulted the herbarium, noted the characteristics of the mushroom in the little notebook. Site found. Condition. All Linné’s morphological features. Cut off a piece of the stem and placed it under the Cuff microscope. A millimetre of organic material, transformed to a porous beam, full of life. A wonder every time.

On the shelf behind me my old friends had accompanied me: a dead auk. A herring gull Tonning had prepared. A mink I had shot and anatomised, its two eyes eerily still alive-looking. And a stuffed cod.

The bishop appeared in front of me.

I had not heard him come.

Pale, a receding hairline, his eyes a little too far apart. Indistinguishable from the cod. He was always silently observing before approaching, drawing so close I could smell the scent of starch from his black biretta.

“How’s it going with the mushroom?’

‘Well, thank you.’

‘There’s another box from Stenkjær outside. Will you see to it as well?’

‘Can’t Tonning do it?’

‘He’s tired, poor fellow. You can manage, Borchgrevink. Afterwards I’d be grateful if you go through the papers on row 7b. They need to be re-indexed but this time according to topic. Understood?’

I made no reply.

‘You forgot this.’

The bishop was holding something out to me: it was the letter.

I grabbed it.

‘Aren’t you going to read it?’

‘Afterwards.’

‘It appears to be from your father.’

I noticed the letter was open. I studied the bishop. ‘After my work here in the library is done, I’d like to return to Copenhagen and complete a doctorate in botany.’

‘An excellent idea, my friend. I shall recommend it to your dear father.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course.’

‘My goal is to be a leading botanicus. Second only to you, of course. After that I’ll concentrate on the large marine animals. I’ve just finished my latest study on the carnivorous seal. Might that be something for the Academy of Science?’

‘Carnivorous seal? Absolutely. Send it along.’

‘I’ve already contacted Pelt in Copenhagen about having it printed.’

‘Interesting. Bravo. You have mentioned it before. What will the text be called?’

‘*Phoca carnifex Norvegiae.*’

Bravo, Borchgrevink.’

I looked at him.

He was lying.

I knew that, of course. He lied to my father saying he was going to secure me a priesthood. No priesthood came. He lied to me saying he was going to secure me a scientific position. Nothing happened. He had not the slightest interest in *Phoca carnifex* because he had not done the analysis. The bishop had risen to be a star in the firmament. Loved by Linné. Worshipped by the academic elite. He had founded the Royal Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. All men of note in Trondhjem became members. Except me. ‘You soon will be,’ he told me. ‘Next year.’ ‘At the next meeting.’ ‘Any moment now.’

Ten years had passed.

He was stringing me along. He needed an assistant, a helper, a servant. I was the best. And free. Father was footing the bill.

Until now.

I feared what was in the letter.

Could I manage without Gunnerus?

In a just world I would not be dependent on him.

In a just world it would be me who was the rising star.

But this was not a just world.

‘Could the bishop advance me a small donation for my diligent labours?’ I said, for about the hundredth time.

He offered an awkward smile. ‘You’re worth your weight in gold, Borchgrevink. But a Bishop’s pay does not stretch far.’

‘I don’t eat much more than one meal a day now.’

‘Oh? We’ll have to do something about that. Here – take this as a sign of my affection.’ He handed me a small box.

I turned it around. It was a snus box in curly birch, with a silver rosette on one side. ‘But I don’t snus.’

‘Look at the bottom.’

There were small letters engraved along the edge: *Tonning*.

‘It was originally meant for him. It’s yours now.’

I swallowed. ‘Thank you.’ I looked at the bishop. ‘What actually happened with the position of head of the cabinet of rarities?’

‘It went to Parelius.’

‘But I’m four times more qualified.’

‘You lack eloquence. A man in charge needs to be able to express himself.’

‘I’m working on that.’

‘Next time it’ll be your turn. For the time being I need you as my primary amanuensibus. I heard you had a merry gathering again last night?’

I did not reply.

‘First and foremost, you need a wife, Borchgrevink. I believe I have a candidate. Christina Bagge.’

‘Bagge? Is that a joke? The priest’s fat daughter?’

‘Her size is of no consequence.’

I’m engaged. The bishop is aware of this.’

‘Engaged? To whom?’

‘Lovisa Linné.’

