

# INFERNAL PLAN

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I dedicate this book to Michael Webber, the author of The Total Victory of Christ for being my inspirations.

The "**Apocatastasis**" series takes place in the second half of the seventeenth century on the fictional island of "Le Pays de Cygnes", near France.

The prequel "**Returning Home**" is the story of seventeen-year-old David, who makes several fundamental mistakes in drunkenness and then has to face his past, Christians and God. It also deals with the massacre of the Waldensian Church and takes place in 1655.

First part of the **Apocatastasis series "Infernal plan"** takes place in 1672, and is a reflection on biblical hell. It is a story about a planned crime and subsequent punishment and a translation of the Bible. Reconciliation and God are sought by the twenty-six-year-old Count Nicolas Renard, after his own infernal plan fails.

The second book "**Furious God**" deals with the preacher Jonathan Ward, who likes to preach on the subject of "sinners in the hands of an angry God." What happens as a result of his speeches will bring Jonathan into the hands of an angry king and force him to reconsider his entire life. And Nicolas is his guide on this journey, which begins in 1675. (The model is the sermon of the same name by Jonathan Edwards, who lived in the 18th century, but otherwise the life of the historic Jonathan has nothing to do with the character in this book.)

*The author of these books is not a native English speaker and I apologize for any mistakes.*

## Introduction

This book takes place in 1672 on the fictional island of Le pays des Cygnes, near the French coast. It is a sequel to the book "Returning Home", a story of the seventeen-year-old David, the future king of this country. In the passages on the Bible, I proceed from general facts in Czech and English and not from French. I don't speak French and the previous story took place by France, because it was partly about the Waldenses. Although some of the characters in the previous book were associated with the Waldensian Church, the conversations in this free sequel do not reflect Waldensian teachings.

The book uses quotations from sozo.cz and nepekelnabible.cz and from the Facebook pages of these authors and is used with their permission. It's also inspired by The Christian Victory Bible and the notes in this Bible translation and by videos of The Total Victory of Christ.

Unmarked Bible quotes are from the English Standard Version.

Other translations are indicated in the text:

The Christian Victory Bible (CVB), American King's James Version (AKJV)

## Chapter 1 - The Infernal Plan

Nicolas Renard dressed quickly, practicing a sad expression in front of the mirror. Soon he is going to learn that the king was dead and that he has succeeded to the throne and needed to look grieved enough. It had to be believable. Nothing can arouse a shadow of the suspicion that perhaps the king's death was not an accident. It cost him a lot of money to make it look like an accident. He paid the ship's captain to set fire to the king's ship at night and arrange for the king not to get out of it. On the high seas, the king should have had no chance of surviving in cold water this early spring. Nicolas was sure that while he was rehearsing his mourning speech, the king's body had been resting on the seabed for a few hours.

His ambitions were as deep as the open ocean, and he was utterly greedy as for his desire for power. Only a few years ago, he left university as the best student, and even the position of one of the richest men on the island was not enough for him. He wanted to be someone. He was a born leader and organizer and had thousands of ideas on how to rule Le pays des Cygnes. His father died two years ago, and Nicolas was satisfied for a while to inherit his estate and decide on his two younger sisters, but now he wanted something more. He believed that power would satisfy the hunger and emptiness he still struggled with internally. One day he will fulfill all his wishes, and then he will finally be satisfied. And his wishes were never modest. He wanted to be a king.

In addition, he hoped that the power would somehow solve the trouble he had been struggling with for a few weeks. He was engaged to the daughter of a wealthy count, but at the same time he expected a child with another woman, who was a daughter of a local farmer. Nina was pretty and bright, and he succumbed to her charm for a moment, but of course she was nobody. And the worst part was that she naively expected him to marry her. He, the Count and the future King! She and her father were relentless, and of course they made sure that his fiance found out about everything immediately. His engagement was canceled and the young countess's dowry was out of sight. But Nicolas wasn't bothered by that now. He will get rid of the ordinary girls somehow, and when he is king, he will be able to choose despite this notch. The young ladies will fall at his feet, and even if the whole island knows that he has an illegitimate child somewhere, they will not care. He knew that power and wealth would help them overlook any flaws in beauty. But Nicolas didn't have any. He was tall, handsome, with a restless tuft of thick dark hair and a peculiar sense of humor. His only flaw was his character. Otherwise, he was very able. In addition to everything that was given to him, he had a photographic memory and, moreover, he was a linguistic genius. He studied in England for a year and during that time learned excellent English, spoke decent Dutch, and during a short stay in Greece and Italy he learned a bit both of these languages and mastered their old forms even better. He was able to read texts in ancient koine Greek and Latin without any problems.

And he was lucky in other ways too. The king's wife, Annabel, whom he was now going to meet, had given birth to four daughters to the king during the eleven years of their marriage, and thus there was no other successor to the throne. The only way she could outwit him would be if she remarried quickly. But he didn't expect that. Even nine-year-old Princess Amelia could not overtake him in a similar way. When he entered the king's study, he was thinking about his future coronation.

Annabel looked upset. It was not surprising. She motioned for him to sit down.

"The royal ship sank this morning," she said in a tight voice without any further introduction. "And the crew was not able to save my husband. Do you know what that means to you?"

"I'm really sorry, ma'am," Nicolas said, as sadly as he could. "I suppose that means the heavy burden of government will rest upon my shoulders. But is it really certain? You know that hope dies last. I would like to give my own ship at your disposal and set out to find the king. Maybe there's a chance he saved himself. What actually happened?"

"Did you practice at home in front of the mirror?" Annabel frowned at him. "These words? That the heavy burden of government will rest upon your shoulders?"

"Of course not, ma'am," Nicolas looked at her blankly. "How could I know anything like that?"

"I don't know," Annabel shrugged. "Perhaps by paying the captain to sink the ship in such a way that the king would not be able to get to the lifeboat."

Now Nicolas didn't have to play his puzzled expression. He looked at her in surprise.

"Pardon?" Was all he could say.

"You disgusting, insidious, greedy scum," Annabel snapped angrily. "I love this guy. I'm expecting a fifth child with him. And I could lose him because someone like you doesn't have a shred of conscience. How could something like that occur to you at all? What kind of a diseased brain is needed for this?"

Annabel did not finish her speech.

At that moment, the ajar door that led from the study to the king's private bathroom opened, and King David entered the room.

"That's enough, darling," he said to his angry wife.

Nicolas looked at the king with horror on his face.

"You look like you see a ghost," the king said abruptly. "But I can assure you that I am alive and well and have gotten home safely, despite everything you have tried to arrange. Anyway, I'm still too upset to deal with you. The guards will take you to jail now. I will talk to you later. I really don't know what to do with you right now."

Nicolas lowered his head and didn't say a word. King David opened the door, and the guards, who were already ready there, led the young man to prison.

## **Chapter 2 - The Bible**

Bible! Of course. What else could one expect from the king? Nicolas sat on the dirty straw mat, looking reluctantly at the two objects that were laying next to him. One was a dirty woolen blanket and the other a Bible. He kept looking at the book for several hours, preoccupied with his thoughts. Although he had nothing to do in the cold cellar, his head was racing and he didn't need to do anything else. Despite the cold, he still hasn't touched the disgusting rag he was supposed to have to cover himself. He reluctantly ate a sauce full of thick meat, which he carefully prepared from it, and finally in the afternoon he opened the book. But not for himself. It occurred to him that if the king was a Christian and he would have to face him, he should also know something about his faith.

In the afternoon, he read Matthew's Gospel, then thoughtfully put the Bible down. He read about Jesus's life in such detail for the first time, and his words, miracles, life, and death were quite interesting in the end. But as he expected, it was all full of hellish flames, and he was disgusted.

Nicolas was playing with a rotting leaf he had found on the floor, thinking. It didn't make sense to him. Why should God, the creator of something as perfect and as thought-out as this small leaf, the tiny beetles or flowers that were Nicolas's passion, create people only to look at their endless suffering in the fire. He would have liked to see something else in it all, but it wasn't possible. The words of the Bible were relentless:

*...it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.. ( Mt. 5:29)*

*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Mt. 7: 13,14)*

*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Mt. 10:28)*

*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? (Mt. 23:33)*

Nicolas studied the Bible for several days. He did not know how long the king would keep him uncertain about his future. His favorite punishment was exile, and Nicolas could already imagine himself aboard a ship bound for America, wondering how he should live there. For now, however, he stayed in a damp cold cell and the king hasn't bothered to talk to him yet. The guards just silently gave him something to eat three times a day, and that was all.

It wasn't until Sunday morning that one of the guards brought him clean clothes, for which they had apparently sent to his home, he gave him a sink with water, and informed him that he would accompany him to the church in half an hour.

"I don't want to go to any church," Nicolas said in horror.

"You are a prisoner, no one asks you what you want," the guard snapped. "By order of the king, all prisoners go to church in handcuffs on Sundays to hear sermons and question their consciences."

The guard was obviously enjoying it. He looked at him mischievously for a moment, then added. "The king has ordered us to watch over you, but we do not have to handcuff you. In any case, if you hesitate, it could happen that this information will not reach me by mistake and that I will put it on you and shove you on the bench next to everyone else."

Nicolas swallowed, nodded that he understood, and began rummaging through the bag of clean clothes the guard had brought him.

Forty minutes later, he was already sitting in a full church, two rows in front of the guards, who had settled in the last row, pretending to come there alone and voluntarily. Although whether anyone saw that the armed men had accompanied him there or not was his least concern at the moment. As much as he appreciated the gesture, he would be much more interested in what was going through the head of a man in lavish attire sitting on the royal balcony. It was clear to him what was his wife thinking about. Annabel gave him one hostile look, then shook her head, turned to her husband, and it was clear from her occasional looks that she and the king were talking about him.

The preacher who spoke in the church was a man in his forties. He was quite funny, but Nicolas still rolled his eyes when he began to preach about how narrow the road to salvation is, how few people follow it, and how many end in eternal condemnation, and how wide the road to hell is. Anyway, as he kept muttering the word salvation, Nicolas began to think about what he knew from the Greek, and at the end of the sermon he became quite curious. When the service ended, he went to see the guy.

"Couldn't you get me a Greek New Testament?" He asked without further ado, barely greeting him. "I'd quite like to look at what the Bible says in the original."

"I just happen to have one at home," the preacher replied. "I once decided to learn Greek, but in the end I gave up. I don't use it at all, so I'll be happy to leave it to you. Would you like to stop on our farm or send someone for it?"

Nicolas frowned. "I hate to say it, but I'm the king's prisoner right now," he sighed. "Could you send it to prison after someone? I can't even pay you for it now."

"Are you Count Nicolas Renard?" The preacher asked.

"Are the sparrows on the roof talking about this?" Nicolas asked grumpily.

The preacher shook his head. "My name is Jean and I think I'm one of the few people who knows about it. Do you have any idea what happened and what betrayed you?"

Nicolas shook his head.

Jean looked at him inquisitively. "I will visit you in prison tomorrow, bring you the Bible and tell you. I have free access there. I go there to visit prisoners regularly."

Nicolas ruffled his hair in embarrassment. "I've been stuck there for a few days now and I don't know what will happen to me. I have no idea how it goes there. They brought me clean clothes today, but I don't know if it's possible to write to someone at home and ask for some other things, for example?" He looked at Jean questioningly.

"We'll talk about it all tomorrow," Jean replied. "Is there anything specific you would need?"

Nicolas shrugged. "I'd welcome a clean blanket and something that won't make my stomach heave just when I look at it."

Jean talked to the young man for a while, and then Nicolas Renard reluctantly went to the guards. They let him out of the church on his own, but then they joined him right outside.

The king went curiously to see his friend, and Jean briefly described to him what they were talking about.

"Try to speak to him about faith, but bring him nothing but the Bible," the king told him. "I need to let him suffer a little more."

### **Chapter 3 - Jean's visit**

Jean and Nicolas met the next day in a special room that was part of the prison. It was dry and clean, there was a wooden table, and Nicolas was glad to have escaped again for a moment from the cold, damp cell in which he had been locked since last Wednesday.

"Unfortunately, they didn't let me bring you anything else," Jean said, pushing the Greek New Testament to Nicolas.

Nicolas nodded that he was acknowledging the information and looked sadly out the window. Spring was beginning outside, and he loved walking in nature. He hadn't been imprisoned for a week yet, and he could hardly bear it. He was frustrated by all the helplessness he wasn't used to, and by being so foolishly caught.

"How did he find out?" He asked grumpily. He couldn't even pronounce the word 'king'.

"I don't know if you've ever heard the king's story of becoming a Christian," Jean began broadly. (This story is described in the book "Returning Home.")

"We're all Christians, aren't we?" Nicolas said.

Jean shook his head. "I don't know if a Christian is for you the opposite word to gentile or pagan, in the sense of a barbarian, but not for me. Moreover, technically, according to the Bible, we are the Gentiles as the opposite of the Jews. But the word Christian means follower of Christ. Someone who belongs to Christ and acts according to his words. I don't know what you know about Christian teaching, but trying to kill a king is not very compatible with Christ's words about loving enemies."

Nicolas nodded that he understood what Jean was telling him, but he didn't comment. Jean took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He tried to suppress his anger. He saw no sign of remorse in the young count's expression, and he wanted to punch him. He needed to control himself so he could continue calmly.

"Anyway, I started talking about how King David became a Christian. When he was seventeen, he got very drunk and attacked an old preacher. Fearing that he had killed him and that he would be executed for it, he fled to Savoie at the time and worked for some time on a farm among Christians, just before the Waldensians were persecuted. At that time, God showed us in a concrete way that it was all a mistake. The old man was my father, and he had survived David's unfortunate attack, and David returned home and reconciled with everyone he had hurt. There were more of those things and I won't go into details, but I was one of those whom David met on that farm at the time. Another person was my father-in-law. We all stayed good friends and we settled here on the island. My father-in-law Lucas has been the main preacher at our church since my father died. I just help out there sometimes. In any case, Pastor Lucas accompanied the king on that voyage to Brest. When he saw the captain limping, he prayed for him and he was healed. That, of course, got his attention. It was only a matter of hours before he gave his life to Christ and confessed to everything. You fought not only against a man, but also against God. I'm not saying that God always protects Christians from everything at all times, but I have had enough experience that he does. After all, it was once with King David that I experienced how an angel saved us. The moment someone fired at us, a bright light suddenly appeared and threw us quickly away."

Nicolas listened to Jean in fascination. The fact that God could deal with people in a concrete and personal way was a novelty for him. On the other hand, it wasn't crucial for him at the moment. He was more worried about his immediate future.

"The king might be at least a little understanding when, after all, he also tried to kill someone and it didn't work out. Despite everything I've done, he's still alive," Nicolas thought aloud. "What can I expect from him? As his friend, you might have at least a little idea. I know he doesn't like executions and that he likes to send people into exile, so I'm kind of counting on it. But I don't understand why he didn't do it, I could have disappeared from his eyes a long time ago and not suffer in this cold hole."

"I don't know what to expect from him," Jean said, "but at the moment I'm trying to treat you like a Christian, not his friend. As a Christian, I would like to see everyone, including you, reconciled to God and transformed. As his friend, I'd rather slap you. He's a man I respect. He leads this country as best he can. He is a loving husband and a great father. And you would let him drown just because of your own ambitions. And worst of all, I don't see a single trace of remorse. You just regret yourself that you had not succeed and that you are in prison for it. There is a huge difference between you and David. What he did then was an unplanned affair. He did it in anger, and then he regretted it and wanted nothing more than forgiveness and reconciliation. Unlike him, you are calculating and cold-blooded, and you planned a deliberate murder, and all you care about is how to escape the consequences. To be honest, I don't see a single reason why the king should be merciful to you."

## **Chapter 4 - Proposal**

"I wasn't really considering exile," David confirmed when Nicolas was in his study the next day.

"Why not?" Nicolas asked in a strangled voice. "Do you want to imprison me somewhere or even execute me?"

"I do not want to execute you, but I take exile as a form of mercy, and at this point I see no reason why I should be merciful to you. In any case, I need time to think about it. I will tell you how I am going to punish you in a month's time."

"A month? Why?" Nicolas asked.

"Because I really don't know what to do with you right now," the king frowned.

"And I'm supposed to stay in that ugly cold hole all month, just to die like an animal somewhere in Basalte Fortress afterwards?" Nicolas looked anxiously out the window at the island, which served as a prison. "What will you get out of destroying me completely and stepping on me like on a worm? Feeling good about revenge? Can't you give me a chance to make something else out of my life under certain conditions?" He blurted out angrily, though David felt a clear anxiety in his voice. However, even the fact that Count Renard was afraid did not relieve him of his usual arrogance.

"The guards will take you back to prison now," David said, rising from his chair. Nicolas sat in front of him with handcuffs on hands, and the guards were waiting outside the door because the king wanted to talk to the young earl in private.

"No, please wait. I have an offer for you," Nicolas said urgently.

"I don't know what you could offer me," David frowned, heading for the door.

"Please at least listen to me," Nicolas tried to stop him, standing in his way. "Please."

"I'm surprised you know a word like that at all," David said, stopping just a short distance from him. He leaned his hand against the wall and reluctantly looked at Nicolas. "You cannot bribe me."

"I know," Nicolas nodded, "and it never occurred to me to offer you anything material. It's about the Bible. The preacher Jean lent me the Greek original. You should know that someone is lying to you. What is in your Bible is not the same as the original. I had a little time so far and I looked up just something, but I will say two words to you 'kolasin aionion'. Have you ever learned Greek at university? Do you know what that means?"

"I only learned the basics," David admitted. "So I don't know."

