

Brother Peer, in charge of any Lorsch business conducted within the chapter room, and, I suspected, Adelong's assistant, led us into a small room off the chapter room, where we were able to close the door and confer in private.

We had not yet sat down after Peer had closed the door behind him, when Clovis seized hard at my shoulders, so that I gasped in pain, whispering at me but in a strident tone, his face close to mine. 'Where in Hell were you? I waited over an hour, and you never appeared.'

I slapped him across the face. 'Unhand me.' It took every millimetre of my resolve not to order him out of my sight. His expression changed, and he saw at once that my state was worse than what he thought.

'My love?'

'I will tell you "where in Hell" I was,' I snapped, struggling to keep my words to a whisper. 'You suggested with sanguine calm the night of the thirty-first of October.'

'And with sanguine calm you agreed,' he said in a cheery voice. It stopped me cold.

'Well, I-I presumed you—'

'Owned you outright like property, and you had no mind or will of your own?'

'Oh, all right, very well,' I snapped; he was of course in the right. 'I do suppose I could have thought of it myself, had I the presence of mind. At any rate, the thirty-first of October it was.' I stopped. My eyes burnt holes through his, and I flashed a brittle smile, arching my eyebrows upwards. 'Any ideas, anything at all come to mind?'

I watched the astonishment drain from his features, giving way to despair. 'Samhain.'

'Samhain.'

'Oh Lord, my dearest, what happened?' He took a seat on the bench against the near wall, and I sat down beside him.

'Well,' I said, my voice still ice cold, 'to begin with, I arrived a bit in advance so we might enjoy more time in the event you arrived ahead of schedule. Alas, a band of naked women celebrants chanced upon me in my monk's garb, and when one of them kist me—'

He put his hands up to his mouth. 'No!'

'They discovered I was a woman in monk's clothes, and stripped me naked, danced round me in song and led me far, far away from our meeting place. They said they were going to "enjoy me", and I would "enjoy them".'

[. . .]

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A phone call woke Rahel up early Sunday morning on 11 April 1937 from her older and closest friend, Leah Abrams, a mother of two young children. At first Rahel had no idea who it was, as she heard uncontrolled sobbing on the other end of the line.

'Hello? Who is this?'

The sobbing continued unabated, as if Rahel had not spoken at all.

'Hello? Do you have the wrong number?' Rahel shouted into the telephone. 'I don't know who's calling—'

'Rahel, this...this is Leah, sorry, I've just found out my children can no longer attend school—'

‘What? What do you mean?’

More sobbing. ‘I mean, Mayor Lippert has just issued an order...all Jewish children are banned from public schools in Berlin.’

‘He can’t do that. He can’t.’

‘He can and he did.’ Leah breathed in and out, struggling to collect herself. ‘He is our mayor but he is also a member of the Nazi Party. The Nuremberg Laws say we are no longer German citizens.’

‘Oh, Leah, I’m so sorry.’ She thought back to when Patek had first told her this, on that wintry April day in 1936, and how reluctant she’d been to give any credence to his words. That day was a lifetime ago, and when she pictured herself then, sitting in the café prior to their contentious conversation, she saw a hopeful young woman dreaming of a future that would be distinguished by independence, prosperity, by her having the ability to motor to distant parts of her homeland. It was as inspiring a canvas of her future life as had ever been done, but since Patek had torn her dreams to shreds, she’d watched her world fail to brighten, and indeed darken and close in around her, tighter and tighter, until now it condemned her to iniquity, exclusion and the life of a second citizen—someone who, by dint of nothing else but her ancestry, was bereft of the most basic rights accorded human beings.

Rahel looked up to Leah, who had an advanced degree in the profession of psychology, where she had specialised as a graphologist, trained in the art of analysing a patient’s (or on occasion a criminal suspect’s) handwriting to assess their personality. In the medical profession, women were rare or unheard of in Germany, but Leah had been emboldened in her choice of graphology as a viable profession in researching the discipline years ago and uncovering the seminal work of a British woman, Rosa Braugham, back in the 1870s in the profession’s infancy.

Leah was both an intellectual and possessed of powerful intuition in her understanding of human drive and personality, in the individual as well as in the collective, and they had engaged in illuminating if at times unsettling discussions of the recent events in Germany. Rahel felt at once great distress for her friend and a sinister foreboding of bleaker days to come.

‘I don’t know what I’m going to do,’ Leah was sobbing. ‘David and Sharon are both at the top of their classes, they’re devoted to their studies.’ After a brief silence, she started to regain control of her voice. ‘This is profane. It will cripple their minds and their development for years if it goes on for a long time. What am I going to do, Rahel? I have no idea.’

Rahel was silent in thought for some time. ‘David and Sharon are seven and nine, and both in the *Volksschule*.’ This was more of a statement than a question.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘At least Adam still has his job at the factory—do you think you could manage teaching them their subjects at home for a while, as simple as their studies would be at such young ages? Until this all blows over?’

‘Blows over?’ A sad, breathy laugh, followed by a long silence. ‘And when do you think this will all “blow over”, Rahel? In a few months? Next year?’ Leah was tearing up again. ‘Once life was a feast, and we thought everything was pure shit.’

‘I know, I know. Some days I wake up and it feels like I will never be the person I was in 1930 ever again. I still want to believe that someone will take the Nazis down, but that time seems far off now—and with each day it feels more and more like it will have to come from outside Germany.’

‘It will. That’s because all of Germany hates us now.’ This was said without a touch of irony, in a flat, dead tone.

Rahel wanted to say something but started several times before she could bring herself to utter the words. She drew in a long breath. 'Patek says things are going to get much worse.'

'How much worse?'

'He thinks our lives are in danger.'

'You mean, that Hitler will have us killed?'

'Yes, correct. Like he will just round us all up and—'

'Yes, of course. This is not a question. The question is when, not if.'

Rahel froze at these words. 'When' took her mind in its hand, as though it were a string, and pulled it taut towards itself, took it into the word, into its sound, into the picture that opened in front of her eyes: a black field of nothingness.

Her mouth opened, but there was no speech. Her friend said something else, but she didn't hear it, and a moment later goodbyes were somehow exchanged and Rahel hung up the phone.