

RETURNING HOME

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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 partly on a fictional island near France and partly in the Alps, in Savoie - a separate duchy between France, Switzerland and Italy, which was part of the Holy Roman Empire. Much of Savoie has been part of France since 1860, some belongs to Italy and a smaller part to Switzerland.

The main characters and plots of the book are fictional, but the events concerning the Waldensian Church are partly real and took place in 1655. It is not primarily a book about the Waldensians, but rather I used their persecution as a plot.

It is based on Comenius's descriptions of how the Waldenses had to flee the mountains in the middle of a harsh winter, and after writing the book, I heard in a document that the main massacre took place on April 24, 1655. In the winter, some people allegedly only moved higher to the mountains to other villages. Therefore, take the description of the persecution of the Waldenses with some reserve, the time information about the attack on them is probably incorrect. At the same time, Comenius claims that these Christians fled to the mountains in the 7th century, but I also heard information that they had lived there since the 1st century.

Chapter 1

The young Count David Paon stood on a hill above the capital, Rouge, trembling with rage. He had a copy of the French Bible in one hand and a bottle of alcohol in the other.

"Christians," he said with hatred. "How nice the world would be without them!"

He stared into the distance for a moment, where the coast of France was visible on the horizon. There they knew how to treat them. More than eighty years have passed since the famous Bartholomew's Night (1572), and the Edict of Nant was released long ago in France, guaranteeing Protestants almost the same rights as Catholics from 1598, but David still thought that such a small Bartholomew's Night would benefit this island.

Le pays des Cygnes was an independent kingdom with over two hundred thousand inhabitants. As the Huguenot Wars began in France, a number of French Christians fled here, to this sparsely populated island country. On the other side of Mount Tranchant, this created a whole new city, filled for the most part with these people. No wonder. French was spoken on the island and the kings were favorable to the new refugees.

And so the population kept growing. There has been some persecution of Protestants in Europe all the time. Waldensians also ran here. From 1560 they could no longer be sure of what awaited them in Savoie. That's when they lost some of their alpine valleys and privileges and harder times began.

And if anyone could infuriate David, it was the Waldensians. Actually, he knew nothing about them, but they were much more zealous and convincing in their faith than the others. In the capital, they had a beautiful new church, in which a fiery old preacher had been preaching for a few years, and his jokes were entertaining the whole city. And the worst part was that Princess Annabel liked the Waldensian teachings. And David was engaged to her.

David drank angrily from the bottle. It was late afternoon and he was quite drunk. But he still stayed on his feet and was also able to read.

He opened the Bible and found a place in it at random. It was the first chapter of the prophet Ezekiel. He shook his head, took one more sip from the bottle, and after a while began to read aloud:

Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four.

"Rings with eyes? Seriously?" He shouted angrily at the sky. "Why should I read this nonsense? Is that why I should lose this country? I'm supposed to be king here! Can you hear me, God?" He shouted. "This is my country. I will be king here, and this nonsense will not deprive me of it."

This was too much for him. Somewhere down in the castle, the princess's sixteenth birthday party began. David was a year older than her and had been engaged for several years to her. Annabel was an only child, and her husband was to become the king of this country. And for years he had been sure that he would be the husband.

"If you do not humble yourself before God, I will have to cancel our engagement," he muttered angrily each sentence from her letter. "God will give you a new heart and a new life - the fountain of wisdom I found in the Bible. And shouldn't it be rather a fountain of nonsense?" He shouted angrily again and took a sip from the bottle. "What will be there next? After those rings with eyes? For example, flying plates or even a talking toilet?"

As he walked, he reopened the Bible. This time he opened it at the page with genealogy of Jesus Christ.

"Is this really your word, God?" He shouted toward the heavens, drinking again. "Do you want to bore us here to death when you gave us this to read? Can't you write anything better? What if you hired a more talented writer, obviously you are not able to write books!"

He came to the castle very drunk. The celebration took place in a large ballroom on the ground floor, and he stumbled among the guests, his eyes searching for Annabel. He saw her in a crowd of friends staring at him in disbelief. After a moment, she recovered and headed for him.

"What are you doing here, David?" She said quietly. "I told you not to come here today."

"I came to greet you, beauty," he said drunkenly. "Besides, you said I shouldn't come until I at least opened the Bible, if I remember correctly. And I've already opened it and it's just nonsense. Flying plates and talking toilets," David said, no longer knowing what he was really reading and what his own expressions were.