"These are the words in Matthew 25 about someone receiving eternal punishment or perhaps even being eternally tortured. In fact, one of those words is derived from pruning branches and the other from the word age or time. So it's really a temporary corrective punishment. But I would say that something like this doesn't suit the church very well. Fear is big business and a great way to control people and make money from them."

David looked at Nicolas in surprise. The young count got him. It seemed that he really had something to offer. David has always been upset about the whole idea of eternal punishment. He could not understand why would God, whose amazing presence and grace he sometimes felt, plan on the other hand, for those who did not acknowledge him, something as terrible as eternal torment.

"I understand you're mad at me and you won't let me go, but can't we cooperate at least a little?" Nicolas asked. "I see you're interested. I know I'm not very modest, but I've always been good at languages. This is not a boast, but a fact. If you want a month to think, in a month I'll be able to tell you about how many inconsistencies I found in the New Testament, and then I can start working on a new translation. At least I will have something to do. I would just like a slightly warmer and cleaner room where I will have a large table and plenty of daylight. And I'd appreciate also if I could get a few things sent from home. This is my offer. If you want to imprison me, give me at least a little more human conditions and I'll give you a better Bible. But I won't do it in some ugly dungeon in the fortress of Basalte."

"Well than," David nodded, seeing Count Renard relieved at the words.

A few moments later, the guards locked Nicolas in a guest room on the top floor of the castle. There were no bars on the windows, but the room was so high that if he tried to escape, he would kill himself. Over the next hour, they moved in a large desk, bringing him both Bibles, a stack of papers, and stationery.

Nicolas sat down in a comfortable armchair and looked around his new prison with relief. The room had a small separate bathroom, a comfortable bed, and there was a tiled stove that came in from the

hallway, and he could tell from the rumble that someone was just putting wood inside it even before he felt the heat.

Nicolas stepped to the window, opened it for a moment, and looked longingly into the vast royal garden, bounded by a stone. Behind it began a pine forest. About two kilometers behind the forest he saw the sea. It was a cold March, but after less than a week in the dungeon, he couldn't get enough of the sight. Finally, he closed the window with a sigh and pressed his back against the tiled stove.

Two hours later, the guard brought him a normal lunch. Nicolas bit into the roast chicken and bread with gusto, and after the meal sat down in the armchair with both Bibles on his lap.

"I will think of a biblical mystery that would put Scheherazade to shame," he said aloud. "Even if it wasn't really there."

In the end, however, he didn't have to invent anything. After a while, he began to compare the two Bibles angrily, then moved to his desk and began writing something furiously with a quill on paper.

## **Chapter 5 - Encounter**

Nicolas began to feel lonely after more than ten days in prison. He was quite happy to be in church again. He could at least see some people and watch them as they talk together, although in this moment he went unnoticed. The old woman on the bench in front of him said a few words to him a moment ago, and now she was talking with her friend about her grandchildren.

Nicolas listened secretly. "...Yes. Little Pierre, this is Anne's son, she could not have children for so many years, and then God told her that she would give birth to a son within a year, and we thought that nothing could happen to this miraculously promised child. And then he was so sick, and when he woke up, he told us what angels looked like. He's only four years old and he's such a smart alec. Do you know what he told me the other day..."

But Nicolas didn't find out, because the service had just begun. The preacher did not threaten with infernal flames this time. The man who was preaching was about sixty-five, and although he did not introduce himself, Nicolas assumed it was Pastor Lucas who had contributed to his imprisonment. He explained in great detail the condition of the fallen man. How he would like to change, but how he can't, how he longs for good, but does bad things that he doesn't even want to do himself. He then described how Christ would give such a person a new heart and change his inner desires. He showed it by example.

"Imagine such a fallen man as a tree planted somewhere in barren, stony soil without water. The tree cannot be transplanted by itself, nor can man rid himself of sin. This requires intervention from above. God is the one who can plant us in fertile soil and water us, and then we can bloom and bear fruit."

Nicolas watched him with narrowed eyes. The whole sermon was about him. Did they somehow agree on it and everyone conspired against him? A fallen man? Is that supposed to be him? There was certainly no one more fallen in the whole church.

At the end of the sermon, Nicolas walked down the aisle as if in a dream. His brain was arguing with his heart, a small part of his personality was reluctant to do so, but a stronger inner voice has won. He knew this was exactly for him and that he needed it.

"Lord Jesus Christ," he prayed with the preacher. "You know I'm sinful and I need you to change me. Please cleanse me from all my sins and change my heart. I want to follow you from now on and do whatever you want from me."



It was just a short prayer, but he meant it, and something happened. He felt as if he were in the middle of a warm stream of air, and he could feel God's presence and the fact that God could hear him.

He opened his eyes and for a moment felt as if he could see the world through God's eyes. He looked at King David and felt how much God loved him, and suddenly he felt a real indignation that there was someone who wanted to destroy all this divine purpose that the Creator himself had with David. He felt a burning anger to himself and at the same time he sensed the love God had towards him as well. It was as if someone had stamped him on the dust and lifted him up and hugged him at the same moment. For the first time, he felt an incredible regret over everything he wanted to do and a tremendous need to fix it.

He was standing during the first prayer but now he was on his knees. He was crying and staring at David with Annabel, oblivious to the fact that those two could see him too and that they had no idea what to think about it.

Pastor Lucas put his hands on his head and he prayed quietly with him for a long time.

"Thank you, thank you for stopping me," were the first words Nicolas said, when he stopped praying.

He wanted to go to the king and his wife, but found that they were no longer there and that he was kneeling in a half-empty church.

"Almost everyone has left," Pastor Lucas said softly. "And the guards are waiting for you."

Nicolas nodded. "Of course," he said, rising heavily. He didn't know how long he had been kneeling there, but his knees were aching.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Pastor Lucas offered.

Nicolas smiled. "I'd really like that."

That afternoon was warm and he sat for several hours on a windowsill, looking out and sucking in fresh air. He felt that it was not just the air that was clean, but everything. He sensed a kind of inner purity and the holy presence of God that tangibly surrounded him. For the first time in his life, he felt perfectly free and satisfied. And he didn't care at least for the moment that he was imprisoned. His soul was free.

## **Chapter 6 - Hell**

The king came to his room in the morning, and Nicolas knelt as soon as he saw him.

"Can you ever forgive me?" He looked at him pleadingly and David looked at him a little puzzled. This was a new Nicolas he didn't know.

"Would you like to sit down?" Nicolas pointed to the armchair. He himself stayed on his knees before the king, and not knowing how to begin better, he described to him everything he had experienced and felt the day before. "Will you ever forgive me?" He finished with the same question.

David nodded and looked at him seriously.

"But you realize, Nicolas, that things have consequences, don't you?" David asked. "Forgiving you doesn't mean I won't punish you."

"I wouldn't have dreamed of that," Nicolas looked at him. "Actually, I probably want you to punish me. Not that I want the punishment itself, but there is something right about being in your hands,"

he explained confused. "I feel it that way. I can't even say why, but somehow I internally accepted that it must be so."

David smiled and nodded. "I see why you can't describe it. This is the first time for you and you have no more experience with it yet, but I myself have experienced a similar feeling many times. The moment one obeys God, it fills him with peace. And until he does the right thing that comes to his mind or is willing to do so, he has no peace. On the contrary, he has a rather relentless feeling. And even in the smallest things. Sometimes I just grumpily say something to someone and I feel like I won't have peace until I fix it. And the second thing is that God says quite clearly in the Bible that people should submit to authorities and respect their rulers and this is the order of the world. It does not mean any exaggerated slave obedience or the fact that one cannot oppose such authorities in certain cases, but perhaps God is showing you the need to acknowledge this."

Nicolas nodded. During David's speech he sat cross-legged, leaning his back on the desk.

"I feel that God wants me to accept whatever you say without grumbling," he said, staring at the floor. Then he sighed, looked at David, and asked in a tight voice. "Have you thought about what you're going to do with me?"

David originally wanted to punish the young count really hard. But when Nicolas looked at him with the puppy's gaze, he softened. Something had changed and that was what David wanted in the first place. He felt that he no longer needed to be punished harshly, but rather at the moment he wanted to test him a bit and find out how he would continue to behave. Even though he saw God's peace in him, which he could hardly pretend, he still wanted it all to be a real life lesson for him. If he should be forgiving, then certainly not right away.

"I still need that time to think," David replied, "and now all the more so."

"Okay," Nicolas nodded. "I will not ask again. I fully understand."

"Did you come up with anything else in the Bible?" David changed the subject.

Nicolas nodded. "There's more, but to begin with, I'm surprised that the word hell are actually two completely different Greek terms. One word is the 'Hades', it is quite clear, although I was a little surprised that there is a word in the Bible that is used for the underworld in Greek mythology. But maybe it's just me who has it so intensely connected, because I had Greek literature as one of the main subjects. The second word confuses me a bit, it is written 'geenna' and it doesn't tell me anything. "Ge" is a Greek word for a county or region, I first thought if it was a geographical name, something like Enny's land, but I don't know if there is anyone in the Bible named Enna. But even though I don't know what it should be, it surprises me that the reader doesn't have the slightest chance of finding out that there are two different terms. I would be quite interested in what was used in the languages that these people spoke. I guess it was Aramaic at the time, and I don't even know the difference between Aramaic and Hebrew."

"Gehenna," David thought. "I think I've heard the word in this form, that it had something to do with the lake of fire at the end of the book of Revelation. But I'm not sure. Anyway, I know that there is a word 'sheol' in Hebrew, and it must be one and the same expression for the idea of hell as such. After all, somewhere at the beginning of the book of Acts, the apostle Peter quotes the Old Testament, a Psalm that says, "you will not leave my soul in hell ..." David found that place, handed Nicolas the Bible and pointed to Acts 2:27: „Because you will not leave my soul in hell, neither will you suffer your Holy One to see corruption.“ (AKJV)

Nicolas reached for the Greek Bible, then settled back on the floor. "Here's the word 'Hades'," he said after a moment's search. "So that proves to us that Hades is the same as Old Testament's sheol. I suppose somewhere in the Old Testament there must be some long passage about what the

sheol or hell is, what people awaits there, and how to avoid it. Where would I find it? I should probably read the whole Bible as soon as possible to have the general picture."

David frowned thoughtfully. "There is no such thing in the whole Old Testament. In fact, I can't think of a single chapter where anything about hell is written. The word as such is certainly there, but it is nowhere in connection with torture, fire or eternity."

Nicolas looked surprised. "I thought the whole Bible was about getting to heaven and avoiding hell. I'd expect a long list, or a warning like this: if you do this, the devils will drag you to hell and fry you there."

"A long list, a warning," David repeated, opening Chapter 28 of Deuteronomy. "That's here," he said, handing him the Bible. "And it could be summed up in one sentence: Nothing you touch will succeed. There is not a word about hell."

"Isn't that a little weird?" Nicolas shook his head. Then he looked hesitantly at the king. "I'm quite wondering what it's all about. On that divine level as well as on the earthly level. It is not a very pleasant task for a prisoner to think from morning to evening about the nature and purpose of punishments, but there are two areas I am considering.

One level is more of a revenge. And so I would see eternal hell. Firstly, I see no justice in that. Even if someone was a brutal murderer who would torture someone for three hours and then kill him, what does that make of God, if he will torture the murderer forever as a punishment? Whether personally or through some devils. And whether it was a real physical agony or just mental suffering, it's still inadequate. God would be worse in my eyes than that killer. It would be disproportionate, unjust, and would only indicate his power, but not his character. And I can imagine the reaction. I would hate such a God, and if I found myself in such a place, I could just swear and curse in rebellion against him. And even if I found myself in heaven and knew that there was such a place of eternal torment somewhere, I would be afraid of God. I would like to be not there, but in the presence of such a cruel God, I would still not be sure of anything.

On the other hand, a temporary meaningful corrective punishment is something completely different. And I think, for example, that the word 'kolasin', which I have already told you about, is more of a remedy. But of course it doesn't sound like that in the translation. If you fix something, you fix it until it is fixed. Then it's okay. So the remedy must be temporary by the logic of the matter. And I see it there. Temporary remedy. But when someone translates the word 'aionion' as eternal, then he will also miss the fact that the second word has a corrective character. In any case, it would say something much more positive about God.

If I take it in relation to you, I expect some punishment, but the milder it is going to be, the more grateful I will be and I will love you for it in a way. But a harsh or cruel punishment would certainly harden me in some way. I do not know the relationship between that correction and justice on that human level. I have really met God and now I see everything differently, I am no danger to you, but I still know that some punishment must come. And it's a stupid paradox. I feel like a new person who will be punished for the old man's mistake. On the other hand, if I didn't make the mistake, I wouldn't be the new person. What I experienced yesterday is worth the prison. I just hope you let me do something useful all the time."

"I definitely plan to," David agreed, leaning in. "Anyway, I would like you not to make any false hopes. I just won't let you go any soon."

"I know, I'm such an idiot," Nicolas muttered barely audibly, hiding his face in his hands.

David got up to leave. For a moment he was almost sorry for the young count, and he wanted to tell him what he was up to, but only one day had passed since Nicolas humbled himself before God. David wanted to see what further changes in his behavior it would bring, and decided that Nicolas could handle a few weeks of waiting.

"Is there anything else you need for work?" David asked in the doorway.

Nicolas raised his head and looked longingly through the window for a moment. "There is one such thing, but I'm almost afraid to say it," he said hesitantly.

David leaned against the fur and waited.

Nicolas got up from the ground and walked over to him. "I don't want you to think I'm rude," he said. "I spend hours with books, I'm completely stiff. At times, I can't think at all. Couldn't Pastor Lucas take me out this afternoon? I need to stretch a little. You have my word that I will never try to run away until you let me go."

"Shall I let you take a walk?" The king asked. "Do you know what is a difference between a home and a prison? First you want a better room, and then you want to go out. Do you know why it's called prison? Because a person is punished by staying somewhere he doesn't want to be."

Nicolas lowered his head. "I'm sorry," he muttered barely audibly. "Forget it."

David laughed and put his hand on his shoulder. "Look at me, Nicolas."

Nicolas looked him reluctantly in the eye.

"Actually, I'm teasing you a little," David said. "I understand that you must be numb. If it helps you at work, the guards will take you out for an hour or two every day. But on the other hand, I would like you to realize that the way I meet your needs is a real favor."

"Yes, sir," Nicolas agreed.

"Are you trying to impress me?" David asked, not used to Nicolas being so respectful.

"Sure, sir," said Nicolas. "I have no other option."

Then he sighed and added, "You don't even know how sorry I am. I would do anything to fix it somehow and I would give everything in the world for me to turn back time. I apologize again for everything. There is something else I want even more than just your forgiveness. I would like to gain your trust," Nicolas said, not daring to use the word "friendship".

David looked at him inquisitively, "Trust takes time, Nicolas. Only time will check everything."

Nicolas looked thoughtful. "This is it. I like to box things, but I forgot one box. I thought it was either a corrective punishment or revenge, but it's actually a test. After all, it's not just about the person involved. I've said it myself before, but now I'm starting to see it. It doesn't just test the one who passes the test, it actually tests the examiner as well. That the one who is to be punished may find out something about the one who is punishing him. The punishments show something about God, it's not just about those people who are going to be punished. That's why the idea of hell always seemed so weird to me. Who, then, would be God? If it were a time-limited remedial punishment, he would certainly be wise, loving, trustworthy, kind, and he would first and foremost be able to gain the love and obedience of all the people he created and not just get rid of those he cannot deal with. That's why I was so upset. Someone who takes revenge only from the position of his power and strength is actually weak, and hell not only shows no positive character trait, but also no ability to cope better with it all. Does it make sense that it's also a test?" Nicolas asked.

"Of course it makes sense, Nicolas," David said. "And that's why it's so hard to decide not to be disproportionate and for the punishment to serve its purpose."

Nicolas looked at David with a sigh. He was talking about God, but he realized that it also applied to what was happening between the two of them.

"I have to go," David said, "but I will stop by again. Pastor Lucas will come to lunch, then I'll talk to him and have them sent for you. I think he'll be happy to take you out, at least he won't have to climb all those stairs to you."

"Thank you again," Nicolas said, smiling at his king.

## Chapter 7 - Metaphor

David thoughtfully went to see Annabel to describe her conversation with Nicolas.

"I've been a Christian for seventeen years," he said with a sigh, "that's exactly half of my life. And all the time I envy people who have a deep personal relationship with God and are thus sure of his love and presence. I always feel it for a few days and I always lose it again. Sometimes I even wrote down on paper what I was going through in those days, but then it always sounded empty to me. It was always something like saying that God was really with me and that he loved me, but I lived it those days, there was life in those words, and in retrospect it was always like an empty poem about love. And then comes an arrogant rascal like Nicolas, he repents, and the next day he tells me things that I haven't realized in seventeen years of living with God. Would you believe that?"

"I definitely know how much you hate it when Pastor Lucas sometimes talks about God as a Papa. You always look like you're going to get measles out of it," Annabel said.

"Um," David agreed. "Nicolas has given me new hope. If there was a chance it was all different, it would be absolutely amazing. You know, the last few days I sometimes wake up at night feeling like I'm flying or jumping high with joy, and then in that dream I'm always frightened that I'm so high in the air and that I'm going to fall. It's a strange feeling."

"I wish he was right, too," Annabel admitted. "But it would be easier for me if someone else told us those things. I'm still pretty mad at Nicolas, even though I'm trying to forgive him. I'd still like to see him in some dirty dungeon, crushed and humiliated."

"But that's what it's about," David said, "that it doesn't work that way. He had been in a dirty dungeon for a few days, and he might have been a little scared, but he still acted like an idiot. The only thing that really changes people is repentance and conversion to God. Today he was crushed and humiliated, but not by the power of some of my punishments, but by God's intervention. You'd have to see him look at me."