Gunnerus expression turned to one of pity. I hated that look.

‘Tonning has shot a ringed seal,’ he said, to escape the subject. ‘It needs to be anatomised straight away.’

‘A seal. I can’t’

‘But you just wrote a treatise on seals?’

‘That’s exactly why. I have a history with that animal.’

‘You need to get over this strange phobia of yours.’

‘Can’t Tonning do it himself?’

‘He says his hands are too dry,’ Besides, apparently he left.’

‘Left for where?’

‘It’ll take no time at all. I want the entrails in spirits by nine tonight. Understood?’

‘I can’t. I beg you.’

The door slammed behind him.

The anatomising room lay one floor down. The walls were of coarse stone. The table scrubbed with lye. Two lamps were lit.

The seal lay on its side, smooth, cold, dead. The body had swollen; the flippers hanging limply along its side. The smell of death pervaded. Holck was standing in one corner. He glanced at me with disinterest.

‘Where was it caught?’ I asked.

‘Trollafjæra.’

‘Trollafjæra?’ I looked at the seal. ‘That was where my brother and I –’ I stopped.

‘Yes?’

‘Nothing.’

‘The organs are intact,’ Holck continued. ‘He shot it through the right eye.’

‘Can you please do it?’ I said in a reedy voice.

‘Pull yourself together, man.’

‘I don’t think I can bear it.’

‘You’re the finest dissector in the city. I’ll hand you the instruments. Get going. Time is short.’

I approached the seal. Lifted the scalpel. Trollafjæra. The net. Johannes going under with the glass float. I began to tremble.

‘What is it?’ Holck said.

I looked at him. It was my fault, what happened. The seals on the skerry. It made me sick to think of it, sick, sick. I placed the scalpel against the abdomen of the seal, drew it towards me in a diagonal motion; the slit opened, blood and flesh spilled out. I felt dizzy. I leaned forward, drove the knife into the stomach of the animal with all my strength. Something burst, probably the *vesica urinaria*. I gagged and doubled over before running for the door.

I stopped outside.

Tore open the letter.

It was worse than I had thought.

LAST CHANCE

*Vienna, September 1767*

From the moment ambassador Bachoff departed his cell, Maximilian Hell’s life was changed. He looked at the depression in the chair where the ambassador had sat, caught the scent of the excessively sweet perfume, heard his steps recede down the chased metal staircase he himself had gone up and down a thousand times, without anything out of the ordinary happening.

For a whole day Pater Hell did not dare to absorb the scope of the ambassador’s request. Maximilian Hell was a well-trained Jesuit. He performed his punishing exercises daily; he had ten years of education in mathematics, theology and philosophy from the Jesuit college at the University of Vienna, where the brothers’ three primary rules of conduct were hammered into every novice: to distinguish between good and evil spirits, conquer the self, and be ready at short notice to go anywhere in the world and live under extreme conditions.

Now he would have use for all three.

Pater Hell let himself out of the building and walked his 732 steps in the warm autumn evening. But when he made it back to the starting point, he took the same walk again. And again. 2196 steps. By then he had put things into perspective.

The prospect of what faced him was so great he had to sit down.

Did he dare to do this?

He needed a confidant.

He made a snap decision.

He sent a messenger to his former assistant, now residing in Pest.

And just four days later the Hungarian János Sajnovics was sitting in front of him. Short. Stocky. Impeccably turned out. His biretta in his lap. His boots shining.

Hell refrained from saying anything of substance for a time, taking the man in instead, trying to find out if he had changed in the six years that had passed since he had seen him. Sajnovics was a Jesuit like himself, fastidious, true to his word, and servile. But he had three other qualities over and above these: good health, an even temper, and skills in astronomy. And during the endless winter of ’59 and the attendant ceaseless icy west wind that year, when Sajnovics had taken care of Hell’s correspondence, Hell had noticed one important thing: the man could suffer cold. He never complained. That’s why Hell stated bluntly: ‘This is about an expedition.’

Sajnovics stared at him with incomprehension.

‘In a year and a half an astronomic event beyond compare will occur. Venus will, as you know, pass the disk of the sun. It has only taken place eleven times in this millennium. It won’t happen again for 105 years. This is the first time we can observe it with modern telescopes. The observations will give us essential knowledge.’