"Go home, David," Annabel hissed at him. "You're obviously drunk."

"Less than the one who wrote this," he pointed to the book in his hand. "You're a goose, if you believe that. This is good only for the chicken brain as girls have. Every guy sees at first glance that this is nonsense. Get a chicken coop, girl, you'll like it. You can talk about this stuff there with the other hens. Do you know what you will become? Queen hen first!"

"David, don't be silly," Laurent, one of his friends, turned to him. "You may be flogged publicly for insulting the royal family. Get away from here and talk to her about it when you're sober."

"Someone, please go for the guards," Annabel turned to the young man standing around.

"Come on, Bela, are you really that stupid to turn your back on your fiance for a bunch of similar nonsense? One cannot make heads or tails of it. Only a headless knight can believe such stupidities, because he doesn't have a brain either, you know? A headless knight and a goose like you!"

"Get out, David," Laurent turned to him again, pushing him away. "The guards are coming."

Laurent pushed him to the window, and during those few meters David was still shouting something about the hereditary Protestant insanity of the whole royal family. He half-got out and half-fell out the window. As he did so, the Bible, which he had previously held, fell on the ground. Laurent bent down for it and shook his head.

David drank the rest of the bottle and headed for the river. He tottered a little.

He came to the place where the Waldensian church was. He looked at the building with hatred. For a while he imagined it on fire. Then he shook his head to drive away the thought. At that moment, two men came out of the church. They locked the door behind them and stood outside for a while. The older one leaned on his cane and began to explain something to the younger man, who

looked distressed and shook his head. The old man then opened the Bible and began to read something to him. The other man looked interested, nodding his head, and then the old man put the Bible in his armpit and put his hand on his shoulder and began to pray for him. Eventually they shook their hands and the younger man hurried away.

David stood there like a statue, watching them angrily. The whole scene made him even more upset. It was clear to him that the old man was the famous Waldensian preacher about whom Annabel had spoken several times, and he felt a growing wave of hatred. He couldn't get away. The old man noticed him, smiled slightly, and walked toward him. David put the bottle to his lips again to look away. But it was already empty.

"You seem to be troubled, lad," the old preacher said. He stopped a few feet away and looked at him inquisitively. "Would you like to talk to me about it?"

"I wish you'd all be gone," David said through gritted teeth. "All filthy Christians."

"What have we done to you?" The old man asked mildly.

"If I were the king of this country," David continued hatefully, "I would have you all shot. There wouldn't be a single preacher with a stupid book. I would arrange another Bartholomew's Night!"

"Well, you're not the king of this country, and you probably won't be," the old man said mildly, but David was furious.

"Because of you!" He shouted on top of his lungs. "I was to be the king of this country! What did you tell her? What did you tell her for God's sake that she doesn't want me now?"

David walked angrily to the old man and grabbed his coat. The old man dropped his cane and staggered a little. He understood who he was talking to.

"You can't even imagine how much I hate you," David hissed close to his face.

"David, let's talk for a moment," he suggested. "No one wants to deprive you of the throne or the princess. All this has a solution."

David looked at him with narrowed eyes. The old man raised his Bible slightly. "What if I read you a nice story about a man who also hated the church and then miraculously met God? The only way you can impress the princess a little is to try to understand her. All these things mean a lot to her."

"I don't want to try to understand any nonsense about wheels with eyes," David snapped. "Half a year ago, she was a normal girl and it was fun to be with her. Now she prays, reads the Bible, and goes to church all the time. I can't stand it! And the worst part is that she thinks I should do the same. I don't understand why she can't at least keep it to herself!"

"David," the preacher tried again, very carefully considering how much he can talk about such things with someone who was drunk. He heard David's speech, saw his strange look, and how uncertain his gait was. "Those who believe in Jesus must talk about it, simply because they are fascinated by it. We experienced something incredible, an encounter with a living God. Annabel will hardly marry you if you don't go through the same thing. The Bible says it's inappropriate for believers to marry unbelievers, you know?"

David stared at him with his mouth open. "Does she have this from that stupid book? That she shouldn't marry me?"

The old man just shrugged. "Nothing is over yet, David. Let's talk for a moment about how you can become the man who impresses her and not look for a problem in her or even in the Bible."