"Don't you dare soften and let him go," Annabel said. "I think we had agreed on something."

David looked at her thoughtfully. "I want to discuss this in the coming weeks with Pastor Lucas and Jean too. I'll see what they tell me when they talk to him. Anyway, if he succeeded then, you would suffer the most, so we have to agree on how to punish him together."

Annabel smiled contentedly.

"It'll be lunchtime soon," David said, rising from the couch. "Come here to me and give me a hug."

Annabel hugged him. "Just enjoy it as long as you can," she said.

David stroked her belly. "Our fifth princess?" He said teasingly.

"Don't make fun of me," Annabel replied. "I told you God showed me he was a boy."

David pulled her close again and buried his head in her hair. "Sometimes it bothers me so much that I have to deal with something all the time and make many difficult decision. What if I didn't do anything else today and we would go for a walk to the sea when Pastor Lucas went to visit Nicolas. Just the two of us?"

"The three of us," Annabel corrected him, touching her belly.

Nicolas got up at dawn and was tired of all the reading, so after talking to the king, he lay down for a while and fell asleep without intending so. He had a strange dream. It seemed to him that he was

sitting in the corridor of the university, preparing for some Greek exam. He felt his stomach tighten. He was always nervous about rehearsals and wasn't sure if he knew enough. Finally the door opened and an examiner came out into the hallway. It was Jesus. He was wearing a bright white robe, and that seemed a little inappropriate in the university building.

"Are you coming to me for an exam?" Jesus asked. Nicolas found it strange. He stood up heavily and nodded.

Jesus smiled warmly at him and said, "Come in."

Nicolas entered a room full of books, where two chairs stood. Jesus sat down, pointed to the other chair, then leaned forward, took both of his hands in his, and smiled again.

"You're probably very nervous, aren't you?" He asked. "But don't worry, I won't bite you. We're going to talk about what you know about Plato and how he used metaphors."

"About Plato?" Nicolas asked. "Do you know Plato, Jesus?"

Jesus laughed. "Of course I know him. I know everyone."

Jesus was still holding his hands, and that reassured him a little.

"Plato's metaphors," Nicolas began to recall. "Like the word *basanos* - a *touchstone*. Expressions with a touchstone were a common metaphor. Instead of saying that something was tested, it was said to put it on a touchstone.(1) I can think of at least two places where Plato uses it in the dialogues.(2) There is a question: would you be thankful for a touchstone of courage or cowardice of your citizens? Or it is said there: This rightly becomes the first and finest touchstone for human beings, whereas all those that are not genuine but pretend to be so involve everyone in the vainest labor of all."

(1) <http://sas.ujc.cas.cz/archiv.php?lang=en&art=35>,

(2) Notes in The Christian Victory Bible, The Total Victory of Christ

"Right," Jesus nodded. "Now tell me something about how the word 'basanos' is used in the Bible."

Nicolas looked at Jesus in surprise. "I have no idea. I haven't had time to get there yet. There is so much."

Jesus smiled. "It does not matter. So I'll give you an alternate date and we'll talk about it again in maybe two weeks. What do you say?"

"Are you throwing me out of rehearsal?" Nicolas swallowed hard. "I know a lot about other Plato's metaphors. For example, how he uses the word means and a war machine."

"I'd like you to answer what I asked you," Jesus said. "You know, Nicolas, all you care about is the result, that you have it over with, but it's not that important. It's really about learning something, and we have plenty of time for that. If you don't know today, nothing happens. The test is not just about me finding out what you have learned. It's for you too. It sets the mirror for you. If you didn't take it as a mistake and a loss, you would see more that each test is your feedback on how you are doing. You have the opportunity to realize and clarify a lot of things. The test is not a punishment, as you understand it. It is, in a sense, a help for you."

Jesus got up and Nicolas got up too. Jesus pulled him close and hugged him. Nicolas sighed and spoke heavily. "It's easy to tell if you've never messed up."

Jesus laughed. "I never sinned," he corrected him. "But that doesn't mean I didn't have to learn anything and that I never spoiled a thing. Being a carpenter was not the same as a carpenter today. We often made the roofs of buildings, for example, but we also made some furniture. You should see what the first cabinet I made looked like. Joseph left it in the workshop and put tools in

it, because it was not good for anything else. When he saw it, he looked at me and said, 'And did heaven really send you here? You don't seem to have any idea how to use a saw.'"

Nicolas smiled. "I feel a little better right now," he said.

Jesus led him out into the hallway where his classmate Alain was sitting.

"Did you pass it?" Alain asked, despite Jesus standing in the doorway listening.

Nicolas shook his head.

"Well, then there is no use for me to try it," Alain said. "I'm completely blank, my main language is Hebrew."

"Just come on, Alain," Jesus said. He closed the door behind Alain and the sound woke Nicolas.

A little confused, he sat on the bed. What woke him up was really a door, but a real one. One of the guards brought him lunch. He gave him a nasty look, as if it bothered him that Nicolas was in bed during the day, but he said nothing. He set the food on the table and left again.

Nicolas still had some time to meet with Pastor Lucas, so he found the book of Revelation. The king told him something about the lake of fire at the end of this book, so he read the last few chapters. Then he reached for the Greek Bible and looked at verse Revelation 14:11. He shook his head and sighed.

Then he looked out the window a little thoughtfully. Alain Leroy. Where is the end of him and where could he get his address? A Hebrew expert might be able to answer some of his questions.

## **Chapter 8 - Gehenna**

"Gehenna," Pastor Lucas said thoughtfully, sitting down on a garden bench and flipping through the Bible. "You are close and wrong at the same time. It does not come from the Greek word region, but from the Hebrew word *gay*, which means valley. It should be the Valley of Hinnom, it is often referred to as the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, that is gay ben Hinnom. The place is mentioned here," said the pastor, handing Nicolas a Bible, opened in the seventh chapter of the Prophet Jeremiah.

Nicolas scanned the text, then read verse 31 aloud. "And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind."

He looked questioningly at the pastor. "When, in particular, did God change his mind? Is there anything written about it?"

"Change his mind about what?" Pastor Lucas asked. "I don't think God is changing his mind."

"It's clearly written here that he wouldn't think of burning someone in a fire. And a few centuries later, in the New Testament God obviously thinks it's a perfect idea and doesn't talk about anything else as it seems. Anyway, why is the Valley of Hinnom a real place on earth here, and it became hell in the New Testament? Where is any justification for this?"

"I know some people don't consider Gehenna to be hell," the pastor remarked. "There is one verse from Isaiah. Here 66:24: 'And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.' This verse is quoted in the place where Gehenna is spoken of and is

translated as hell, but I know that in Isaiah there is talk of corpses. On the other hand, something else is being said about being thrown into Gehenna after death."

"The king told me that Gehenna could be a lake of fire in the book of Revelation. Is there a text in the Bible that connects the places?" Nicolas continued.

"I don't know of any such verse, but there is fire in both places," said the pastor.

"Ah, so if I find a sentence in the Bible that a fire broke out somewhere in a valley and someone went there and fell into it, should I correctly translate that he fell into a fire in hell or into a lake of fire?" Nicolas asked sarcastically.

"So you intend to correct or re-translate the New Testament?" The pastor suggested. "I wonder what it will be like."

"You might call it the Criminal's Bible," Nicolas joked. "In any case, even though no other translator was probably a criminal who would work on something similar in prison, I have another great advantage over those people, and that is a great knowledge of classical literature. Today I was looking at the passage about the lake of fire and that sulfur hit me completely in the eye. Have you ever wondered why sulfur is mentioned there?"

"I think of hell as a disgusting stinking hole," said Pastor Lucas. "Sulfur stinks a lot, doesn't it? So that's about all I know about it. Literally, I know that the place of eternal torment is not hell, but a lake of fire, but people still speak of the eternal torment as a hell. Hell and death are to be thrown into the lake of fire, and in its description it is essentially the same, because both are places of fire and eternal torment."

"Ulysses probably had quite strange taste when he said in Homer's *Odyssey*, 'Bring me sulphur, which cleanses all pollution, and fetch fire also that I may burn it, and purify the cloisters . . . First light me a fire,' replied Ulysses. She brought the fire and sulphur, as he had bidden her, and Ulysses thoroughly purified the cloisters and both the inner and outer courts."

Pastor Lucas looked at him questioningly.

"It's just that this is the first thing that came to my mind when I read the words fire and sulfur, moreover in connection with the word 'basanos' - a touchstone."

"And what in the world is the touchstone? What is it good for?" Pastor Lucas asked. "There are no touchstones anywhere in the Bible."

"They are not, but maybe they should be," Nicolas replied. "The touchstone is a tool for testing the purity of gold, gold melted in fire and refined with sulfur, to be exact. If you have a sentence in which you mention that you are going to milk and have a bucket, everyone will understand that you want to get milk from the cow. And I think that every refiner or goldsmith who hears that you have a touchstone, fire and sulfur will think that you are going somewhere to melt, purify and test something.

I have noticed that in Revelation 14:11 there is a word that could be translated as a test by a touchstone. As far as I know, the verb related to this word was used for interrogation, which could be associated with torture, but only for slaves, not for free people. In any case, the goal was to find out the truth and not some nonsensical torment. Of course, I'll have to look at all this properly. I don't want to deny that in some senses it is associated with a certain amount of pain and effort, but I would still be careful to translate it as torment. I'm definitely sure that the touchstone was figuratively used as a metaphor for other tests, and I'd rather lean towards the translation that those people are going through a test in the age of ages."

"There is forever and ever," Pastor Lucas corrected him.



"Certainly not," Nicolas said angrily, continuing, "'Aion' means age, it's a time-limited noun. I would be able to give you a complete list of places where the word is used in the Bible itself as a time-limited period. Anyway, eternity is something that shouldn't have a beginning or an end if I'm not mistaken. And there cannot be two eternities. This word is used quite commonly in the plural. And the word 'aionion' is derived from it, which is often translated in the Bible as eternal. And the news for me is that it should be translated that way. This is not the case in ancient literature. I can think of a passage where Plato says that when the aionion intoxication is over, souls leave the infernal regions. (3) The Greek word for eternal is 'aidios'. While everywhere in the Bible there is the word 'aionion' when speaking about punishment. I can't think of one word now to express what 'aionion' is, but I would say time-during, maybe even temporary, but it's probably not that accurate. It's just a few twisted words, but just the essential ones. I really want to make a completely new translation from the original and rather not be fooled by what someone has written elsewhere."

(3) Bible Threatenings Explained by J.W. Hanson, p. 88

Pastor Lucas listened in silence and looked at him inquisitively. "Be careful, Nicolas. Realize that you are playing with God's word."

"I'm not playing with it. Of course, I almost don't know the Bible, I haven't read the whole New Testament yet, but I feel like someone else was playing with it. It occurs to me that the people who translated it sometimes sat down and wondered what Jesus might have meant? And then they wrote there what occurred to them and not what really is there. It seems to me as if Jesus had said for fun that if his disciples teased him, that he would pull them by the ears, and a thousand years later the sentence would be that if someone dislikes his words, he will become deaf as evidence of God's wrath. After all, there is talk of the end of the age in Matthew 13 or 24, and I do not see a single reason why it should be translated as the end of the world. After all, it may well relate to the end of the time that Jesus is talking about there, but these small and unnecessary changes are confusing. If we should be consistent, so why not translate it as the end of eternity?" Said Nicolas jokingly. "Other times they translate the word as eternity. Nowhere is there talk of eternal punishment, the word I have just explained to you is everywhere. After all, the Greek knew the idea of eternal torture and put it in the words 'adialeipton timoria' – which means never-ceasing torment or by the words 'aidios timoria' – eternal torment. (4) If Bible writers wanted to be accurate and reassure their readers that they really mean endless torment, why not use the term? I've only been digging into it for a few days, and I have to say I'm getting dizzy. I just knew Christ, but I'm not really sure how credible the Church's teaching is."

(4) Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years by J.W. Hanson

"It might be useful that you are so untouched by what people think and you can look at it freshly," Pastor Lucas said thoughtfully.

"I didn't mean to offend you," Nicolas reassured a little. "I'm grateful you came to see me at all, that I could be out for a while, and I'm still not alone."

"I'm glad you're happy to see me," Pastor Lucas smiled, "despite the fact that it was I, in a way, who got you behind bars."

Nicolas sighed. "Only my own stupidity got me behind bars, and I absolutely deserve it."

"Anyway, the local orphanage thanks you for the new roof, and the brothers who work on it thank you for the well-paid job they have because of your charity."

"That's nice," Nicolas nodded when he learned how the money he'd given the captain had ended. "After all, it was just a deposit, maybe it would be right for the rest of the amount I promised him to go for similar purposes, but I don't know how I will be able to dispose of my property now."

Then he smiled. "Yesterday in that church, I thought you had prepared the sermon for me. It wasn't until the afternoon that I read the letters to the Romans and the Corinthians and realized that it was about the general condition of a fallen man."

Pastor Lucas laughed. "You don't even know how many times in my life people have thought that someone was telling me something about them, but sometimes God shows me what to say and only he knows who will be affected."

Nicolas thought for a moment, then looked pleadingly at the pastor. "Do you think you could do something for me?"

"What should it be?" Pastor Lucas wanted to know.

"Could you visit three young ladies and tell them what happened? Two of them are my sisters and the third is a farmer's daughter, she is pregnant and she is not my wife. Please tell them everything and also that I am very sorry. I would like you to tell them a few words about how to know Christ. My manager should know about it too, even though he doesn't need any further instructions, let him do everything as before. And to Nina, the pregnant girl who wanted nothing more than to marry me, you can say that if she wants to marry a criminal who doesn't know how long he's going to be in prison, I'm all hers. She will definitely be excited. I've been thinking so much of a way to get rid of her, and I think she'll be happy to be able to get rid of me now. Anyway, I think if she wanted me, I'd be quite happy in the end."

"Maybe it won't be so bad," said the pastor. "You will soon know what will happen next, and then the young lady will be able to make a decision."

"I'd really like to see the baby," Nicolas admitted. "And I'd like his name to be David, if it's a boy. Could you tell her?"

"David?" Pastor Lucas asked in surprise.

Nicolas nodded. "I appreciate the way he treats me. I'm really sorry we didn't know each other any other way. It would be an honor for me to count him among my friends."

"All right, I'll be happy to do it for you," said Pastor Lucas. "Although if I can give you one piece of advice, some women don't like it very much when men are always longing for sons. And it's even worse when they show it when the baby girl is born and their wife has had a long delivery. As nice a gesture as it is, I would skip it in your place at the moment."

"Then tell her what you want," Nicolas replied.

"I'd like to pray for you before we say goodbye," Pastor Lucas suggested, then handed Nicolas to the guard, who had been watching them from afar.

## **Chapter 9 - Jean**

"And isn't it just that you're making up non-existent problems here to avoid jail?" Jean asked in an awkward tone two weeks later.

Nicolas frowned a little. "I admit that it occurred to me for a while, before I experienced that God touched me, but I don't have to invent anything. There are many problems and they are real."

Jean looked upset. "Isn't it a little strange that for centuries all translators have expressed everything in the same words and suddenly you come and have a different view of everything? Do you think all the other Bibles are fake and your only will be the real one? I don't want to remind your actions to you, but has God really not been able to look after it? None of those pious translators understood that, and then- "

"And then comes a criminal who studied ancient literature and Greek and sees a lot of things differently?" Nicolas asked mildly. "Please try to detach yourself from who I am for a moment, Jean. You're right, when I'm done with the job, it will look like there are two Bibles side by side. One of them will be quite different, and you could certainly say that one is fake, if you will. But which one? Try not to judge it on the basis of tradition or my character, but only on the basis of facts. It is not that there is no other such Bible. This problem has existed for much longer. I also have the Latin Vulgate with me, and there are the things about the lake of fire translated, as I say. There is a word for a small lake and there is definitely not forever. There is the term 'saecula saeculorum', and that is a limited period of time."

"Even if you think of something about the lake of fire," Jean frowned at him, "you will never cancel dozens of verses that the way to salvation is narrow, that only those who believe and be baptized will be saved and many others. Salvation is not for everyone. From your talk of the lake of fire, it sounds as if God has finally purified and taken everyone, and that is a dangerous delusion. If that were the case, it would be completely useless to do anything here on earth. In that case, I could stop all that preaching and spend more time with my family."

"Is the result really all that matters? Isn't it also about the journey itself?" Nicolas asked.

"I think the journey is definitely a little less important than the outcome," Jean frowned.

"Really?" Nicolas said. "Jesus is the King of kings, and according to you, it doesn't matter if a person reaches the final destination as his friend and if he is rewarded, or if he will be there as an enemy awaiting punishment, that is, if Jesus eventually accepts him anyway. I can tell you from what I'm going through now that it does matter. I quite envy you for your relationship with the king. You consider our earthly king to be your friend, while I am locked up here, waiting for him to punish me. What if it's the same with Jesus?"

"What you're saying is nonsense," Jean replied. "Because then the Jesuits and the torturers of the Inquisition, along with their victims, could be saved. And that doesn't sound very fair to me."

"I thought salvation was an undeserved grace to all," Nicolas said. "And when I say all, why does once the word all means everyone and the second time not when it is written, that in Adam all died and in Christ all will be made alive. All died in Adam, so it should be the same all who will then live in Christ, right? If you read a sentence that everyone is going to the garden, then it must be written there, for example, everyone, except Jean, went to the garden, so that it was clear that it was not really everyone."

"Nicolas, you can't take the Bible like that. You have barely read the New Testament for the first time, and you have only a general impression. You take one sentence from one epistle and build on that a teaching. You have to know everything and be able to put it together. In one letter you will find that Christ died for all, and elsewhere you will read that only he who confesses Christ will be saved. When you put it together, it's clear that he will save those who confess him as their Lord."