‘About?’ Sajnovics said rhetorically.

‘About? You know what about.’ Hell was almost annoyed. ‘Let me put it simply, Sajnovics. By measuring the time Venus takes to cross the disk of the sun, from different places on the globe, we can calculate exactly the distance from the earth to the sun. The discovery of the most important scientific fact for 2000 years.’ He paused.

Sajnovics picked up a few nuts, chewed, looked at Hell.

‘The passage of Venus is in other words the key to understanding ourselves, our place in everything,’ Hell went on. ‘Expeditions are being sent to Tahiti, San Domingo and Russia. But also to our part of the northern hemisphere. There’s just one problem: it will be night most places in Europe when the passage of Venus takes place. The sun is below the horizon. But there is one point in the northern hemisphere where the sun is visible this entire day and is unusually favourable: Europe’s most northerly and most easterly point.’ He paused. Observed the Hungarian’s reaction.

‘And that is?’

‘Vardu.’

‘Vardu?’

‘Vardø. An island in a lesser-known, backward country. Norway. Part of the kingdom of Denmark. It’s a journey of 10,000 kilometres. We would be back in two years. The pay is terrible, the climate unforgiving, the people violent, and the Jesuits are denied entry to the realm. We must travel armed, under false identities, in disguise.’

Sajnovics eyed him. He was perched on the edge of the chair. For a moment it looked like he was going to get up and leave. Pater Hell knew what he was thinking: what about friends, career, family, feast days? What about the dangers, logistics and transport? What about food supplies, the cold and illness?

Sajnovics did not bat an eyelid. ‘What about wine?’ he said.

‘We’ll bring our own.’

Sajnovics hesitated for a moment, put out his hand: ‘I’ll go.’

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His assent was such as one could wish for from a friend. It was generous and unreserved. Pater Hell wrote straight away to the Jesuit superior general, Pater Ricci, and after that to the apostolic vicariate for the northern regions who since the reformation had been forced into the Protestant fold.

And only then, when that was done, did the enormity of the task sink in for Maximilian Hell. For a young man this would be a daring undertaking. For an aging man without experience of travel it was hazardous. Transport would be by wagon and ship. It entailed traversing dangerous areas with highwaymen and wild animals, notorious valleys and mountain passes, in a country with practically no roads. And after that: weeks at sea through Europe’s most inhospitable waters. The marine charts were inexact. The language foreign. The religion hostile. Damp, cold, wind, darkness – all were significant factors one had to consider. All the technical equipment would have to be taken along. There would be no possibility of help or assistance. At their destination they would have to construct an adequate astronomic observatory within a few months. While they simultaneously carried out magnetic, cartographic and meteorological observations, recorded oceanographic facts, collected zoological material, got sketches down and rectified all the astronomic instruments, in order to ensure everything worked on that one day, for the few hours it really mattered. A journey of 10,000 kilometres, over two years:

For six successful hours on June 3, 1769.

A dizzying project.

Like an elephant balancing on a pinhead.

‘What can go wrong?’ Sajnovics said.

‘Everything.’

Hell slept poorly for three months after the visit of Bachoff. For each passing day it became clearer to him how much was at stake. In the field of astronomy there were three leading countries in the world: France, England and Russia. After that Sweden, Holland and Prussia, and on down, until Austria, with Hell as court astronomer, in spite of its imperial observatory, coming in at second last place.

And at the very bottom: Denmark-Norway. A nation no-one took seriously in the field. Nor hardly in any other either.

The passages of Venus usually came in pairs, at an interval of eight years, and then an interval of over one hundred. At the last passage, in 1761, both Austria and Denmark-Norway had made desperate attempts to obtain clear observations, something which would have elevated them to a level in the scientific world required by a modern state. But the Austrians had not managed. And Denmark-Norway had been laughed at. Now a new, last chance was coming. Both nations were desperate.