"Should I change?" David shouted angrily. "Why me? She's a goose, and that book is a complete bullshit. I will not change. I'll shatter her faith into a thousand pieces."

"What if you found out about it all first?" The preacher suggested. "You can take the Bible if you want."

The old man continued talking, but David felt as if darkness had surrounded him. He looked at the book in the preacher's hand. He hated it terribly, and someone offered it to him again. He wanted to drink from the bottle, but as he lifted it up, he remembered that it was empty. But the preacher did not notice it through the dark glass and walked over to him.

"What if you gave me the bottle and took this instead?" He offered, handing him the Bible again.

It all seemed like a silly joke to David. He tightened his grip on the bottle and, in an eclipse of his mind, swung it unexpectedly with full force. For a moment he felt like he was just a spectator of what was happening. It was as if some inner force hidden in him, completely disconnected from his brain, had done it all. He could feel a low voice screaming somewhere in his drunken head to stop, but it was too late. The glass bottle shattered on the preacher's head. The old man tried to raise his Bible in defense, but David's attack was unexpected and quick. It seemed to David for a moment that time had stopped. He saw the old man's body fall to the ground very slowly. Blood dripped from his head. The old man threw up his hands like a rag doll. The Bible fell into the dust beside him, and the old man landed with a thud on the dusty ground, where he lay motionless.

David stared at him for a moment, his eyes wide. There were two women who had seen it all, and now they were screaming in terror. On some strange impulse, David bent down and picked up the old man's Bible. Then he ran away with uncertain steps. The women were still quite far away and he was hoping they didn't recognize him. He had to disappear. He felt as if he had sobered up in a single moment. Suddenly he was able to think clearly, but on the other hand he felt his body intoxicated by alcohol not obey him. He ran senselessly out of town, into the woods that surrounded Rouge. He fled like a frightened animal, one image after another flashing through his head. He recalled very vividly the dead old man with the broken head, and he remembered just as clearly now the execution of a murderer which he saw last year. He remembered his frightened face, the loop around his neck, and the executioner who had moved the lever of the pit. He remembered the judge's official expression and the half-curious and half-frightened glances and remarks of his comrades. But the executed killer suddenly had his own face in his imagination.

Chapter 2

David crouched on a small fishing boat heading for the coast of France, sadly watching the island of Le pays des Cygnes slowly turn into a small spot on the horizon. He considered it incredibly lucky that he had managed to reach a remote fishing village and that he had enough money with him to pay for a trip to France.

It was clear to him that he must never return to Le pays des Cygnes. His family, Annabel, and all his dreams remained in the distance. Just yesterday he wanted to be a king and considered anything less a loss. Now he was glad he was alive. He still had some money with him, but otherwise he had

nothing but his cloak and the Bible he wrapped in it. He didn't even know why he had taken it with him, it was an impulsive decision, and now he wondered how much he could get for it.

He had no idea what he was going to do. He was the son of the richest count in the country and had always lived comfortably. He hadn't understood his father at all in recent years, but the old fool was, of course, a sure source of money. He paused a little when the expression came to his mind. He'd been thinking about him lately this way, and he was sure he'd written a similar expression in his diary.

He looked back a little thoughtfully at the island. His father will soon learn that his eldest son is a murderer who has also publicly insulted the royal family, and then he will probably find his diary. He didn't hide it very well. He recalled some of the expressions he had written down there: an old fool... the old moron preached to me again... I had to listen to his stupid bullshit... that asshole gave me a thrashing just a day before my fifteenth birthday... What will his father be thinking if he reads his diary?

David swallowed. He was seventeen now, heading empty-handed, nowhere. He would quite like to sit at home at a full table and sleep in a soft bed. How he would like it now if he could just walk around the city, even at the cost of being publicly flogged. He could vividly imagine the disgrace. Mocking of the crowd, remarks from his friends, how Annabel would look at him. Would she forgive him or would she want to teach him a lesson? The law would definitely be on her side.

He would very much like the old preacher to walk around the city alive. All the other troubles he found trivial compared to the murder. He shook his head to drive away the thoughts. At the same moment, his stomach grumbled. But he had no food with him, and he was not feeling well after the previous day. It was early in the morning, and it had only been about twelve hours since the murder. His head and stomach ached, he felt a general weakness, and on the swinging ship he had already handed over all the remaining contents of his stomach to the sea.