"How did those people do it then?" Nicolas said. "As far as I know, the Bible is not a book. These are letters that were not written in one place at the same time. Did someone in Corinth read that everyone would live in Christ, then wait twenty years, travel somewhere to Rome to read another letter, and then finally put it together?"

"Really funny," Jean remarked, annoyed.

"I was interested in this topic, so now I will read you a few verses that I wrote only from Paul's epistles. Among other things, there is not a single mention of hell anywhere, except for one mention of temporary fire."

- *So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life. Rom. 5:18 (CVB)*

- *For it is written, "As I live," says the Lord, "to me every knee will bow. Every tongue will freely acknowledge God." Rom. 14:11*
- *As in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 1 Cor. 15:22*
- *He died for all, that those who live should no longer live to themselves, but to him who for their sakes died and rose again. 2 Cor 5:15*
- *Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil. 2:9-11*
- *For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him; and through him to reconcile all things to himself, by him, whether things on the earth, or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross. Col. 1:19, 20*
- *For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all; the testimony in its own times; 1 Tim 2:5,6*
- *For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we have set our trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. 1. Tim. 4:10*

"I could go on, but notice the last verse. God is the savior of all people, especially believers. This means that he is still the savior of another group that is not explicitly mentioned there, probably unbelievers."

"Is this in the Bible?" Jean frowned, reading the last verse in astonishment. Then he shook his head. "You have to take it in the context of the whole New Testament anyway. God is not the savior of all. He is a potential savior, but he will not save a lot of people in the end."

"By that context, you mean that you cannot put it in the box of your imagination?" Nicolas replied. "You have a superior idea that God is not the savior of all, and you will interpret everything accordingly. But it can be done the other way around. If I have the superior idea that God will save everyone, I will understand your favorite sentence about the narrow path this way: the path that leads to the good life is narrow and few people have enough sense to follow it, while the path to self-destruction is broad and lot of idiots follow it. I think you're talking to one of them right now. After all, even in the 5th Book of Moses, there is a whole list of bad things that will fall on people if they do not obey God, and I would dare to say that a lot of evil does not fall on people so that an invisible hand appears from heaven to beat them for what they did. The bad things are punishment in themselves, they have consequences. When you jump off a high rock, you kill yourself, and when you tease a bad dog, it bites you."

Jean just shook his head. He was running out of arguments, but he was getting quite upset.

"People in Jesus's day obviously had their ideas of what the Messiah should look like," Nicolas continued. "It seems that they expected political Messiah and did not understand Jesus much. What if even today the Church does not understand him as much as it thinks?"

"Well, it's great that you understand him," Jean snapped.

"Look, Jean, it can be seen from almost every single epistle that reconciliation is for all, while in most there is no indication that it is just for someone. If, in your opinion, Jesus kept talking about saving only someone, and Paul was talking about saving everyone, then Paul was saying something completely different from Jesus. From the logic of the matter, one could assume that Jesus meant

something else, when Paul did not understand him that way and he did not need to scare people with hell."

"But Jesus warned against hell, and he is our authority!" Jean was angry.

"Jesus spoke several times about the Valley of Hinnom, but he mentioned hell very little. He just said something like Capernaum, you'll be thrown into hell. One would almost expect some teaching on hell, especially if it is a new idea that is not in the Old Testament. And I have to say, it's a little weird. For thousands of years this notion of hell has not been known, then the angel proclaims great joy to all people that a Savior has been born to them, who will announce to them that he will save them under certain conditions and otherwise hell awaits them. How many people really know Christ? According to you, perhaps only a few percent of the population of this planet would be saved."

Nicolas deliberately found the place and recited it to Jean in a modified version. "The angel told them, 'Fear, I bring you a terrible message that will make all people panic. For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Judge, who is Christ the Lord. And that's how you know it. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly, many other heavenly angels appeared beside the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in heaven and on earth terror among men, God will finally deal with them and there will be justice.' Why didn't the angel give them a lecture about the fact that there is such a thing as a hell of fire and what is happening there? They could not know from the texts of what we call the Old Testament today."

"But Jesus later gave such a lecture to the people," Jean said. "That teaching is there in the story of the rich man and Lazarus."

"Yaeh, but even there, something completely different happens than the translations say," Nicolas said. "The rich man is not tortured, those expressions mean something else. And there is the word from Revelation again."

"What would Christ warn people about, if not hell?" Jean asked. "And what else but salvation from hell means that we are saved?"

"You see," Nicolas thought. "I have realized it just now, I'm talking here with you about the salvation as you are using the word, but the word 'sozo' is not a religious word. After all, Greek did not even know such a concept and Christianity was a new religion. If the New Testament writers meant by that word anything else than what it normally means, they would perhaps explain it in other words. But 'sozo' is to save, redeem, protect, heal, thrive, be cohesive, healthy, free from danger or destruction, injury or the threat of death, save the suffering and afflicted, or keep safe. We are still talking about 'salvation' here, and according to you, it means coming to heaven, and that is so religious as opposed to what the word means. I would have to take a closer look at how the word is used in the New Testament, but one specific clarification comes to mind. It says that Jesus will save people from their sins." (Mat. 1:21)

"And what do you think Jesus meant by telling the people save yourselves from that perverted generation and what fiery furnace did he warn people about, if not hell? Did he come to warn them that a great fire would break out somewhere in Judea?" Jean said irritably.

"Sure, that's it," Nicolas nodded enthusiastically. "Thank you, I haven't realized it before. Jesus spoke of the calamities that would befall that generation, and that generation largely perished in the fall of Jerusalem. That is why Paul said other things than Jesus. Because he told them to the Gentiles who were not affected."

"Why are we wasting time here together," Jean said instead of arguing again. "This is such nonsense. After all, the whole New Testament is not about destroying Jerusalem. What would be the significance of studying it here 1,600 years later? I don't think you understand God's plan of salvation at all, and you're not even willing to let it be explained to you."

"The plan of salvation?" Nicolas repeated. "Do you know that the word gospel means good news? What you're telling me is starting to seem more like an infernal plan."

"And you know everything about infernal plans, don't you?" Jean asked. "Now I understand why you feel like such an expert!"

Nicolas looked at Jean thoughtfully for a moment, but was too occupied by the discussion. He decided he deserved such a remark, so he didn't comment it.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" He continued. "I almost think you'd like to see these people in hell, don't you?"

"Most of all, I know where I'd like to see you," Jean snapped. "Closed for many years in the fortress Basalte. I also told this the king when he asked me for my opinion on what to do with you. It offends me that someone like you is trying to translate God's word. I understand these things and have been studying them since childhood. You accepted Christ two weeks ago and you have just opened the Bible, so forgive me if I say that you act as if you have eaten king's Solomon's shit. (This is a common Czech expression for a person who claims to know it all and I just need it here, although it can't be translated well.) I am fed up with you. No criminal who wanted to murder one of my friends a month ago will teach me about the God I serve my whole life!"

Jean slammed the door more noisily than he wanted, and Nicolas heard him not be able to lock it in anger for a moment. In the end, however, he dealt with the lock and hurried away.

## **Chapter 10 - The King's decision**

Nicolas paced the room for a moment to calm down. He was unable to read or pray. He opened the window and looked longingly outward. He realized that he had lost his walk by arguing with Jean. The guards usually went for him at two in the afternoon, but if he had an appointment at the same time, they expected someone else to take him out. Nicolas assumed they would not come again. But that was the least at the moment. He looked toward Basalte Fortress, wondering what might await him in the future. He knew it would be neither execution nor exile, but he had no idea how long his sentence would be.

He was surprised when an hour later the door opened. But it was not the guards, but the king. Nicolas jumped off the windowsill, closed the window, and looked at him hesitantly.

He seemed really angry. Nicolas didn't know what to say, he just greeted him and decided to let him speak first.

"Do you want to go out?" David asked abruptly.

"I'd love to," Nicolas nodded. "We just had a pretty awkward conversation with Jean, so I'd need to clear my head for a moment."

"I also had an awkward conversation with Jean," David said. "Actually, we had a real quarrel and I feel like kicking something."

The king for a moment stood his room and Nicolas was wondering if he really won't kick his table because he looked so upset. But David shook his head, opened the door wide and militarily commanded: "Let's go!"

David locked the door in excitement out of habit, though it was completely useless, put the key in his pocket, and took a brisk step toward the stairs. "I'm very upset," he admitted. "It seems to me that Jean is very thickheaded, but on the other hand I'm afraid we're really playing with fire and we're wrong. Can you briefly describe the main points of what you talked about together? I need to clarify this and compare it with his version."

Nicolas agreed and tried to summarize their conversation. It helped him calm down a bit when he could think logically about his arguments.

"It makes sense to me anyway," David said when Nicolas had finished. They walked here and there together in the garden, and David was diligently destroying a piece of weed that he had plucked by the road, making it the object of his wrath. "But yet our dear Jean just considers it to be his Christian duty to warn people in the Church about you and your views, in case they would talk to you," he said angrily. "Which, of course, warns people indirectly of me, because he can't afford to say that what the king thinks is stupid, so let no one talk about it with him."

"I spoke quite politely to him," Nicolas defended. "I just wanted to discuss it, but he seemed terribly upset."

"It's not your fault, Nicolas. I can imagine exactly what is going through his head. If the acceptance of Jesus is a matter of eternal life or eternal death, then every mistake is inadmissible and people need to be warned. So the truth, his truth, whether objective or subjective, is more important to him than people. And that's why I'm so upset in a way. I will not repeat to you what he told me, because it was not very polite, but I am angry that my friend is able to stab me in the back in the name of this truth, despite knowing me for seventeen years."

"I'm sure it couldn't be as bad," Nicolas joked. "According to Jean, I ate Solomon's shit, so you couldn't have had anything worse for lunch."

David laughed. "Not that it would be funny," he apologized. "I really don't know if I should be angry or laugh."

"I thought the church was a nice place where people were friendly," Nicolas sighed.

"Partly yes," David said, "and partly it's a place where people sometimes treat each other worse than unbelievers precisely because of their strange ideas about how things should be. They think that they have to correct each other in the name of love, and that annoys me. Unbelievers either love or dislike themselves, but in the church it sometimes seems to me that people can be nasty with a stupidly kind smile on their face."

David shook his head. He didn't want to be angry with Jean. He stopped and looked at Nicolas thoughtfully, then pointed to a nearby bench. "Let's sit down, shall we? I think it's time to tell you how I decided what would happen to you."

"Well, you can pull a person out of what's bothering him," Nicolas said, stunned. "I am no longer angry, but frightened. Especially if you consulted with Jean about what to do with me."

David looked at Nicolas and shook his head. "I've talked about you with different people, that's true. But what I'm going to tell you now is the decision of me and my wife. She would be most affected by what you wanted to do, so I took into consideration her opinion."

The king sat down on the bench and Nicolas followed in astonishment, then sat down, his head in his hands.

David leaned his elbow on the back of the bench, rested his head on his hand, and studied Nicolas for a moment. Nicolas straightened, raised his head, bit his lip, and stared into his eyes. After a moment, he averted his eyes before the king's searching gaze, but then regained the courage to look at him.

"Are you ready?" David asked softly.

Tears welled in Nicolas's eyes. "For a moment, I completely forgot who I was. It was like having two friends on the same side talking together," he said shakily.

Then he controlled himself, looked at David, and nodded.

"What you wanted to do will cost you ten years of your life, Nicolas," David said slowly.

Nicolas felt tears well up in his eyes again, ran a hand over his face, and repeated in astonishment. "Ten years in prison?"

After a moment, he nodded silently, but did not look at David again.

"I know I deserve it," he said in a strangled voice. "It's just that I feel so lonely. I talk to you perhaps for an hour a week. And now Jean certainly won't come to see me either. I tried to talk to the guard who takes me for walks for a while, but he sent me to hell. He told me to walk and not bother him with my words. I pray for hours, but it's not the same as talking to a person. I even talked to my picture in the mirror yesterday morning."

David put his hand on his shoulder. Nicolas finally looked up.

"You don't listen to what I'm telling you at all, Nicolas," David said. "You twist my words almost like the translators you're angry at. I did not say ten years in prison, but ten years of life."

Nicolas looked at David questioningly. David saw how anxious the young man was and that he was trying hard not to cry.

"Try to calm down a little and listen to me, okay?" David said mildly, smiling at him. "You will be imprisoned, in the same sense as now, for a year. And here, basically under the same conditions as before. I want to keep an eye on you, and I'm really interested in what you're working on. But I'll allow you some more visits so you don't go crazy here and talk to the pictures in the hallway, okay?"

Nicolas nodded and looked at David curiously. He didn't dare interrupt him. He could barely breathe as he anxiously awaited what the king would say next.

"Your status and wealth remain with you," David continued, "although we have taken some steps to ensure that you cannot become the heir to the throne in the case that something happens to me. Although I assume you have already sobered up from such desires."

"Of course," Nicolas said softly. "I'm really glad nothing happened to you. And once again, I want to ask you for forgiveness. I really appreciate the way you treat me and I'm really starting to like you. I just hope that I will like you even after you speak," he admitted a little shakily.

David smiled. "You will be free for the next years in the sense that you will not be locked up anywhere. But you will do what I want you to do, and for free, given your possessions. The rector of our new small university is a good friend of mine and he is interested in you. You will be teaching languages there from next year."

Nicolas looked at David in astonishment. It took him a moment to absorb the information. David stared at him. Nicolas smiled for the first time since the conversation began, then asked a little timidly:

"That is all? That I will teach somewhere?"

"That and anything else I might tell you," David nodded. "You are simply in my service for ten years and you will do what I want you to do."

Nicolas smiled happily, took a deep breath, and shook his head in disbelief.

Then he asked, shyly, "Do you think I could hug you?"

David laughed and nodded.

"Thank you, thank you a thousand times for everything," Nicolas repeated over and over as he rested in his arms for a moment.



They stared at each other in silence for a while, then Nicolas noticed that Annabel had come to the garden. He sighed a little and looked in her direction.

"I haven't had a chance to apologize to your wife yet," he looked at the king.

"You know she's pregnant," David warned him. "She's a little too sensitive."

"It's okay," Nicolas said. "If she wants to slap me, I deserve it."

With that, he got up and went to her. David remained seated on the bench. He watched the young man, who had recently wanted to take his life, kneel before his wife. Annabel frowned and leaned forward as much as her belly would allow. Despite Nicolas's sincere apologies, she was evidently giving him a good lecture, for Nicolas remained kneeling in front of her, nodding, and after a while the king saw that he was wiping his tears and searching his pockets for a handkerchief. Annabel shook her head and finally handed him hers, a little annoyed. David got up and walked over to them. He sat down next to his wife and pulled her close.

"Maybe they should let you preach in church sometime," he turned to her. "Perhaps more hardened sinners would then go forward for repentance."

"Sometimes I wonder if it will be like this with Christ," Annabel said thoughtfully. "I was fascinated by everything you two deal with, all the corrective punishments and remedies. Somehow I'm beginning to believe that, as it is written, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, that it might look more like the three of us talking here. After all, we are his children. We are to be his image, and he himself has led us to such a miraculous reconciliation. I can't imagine that someone will involuntarily bow to him and he will kick him to hell forever and ever. What if those people kneel in front of him with love and gratitude, despite the fact that he will also punish them in some way?"

Nicolas rose from the ground during her words and sat hesitantly beside David.

"I know the sentence is in the New Testament twice, I searched for it a few days ago, and once there is that everyone will confess that Jesus is Lord and the second time that everyone will praise him," David remarked, "but yesterday I found out that it is a quotation from the 45th chapter of Isaiah, where it is written that everyone will swear in God. Perhaps you could look for me at what's in Greek, Nicolas."

Nicolas nodded. "Anyway, I'm glad what a master you are," he said, embarrassed. "It is quite clear to me that any unbelieving king would have me executed on the spot. And I certainly give you praise for your kindness - I can't imagine that it could be otherwise in relation to God. I'm really grateful for everything. At first I had the impression that I had fallen into the hands of the enemy, but now I feel more like I am being punished by an older brother who thinks well of me. You are much milder than I could have hoped for," he admitted. "I realize what I wanted to do a lot more than you think."

"Older brother," Annabel repeated his words. "Don't forget your older angry sister, too, young man. I've heard that it's necessary to be more strict with boys and remember that I am going to keep an eye on you. I think you have a really long house arrest. Beware of me and chop Latin! (Czech expressions that means to obey.) And now go into your room and do something useful!"

Nicolas submitted to her teasing. "Yes, please," he nodded obediently. "I promise to be very good, but I must admit that at the moment I am only chopping Greek, I prefer originals to Latin."

"Could you slap him for me?" Anabel asked David, who was sitting between them. "I am trying to scold him here, and he's still rude."

Nicolas crouched a little. David laughed, but didn't slap him. "Go to your room," he repeated after Annabel, reaching into his pocket and handing him the key, "and watch your speech, young man."

"I do that all the time," Nicolas joked. "And very carefully. Languages are my hobby."

David looked at him with that look that says: really?

Nicolas smiled guiltily at him.

"You know, in fact, it all ceases to be a punishment," he said seriously, taking the key from him. "I feel that the fact that my future is in your hands is more of a privilege for me."

## **Chapter 11 - Indian Exam**

David never took the key back from Nicolas, and Nicolas appreciated the gesture of trust. He never dared to leave the castle, but over the summer he got used to taking his work in the garden and he also often sat there with his wife Nina, whom he married only a few days after it was clear what the king was up to. Thanks to her visits, he did not feel lonely. Sometimes he was looking forward to walking on the beach or riding a horse, but he was quite satisfied. He took the mild punishment more as a quiet work stay. He had plenty of time to be alone with dictionaries and the Bible, and nothing distracted him.