As Hell went back and forth through the corridors of Geheime Hofkanzlei in late autumn to obtain clarifications, authorisations, and signatures it became increasingly clear to him that there were other compelling reasons that he needed to succeed. For over twenty years he had been the astronomer of the imperial court at the old star observatory, built on the roof of the new auditorium on Unteres Jesuitsenplätzl. But the equipment was still not on a par with the observatories in Paris or London, and visibility, due to the constant burning of wood fires in the inner city, was unfavourable. In addition, the clatter of carts and shouts of people from the street below was audible and the university’s anatomy hall was only two floors down. Not infrequently the students would toss severed body parts out the window; a stench of life and death rose through the floors. How was one supposed to achieve precise results under such conditions? Time and time again Hell had begged to have the observatory moved outside the inner city.

His pleas fell on deaf ears.

So, he remained standing in the smell of death, behind Marinoni’s old telescope, making his observations.

Despite publishing his updated tables in the *Ephemerides Astronomicae*, he felt his field of study was treated unfairly.

‘Do you know what is lacking in this country,’ he said to Sajnovics: ‘an academy of science. France has one. Russia has one. England has the Royal Society. We have nothing. Carrying out scientific work without an academy is like making soup without vegetables. It does not work.’

Sajnovics made no reply. He detested vegetables. He was sitting forward in his seat, listening to his former boss, his swarthy face brightened up. ‘Interesting,’ he said.

‘This is our last chance to salvage Austria’s reputation,’ Hell said. ‘It doesn’t matter if it’s under the patronage of Denmark-Norway. This will also save us.’

They looked at each other.

Those last words were the truest he had spoken.

The Jesuit Order was in decline. In the last few years, they had been expelled from Portugal, Scotland and France; more and more states feared their power and influence. Even in Vienna Hell could read hateful anti-Jesuitical pamphlets on the lampposts: they were agents of Satan. What would happen if the authorities were swayed?

Hell did not dare to think about it.

He was an aging, semi-successful, reactionary man, in the wrong country, and a member of the wrong order. Even now in 1767 he had become an anachronism. He spoke Latin, believed in the virgin birth, distrusted women, wore peculiar old blankets and had a poodle.

There was no way around it:

Pater Maximilian Hell needed a scientific victory.

THE EMPEROR’S PAINTING

*Vienna, December 1767*

Maximilian Hell set about planning with tremendous energy. He compiled endless lists – from dry goods to building materials. He checked shipping routes, procured tickets and passes, got hold of dictionaries and ordered clocks, thermometers, and navigational instruments. He had already received 1314 florins from Bachoff and he spent them wisely. He conferred with Sajnovics the entire time. The Hungarian had arranged a leave of absence from his position in Buda, moved to Vienna and was displaying his capacity for organisation. When he had passed on his inheritance of a castle in Torsdas to his brother and begun his novitiate he had said goodbye to a worldly career. But he had 600 years of land administration in his blood. What he was lacking in imagination and empathy, Hell thought, he made up for in systematics. In his black Jesuit garb, he was almost indistinguishable from the Protestant priests Hell had grown up with back home in Windschacht, in a strongly Protestant region with numerous Lutheran churches. Not that Hell had ever been inside one. He had only passed the open church door on Sundays, as the Catholic mass began an hour earlier, and heard the priest’s earnest interminable sermons. The Catholics believed that works alone led to salvation – and lay about at home three days a week drinking sweet wine. The Protestants believed works meant nothing at all and did little else but run around in practical pants doing things.

Sajnovics was like that. A sort of closet protestant.

Everything about him was active.

And he never asked questions, just did was what was asked of him to the letter. When Hell presented him with his idea for an extensive three volume work after the trip, set to include a description of all of Norway, a solution to the mystery of the Northern Lights, the mystery of the decrease in sea level and of luminescence, and a range of other major topics, he just nodded obligingly. A person without independent ambition but with the ability to get things done. What more could the leader of an expedition wish for?

Sajnovics did not care about European scientific cooperation and the French astronomer Lalande, who was going to collate all the different observational figures following the passage of Venus and calculate the earth’s definite distance from the sun. He did not concern himself with Lalande’s global pretensions, his foolish atheism, his famous jealousy, no, had not even read Lalande’s renowned account of his travels in England, which for the most part contained the times of public coaches and the average size of British men’s feet.

All he said was:

‘Isn’t this Lalande rather arrogant?’

‘Not in the least.’

‘Isn’t it time you took over his central position?’