Switzerland or America? he thought along the way. What could he do? What kind of job could he find? He did not want to stay in France. He was afraid that even in such a large country, someone might happen to discover and recognize him. He must never return home again, and if he wants to live, it must be as far away from the island as possible. The island has been his whole world so far.

Two hours later, the fishing boat arrived to the French coast. David walked around the city, feeling as if he had a burned-out mark on his forehead. He looked around cautiously, wondering if there was any chance anyone could recognize him. Then he calmed down a bit. After all, the news don't travel that fast, maybe it's not yet clear what he did. But then he remembered the young man talking to the preacher in front of the church. He must have seen him. And his escape is a perfect confession. Maybe if he stayed there and tried to camouflage it... If he knew if there was anyone else who saw him... If he could remember how far the women were and if they could recognize him... But he would have to think more the day before and not to be totally drunk. He couldn't remember the details of what was going on around him.

He was now in La Rochelle, and the city had a lively trade with the island. It was better to get out of here. He bought only a canvas bag, some bread and a bottle for water, and headed for the stagecoaches. Two hours later he was on his way across France, towards Switzerland.

He slowly ate small pieces of bread along the way. He was finally well physically, he just needed to sleep. All the fear, guilt, and despair in his soul was something completely different, but now he needed to take care of his immediate needs. He had almost no money left, he was completely alone and had no idea what he was going to do next. And then it hit him! It is not true that there is no living soul who would not be willing to help him. Christians! It's a bunch of naive fools who think they should love their enemies and help those in need. A plan began to emerge in David's head. He decided that the Bible he had inadvertently taken with him would not be completely useless.

An older gentleman with his grandson, about ten years old, boarded the stagecoach in Lymoges. The boy stared out the window for a moment, but then became bored and after an hour asked when they would arrive at his aunt's in Clermont-Ferrand. David, who was on his way already second day, smiled. He knew very well that the journey across France took many days. It will be another two days of travel to Clermont-Ferrand, and then it will take almost another two days to Lyon. The distance between Lyon and Geneva was another hundred and fifty kilometers. But he completely understood the boy. He was beginning to feel stiff and regretted a little that he hadn't chosen a city halfway. The food in the inns was more expensive than he had expected, and it meant he would be hungry for a few days along the way, and he had no idea what he was going to do next.

The old man explained the distances to the boys as well. "I told you we would be on our way for almost a week. We will visit your aunt first, and then we will go to Lyon to see your grandmother for another two days. It's another two hundred kilometers. But you'll like it in Lyon. I will show you the ancient Roman theater and the magnificent cathedrals. You'll see how we process silk. We will go for walks along the rivers Rhône and Saône and you will see their confluence. Lyon is an old city founded by the Romans before Jesus Christ was born. Two Roman emperors, Claudius and Caracalla, were also born there. One of the first Western European translations of the Bible was even made in Lyon. You know how I told you about Peter Waldo. He had the Bible translated into Arpitanian as early as the 12th century. At that time, Lyon was part of the Holy Roman Empire and some important councils were held there. Councils are church meetings in which important bishops solve various problems. And then in 1310 Lyon was occupied by the French."

David also listened to the old man out of boredom, and it occurred to him that perhaps he might also learn something about the Waldensians. He couldn't stand them, but it was all personal. It was only related to Annabel. Otherwise, he knew nothing about them. Every mention of them tortured his conscience, but at the same time it aroused his curiosity.

"I'm sorry to listen to you," he said to the old man. "I'm also a little bored. Did Peter Waldo establish the Waldensians?" He asked, looking around at the other passengers. The stagecoach was a larger carriage, of which there were six people at the moment. The stagecoaches were a novelty of the sixteenth century. It was quite expensive and not very comfortable way to travel, but David was glad there is such a thing. It was possible to drive across France along the route on which inns and switching stations grew. Some stagecoaches even had additional seating at the rear above the storage space, and the passengers who wanted to save money could sit next to the coachman. But David paid for the space inside for the long journey, even though it meant he didn't have much left for food. In addition to him and the old man and the boy, there was another man who slept despite all the shaking at the window and a young couple. They had been talking quietly so far, but they looked up at David's question, and the man said. "Feel free to speak out loud. I'm a teacher, maybe I'll learn something too."