He was sitting in the garden pavilion above the first epistle to Timothy, examining verse 2:4, which said that God wanted all people to be saved and come to a full knowledge of the truth. He pondered the verb 'thelo', which could also be translated as 'design' or 'plan,' and preferred to translate the verse: "God designed to save all", but he did not want to push too much. He looked in the French Bible and frowned a little. There was "God wishes". Here, obviously, someone suggested to the reader that God wanted and longed for it, but it would not work. Should he have gone the opposite extreme? Eventually he shook his head and wrote "wants" there, but he didn't like it very much. He frowned and thought about the verse for a moment, and finally corrected it to "intend."

Somewhere in the middle of his thoughts, he heard the sentence, "... it's an Indian test of courage, you know? Of course, it's dangerous, but how else could Indians show that they're not afraid?"

At first he ignored it, but when he looked up again and saw two receding figures heading for the forest on their own, he set down the Bible and went after them. After all, he wondered what such an Indian test of courage entailed. Especially if it was invented by the king's eldest daughter.

It was a strange feeling for him when he first crossed the borders of the castle garden, which had been the whole world for him for many months, and he found himself alone in the wild. But he didn't have much time to think about that unexpected freedom, because he lost both princesses for a while. In a moment he heard them again, along with the roar of water.

He didn't know these places. He had a house in the capital, where he now housed his wife and which was to become their home for the next few years when he worked at the university. So far, however, he himself has lived mainly on his estate on the other side of the island, except for the years he spent studying abroad.

He was horrified to find that a wide stream was falling into a bottomless pit, disappearing somewhere underground, and a young princess was balancing on the fallen tree above the abyss.

Amelia was barefoot, which probably also belonged to the Indian trial, and thus she reached the middle of the tree. There she turned and called to her younger sister, "You see it's nothing!"

And as she turned to move on, she didn't notice the bee resting there in the late summer. The sting startled her so much that she lost her balance and she fell into the water with a scream and disappeared from his sight. Her sister Clare ran back to the castle, screaming, and did not notice Nicolas.

He reached that place in a few seconds. He saw only a mighty stream of water disappearing underground and his stomach clenched with fear. There could be anything down there. He might

have shattered there as well, but there was no time to think about it. Even scarier than what he had to do was the thought of him doing nothing.

David and Annabel felt that their whole world had collapsed in a single moment. They did not know what was down where the stream disappeared, but it was clear to them that even if there was a pool, Amelia could not swim, and it would be too late for anyone to reach her. Otherwise, the fall itself would have killed her. Of course, several people went there immediately, but they were still worried that they would only look for her body. Seven-year-old Clare told them the news, terrified, but she couldn't figure out what her sister's disappearance meant. She was afraid that she was in big trouble, but her parents just shouted at her to go to her room and stay there and they didn't pay any attention to her.

It seemed to Nicolas that he had been falling for an eternity, and he could not see what was beneath him because of the falling water. Fortunately, he fell into a deep pool, and the moment the surface closed above him, he saw the drowning princess. He grabbed her and quickly scrambled with her to one of the stones on the side of the pool. Amelia was coughing the water, but she was fine.

"An Indian test of courage, isn't it?" He said a little angrily, looking around. The water was incredibly icy. Amelia was shivering, but didn't say a word.

"I hope you still have enough courage to face your mother. I think you know how good she is in scolding people."

"I was hurt by a stupid bee," Amelia cried, examining her foot.

Nicolas sighed. "I didn't mean to be mean to you, but do you know how scared I was?" He said, examining her leg. "I don't like heights and I was afraid we'd kill ourselves down here."

He managed to take out the sting.

"It's so cold, we need to get out of here as soon as possible," he continued, "or we'll be sick. But there is no way, just the stream," he pointed in the direction where the turbulent waterfall turned into a calmly flowing underground river that disappeared into a rock tunnel, the only possible escape.

He took the nine-year-old princess on her back and carefully walked down the stream. The water was sometimes up to his waist, sometimes up to his chest, depending on how wide the trough was. It wasn't easy with the girl on her back, but after less than a kilometer they found themselves in a wide cave, with some daylight. The stream continued through another tunnel, but Nicolas was more interested in the opening above them. It was about five meters high, and the rock seemed to be forked enough for them to climb.

In addition, Amelia had completely blue lips and was knocking with cold. Nicolas took off his shirt and tied a sleeve around her wrist.

"I'll hold you this way if you fall," he explained. Then he began to climb carefully up the jagged rock. If it was warmer, he would probably explore the rock himself first, but he didn't want to linger. But Amelia was doing well. She only needed help in one place, because she was too small to reach the ledges above her.

They climbed in a small cave, the entrance to which was only two meters above the ground. Nicolas jumped down into a pile of pine needles and caught Amelia jumping down behind him.

"Do you know where we are?" He asked her. "Is it closer to the castle or the city? Do any people live here?"

"We are not far from a fishing village," Amelia replied.

"Come on, let's run," Nicolas suggested. "We need to warm up. Lead me."

Amelia tried, but shook her head after a few steps.

"I can't, the needles prickle my feet, I don't have shoes and it still hurts when the bee stung me."

"You're acting like a princess," Nicolas teased, "and I thought you had just passed the Indian test of courage and would get some medal."

"I'll wait here," Amelia said, shivering.

"Forget it, girl," Nicolas said, taking her on his back again.

He wanted to distract her a little, so he talked to her on the way.

"But is it clear to you that if you let yourself be carried like this, there will be no medal?" He continued teasing her.

"The Indians do not give themselves medals," said Amelia. "That's what kings do. For example, the Indians get a tooth from a bear or a shark."

"So I hope to get one from you as I jumped after you," he said.

"I have two shark teeth and they are both real," Amelia said. "I got them from the old captain who doesn't like you very much, but if you don't mind, I'll give you one, Mr. Renard."

"I'd love to," Nicolas said. "And feel free to call me Nicolas, after all, I'm just an ordinary mule."

"What is a mule?" The princess asked. "Dad also said about you that you were a stubborn mule when you were imprisoned. But he doesn't say it now, I think he quite likes you. In fact, he never even told me what you did to him. Why were you in prison?"

"A mule is a cross between a donkey and a horse and is used to carry things similar to a donkey. In addition, mules are sometimes pretty stubborn, that's why it's said," Nicolas replied and he was very happy that they came to the village during the speech, because he didn't want to explain to the nine-year-old girl that he wanted to kill her father.

In front of one of the first cottages, he saw some people and asked them to sit Amelia somewhere by the stove and run himself back towards the castle. It was clear to him that King David must be scared to death and did not want to prolong his anxiety. It took him a while to orient himself in the woods, but he soon managed to get to the places where the stream was lost underground.

King David stood there in a crowd of other people. He held the weeping Annabel around her shoulders and they stared into the deep abyss as his men tied the longest ropes they had to lower themselves in the pit.

"God help me," David prayed in his mind. "I know I have to be here for my wife, and at the same time I feel like I can't cope it myself and it will break my heart. She was my first baby girl. She may be with you, but I don't know how to deal with it, I don't want her to be with you. I want her here on earth with me."

"I hope you're not taking the Indian test of courage too," somebody said suddenly behind him. The king jerked around. Behind him stood a soaked Nicolas. "I would not do it in your place. The water is incredibly icy. Anyway, Princess Amelia is fine. In addition, she promised me a real shark tooth on my neck for passing the test. But she only has two, and she wants to keep the other one, so it

doesn't pay for anyone else to jump there," Nicolas said, looking at the men who had been trying to attach the rope to the fallen tree to get underground.

"Where is she?" Annabel asked, not in the mood for such jokes at the time.

"I left her in a fishing village, the first cottage facing the sea, under a big oak tree, you can't miss it," Nicolas replied.

David stared at him for a moment, then recovered, unbuckled his cloak, and handed it to him. Nicolas nodded his thanks, took off his wet coat, and wrapped himself in David's dry cloak.

David pulled him close and hugged him tightly. His voice completely failed when he whispered in his ear, "Thank you, my friend."

"I'd like to hug you, too, if I didn't have a belly like that," Annabel said, "and at the same time I want to slap you for your stupid jokes at such a time."

Nicolas smiled, but couldn't think of anything funny to reply. He carried Amelia all the way and was completely exhausted.

"I'm going to warm up," he said simply. "I'll see you later." And with that, he went to the castle.

The next day he woke up so late in the morning that it was almost lunch time. After the meal, he went for a walk in the garden, and then began to read a book he had borrowed from the king's library a few days ago. He thought he deserved some rest. Still, he regretted that King David had not appeared all day. At six o'clock a maid arrived, who usually brought him food. From the moment his door remained unlocked, she took over this duty instead of the guards.

"I was told to take you down for dinner," she informed him.

Nicolas nodded in surprise. "Give me two minutes, please," he said, quickly checking his looks in the mirror.

The maid led him to the room where the king sat with his three older daughters. The smallest girl was not there and he did not see Queen Annabel anywhere.

Nicolas greeted them, bowed slightly, then winked at Amelia. "Am I here right for the shark teeth ceremony?" He asked.

"I have it in my room," Amelia said, "but I will certainly bring it."

David invited him to the table and the servants began to bring food. The king looked tired.

"I don't know if you've heard that our son Lucas was born at eight o'clock in the morning?" He looked at Nicolas. "I wanted to come to see you, but I didn't get much sleep this night, and I fell asleep after lunch. We were expecting him in two or three weeks, but he probably hurried a little thanks to all the events yesterday. We eat and then we talk, okay?"

"Congratulations to the heir to the throne," Nicolas smiled, meaning it honestly. The king stared at him for a moment, but Nicolas didn't seem to remember that he was once the heir to the throne.

It was strange to eat again with other people after a few months, and Nicolas felt clumsy. How many times had he swallowed his food from a plate he held in his hand, because he had stacks of papers all over the room.

"Shall we go to my study or do you want to go to the garden?" The king asked, looking out the window. It was a nice and warm autumn, but it was clear that it was early October and the evenings were cold.

"Maybe we can stay inside," Nicolas suggested.

"I still have to go for the tooth," Amelia said.

She returned in a moment, and Nicolas knelt in front of her, letting her put it around his neck.

"Should I say something?" He asked her. "Any solemn Indian vow?"

Amelia shrugged. "The Indians give themselves different names, so I give you the name Brave Jumper."

"Thank you, Princess," Nicolas said seriously. "I'll keep that tooth among my greatest treasures." And strangely, he meant it.

"And thank you for saving me, Brave Jumper," Amelia added.

"Your father once saved me, so we're even," Nicolas said, looking up at David and rising from the floor.

"I'll borrow the Brave Jumper now with permission," David said, leading Nicolas to his office.

David leaned against his desk, unwilling to sit behind it so that the desk wouldn't be an obstacle between him and Nicolas.

"Thank you very much again," David said seriously.

Nicolas smiled. "It was a real pleasure."

"Those ten years are still valid, Nicolas, but otherwise you're free. You can go home," the king said, smiling at him. "I would like you to continue working on that translation and I want you to show up here once a week and let me know what you're doing. Let's say, on Monday at two o'clock in the afternoon. At least we will be able to discuss our opinions about Sunday's service together, as long as they let us in," David said sarcastically.

"Thank you," Nicolas said, "but it wasn't absolutely necessary. My punishment was already very mild."

David shook his head. "You're also expecting a baby at any moment, and you should know that I planned it anyway. It should have been a surprise. I did not intend to keep that year. But I said it more so that I had some reserve in case there was any problem."

Nicolas nodded. "Thank you."

This time he didn't ask David and hugged him without waiting for his permission.

## **Chapter 12 - Letter**

"Can I have a moment, sir?" Nicolas asked the next morning, slipping into the king's study.

"I'm already packed up and I came to say goodbye, but I got a letter yesterday that might interest you as well."

"I said you don't have to address me like that," the king looked at him. „You can use my name.”

Nicolas shook his head. "Please address me as you wish, sir, but I simply cannot. I don't feel good about it. Just as a former alcoholic can't go to a pub, for me, to address you respectfully is part of a personal transformation. After all, you also never call Pastor Lucas by his name and he calls you David and it's no problem," Nicolas said, handing David several folded sheets of paper.

"It's from my classmate who specialized in Hebrew. I wanted to know his view of hell and the occurrences of the word in Hebrew in the Old Testament, because if it was not translated consistently, I could not trace it back in the French text. I almost think that I would like to make some notes in the Bible about problematic words or to point out sentences that are quoted from the

Old Testament, some kind of references, although we may be glad that at least verse numbering has been invented in the last century and that we know how to find the verses."

David unfolded the letter and raised his eyebrows a little above the first sentences:

*Dear Nicolas,*

*I was pleased that you wrote to me that you became a Christian and that you also started with such a godly work. Surely you know what honor and responsibility it is at the same time, and how holy and blameless we must live, we who have committed ourselves to something like this.*

David looked up at Nicolas a little amused, and he just shrugged. "I didn't write anything personal to him, and I don't know if he would bear it."

*As for hell, you rightly write that in the Old Testament there is the word „sheol”, but it is translated differently, mostly hell, grave and pit. There is no unity in this and it is more about the context and feeling of the translators. After all, even the righteous are going to hell, even in peace. (Jacob wants to follow his son to Sheol Gen. 37:35 and 42:38 says that they will bring him to the grave, ie Sheol. Or 1 Kings 2: 6 Don't let him go to Sheol in peace!) , And then it is more appropriate to use the grave, other times the word hell also emphasizes the impiety of those who end in it. It occurs there 66 times, as far as I know, and you have a list on a separate sheet of paper.*

"I don't know if it's context or a confusion," David muttered, but read on.

*And now to your questions. How did the people of the old covenant imagine hell? Certainly not like us, and I would say that even today there is no unity in these views. I would say there are two main views on what happens after death. The first one is that people are sleeping in the dust of the earth and waiting for the resurrection. But why would Jesus tell the criminal on the cross that he would be with him in paradise? And Moses, who appears to Jesus? Is he a real man or is he a symbol of the Law? At the same time, from the Old Testament, it really looks like that at first glance. Old Testament "sheol" is not a place of punishment, nor of torment. It is a grave or basically a hidden place of death, the realm of death, the underground, extinction. (Isn't that a bit of a phrase? Capernaum you will be thrown into hell - Capernaum, you will perish, you will be buried, we will not see you again?)*

*The second is the classic view that after death people go to heaven or hell. Or to purgatory, although I see no basis for such an idea anywhere.*

"It's a bit of a paradox," David remarked, "that in the end I see in the Bible something like purgatory, though not in the Catholic sense of the word."

*Another problem is the resurrection itself. People were expecting it at the end, but at the end of what? Jesus does not refute or affirm this teaching to Mary and Martha, saying that he is a resurrection. Expectations of what would happen next were very distorted at the time, the Jews were expecting the immediate establishment of a political kingdom, and the fact that Jesus would not give a lecture on this subject when Lazarus was resurrected could also mean that he did not want to deal with their confusion at that moment.*

*In any case, notice how great tribulation occurred in the year 70, when the temple and Jerusalem were demolished, and that Daniel says that the resurrection will occur after the great tribulation. I will also dare speculate whether people did not really sleep in the dust of the earth before, and their afterlife existence was not changed by Jesus' death and resurrection or the end of the Old Testament period, but I really do not know.*

*Have you ever noticed the expression a better resurrection (Heb 11:35)? Or the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14/14)? Dead in Christ shall rise first (1st Thes. 4:16)? How many resurrection does the Bible actually mention and when? But you want answers from me, not more questions.*

*In any case, I believe that we do not fully understand and appreciate what happened in the spiritual world at the time when Jesus died and rose, and also at the time when Jerusalem fell.*

*You ask, why would Jesus be the first person to explain to people that there is hell in the sense of punishment?*

*After all, he is the Savior who saves from hell, so maybe he had to explain to them what he had actually come to save them from, while until then it might have been a hidden secret. Our knowledge is only partial!*

"As partial as my knowledge is, I recognize when something sounds like nonsense," David said, a little disrespectfully.

"I know," Nicolas nodded, "an angel tells the shepherds the good news of great joy: 'For four thousand years, I have kept my secret from you, that I have created a place where you will suffer forever, and now I finally tell you! Glory to God, and let people be at peace!'"

"And we are to love our enemies, but God will torment his own forever," David said.

Nicolas shivered a little. "I am happy this approach was not your role model," he said.

David shook his head at the letter and grinned. Nicolas noticed that the king was beginning to behave a little more naturally in his presence than before, and he was a little surprised by the small gestures, and at times he found it funny.

"Do you know what I noticed?" David remarked. "It occurred to me that God had told Adam that if he ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, he would die. Why did he forget to tell him the little thing that people should still suffer forever for their sins? I don't want to start a discussion on spiritual death now, but since we're talking about those things together, it seems to me that the Bible is a book more about the earth than about heaven, and that the consequences of our actions are also more earthly. This is not to say that there is no punishment, but when I read various things that I have seen spiritually before and applied them to eternity, I have for some time come up with completely ordinary earthly variants of what it can mean."

"Anyway, the letter is quite interesting from this place," Nicolas told the king.

*In any case, I have to agree with you that some places that are related to hell can only be earthly judgments and that many warnings relate to the fall of Jerusalem. Recently, I spoke on this topic with a friend who has extensively studied it – so I add a few notes from what he told me:*

*Jesus repeatedly returns to this subject in the chapters Matthew 13-25. There are a few points worth mentioning. People will be thrown into the fiery furnace 13:42, but nowhere is it written that hell is the furnace, on the contrary, the furnace of God is Jerusalem. (Is. 31: 9)*

*Matthew 16:28 begins to predict that this applies to that generation, which is repeated in other verses too.*

*19:28 an interesting mention of the restoration of all things, which is also in Acts 3:21*

David opened his Bible with interest and remarked, "I have never noticed this – heaven must receive Jesus until the times of restoration of all things, which God spoke long ago by the mouth of



his holy prophets. (CVB) - and there is the restoration of everything. What exactly is not everything that will be restored?"