Hell did not reply but looked at him in surprise. Put this exchange to the back of his mind.

But there it would remain.

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The weeks passed and the expedition took shape.

Prior to the year’s end most of the work had been done. The route had been decided upon and all contacts heading northward secured. The plan was to go directly to Copenhagen then continue to Trondhjem without delay, spending the winter there before going on to Vardø in the early spring of ’69.

Finally, it was time to get on with the most important part.

They had one main problem.

Being a Jesuit in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway was punishable by death. And in all other north European states they would face huge difficulties.

They would have to travel incognito.

‘What will I disguise myself as?’ Sajnovics asked.

‘You can choose. A farmer or a merchant.’

‘What about a clockmaker?’

‘Come up with something better.’

‘We’ll bring a dog,’ Sajnovics said.

‘Why?’

‘No-one will think two Catholic agents are travelling around with a dog.’

He had something there.

‘Pater, can you get one?’

Hell looked at him, snapped his fingers.

A large, brown poodle came down the stairs from the observatory and glowered at Sajnovics.

The Hungarian stood up in surprise. ‘There, there, good boy.’

‘He’s called Apropos. Good he likes you. You’ll be the one looking after him.’

Eventually Hell sat down to compose the most important letter he would write: a humble entreaty to His Holiness, Pope Clement XIII. It concerning key dispensations on the long journey. A journey, funded by the king of Denmark, ‘*beginning this spring and lasting for several years’*, Hell wrote, ‘*passing through Saxony, Brandenburg, Denmark, and Sweden to the furthest island of Norway by the Arctic Sea, called Vardøhus, a place where I will have to stay for a rather long period of time because of astronomical observations that I have been ordered by the king of Denmark to undertake*.’ Since this journey –

*-- and sojourn will befall me and my assistant in non-Catholic lands, in which neither official churches or other places of Catholic worship are found and no worship of the Catholic religion is tolerated, and where our religious dress will need to be exchanged for secular clothing and we on the whole will have to behave in public in such a way we not only avoid the suspicion of being priests, but on certain occasions even must avoid being recognised as Catholics, we hereby beg, on behalf of myself, my assistant, and my servant in order to avoid danger (…) to be bestowed by His Most Holy Pontiff the most gracious permission for the utterly necessary dispensations --*

Three things followed:

One: to be freed from the obligation of reciting the breviary.

Two: to be allowed celebrate mass upon a portable table ‘*that we will bring with us in secret.*’

Three: ‘*For as long as we stay in non-Catholic lands, we beg most humbly to be allowed to eat meat even on days prohibited by the church when this cannot be avoided.*’

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On December 12th there was dinner and entertainment hosted by Van Swieten. Count Bachoff was also present, at the head of small Danish party. After the main course an overfed wunderkind, supposedly bestowed with ‘God-given talent’, played his own compositions on the harpsichord for the gentlemen. His father sat next to him cracking his fingers. But God must have taken that day off. Hell fell asleep. Sajnovics said: ‘Big today, forgotten tomorrow.’ He believed the young composer would do better to join the Society of Jesus and devote himself to more important work. His point being that God the Father did not enjoy being among pianists and glitterati. ‘Our Lord lives in the country,’ Pater Hell joked afterwards. They clinked glasses.

‘Which is exactly where we’re headed,’ Sajnovics rejoined.

When the Turkish cakes were served, discussion turned to the country of Norway. Van Swieten had heard they ate rotten fish there but the Danes merely laughed: ‘They eat a lot of things up there but not that.’ Count Bachoff stood up at the end of the table and wished all welcome.

He pointed out that the oldest progenitor of the Norwegians was Jafet, one of Noah’s sons, who after the Deluge had travelled north from the Tower of Babel. ‘It’s said the original inhabitants of the Nordic region were decedents of Jotuns,’ he said, ‘from Norse mythology, and these are supposed to have the same origins as Germanic peoples mentioned in both Norse and Anglo-Saxon sources, including Goths, Geats and Gutes. We’re talking, according to Professor Schøning, about one of the oldest peoples in the world.’

Hell looked impressed.

‘These first men,’ Bachoff continued, ‘were fleet of foot, agile and intrepid, they ran around almost naked in the cold while pursuing athletic activities like fighting, swimming, running, ball throwing or skiing over glaciers and ice. And what do they think they ate?’