The old man looked thoughtfully at his fellow passengers. "I'm no history expert and I'm a Catholic," he said, as if defending himself, even though being a Protestant was legal in France at the time. "But on the other hand, I'm also interested in what the other side is saying. For example, I read the Calvin's Institution and I also read the Bible. One should know these things just to form one's own opinion. In any case, Waldo certainly did not establish Waldensian or Waldenses. You can use both. It is an understandable mistake. Calvin's followers are Calvinists and Luther's followers are Lutherans. So it occurs to you that the Waldenses come from Waldo. In fact, it should be the other way around. I think the name meant people from the valley. It's like thinking that when someone's name is Francois Cheese, they invented cheese," he said, for simplicity looking at his grandson. "While the cheeses were here a long time ago and he just started producing them. Waldenses are, as far as I know, Christians who lived in the Alps long before Waldo. He lived in the years 1140 - 1205, it is not known exactly. He was a merchant who took to heart mainly Christ's words about poverty, and his followers called themselves "Lyon's poor." On the other hand, he probably couldn't live like a complete beggar if he could arrange something like a translation of the Bible, which must have been an expensive affair in the days before the invention of book printing."

The old man winked at his grandson to check. "When was book printing invented?" He asked.

"Everyone knows, Grandpa, that Mr. Gutenberg came up with it around 1450," the boy said, a little annoyed.

"Waldenses, as far as I know, continue to live in the Alps in closed valleys. They farm there quite independently of the outside world, although there are some wandering Waldensian preachers. In any case, Savoie is not part of France, and I don't know much about what is happening there. However, in the last century, a French translation of Olivetanus's Bible was published, and I have it at home. The book is huge, weighs perhaps five kilos, and there is a note that this translation was given to the people by Waldenses. This does not mean that Olivetanus is one of them. As far as I know, he was Calvin's cousin, but the Waldenses paid for his work. I assume that the Waldenses are close to the Reformed churches, although I have never been interested in the details of their teachings. Their preachers are educated and some of them certainly speak French, but otherwise, as far as I know, they have some other dialect."

David found that talking to the old man made his way better. He himself entertained his grandson for a while with ancient Roman myths, that he knew, and with the teacher they became entangled in a discussion about the history of England. He was almost sorry that they should leave at Clermont-Ferrand the next evening.

The next day, the first flakes began to fly in the air. David slept curled up in his cloak, but often woke up because of the cold. He was getting tired of the trip, and with a heavy heart spent at noon at the inn where they had stopped, the last money for a bowl of hot soup. Then, when the stagecoach stopped again in the evening, he said goodbye to the old man and the young couple, and as new passengers reached the stagecoach, he went to stretch a little.

Then he sat down a short distance from the pub and finally pulled the Bible out of his bag. He opened it hesitantly and studied its contents. He vaguely remembered Annabel telling him something about it. Something about reading the New Testament first. He went through the Gospel of Matthew, which some time ago upset him with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, and started to read the story of Christ's birth and the beginning of his public ministry. Surprisingly, it all had sense and

he found it interesting. David vaguely remembered that in his drunkenness he was shouting something about talking toilets, wheels with eyes, and flying saucers, and he couldn't remember why. He read several chapters at once, and then the passengers began boarding the stagecoach again, and it was time to join them. He hid the Bible in a bag and went to them. He noticed that one of the new passengers was looking at him thoughtfully. He was a man in his fifties, dressed as a farmer.

Chapter 3

David didn't feel like meeting new people, so even though the new passengers began to talk to each other and speak about what they were doing, he didn't join them. All he heard was that the older man's name was Lucas, that he had a farm in the mountains and was making and selling cheese.

The next morning, David focused mainly on covering up the twitching in his stomach from the others. He looked thoughtfully out of the window, trying not to think about how warm it would be in his father's house right now and what specialty the chef would be preparing for lunch.

The stagecoach stopped for a longer lunch break, and while the coachman changed the horses, the other passengers set out to buy something for lunch. He just looked sadly at the inn, sat a short distance away on a wooden bench, and stared at the flying snowflakes for a moment. As the others warmed up, he pulled the Bible out of his bag and began to read again. On one hand, he would love to warm up inside, but he didn't feel like looking at their full plates and listening to the carefree laughter of people who enjoyed life.

He began to read preaching on the mountain and, with a sigh, turned the pages that contained Jesus's words about loving the enemy, setting the other face, and dealing with others. He couldn't finish it. After a moment, he closed it and stuffed the Bible back into his bag. He was breathing at his fingers, looking at the sky. "Are you laughing at me? Having fun?" He whispered softly. "You really don't have to try to make me feel even more miserable, I'm feeling terrible even without you reminding me and making fun of me."