*Then there is the mention of unfaithful winemakers: He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will lease out the vineyard to other farmers, who will give him the fruit in its season. (Mt 21:41) And the wedding, I will return to this, but there is a more specific warning: When the king heard that, he was angry, and sent his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. (Mt 22: 7)*

*Further: You serpents, you offspring of vipers, how will you escape the judgment of the Valley of Hinnom? ... on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth... Most certainly I tell you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Mt. 23:33-35-36)*

*The Valley of Hinnom is near Jerusalem, and you should know that in addition to it being a place of sacrifice, it was also a garbage dump where a fire was constantly burning, as well as a place where criminals were executed. And when I say executions, I should probably mention that at a certain time, among other types of executions, there was punishment by burning for the worst crimes. It is logical to understand this literally, moreover when Jerusalem fell, this valley must have been full of corpses.*

*In any case, THEN the disciples ask him in the next chapter when the time will come. Sometimes take the time and write down a comparison of Matthew 24 - Mark 13 - Luke 21, there is interesting additional information. It is one and the same conversation written in more or less detail.*

*It bothered you why there was an absolutely serious assurance at the end of verse 34 that it would all happen to that generation when some of those things obviously didn't happen. They didn't happen according to your ideas, I dare say, because you're looking for something else. You probably know from history that such things as famine, earthquakes, false prophets, and wars were characteristic of the next forty years, but you were most troubled by Jesus's COMING with all the POWERS OF THE HEAVENS.*

*So - first the coming. Notice the word "parousia," which was actually the official visit of a general or ruler. Here is the idea again - Jesus will come, stay here and establish a visible kingdom. But the visits come and go, and it is rather interesting that Josephus Flavius really testifies, along with other historians, that the heavens have opened, the heavenly armies led by a great figure have appeared, and so the Jews have indeed seen the one they pierced.*

*Moreover, I think that Jesus changed something at the time, but again on that spiritual level. Again, it's all more spiritual than people expect, but it was the same when he died and was raised. They wanted redemption from the Romans, he redeemed us from sin.*

*The powers of the heavens are, in a way, a simpler matter, not the end of the world, as one might think, but a common rhetorical expression that you will find variously in the Old Testament, and I think it was not the sun, moon, and stars, just as the celestial did not bow to Joseph - but his brothers. Moreover: heaven and earth will pass away, it should only be an image of the temple, which in its arrangement was such an image of heaven and earth. After all, the Romans rolled up the temple curtain with the scenes of the heavens as a scroll, and I think that fulfilled the word from Isaiah 34:4 that the heavens would be rolled up like a scroll. For on the one hand, it seems that heaven and earth will pass away, and on the other that Jesus will establish an endless kingdom on earth. This is the way it can happen.*

*If you find it strange, then I ask you: Has your whole world ever collapsed? (In Czech) Our worlds are collapsing, but in other languages there is the expression "his heavens and earth have passed away" and it is exactly the same.*

*You probably know that the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation are then, according to my friend, only a symbol of the new covenant and the new system, and that explains well the problematic sentences that there are still people in need of healing or that there are kings, otherwise I would no longer expect human rule on the new earth.*

*Anyway, Jesus holds in Revelation in his hand a scroll of divorce, and I agree that in the Revelation he divorces Old Covenant, and after the fall of the great city and unfaithful harlot there is a wedding (look at the words of Rev. 11: 8 , great city, where our Lord was crucified and the great city at 18:16). There are many good reasons why it should be about Jerusalem and not about Rome, as you mentioned, but I am writing a letter and not a book, so maybe some other time – personally? So Jerusalem falls and there is a wedding. As I wrote above - the Jews refuse the invitation to the wedding, see Mat. 22, then their city is burned and others are invited to the wedding. Therefore, I would say that the Church is not the bride of Christ, but his wife.*

*The entire New Testament apostles write that the end is near and some will live to see it. This, in my opinion, is the end of the old age that they had in mind.*

*I do not see a significant turning point in history, which from a historical point of view would mean a breakthrough for Christians, but I believe that a lot of things that we do not understand have happened on the spiritual level. I hope I have answered some of your questions.*

*To sum it up: A lot of things that people say about hell and the end of the world are, in my opinion, stupid in a closer study. But watch out for the opposite extreme. The fact that the fiery furnace can be Jerusalem does not, in my opinion, in any way disturb the lake of fire. Some people think that God will save all people, but where is their free will and where is God's justice? You're freshly converted, and it kind of sounds like you talked to someone like that. Watch out! The path to heaven is not so wide. Therefore, walk on that narrow path leading to life and guard your salvation!*

*Also write something personal about how you are, greet your beautiful sisters and hold fast to Christ.*

*I hope to see you sooner than in heaven. I've never been to the island of Le pays des Cygnes before, but I have a grandmother in La Rochelle and I know it's not far, so I think I could visit you sometime in the spring.*

*Alain Leroy*

"There are a few interesting things that I didn't realize," David admitted, "but also a few oddities."

"Yes," Nicolas agreed. "But on the other hand, if some of the things concern just the fall of Jerusalem, the Bible makes a little more sense to me."

"To me as well," David remarked. "You are not burdened by someone teaching you for seventeen years that many of these things actually apply to life after death. And when one clarifies them, then there are a few more things I do not need interpret as hell. And all the more I feel freer in what we talk about. Although, on the other hand, I'm still afraid we're wrong. How confident do you feel?"

"It seems to me," Nicolas admitted, "as if we detonated a bomb and blew a lot of dust. I think that when the dust settles, we will see everything more clearly."

David nodded. "You said it aptly. I definitely feel that way, I enjoy it and it confuses me at the same time, it fills me with joy and uncertainty, but internally I feel that the whole idea of eternal punishment has always been an obstacle for me. For example, I always hated it when someone talked about God as a papa. I don't know if it's the correct translation of that expression - abba -

father, but God was never a loving Father to me. Anyway, I'm still not able to say it, but I've gotten used to thinking of Jesus as our older brother lately. It is written somewhere that he is the firstborn among the brothers, and sometimes I imagine him as such, older, more experienced, wiser, but at the same time understanding and compassionate and close as a brother."

"In that case, I have two older brothers like that," Nicolas smiled at David.

"Really?" David said teasingly. "Here, your friend advises you to watch out for people who have similar views as I."

"In that case, you have to watch out for me, too," Nicolas said, a little shyly. He thought of a few funny remarks, but he didn't dare say them. He felt he could not yet afford it towards the king.

David smiled. "I've been watching over you for a long time and I still plan to do it in the future. So don't forget that your older brother invited you at two o'clock on Monday," David said, adding after a short pause, "Brother."

Nicolas nodded and looked at David gratefully. "Do you need to examine me? What was born in my head again? It reminds me that I didn't even tell you a dream, as I did an exam from Greek by Jesus himself."

"I hope he gave you an A," David said, "you know how holy and blameless such a Bible translator must live, and what perfect results he must have in everything."

"Actually, he kindly fired me," Nicolas laughed, telling him the dream briefly.

"Don't tell Jean," David winked at him, "I know how he'd interpret it."

"Jean hasn't been talking to me in a long time," Nicolas said sadly.

"Same with me," David informed him, "but I'm thinking we should change that and try to talk. What if on Monday I invite him and Pastor Lucas to come at 3 p.m. for example, and we talk?"

"Okay," Nicolas nodded, "but I wanted to say goodbye by saying I'd look forward to Monday, and now I'm not so sure."

### **Chapter 13 - Quarrel**

It was about five minutes after two o'clock that the following Monday, when Nicolas crashed into the king's study, panting. He gasped for breath and he couldn't speak for a moment.

"I appreciate punctuality," David said, looking at his watch, "but I would forgive you for a little delay."

Nicolas shook his head. "Nina started giving birth in the morning and is now bleeding terribly. I heard you have a good doctor here."

David became serious and headed to the door. Nicolas was following him.

"We haven't talked in a long time," David looked at Jean, who was sitting across from him at the table, under the windows of his study, with Pastor Lucas. "I thought it would be good to meet also with Nicolas, but in the end he couldn't come."

"What's so important that he doesn't have time to meet the king?" Jean asked in a not-so-kind tone.

"Something happened," David snapped, annoyed by Jean's tone.

"I thought we wanted to have a nice chat here, lads," Pastor Lucas looked at them. "So what if we started with a prayer?"

"Nicolas's wife has started giving birth, and it doesn't look good," David said, looking a little reproachfully at Jean, "so we should probably pray for them in the first place."

Jean frowned. "You know David, I heard what happened to Amelia, that she almost died and now Nicolas's wife is in danger. Maybe this is a warning to you, and God is trying to reprimand you and stop you from doing what you are doing. I think it would be good to consider this option if you want to pray. Maybe it's God's punishment for opposing what his word is clearly saying and trying to twist it."

David stared with his mouth open. "Are you kidding me, Jean? Rather, it is a blessing that nothing happened to Amelia, and for me and Nicolas it was another step on the path to mutual friendship. What's more, he showed how much he had changed."

"Everything can be taken in two ways," Jean said.

"Well, just," David said. "And the word of God, too. But if you are so sure that bad things are God's judgments, tell me how you sinned when your youngest child died five years ago!"

Jean frowned and David continued. "Many of the families I know have lost one or more children in the past. Such is the world. Women die in childbirth and children also die, and of the survivors, a relatively significant percentage do not live to adulthood. I think the sun shines on the righteous and the unjust, and I would just as well say that different things happen to Christians and non-Christians alike, because that's the way it is in life. Tell me, if you're so smart, what would happen if an earthquake hit our entire island? Would all the houses of Christians remain intact, and not a single Christian would die, or would it affect believers and unbelievers alike?"

"On the other hand, God brought Lot out of Sodom, so I'd say you're wrong that God doesn't interfere in such things," Jean said. "Sometimes he takes someone out of the middle of similar situations."

"We both know that, but why?" David said. "Why did God save you then when thousands of other people died? Was it because you were better than them, or did God only have another purpose in his sovereignty?"

The two of them looked at each other for a while, and at that moment there was a knock on the door. The doctor came in.

"I'm very sorry, Your Highness, but nothing could be done. I couldn't save the lady. But the baby looks like she's fine, she's a little girl," said the doctor. "The Count tells you that he apologizes and that he will come after the burial."

There was an awkward silence in the room for a moment.

"You know what, Jean?" David suggested, sighing. "Don't comment so I don't give you a few slaps."

"Do you have to be so annoying?" Jean snapped irritably. "I said nothing. If you hadn't attacked me, I might have admitted at this point that you were partially right. Of course, God probably didn't save the handful of us then because we were the best Christians there."

"What is this meeting all about, David?" Pastor Lucas asked. "About your relationship or your truth?"

"There is only one truth," Jean said.

"Yours, isn't it?" David asked. "Anyway, Nicolas and I have studied a lot lately, and I already have a little more holistic view of those things, so I thought I'd explain it to Jean here. I think I can convince you that God will save everyone in the end. After all, I have been diligently studying not only the Bible but also history for months, and I have some information here for you."

Jean looked at David with narrowed eyes. He leaned back and listened with his hands folded as David started.

"You should know that the first Greek-speaking Christians believed that everyone would be reconciled to God in the end, and that if it did not happen at a given age, it would be in the future age. That is why it is also interesting how Nicolas translates that different punishments relate to a certain age. It is quite possible that God is acting at different ages and that we do not fully understand this idea. Origen of Alexandria, one of the greatest Christian thinkers who was born at the end of the second century and died in 253, also claimed that God's fire is not physical but spiritual, it is about pity and purification. At that time, a guy, Celsus, even attacked Christianity as a strange idea precisely because it taught the punishment by fire, and Origenes replied that such a fire had a corrective character and was to remove evil from man. And Origen was not alone. During the first centuries, there were dozens of Christians who had the same opinion and from which some written mentions have been preserved," said David, satisfied with himself.

"And because a couple of guys had the same opinion as you in the past, should I admit they you right?" Jean shook his head incomprehensibly. "The Bible clearly speaks of eternal punishment, you will not trick me. I don't care if Nicolas thinks there's anything to do with any melting and if any Origenes thought so. People could not agree on some things during the life of the apostles, and even then there were various deviations. The fact that something like Nicolas was thought of by a man whom the church recognized in the third century is completely unimportant to me."

"Jean, you're missing the logic of the thing," David said angrily. "Understand that you have a translated Bible, and you think that God punishes people forever. They had the original and Greek was their native language. I'm trying to explain to you that they read it and understood it as I say, and that's proof that it's a corrective punishment."

"David, come to your senses," Jean looked at him. "Eternal fire is for the devil and his angels. According to you two, the devil would have to be refined as well. You must have missed the fact that he's in that lake of fire, too."

"So what," David said. "It is written that in Christ everything that is in heaven, on earth, and under the earth is to be reconciled, if I am not mistaken, so the devil is everything too, right? After all, I have the impression that I have heard somewhere that this is exactly what the Greek Church believes in, and that is actually further proof. Do you hear the word that's in it? Greek! That means they know Greek and understand it more than a French-speaking cow farmer."

"You think you know everything better because you went to university, don't you?" Jean said indignantly. "And because your Nicolas is such a scholar. So that's what it's all about. Not about what God's word says, which is so simple that not even the dumbest will get lost in the way, but that here two gentlemen have a degree and a university and one is also a king, and therefore you have to understand everything better than any cattle breeder. You should have said pigs right away, you forgot I keep pigs too!"

Jean stood up. "This meeting is as useless and stupid as any previous conversation with you, and I will no longer listen to this speech."

David jumped up angrily in his chair. "Don't you dare leave," he hissed at Jean. "Sit and listen to what I'm telling you. I have even more and you will listen to it all today."

"Or what?" Jean snapped, concerned about David's treatment. "You can shove your talk of salvation of all up your ass, David!" He said, pushing the king, who stood in his way. "If you believe in something like that, you're an idiot! Maybe the others won't tell you, but I will. All this is nonsense and can only be believed by someone who has been completely brainwashed. Your position has risen in your head so that you are already absolutely convinced of your infallibility. But you're just an ordinary idiot who thinks he ate Solomon's shit!" Jean shouted the last sentence shakily.

"Is that how you talk to your king?" David looked at him, and Pastor Lucas noticed that his chin was shaking a little. "Then I'll tell you something, boy. By law, there is an offense called an insult to royal majesty. You won't talk to me like that. Even if I act like an idiot, you'll tell me politely and you won't yell at me like that. It is not for the first time. I forgave you last time, but the second time I won't."

At that moment, a maid with refreshments entered the room and David turned to her. "Go to jail now and tell the jailer to come here and bring the shackles!"

"The jailer is supposed to come here with shackles," the young woman repeated a little incomprehensibly, and David nodded. "And hurry!"

Jean's chin was shaking now, too. He leaned against the wall and stared blankly at David for a moment. "You can't do that to me, David," he said softly. "I hardly slept today thinking about this conversation. I know I'm sometimes rude and I apologize to you. I always have remorse for talking like that, but when I haven't slept, I am useless. I've been up since two o'clock. I'm completely exhausted."

King David looked like a statue and looked at him with folded arms. His thoughts were partly with Nicolas, he was embittered by the sad news he had just learned and needed to vent his frustration on someone.

"There's a straw mat in the prison, you can sleep there," he said harshly.

"David, please," Jean said in a shaky voice, "I'll be a joke for everyone. I go there to serve prisoners. Everyone knows me there. I'm an assistant preacher. Do you know what a disgrace it will be in the city? I thought we were talking here like two old friends. Moreover, the Bible says that Christians should not be judged in front of unbelievers."

"No one is judged in front of unbelievers. As king, I am the highest judicial instance in this country, so I judge you as a believer, so don't come at me with this. You just told me a few nasty things, so I don't feel like we're two old friends right now."

Jean slid along the wall, sat on the floor and said no more. Instead, he started to cry. A jailer entered the room a moment later.

"Thank you for coming," David said. "Here the pastor is planning a dramatic scene in the church and needs to borrow the shackles as a prop," David said, staring at Jean, who raised his head at his words and looked at him blankly.

"And now, if you'll excuse us," David continued. "We just learned that one of our friend's wife died a while ago in childbirth, and here Jean's heart broke. He's very sensitive," David explained, pushing the jailer to the door. "You can't imagine how much he cares about people and how difficult it is for him."

Jean wiped his eyes and stared at David in disbelief. The only sentence that came to mind was: *You're stupid*, and he didn't dare say it out loud.

"I think that's enough, lads," said Pastor Lucas. "Please both sit here again and listen to me for a moment. We are the Church of God and you behave like two angry dogs. Both of you," Pastor Lucas looked at David. "I understand you needed to settle Jean, but I think this was too much and I don't even have to talk about what you said, Jean. I don't know how you can even let something like that out of your mouth."

Jean sat up with his hands on his knees, his head in his hands, and looked up timidly at David for a moment.

"I apologize to you, Your Royal Highness," he said in an impersonal tone.

"Don't talk to me like that," David snapped.

Jean shook his head and stared at the floor. "I would rather speak to you from now on in a manner worthy of your royal majesty, Your Highness."

"I said that was enough, boys," the pastor said again. He deliberately addressed them in this way, even though Jean was almost forty. After all, they were both younger than his eldest sons. "Now you will listen to what I think about it and that we will close the discussion. Jean, I want you to think about it and as for you David, I want you to let him be. Then we talk about other things that concern the church, such as the performance I'm planning," said Pastor Lucas, pointing to the shackles. "I think it's actually a good idea."