He nodded to Sajnovics.

‘Mushrooms?’

‘Yes, that too. A lot of mushrooms. But also milk, a piece of fish, a piece of sealdog or whale washed up on the beach, raw, perhaps cured. And they are still the same. They are poor – and will no doubt remain so for another 500 years. And perhaps that’s for the best, for what kind of damage could these congenial indigenous people do if they acquired means?

The men chuckled.

‘They drink copiously, love colourful hats and the women have a free position. Pontoppidan describes in his addendum to *The Natural History of Norway* how women in Setesdal – a valley in the south of the country – wear nothing under their skirts. When they want to relieve themselves, they crouch down and lift their skirt a little. Practical, perhaps, but not particularly hygienic.’

Laughter around the table once more.

Van Swieten was beaming and the candelabras shining; all at once Hell felt that this entire expedition had the gleam of feasibility.

Count Bachoff clapped his hands.

A young man in uniform entered. ‘This is my adjutant, Second Lieutenant Olsen. From Larvik in Norway. He’s also a drummer in the Bornholm enlisted infantry regiment, currently stationed in Copenhagen.’

The young man stood in the centre of the room, legs slightly apart. His blue and red uniform was impeccable, buttons and leather polished. He undid his jacket and stood in his undershirt. ‘This is in many ways a classic Norwegian,’ Backoff said. ‘Broad-shouldered, well-built, sturdy. ‘If you look at his teeth,’ – the man opened wide – ‘you will observe strong molars, both on the top and bottom. Carnivore. Root vegetables. Small amounts of fruit and marmalade. The skin is fair, almost suspiciously so, and what’s more, the arms are unusually long, putting one in mind of the bush chimpanzee James Bruce discovered on his reconnaissance south of Cairo last year.’

‘What is the ratio of length between the knee joint and calf?’ Sajnovics asked.

Everyone turned to look at him.

‘One to three,’ Bachoff said. ‘Central European, with some negroid in the final phase.’

‘Average height?’

‘1.68. South of Dovre anyway. No studies have been carried out north of Dovre as yet. An undertaking for yourselves perhaps. Turn around, please.’

The soldier did as he was asked, removed his shirt, and stood sweaty and muscular in front of the gazing men. Hell noticed Sajnovics was blushing. ‘Always three garments on the body in Norway. Wool underneath. To protect against the rain one wears sealskin cured with *tran*.’

‘Tran?’ Hell said.

‘Oil from boiled whale liver.’

‘Cod liver,’ the second lieutenant said.

‘Thank you. Cod liver. Notice the language: many diphthongs. More on that later. Health on a national basis is normal, inoculation seldom. The average temperature in the northlands is as low as seven degrees, possibly due to the significant flow of arctic ice over the last sixteen years. This may also have served to have fortified general health. Leprosy, rade disease, and smallpox are the most common illnesses, and chancre, of course, in a northern European variety, the lesions appearing on the penis. Could you please show us, Lieutenant Olsen?’

Hell’s mouth fell open.

Sajnovics swallowed.

It was a joke.

Bachoff laughed heartily. The others laughed with relief. Van Swieten rang nervously for more wine. ‘This was most obliging of you, Olsen,’ Bachoff said. ‘As you can see: good hips, strong bone structure. Typically Norwegian. Above average physique. Only intellectually is there a little to be desired. The country has as yet no university. No-one seems too concerned about that. The desire for predominance is not as strong with them as with us. According to Professor Schøning Norway is a country with a selective reverence in terms of qualities; they admire those who excel in pole-vaulting and bucket-throwing. No other areas really matter. Were there any questions?

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After this the planning gained momentum.

New pieces fell constantly into place. Some nights Hell and Sajnovics sat by lamplight dreaming of the Northern regions, talking about the sea serpents Bachoff had referred to, the bright summer nights – and not least the darkness. It was perilous but also exotic. Sajnovics had not been further north than Trenčín. But he was well-read. ‘He who reads roams,’ he said. They toasted with the wine the Hungarian had obtained: a 1756 vintage Nikolaihof, first class. They laughed. Walked the dog. Studied Sajnovics’ new azimuth compass, which measured celestial angles even more accurately than before. Sang hymns.