David did not notice Lucas sitting near the window, looking at his "brother," who was sitting outside praying instead of having lunch.

David took his bottle out of his bag and at least went to the pump to fill it with fresh water. The ice water wasn't exactly right for his stomach, and before he filled it, he drank and refilled it, his fingers were frozen.

He wondered if he should take a walk, sit in the stagecoach, or go warm up inside, but at that moment Lucas came out, walked over to him, and smiled at him.

"Lunch is on the table, I ordered food for you too, I'd like you to be my guest today, brother."

David followed him, embarrassed. Lucas sat with him at a separate table away from the others so they could talk undisturbed. And two full plates of steaming meat, vegetables and patties were really waiting there.

As Lucas prayed, David just lowered his head in shyly and studied the plate of tempting-looking food. Lucas then said "amen" and started eating. While they ate, he didn't ask questions until David's plate was almost empty, then looked at him and asked, "What's your name, anyway? Tell

me, what is a young man in such expensive clothes doing on his own, and obviously without money?"

David sighed and introduced himself only by his first name. He wondered what he could think of. Lucas looked at him sincerely, and he somehow did not manage to pronounce any of the lies that occurred to him.

"I can't go home," he admitted hesitantly, "and I don't know what to do."

"Didn't your parents throw you out because of faith?" Lucas asked with interest. "Where are you from?"

The answer, however, was only David's startled expression. Being rejected for faith sounded like a good story, but David wasn't sure if he could pretend to be a zealous Christian after reading a few pages of the Bible.

"I see it's hard for you to talk about it, so at least tell me something about how you came to Christ," Lucas urged.

David thought deeply. Being indebted to someone he considered to be one of his enemies was harder than he expected. Lucas's friendly expression and sincere interest were disarming.

"When I first knew Christ," he began quoting modified sentences from a letter sent to him by Annabel some time ago, "it was as if a light was shining inside me. It was as if the world was suddenly given colors for the first time, and until then everything was just gray. It's like I'm starting to breathe cleaner air, like I'm opening my eyes for the first time."

He said it all quite stiffly, and Lucas raised an eyebrow a little surprised.

"Really?" He looked at him amused.

"Sure," David nodded. "To know Christ is to begin to live."

At the same time, David remembered the other sentences about what the believer had in common with the unbeliever and what the light had in common with the darkness with which the letter continued, and how Annabel would have liked him to know Christ.

The passengers began to rise at that moment, and Lucas stood up as well.

"Actually, David, that sounds like something you read from a book," Lucas shook his head. "I think that's what a poet or a romantically based 15-year-old girl might say. But of course I don't want to hurt you or your faith. I just want to say that if you don't happen to know Christ and you have the Bible with you for some study reason, then you don't have to pretend it just because you're hungry."

David stared at him. Was it really that transparent?

"You know, I'm really interested in it all," he said hesitantly, "but it's all very confusing."

Lucas put a hand on his shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "That sounded much more honest," he nodded. "You know, David, I'm forty-eight and have two grown sons. You can't imagine what they were able to tell me to avoid punishment. So I am not easily tricked."

David nodded and sighed.

"Where are you going, anyway?" Lucas asked on the way to the stagecoach.

"I paid for a trip to Geneva," David replied.

"I'm getting off in Lyon tomorrow midday," Lucas said as he sat down in the stagecoach next to him. "So we still have some time to talk."

"What would you do if you were seventeen, you had nothing and no friends?" David asked quietly. "I know Latin well and of course I can read and write, but that's about it."

"First of all, I would consider whether I really don't have any friends and whether I have to be on the run," Lucas said. "And secondly, I would consider whether it is better to run from things or face them. I understand that nobody is waiting for you in Geneva?"

„That's right," David nodded.

"Where are you from, anyway?" Lucas looked at him questioningly.

"Not far from La Rochelle," David told the half-truth.

"You can get off with me in Lyon," Lucas suggested. "I have some acquaintances there. We may ask if anyone is looking for a home teacher or a scribe. If not, you could go to my farm with me for a while, but it's almost in the mountains, there is a lot of snow in the winter and you could just help us for food. There's a lot of work with the cattle and with removing the snow in winter."