Pastor Lucas had to smile a little, feeling at that moment that he had returned to the days when he had spoken to his oldest two sons in this way and had settled their no less passionate quarrels.

"So," he continued, seeing that they were both paying attention to him. "My attitude is less sure in the whole thing than David's, and I'm not so interested in all that rummaging through in words. But there are a few things from what David told me that made me decide to look at it all. And there is one area that has fascinated me personally. So far, I have such a looser attitude to it, I am simply researching it and I do not need to take a stand on it immediately, I am not fighting fiercely against the idea that in the end everyone would be saved, but not for her either.

Anyway, the thing I've been studying for months is judgment. And I went through different places that apply to that in the Old Testament as well. When we start with the most famous "eye for eye and tooth for tooth", it says something about the adequacy of guilt and punishment. And there are many such things. There are hundreds of places that talk about the judgment, and much of the first mention in the law emphasizes a fair trial, without harassment. I was even intrigued by the fact that the Psalms encouraged the joy of God's judgments. But there are a few places that have attracted me a little more, such as Isaiah Chapter 25 - God's judgments teach us justice, or the fact that in the Old Testament there are dozens of places about judgment and all these are earthly judgments and all the judgments by fire mentioned there are really just about earthly fire. Even Zephaniah 3:8,9 says that when the earth is consumed by the fire of God's jealousy, people will have clean lips as a result and will serve God. Do you see the connection there, Jean? The whole earth. There is anger, fire and jealousy and the result is purity and praise.

And as soon as we go into the New Testament, it's there again - a reasonable judgment, at the rate you measure, will be measured to you. In the New Testament, I noticed that Jesus in Matthew distinguishes between two terms - the Day of Judgment and the judgment of that generation. So the question is whether it is one and the same and if not, what about when we suddenly find the term judgment in the Valley of Hinnom. Which of these two groups does it belong to? And all those places about the judgment in John, that is a chapter in itself - the resurrection to the judgment, now is the judgment of this world, the ruler of the world is judged, and so on. In addition, Nicolas would know if our word judgment is one and the same word in Greek for all those places. It is quite interesting that, on the one hand, it seems as if the Christians should not come to judgment, but on the other hand, according to 1 Corinthians 3:13, the fire will test the work of every human being. Everyone is to stand before the throne of God, and it is immediately written in Romans 14:11 "As certainly as I live, declares the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will praise God." (ISV)

David interrupted him: "Nicolas and I talked about what the Greek word 'exomologeó' means, which is the same in the two places in Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:11. That verb has three parts, ex-out, omo- the same and logo-word. When it comes together, the meaning is to confess the same word, to agree. To acknowledge someone's truth. At the same time, the word is translated somewhere as to praise and to thank. It also means agreeing, acknowledging debt, in fact it is used even where there is talk of confessing sins. In any case, Nicolas said that he would like to translate

it like every tongue will confess from the heart and unreservedly that Jesus Christ is Lord. I don't want to provoke Jean now by connecting something that is not connected in that place, but if everyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord is saved and everyone has to confess it, then doesn't that mean that everyone will be saved?"

David looked at Jean amicably. Jean narrowed his eyes a little, but said nothing.

David then said, "Anyway, I couldn't find the places for a while and I heard that in some languages there is something called 'concordance' and it occurs to me that I could also entrust Nicolas with something like that. It would be interesting to know where what is written. The first such concordance was made by someone from the Latin Bible in the thirteenth century, but there is no such thing in French yet." (Interestingly, the first French concordance was actually published in 1840 and the English in 1550.)

"That's a good idea," the pastor nodded. "So, to return to the subject, there's a lot about the judgment in the Bible, and I'm researching all these things at this time. In any case, I would like to say that Jesus himself says that he did not come to judge the world, but to save it, and yet it seems to me that much more emphasis is placed on the fact that there should be some condemnation than on the fact that there is a savior who takes away sin of the world. I was really impressed by the connection between judgment and the knowledge of God. Today, I am much closer to the idea that God can win over all people with His love.

And the way you treat people, David, is a pretty good illustration. I think you did very well with Nicolas and we know the result. He was willing to sacrifice his own life for your family, because he who was forgiven a lot, also loves a lot. As far as I know, he accepted your judgment of what would happen to him by thanking you and embracing you. You never had to watch where he was again because you won his heart.

On the other hand, what you had just done with Jean was a little harder than necessary, and he is sitting here stubbornly and insultingly, watching the floor. Leaving aside the fact that he stayed here for me, we can say for illustration that he is afraid to leave and is afraid that he will end up in a dark hole in the underground if he defies you again. It has nothing to do with his heart and respect.

And now we will transfer it to God and his son Jesus Christ," the pastor continued. "God was able to win the hearts of us all, and I hope you don't follow him just so you don't end up in a dark or fiery hole in the underworld. We are sure of his goodness in our lives that we can love him despite living for many years with the idea that there are a lot of people who can't and won't love him and they should end up somewhere forever for this decision – if I might call it so - and suffer, and we justified it all with a kind of strange justice.

But that justice is what got me when I read everywhere about a fair trial. We approach the Bible by learning a certain type of verse, that whoever believes will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned, and we will automatically fill there to hell, and we will not even think about whether the person can be condemned to something else. And these verses are for us like strongholds in our minds. There are other verses, aren't there, Jean? You came to me once with the fact that it is unbelievable, that it is written in the Bible, that God is the savior of all people, especially believers, and that you have not even noticed it for many years. For example, I have found in Lamentations a verse that God will not cast off anyone forever. So what about that?"

Pastor Lucas looked at them inquisitively and continued. "I already told you what about that. I want to ask you to leave each other alone for half a year. Investigate it and let yourself be. Can we agree on that?"

Jean nodded. "Okay, but I have to say there's something to what you're saying. I promise I'll go through it and apologize again. And I also want to resign from the preaching for a while, I don't feel like it now and I need to get some things in order."



"I'm glad you said it first, Jean, and I don't have to say it," Pastor Lucas sighed.

David leaned forward and looked at Jean guiltily. "I am sorry. I was upset and sad about Nicolas too, and I didn't know what to do with you. I invited you here to settle our relationship, but I realize I wanted to settle it by convincing you that I was right and that you would acknowledge it."

"Okay, David, but please never do this to me again. Although I admit that I deserved it a little. You can't even imagine how I felt," Jean said, tears welling up in his eyes again. "I've been going to visit those prisoners for years, and I've never been able to imagine what it would be like to be one of them. And those ten minutes that I spent as a prisoner in my imagination were enough for me."

"I'm sorry, Jean," David repeated. "But could I just say that I think you've been mentioning it for years, that I'm the king and you're a farmer? I never had problem with it, it's an internal problem of yours and I don't know why you have it."

Jean nodded. "I'll think about it. And could you think of something too, David? Being a king changed you a bit. It's just the little things, like the way you talked to the maid. You used to treat them more kindly. They're people, too, my king, don't you think?"

David ruffled his hair thoughtfully, then nodded and looked at Jean.

"Is that all?" He asked.

Jean agreed, and Pastor Lucas took the floor again. "So now to our program. I'm not going to preach this Sunday, but then it could be done. "I think of a nice scene about the servant from Matthew 18, whom the king had taken to prison for not wanting to forgive his neighbor for his debt, when I had already borrowed the shackles for it," he winked at David. "And I was wondering if you would like to play there too, David? You have quite a talent for it, as we well know and people would have something to talk about. A little commotion and fun sometimes doesn't hurt, what do you think? And while we're at it, I wonder if you'd like to say a few words about how you believed again. It has a good effect on children. Sometimes they even take oaths to never drink alcohol."

"All right," David nodded, "after all, I have a practice in forgiving offenses and wanting to put someone in jail."

"But I didn't say who I wanted you to play," Pastor Lucas teased, staring at the shackles.

Jean laughed and asked, "And could I once in my life play the king?"

"Should I lend you a crown?" David asked.

"That would be nice," Jean replied seriously.

They teased each other for a while, and strangely, it was Jean who said. "I think it's completely inappropriate, David. You're our king, and you shouldn't play anyone else there, but it was nice to imagine it for a while, and I enjoyed the idea of having you taken to prison in shackles. In any case, it is interesting that the servant should be in prison only until he pays," Jean thought. "I don't know if he's able to pay at all, but he's supposed to be there a limited time."

## **Chapter 14 - Final exams**

Nicolas was sad and thoughtful during Monday's meeting with the king, but he was not broken.

"I understand that these things just happen. In the months when I didn't have other people around me, we got closer enough, but on the other hand, it's not like I lost the love of my life," he admitted. "The relationship started badly and was very short. I would like it to continue and maybe in time she would become the love of my life, but in the end we basically lived together for only

five days. But I'm glad I could be home for those few days. We went together for a beautiful long walk by the sea and I will always be happy to remember that."

"What about the baby?" David asked.

"Her name is Anastasia," Nicolas said. "Nina wanted it that way, and even though I wondered for a while if she should be named after her, I finally gave her what Nina liked. She has it as a memory of her mother. Although I personally find it long and call her 'Anne'. Anyway, she's fine and we managed to get a nurse quickly. And that's about it," Nicolas shrugged.

"I'm really sorry," David said.

Nicolas nodded. "Actually, I had sort of expected it from the first moment the complications arose," he admitted. "I've had such a strange dream before."

"Another dream with Jesus?" David asked curiously.

Nicolas nodded. "But I don't mean that those dreams are a revelation of God or something. In fact, I often imagine these things at bedtime, and sometimes I don't even know what my own thoughts are and what I already dream."

Nicolas looked out the window thoughtfully, closing his eyes for a moment as if to return to his strange dream.

He lay dormant in bed and Jesus stood at the sink, wiping his face.

"You should get up," he told him amiably. "You know we have final exams today."

That woke Nicolas up. "You mean the Last Judgment?" He asked agitatedly.

Jesus smiled, walked over to the table where breakfast was prepared, and picked up a cup. He drank, and Nicolas thought he was looking at him a little curiously.

Nicolas walked over to the table, completely stunned, and his stomach tightened as he looked at the breakfast plate. He pushed it away and looked at Jesus with an impersonal look.

"I know you're nervous," Jesus said softly, "but can you tell me what you're afraid of?"

Nicolas thought frantically for a moment, then blurted out. "It's all so terribly official. We must appear before the judgment seat of Christ!"

Jesus looked at him a little incomprehensibly. "And should I stand there all the time? It can take quite long. After all, that seat is just a better chair."

"I'm sure you'll have a gold crown," Nicolas continued.

Jesus shrugged. "I am the King of kings. I wear a crown. And is that a problem? My father gave it to me. People usually say it suits me. So you're afraid of me sitting in a chair with a gold headband on my head?"

Nicolas understood that Jesus was teasing him a little, but he couldn't laugh. These were supposed to be final exams, and he was completely nervous.

"You can't imagine how scared I'm of that judgment!" He blurted out.

"Can't I imagine that?" Jesus repeated, shaking his head a little. "I went through it for you," he said, pointing to his wrists. "Do you know how I felt before? I was so scared I sweated blood."

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment.

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Jesus asked. "It's just what you did here on earth and what reward you get. It doesn't decide what happens to you. So why are you so scared?"

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in me," Nicolas admitted in a strangled voice. "You know what I am. I wanted to kill the king! I was in prison!"

"Of course I know all this," Jesus nodded. "So it's not entirely clear to me why I should be disappointed. Do you think there's something I don't know that will surprise me? Plus, I think prison is a really good place to think, and we've got your attention. David has been talking with me for hours on what to do with you, and if I'm not mistaken, you were more than happy with the result. You thanked him for that and you hugged him."

Nicolas looked at Jesus thoughtfully. "It'll be perfectly fair, won't it?" He said softly.

Jesus nodded.

"Sometimes I remember Alain, how else he managed to take these things. The previous dream reminded me a bit," he thought. "When we did the Plato test, no one actually fired me. I was the best, and Alain was glad he did it with a C. And he seemed to wish me my results, and even though he didn't succeed, he could always be what he was. He was able to admit his mistakes in one sentence and rejoice that someone had succeeded. When I think about it, I'm actually more afraid that I'll look like an idiot and that there may be some other people who will laugh at me."

"I think the other people have to think about themselves," Jesus said.

Jesus stood up and looked at Nicolas. "Come here, please," he told him, hugging him tightly for a moment. Then he stared at him again and asked, "So, can we go now?"

But they didn't go anywhere. It was a dream, after all, and Nicolas was suddenly sitting in the hallway of the university in front of the final exam room, holding a large chest. He was there alone, so he opened it curiously and looked inside. There was some wood, straw and various papers in it. As he pushed it away, he felt something hard. It was a muddy stone.

At that moment, however, the door opened and he slammed the chest with a start. He felt panic again, as he had before each test. An angel stood in the doorway, and it seemed to Nicolas that he shook his head a little incomprehensibly. He walked over to him, sat down, and asked, "Why do you look that way again?"

"How again?" Nicolas asked.

"As before any exam," the angel said. "Everyone knew about you that you were the best student at school, and I never really understood why you always freaked about everything. During the final exams, you seemed to collapse at any moment, and at the same time you knew things that not even the examiner knew."

"Are you my angel?" Nicolas asked.

The angel smiled and pointed to the door instead of answering. "You know Jesus will be there, don't you?"

Nicolas nodded in fright.

"And Jesus is wonderful," the angel said dreamily. "Only completely blind beings do not see and do not understand. It's like King David and you. I would almost say it's a model situation. First you wanted to get rid of him, you wanted to rule in his place, then you resisted, you wanted to get away from him, you couldn't even recognize his right to punish you. It took a while before you began to see things differently, before you fell at his feet and repented. And then you started loving him and having a relationship with him. In a way, you were glad that he decided for you. Your whole imprisonment started a beautiful correctional process, and it is exactly the same with Jesus. I always like to watch it again. I'm not just your angel, I've been in charge of a lot of different people over the centuries, and some of them have been quite famous. One of the people I cared for was Silas, so I spent a lot of time in the presence of the Apostle Paul. I'll introduce you one day," he

suggested. "You should see his expression when they stoned Stephen. I wondered what an arrogant idiot this was. But I always enjoy watching people like that transformed by the love of Christ over and over again," said the angel with a look of amazement on his face.

Nicolas struggled to his feet. "Have you decided to specialize in arrogant idiots?" He asked self-critically.

The angel laughed and led him inside. Jesus was sitting there. He had really a golden crown on his head, but when Nicolas looked at him, he deliberately straightened it and winked at him. Then he pointed to a chair next to him.

Nicolas sat down, sighed, and Jesus took his hand for a moment and smiled at him.

"Can we begin, Lord?" The angel asked.

Jesus looked at Nicolas for a moment, then nodded.

The chest in front of them was suddenly on fire. Nicolas felt that his whole life was projected before his eyes, but he watched it partly as a spectator, and he felt that in Jesus's presence he somehow better understood what he was looking at and could discern what was right and what was wrong. When the fire burned out, the chest was gone and several precious stones lay in front of them.

"This was the first part," Jesus explained, "and now it's time for questions. Are you ready?"

Nicolas looked at Jesus, and at that moment he felt exactly same as when he had sat with King David in the garden, awaiting his judgment. He swallowed hard and nodded. There was a moment of silence. Then Jesus urged him. "Then ask me!"

"Should I ask?" Said Nicolas, surprised.

"And who else?" Jesus said. "I know everything. You don't expect me to ask you anything, do you? You are the one who has thousands of questions."

It seemed to Nicolas that Jesus and the angel looked at each other for a moment and shook their heads.

Nicolas didn't know how long he had been there, but when he went out into the hall, there were other people he knew waiting. Jesus accompanied him to the door, and together they looked around at Nicolas's friends.

Jean seemed to collapse at any moment. Pastor Lucas looked excited to see Jesus, and Nicolas watched a mixture of amazement and curiosity in his face. And then there was Nina. She ran to Jesus and before that she gave Nicolas a small baby in his arms. And the moment the door closed behind her, Nicolas realized she was gone for real.

David listened curiously to Nicolas, and Nicolas noticed that when he had finished his story, the king blinked several times.

"Have I been there too?" He asked after a moment.

Nicolas nodded.

"And what was I doing?" David wanted to know.

"Actually, you've been looking at me curiously all along and waiting for me to tell you something. You didn't pay attention to Jesus at all at that moment."

"Really?" David asked thoughtfully, nodding. He felt there was something to Nicolas's words.

"We've been talking about things for months and studying," David said. "Perhaps we should pray together during our meetings from now on. I would definitely like to pray for you now. I must say that for the first time today I was nervous about meeting you," David admitted. "I never know what to do and say in such situations."

"I'll be fine," Nicolas assured him, smiling a little sadly. "But it will definitely help me if I have friends around me at the moment."

## **Chapter 15 - Brothers**

The church was fuller than usual on Sunday. The fact that an interesting performance was being prepared was announced. King David stood on the balcony where he normally sat, Jean knelt in front of him and shouted loudly, "Sir, have patience with me and I will pay you everything!" A moment later, Jean angrily grabbed his fellow servant's neck and shouted at him, "Pay me what you owe me!"

Just a moment later, Jean found himself in front of David again, and king snapped at him, "You evil servant! I forgave you all your debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I was merciful to you?"

Nicolas stood behind Jean, clinking with chains warningly. David was a little surprised that he was willing to play with them as well, but he seemed to enjoy it quite a bit when he could grab Jean and yell at him, "Come on, you villain! I'll take you to jail and you will stay there until you pay for everything."

Nicolas looked thoughtful for a moment, and he realized that he needed to talk to Jean too. David partially described his conversation to him during their Monday meeting, but Nicolas had not yet had the opportunity to be alone with Jean. They met just a moment before the service to rehearse the short performance, and Nicolas was surprised at how maliciously he handcuffed Jean and led him away.