The Wednesday of 13th April, shortly before departure, provided a highpoint.

They were seated in the cheap carriage on the way down Kohlmarkt; their black Jesuit capes fluttering in the draught, their birettas in their laps. They were grinning as though on their way to a medal presentation.

‘Can I accompany you in?’ Sajnovics said.

‘Unfortunately. We must follow court protocol.’

‘But I’m a member of the expedition.’

‘I said no.’

‘We’ll see,’ Sajnovics said, as if it were he who decided who was granted an audience at Hofburg.

Hell gave a strained laugh. Sajnovics had in the last weeks boasted one time too many about his aristocratic origins and pointed out more than once that had he not become a Jesuit he could have made a career at court. ‘My family have ruled in Komitat Fejér for seven generations,’ he said.

‘To have a career at court one needs an unbroken aristocratic line of sixteen generations,’ Hell said. ‘You’re nine short.’

‘My father visited Emperor Franz on two occasions.’

‘Franz has been dead three years,’ Hell said.

‘The emperor was a great collector. Have you heard about his collection of natural history objects? My father told me about them. A real Noah’s ark. One specimen of everything imaginable and unimaginable, from birds to stones. Franz paid 4000 guilders for one *Epitonium scalere*, the precious wentletrap.’

‘I don’t like snails.’

‘It’s a pity he’s dead.’

‘But his wife’s still with us.’

They alighted in the sunshine in Heldenplatz.

The huge sombre and resplendent Leopold wing of the imperial Hofburg Palace loomed in front of them and Hell had a sudden realisation. It gave him pause, made him dizzy. As he and Sajnovics passed through the Swiss Court and crossed the stately courtyard, he understood for the first time, not only the enormous practical and symbolic significance of the expedition, but also his own advancement on the social scale.

Now he was here.

For a moment Hell felt pride tickling in his stomach at this rise in status – a warning sign, he knew, that could change a man in seconds. He suppressed the feeling.

They were led, hurried, and shooed through the imperial chambers, at every room a step closer splendour. Cherubs. Crystal chandeliers. Oil paintings. Sajnovics was still allowed accompany him. From Trabantenstube on to Ritterstube, and further on to the first antechamber, then another antechamber, to Geheime Ratstube. Sajnovics still with him. The chamber servants swarming around them were replaced by valets, then oberstseremonimeisters, then obersthofmeisters*,* then princes and knights of the Golden Fleece, to the next highest favourite in the imperial house, Johann Josef Khevenhüller, who looked like he had melded into the gilded ornamentation.

This was as far as inferior visitors went.

Sajnovics was left crestfallen behind.

And Pater Hell, the engineer’s son from Windschacht, a man originally of such lowly position in the Habsburg hierarchy that even the binmen had been on first name terms with his father, now stood in the middle of the hall of mirrors at Hofburg, surrounded by silk-clad *Ehrendamen*, ladies of honour, and ladies-in-waiting, staring at a small, rotund and almost perfectly pink figure twenty metres in front of him.

Maria Theresa Walburga Amalia Christina.

Queen of Austria.

Queen of Hungary, Croatia, Bohemia, Transylvania, Mantua, Milan, Parma, Galicia and Lodomeria, and the Austrian Netherlands. Duchess of Lorraine. Grand Duchess of Toscany. The supreme holy German-Roman Empress. *Mater Austriae*. The sole and undisputed ruler of the entire Hapsburg world.

‘Hello,’ she said. Just that.

‘Hello,’ Hell mumbled.

Such was the magnitude of this undertaking: they were almost on first-name terms.

Hell shuddered.

Maria Theresa was the opposite of everything he had believed: intelligent, friendly, informal, and unprejudiced.

They spoke about Norway. Marie Theresa had received reports that the kraken had been observed off the northern islands of Loföten several times, most recently in March: an enormous ten-tentacled sea serpent that could only be fought with unorthodox methods. Hell could not confirm this. They spoke about the town of Bergen, which a relative of the empress had visited in ’23, claiming afterwards that it was ‘the home of a smugness all its own’. Hell was unable to confirm this either. ‘Astronomy is a dry and difficult discipline,’ the empress said in her soft German, ‘yet appealing and exquisite because the stars investigated are so much more beautiful than earthly human bodies.’