David nodded. During the afternoon, they talked a bit more and then Lucas slept part of the time. David couldn't sleep. He was thinking hard. Then, when he sat down with his new friend over a full plate in the evening, he looked at him a little hesitantly.

"Maybe it's stupid," he said, "but I'd quite like to clear my head for a while. If there was really a job for me at your farm, I would take it, but I don't want to be a nuisance."

In fact, something fascinated him about Lucas, and he felt a strange sense of security in the way he had confronted him amicably before.

"You wouldn't be a nuisance," Lucas assured him. "I had three helpers, and one of them recently got married and left. So I was actually looking for someone, but I didn't quite imagine that he would be a young man dressed as a prince."

"I am not a prince, I am a count," David replied. "Or I used to be, but now it doesn't matter."

"So I feel relieved," Lucas laughed, "I hopes we'll find some good quality rake for you if you're a count," he winked at him. (In Czech the words for rake and count sounds very similar.)

David laughed. "I admit I'm not used to hard work, but I have enough strength. I've studied so far, but at the moment I really don't know what I'm going to do next and I need to think about it for a while."

"Well, if you happen to think you need to write a letter and reconcile with someone, I have enough stationery at home," Lucas smiled. "You should know, David, that I am first and foremost a lay pastor and preacher. I'm one of the Waldenses, if that tells you anything."

David swallowed. It seemed to him that his plan to sneak in among Christians worked too well. He wondered for a moment if God had a sense of humor. Until now, he was making fun of God, and now it seemed to him that God was making fun of him.

"Does that mean anything for me?" He asked cautiously.

"It means I think I'm able to give you answers to the questions that bother you," Pastor Lucas said.

"I was wondering if that meant I had to do something special or not," David wanted to know.

"There is one thing," Lucas nodded, "if I ask you something, you'll either tell me the truth or tell me you don't want to talk about it, but you won't lie to me. Deal?"

David nodded eagerly and was a little relieved.

"If you ever want to talk about what happened, I'm at your disposal, but I won't force you," Lucas assured him, taking the last bite in his mouth.

"Thank you," David said with relief, "for everything."

Chapter 4

Pastor Lucas was a man of action, and he managed to get back money for the last part of journey David did not take. It was enough to get some ordinary clothes for him. They spent the night with Lucas's brother a short distance behind Lyon, and the next day they rode to the Alps on horseback.

Lucas's farm stood a short distance from the village in a picturesque mountain valley dominated by a large lake. The farm itself consisted of a smaller residential building and several barns and stables. There was already snow on the mountains above them.

David set to work with all his efforts. His richly decorated clothes were closed in one of the chests, and he carried the hay to a herd of thirty cows, removed manure, and when snow buried the farm after two weeks, he spent hours throwing it away. Somehow he hoped that by working, he wouldn't have to think that much, and in part it worked. In the evening, he always ate his food with gusto, and exhaustively fell into his bed just to get up at dawn and continue with hard work. He did more than he was asked to, and Pastor Lucas sometimes watched him thoughtfully, prayed for him, and wondered what the seventeen-year-old lad could run away from.

David was almost terrified of Saturdays when only the essentials were done. No one forced him to go to Christian sermons, but every Saturdays, the whole family gathered around the table after lunch, eating buns, and the pastor told some Bible stories or his various life experiences. David was among those who listened to him, though more so that he could rest in the warmth and have something good to eat.

He didn't like Saturdays. He preferred to work from morning till night and was pleased with his decision to prefer physical work to comfort. As soon as he had nothing to do, his conscience pricked him and he preferred to silence it with toil and fatigue. If he ended up somewhere as a clerk, he would have much more time to think and he would probably suffer.

Enviously, he watched the pastor and his wife, Alison, laugh with their three children who were still in the house, or with what joy they welcome Olivier and Didier, their older sons, one of whom already had a child of his own and the other was awaiting the birth of his first child in February. In addition to them, they had two daughters, Margot and Marion, aged thirteen and seventeen, and a nine-year-old boy, Philip, who was an inquisitive participant in discussions and constantly asked his father for new stories and had many questions. From time to time, David wondered when was the last time he'd looked at his father with admiration, or when he thought something of what he was

saying had been interesting. Occasionally he recalled some notes from his diary and shook his head to drive them away.

The pastor spent a lot of time visiting various places and talking to people, but the farm fed him. In fact, the whole farm was taken care of by two men who were only a few years older than David.