Pastor Lucas, meanwhile, took the floor and commented briefly on the scene, then announced that Count Nicolas and King David also wanted to give their testimonies. Nicolas was supposed to speak first, but he seemed to have a completely different problem now.

"Somehow it got stuck," he explained. "I can't take Jean's shackles off."

Pastor Lucas tried it too, but it really didn't work.

"Then keep trying, and if that doesn't work, send for the jailer," David suggested, "and I'll start first."

"Those shackles are pretty good props," he said, glancing at his listeners, "and I should have them right now for the effect to be perfect, because seventeen years ago I was sure I was a killer and that something like that really awaits me," David began his story of drunkenness, presumed murder, and knowing God. "Pastor Lucas regularly asks me to tell this here every few years," David said, "and at least that's how you hear the real version, because the stories that circulate among people are sometimes quite wrong. After all, I never hid the story, and many of the older people were here in person on the day my father and king were still alive, and I was only a frightened seventeen-year-old lad."

David paused for a moment, looking with a little regret at the balcony in front of which he had once been confronted with his father and the king. Five years had passed since the two men had died together at sea, and the memory was still painful.

"Anyway, I know there are strange stories told among people about Count Renard sneaking into my room a few months ago and trying to kill me. We tried not to spread what had happened, but people

still somehow learned that I had one of the richest and most important men in the country put in jail, and Count Renard would now like to tell you something about how he knew God and how it changed his life. I myself have watched the change closely and for a long time, and thanks to that, the Count stands here today as a free man and also my brother and friend, who recently saved my daughter's life with his bravery and dedication. So I wouldn't want anyone to be disrespectful to him, even if they hear about everything he planned. I definitely respect him and I would like you to approach him that way."

David came down from the pulpit. Nicolas looked a little moved, but fortunately he got a welcome break so he could prepare for his speech, because at that moment the jailer rushed inside. It took him a while to remove Jean's handcuffs. David took the break to look around the church. He noticed that his testimony impressed people, as always. He was particularly intrigued by a tearful young man who was confiding in his father about something. David guessed there would be some alcohol-related adventure behind his tears, and he was glad his story could serve as a warning.

Nicolas replaced him, and David realized with surprise that Nicolas was a much better speaker than himself. He spoke in a firm, calm voice, pausing in the right places, knowing when to joke and when to be serious. David listened with interest. He's really liked him in the last few months. He knew he was twenty-six, but he thought of him more as a teenager. Now he found that Nicolas was a very charismatic speaker and a grown man.

"You might be wondering how such nonsense comes to mind," Nicolas said. "Some time ago, I had the main road repaired on my estate, following the example of the ancient Romans, and the act rose a little in my head. Every time I drove to the capital on an old muddy road full of roots, it occurred to me that if I could lead this country, there would be better roads everywhere. You know that it's said to make a mountain out of a molehill, and I made a really high mountain out of it," Nicolas joked. "In any case, the Bible says that we should be careful not to have bitterness in us, and I am, among other things, a passionate grower of exotic plants. And many of you know how easy it is to transplant a small plant and how difficult it is to transplant a shrub after three years. I think that comparison to the roots means that we should not let things grow over our heads, and at a time when we have a problem that we do not know how to deal with, it is good to seek help as soon as possible. And because I'm a road expert, I can assure you that there is one way, truth and life, where you will always find help."

Pastor Lucas watched with interest the people listening to Nicolas, and when the Count was finished, the preacher did what he thought was most appropriate at the time and told the congregation: "Well, when Count Renard said it so nicely here, if anyone has any problem and you want us to pray for you, come here in front."

One person after another began to rise from their seat.

"Go to those people and pray for them too," the pastor suggested to Nicolas.

"Me?" Nicolas asked in surprise. "I do not know how."

"Then take David with you," the pastor suggested.

Nicolas and David then prayed together for three aching old women and the embarrassed young man who had stolen his father's money so he could get drunk and now wanted to give his life to Christ. When the flow of people stopped a little, Jean came to them.

"I want you to pray for me too," he said with a sigh. "I really don't know how to deal with some things in my life," he admitted. "I can't control myself the way I should. How many times do I say things I shouldn't. Sometimes I'm irritated and rude, even though I know it's not right and I'd like to apologize for that. I know I should be a role model as a Christian, but—" Jean paused in embarrassment and shook his head.

"You forgot to add that you should also live and not just think from morning to evening about what you should," Nicolas added, half jokingly, placing his hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, God is the savior of all, and He can certainly save you," David said, teasing him a little.

"And I still have a strong desire to punch some people, even though I know it's not right," Jean added to his list.

Instead of another word, David hugged him and said, "I still love you, even though the conversations between us may be worse than when the Pharisees were talking to Jesus."

"Now it's a question which of us is a Pharisee and who is Jesus," Nicolas thought.

"Will you pray or speak here?" Jean said jokingly.

David laughed, put his hand on his head, and looked up at the sky.

When they were finished, he turned to Jean and said. "It is written that we are to pray for one another, so perhaps you could also pray with me for the supreme manager of all my roads, so that he can plan them with the care of the ancient Romans, so that the passengers who follow them may ride and walk there safely and that they don't come up with any stupid thoughts on those roads," he suggested, placing his hands on Nicolas.

Nicolas listened in astonishment, but he was to be in the king's service for many years, after all, and he more than liked the task.

"And what are we to pray for you for?" Jean asked.

David laughed. "I wanted to say for a moment: for more friends like you two, but on the other hand you're sometimes time consuming, so I don't know if I could handle another Jean or Nicolas."

Jean shook his head. "You know, David, the last few days God is closer to me again. I know that the willingness to put some things in order opens the heavens, even if those things are not solved yet. Anyway, even though I don't agree with you yet, you gave me a lesson and I realized that we still have something to give each other. Nicolas is a bit as the prodigal son who returned home with great humility, while I acted like the other angry brother the whole time. But there is another brother in our story that Jesus does not mention and it was you. You greeted the culprit with open arms together with our father, and I think I was a little upset that you were so excited about him. I thought you should agree with me more, because I'm your brother, who was at home all the time, I was nice and liked you while this one tried to hurt you. That's why I couldn't accept anything that the newcomer said."

"You can still welcome me home," Nicolas said, and Jean opened his arms.

"I really wish we were friends, even if we have different opinions," Nicolas said. "Because it also makes me think and see things from multiple angles, and it's useful too. I was really taken aback by the maliciousness I felt when I put on the handcuffs."

"The jailer was really amused," Jean admitted. "When he took them off for me, he joked how fun it would be if he really had to take me away. He has no idea that our dispute has gone so far that it really almost happened."

David rolled his eyes. "Jean, that was really just a stupid joke. I didn't want to do it. I just wanted to scare you. I apologize again."

Nicolas looked at them blankly, and Jean had to explain in a few sentences what he was talking about.

Nicolas laughed. "Our king really knows how to get someone's attention, doesn't he?"

"Our King of kings, too," David remarked. "To tell you the truth, there were times when I didn't like the story of the prodigal son. I've heard it read so many times that it got on my nerves, and if I didn't voluntarily take a topic out of the Bible myself, it would be a parable about a sower and a prodigal son. On the other hand, it is interesting that I still come across how this parable illustrates my life."

David looked at them both and said, "Please pray for me, too. I don't have anything specific that I need at the moment, except perhaps that I want to be more confident in whether or not I understand the Bible things we are researching well. But I want you to pray for me just because you are my brothers."

Jean put his hand on David's shoulder and Nicolas looked at the king a little hesitantly. David nodded at him to do the same.

## **16 Epilogue:**

The year was 1685 and in France the Edict of Nant was just repealed. When Nicolas found out, he went to see David. In his study, he came across an old captain, the same one he had once bribed to help him get rid of the king.

"I'll wait in the hall," he said apologetically, backing away, but David motioned to him. "Feel free to come in, we're done here anyway."

"I was wondering if I could help you with something, sir," Nicolas looked at the king. "I suppose you will try to help people fleeing France."

"Do you miss the years when I've organized your life?" David winked at him with a smile and added. "I have just been discussing the situation with the captain."

"And what can I do about it, sir?" Nicolas asked again.

"Nothing to me, I don't need a land rat in my way," the captain muttered. "And one who knows about ships just how to send them to the bottom."

Nicolas laughed.

"I don't think there is anything funny about that," the captain looked at him.

"Neither do I," Nicolas said apologetically. "It's just that I've heard you're rehearsing a scene about a prodigal son in church and you are playing a father there, so I imagined you for a moment."

Nicolas frowned, looked at him with folded arms, and spoke theatrically. "Well, look who has arrived. I'm surprised you have the courage to come to my eyes. You look like a pig. I really wonder what you wasted my money on. So go wash under the pump, ask in the kitchen if they have any leftovers from lunch, and then we'll talk about what to do with you. You'll have to obey, young man if you want to be here. And you'll start in the morning by cleaning the entire deck."

The old captain smiled. "Well, I think I'd rather stick to that Bible version, even though the prodigal son is certainly lucky that I'm not his father. I guess I would really welcome him somehow like that."

The old captain said goodbye to them after a while, and Nicolas smiled at David. "Will you have a job for me, sir?"

"You really don't have to call me that," David said. "You've been one of my best friends for years."

"I have to," Nicolas replied. "Every time I address you like that, it's a reminder to me that the world - at least mine - is fine. That you are a king and I can stand by your side as happily as Jonathan by the King David of the Bible. So do you think one land rat would be useful to you at this time, my king?"



David nodded with a smile. "Certainly."

Nicolas bowed theatrically and said, "I'm always at your service, my lord."

David looked at him lovingly. Thirteen years had passed since they first had met and Nicolas was almost forty. David himself was already gray, and he was forty seven himself.

Every time he saw Nicolas, he was amazed at the miracle of reconciliation. He knew that it was written several times in different words in the New Testament that the whole of God's creation would be reconciled in Christ, and he thought that this meant not only reconciliation with Christ but also with one another. As for the two of them, they have been reconciled long ago.

**The end**

## **FURIOUS GOD (Apocatastasis 2)**

Excerpt:

### **Chapter 1**

Jonathan Ward preached one of his famous sermons on "sinners at the hands of an angry God" and Count Nicolas Renard sat in a front pew of the church and frowned. The guards were hidden in the back of the building for now, waiting for Nicolas's sign. Jonathan was preoccupied with the account of hell torment and had no idea that hell was really waiting for him soon. The king himself planned to make it of his life.

(Note: Jonathan Edwards SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD SERMON VI. Jonathan Edwards sermon from 8.7.1741, [https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/edwards\\_angry.pdf](https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/edwards_angry.pdf))

"It's like walking on a slippery sidewalk over an abyss. It's a matter of time before you fall into that abyss. The only reason you haven't fallen there yet is because it's not the right time. It is as easy for God to throw you there as it is for you to crush a worm that you see crawling on the ground. And sinners deserve to end up in hell! Justice itself cries out: punish them for their sins forever! It is not that a verdict is awaited, he who does not believe is already under a sentence of condemnation to hell. God is very angry with you, earthly sinners, as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of His wrath."

Jonathan Ward paused, looked around at his audience, then continued. "The pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive sinners; the flames do now rage and glow. The devil stands ready to fall upon you, sinner, and seize you as his own, at what moment God shall permit him. You belong to him; he has your souls in his possession. The devils watch you; they stand waiting for you; like greedy hungry lions, that see their prey!"

Jonathan threatened on from the pulpit, and Nicolas shook his head in disbelief for a moment. Then he controlled himself. He had a job here and he needed to look neutral. For a moment, he stopped paying attention to Jonathan's words and studied the young preacher thoughtfully. He was almost thirty and Nicolas was the same age. Physically, however, they were all completely different. Nicolas was tall, slender, and dark-haired, while Jonathan was relatively short, a little chubby and blonde. Yet he looked like a giant, perhaps because he had such a loud voice, and he always looked and behaved so seriously.

„Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment, for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you," Jonathan thundered. "There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder;

and were it not for the restraining hand of God they would immediately burst forth upon you. Repent, sinner! The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much in the same way as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; His wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet, it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in!"

Jonathan Ward certainly had no idea what danger he was in at the moment, and that the earthly king was knocking with rage over him, shouting angrily, and that in his anger he had shattered the plate that came to his hands. Nicolas had never seen David so furious, and in his tantrum he trembled with almost the same horror as the sinners in one of the many churches in Rouge, the capital of Le pays des Cygnes. And then David cried. And it was perhaps even worse.

„He who enrages an earthly prince, is liable to suffer the most extreme torments that human art can invent, or human power can inflict," Ward continued, as if sensing what was going through Nicolas's head, „But all the kings of the earth, before God, are as grasshoppers; they are nothing, and less than nothing: both their love and their hatred are to be despised. The wrath of the great King of kings, is as much more terrible than theirs, as His majesty is greater. This is the day of mercy and if you do not accept it, God will never have mercy on you again. You will be vessel of wrath fitted to destruction; and there will be no other use of this vessel, but only to be filled full of wrath. God will be so far from pitying you when you cry to Him, that it is said He will only 'laugh and mock.' He will not only hate you, but He will have you in the utmost contempt; no place shall be thought fit for you, but under His feet, to be trodden down as the mire of the streets. God hath had it on His heart to show to angels and men, both how excellent His love is, and also how terrible His wrath is."

Nicolas frowned and shook his head and Jonathan Ward noticed him for the first time now. The two did not know each other personally, but Nicolas had no doubt that the preacher knew who he was. He was too well known and his controversial work was discussed in all churches. Nicolas Renard was the exact opposite of Jonathan Ward and believed that in the end all mankind would be saved and sometimes preached about it too when Pastor Lucas let him.

Jonathan looked at Nicolas now and continued, "Some people don't understand how important this is. When the great and angry God hath risen up and executed His awful vengeance on the poor sinner, and the wretch is actually suffering the infinite weight and power of His indignation, then will God call upon the whole universe to behold the awful majesty and mighty power that is to be seen in it. Sinners shall be tormented in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and when you shall be in this state of suffering, the glorious inhabitants of heaven shall go forth and look on the awful spectacle, that they may see what the wrath and fierceness of the Almighty is; and when they have seen it, they will fall down and adore that great power and majesty.

It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you, sinner, must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration, before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your souls; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance's, and end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. O, what can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: for, "Who knoweth the power of God's anger?" This

acceptable year of the Lord, a day of great mercy to some, will doubtless be a day of as remarkable vengeance to others. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over every unregenerate sinner. Let every one flee out of Sodom: Escape for your lives. Look not behind you!"

Jonathan finished and looked around at his listeners. Nicolas heard that someone in the church was crying and most of the people were staring at their preacher in terror. Jonathan Ward frowned as Count Nicolas Renard raised his hand and broke the sacred silence.

"Could I ask you something?" Nicolas turned to him, and without waiting for an answer, he continued. "If hell awaits most people, what about children? Is it worth calling a doctor to them? Isn't it better to let young children die, for example, to ensure that they will be saved?"

"Of course," Jonathan Ward frowned, "but only some will get that kind of grace."

Nicolas continued: "So wouldn't it be better to kill them right away? I ask just in theory, if murder was not a sin. Wouldn't killing young children be more of a form of mercy?"

"It certainly would be," Jonathan nodded, "but the biblical answer is different, and I've been telling you this for a long time - don't marry, don't have children, as the apostle Paul also advises us in Corinthians, but few listen to him!"

With a sigh, Nicolas rose from his seat, turned back, and nodded. That was an agreed sign.

The guards headed to him, and the whole church watched them in amazement.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jonathan Ward's eyes widened as the guards, equipped with the shackles, reached the pulpit. "I know you persuaded the king that everyone would be saved, but you can't have me arrested for having a different opinion, because there's a lot of religious freedom in this country," Jonathan Ward said angrily, staring at Nicolas while the guards began to handcuff him in front of the entire congregation.

Nicolas looked at him sadly and stepped out onto the pulpit.

"Hold on a second," he looked at the guards. "The young man should know why he was arrested," he said with a sigh.

Nicolas grabbed the pulpit with both hands, glared at the startled audience, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Something terrible happened this afternoon," he said slowly. "One of your preacher's followers took his views literally, broke into an orphanage after worship, killing the ten smallest orphans who were there."

Nicolas made a dramatic pause and motioned for the guards to lead the preacher away as people looked around in shock and began to talk quietly together.

"Try to pay attention for a while longer," Nicolas told them, opening the first chapter of James' epistle. "Let us now read one more practical verse from the Bible: 'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.' (James 1:27 NIV) You've heard enough about the pollution of the world today, and I want to talk about the first part of this sentence now. If I'm not mistaken, there are about seven churches in our capital. How many of you are here today? One hundred and fifty? Two hundred? Only you yourself should be able to take those few children out of the orphanage. So tell me, if you are so zealous for God's word, why are the children there at all, when there are so many Christians here? You are one of the few churches to have services on Sunday evenings, and I do not have the opportunity to address any more now. There are twenty-two more children in the orphanage. I want to see those kids in families. They are frightened and need someone to devote themselves to them at this moment, and with the word devote I do not mean to

preach to them about hell. Take them to the sea, buy them a toy and talk to them, they really need it. The sermon usually ends with a challenge, so here's my challenge: Come forward, all of you who are ready to help at this point."

Nicolas looked around at his listeners. Some couples began to talk quietly together, and it took a while for some of them to get up and go to him. Nicolas, meanwhile, looked around the gathered. He saw a couple of his students among them, and then noticed a young woman with tears streaming down her cheeks and pale as a wall. Emma. Nicolas closed his eyes for a while and returned in his memories to the moment he first saw the girl.