Hell cleared his throat. He told her that their greatest dream during the passage of Venus was to see the most mystical phenomenon of all: *gutta nigra*, the black drop – which occurred between the sun and Venus as the two heavenly bodies touched one another.

‘A celestial kiss,’ Pater Hell said.

‘A tear,’ the empress said, ‘What a beautiful image.’

‘Hipparchus said that Astronomy is the first of wisdom.’

‘But won’t the harsh cold cause you permanent harm, do you have good furs?’

Hell confirmed he did – although that was a lie at the time.

‘I would like a *phoca* for our collection. Can you bring one back, preferably larger than a ringed seal?’

Hell bowed, impressed by the empress’ detailed knowledge.

When the empress inquired if Hell was undertaking this long journey alone, he replied that his travelling companion was out in Geheime Ratstube merely waiting for Her majesty’s permission to fall at her feet.

Marie Theresa said she would like to see him.

Sajnovics was shown in.

The young Hungarian looked like a foreign body in the magnificent room, angular and off-key. Oddly uncertain at first about who he was standing in front of before being struck by the sudden realisation. He prostrated himself, stretching his arms out and pressing his torso against the parquet floor. It was a foolish gesture, devoid of style or dignity. The empress offered an embarrassed smile but did proffer her hand when they were leaving. ‘Many do not return from the Northern regions,’ she said.

‘That will not be our fate,’ Hell said. He bowed. ‘We already look forward with joy to returning.’

His words would prove oddly prophetic.

Hell took the hand of the empress carefully, brushing the knuckles with the tip of his nose and making the customary kissing sound.

Sajnovics pressed forward, took hold of Her Majesty’s hand with both of his, as though it were a piece of meat and practically smacked his lips. Another gesture lacking style. Wasn’t the man of lesser nobility? Hell thought as they withdrew walking backwards.

When they reached the doorway, the empress motioned for them to stop.

‘There was something I forgot, Pater Hell,’ she said. ‘I have decided that you, upon your glorious return from the Ice Sea, will establish our first scientific academy.’

Hell looked at her, the room span.

‘I have another surprise for you as well. It concerns a painting depicting my late husband, Kaiser Franz. After this audience I would like you to go straight to Wollzeile 4, to the fourth floor. Can you promise me that?’

Hell bowed low.

The doors closed.

They drove back without exchanging a word.

Hell knew something profound had happened. This was beyond all expectations. This was extraordinarily joyous. At the same time, it was frightful and dangerous. Because what if –?

He thrust the thoughts aside.

Wollzeile 4 was located in the heart of Stubenviertel.

The atelier of painter Ludvik Kohl lay on the fourth floor. He was a pale, skinny man, whom Hell was already acquainted with, and he nodded politely to the astronomer before bringing him into his atelier and showing him an enormous, stretched canvas, where five people were sketched in charcoal. ‘This is the painting the empress has ordered,’ he said dryly. ‘It’s to be finished within two years.’ He went on to say the picture would occupy the most central position in the new science academy the empress was planning.

Hell regarded the canvas.

Within the simple wooden frame, the bodies were only outlined but the faces were recognisable. The picture showed the recently deceased Emperor Franz sitting at a table with scientific objects: an ammonite, an emerald and a rock crystal. He was holding a magnifying glass and staring coldly at the observer, full of arrogant awareness of his own importance. It was the new time the picture displayed, an emperor bursting out of the narrow, mythological frames of his forefathers towards something new: towards rationality. Science. Reason.

Though the picture was far from finished, it was impossible not to be seized by its majestic calm: it was cold, calculated, dignified, with clear, vivid colours in, for the moment, broad strokes. Around Franz, his five foremost men were standing, the emperor’s scientific advisors – solemn, self-important, marked by the profound symbolism of the moment.

There was Marcy the mathematician, hand outstretched, in front of a huge globe. The numismatist Duval with a tray of gold medallions. Court librarian van Swieten with an open book. And next to the legendary collector von Baillou, founder of the king’s immense collection of natural objects, stood a man whose features Pater Hell recognised immediately.

Himself.

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Translated by Seán Kinsella