Pascal was twenty-four, serious and thoughtful, and it seemed to David that he understood slow cows and that his presence strangely calmed them. Pascal was the one who spent most of the milking and making cheeses during the season, while the cheerful Jean, two years younger, liked to talk to people and sell their products. But now most of the cows were expecting new calves, there was no one to milk and the life on the farm slowed down a bit, and this time was devoted to maintenance, for which there was not enough time during the year.

Pascal and Jean exchanged their routine duties for carpentry tools, repairing barns, and finishing a room in the house to serve guests who often visited the pastor. David stayed in one room with these two helpers and occasionally heard them talking or praying together in the evenings. It was a new world for him.

How many times he remembered with shame how he roared that Christians deserved another Bartholomew's Night. Although they seemed strange to him a bit, in a way he envied the peace he saw in them, and something attracted him to them in a strange way like a moth to the light. They were his only friends now, and he kept in mind that the only one who noticed in that stagecoach that he was hungry was a Christian.

A few weeks before Christmas, Jean sat down at a table with a stack of papers one Saturday and began writing one letter after another.

"Are you writing a book?" David asked.

Jean laughed. "I am one of fifteen children. At least once a year I try to write to all my siblings and parents."

"Actually, I'm surprised that someone who can read and write takes care for cows," David looked hesitantly at Pascal, who was leaning over the Bible.

"We take it partly as a mission," Jean looked at him. "What Pastor Lucas does is important work, and we help him in this way. My father is also a preacher and has always cared about our education, just so we can study the Bible. I'm the youngest of all the children. When I was born, my father was almost fifty, and a few years ago the mountains began to be too much for him. When I was eighteen, my parents left to live with my oldest brother, but somehow I felt that God wanted me here at the moment and that he was preparing me for something else."

"And you, Pascal?" David looked at him.

"I'm an orphan," Pascal said simply. "I've been living here since I was nine years old, and I'm trying to pay back with my work that they took care of me when I was still young to work. Anyway, I won't be here long."

"Pascal will get married in the summer," Jean winked at David. "I took him to my sister's in Lyon last year, and one of my many beautiful cousins was visiting, so I won't get rid of him now," Jean teased his friend. "And my hand will probably fall off next Christmas if I have to write to him as

well. David sighed a little at the mention of the wedding, remembered for a moment Annabel's laughter and teasing, and the passion in her eyes as she told him about Jesus Christ.

Life in the farm was advancing at a leisurely pace, the snowdrifts were up to David's shoulders, and life on the island was beginning to seem like a thing of ancient past. He fought the snow, which was still falling heavily from the sky, and he felt that he could spend the rest of his life doing that monotonous work. But one January day, a message came like lightning from clear skies to change the lives of all Waldensian Christians forever. It was not completely unexpected, they had been feeling a certain opposition for a long time, but they still had no idea that everything would worsen like this, and even in the winter.

Jean ran out of the village, out of breath. "The villain Andres Gastalda finally got us. The devil owed us that inquisition. A patent has just been issued ordering all Waldensians to either leave the country within three days or convert to Catholicism within twenty days - those who disobey should be executed."

There was a stunned silence in the room. Pastor Lucas set down his cup of tea and ran a trembling hand over his face. It was January 25, 1655, and snow was falling heavily behind the windows.

Pascal was the first to get on his knees and the others joined him. Only David stood quietly by the window, staring at the landscape.

"So what, our prophet?" Pascal asked Jean after a moment. Jean just shook his head.

"As much as I appreciate it, when Jean sometimes has some observation," Pastor Lucas said thoughtfully, "common sense is enough for this. We all know history. We know what the Inquisition is capable of. There are still people living in France who experienced Bartholomew's Night as kids. I wouldn't dare stay here. The question is not whether to leave, but what we can take with us. My brother has a farm near Lyon, so there's not much to think about. We will build a small house there and do the same as before, only in a smaller scale. Pascal wanted to leave anyway in the summer, and Jean can twist his neck watching my older daughter, even though he's afraid to tell me, so I expect he's going to be eager to stay with us."

Jean blushed and looked at Pastor Lucas, embarrassed. At that moment, Marion pretended that there was nothing as important as the sewing she had been doing.

"Why do people hate you so much!" David shouted angrily. "It is unfair and stupid to do so. Every reasonable king should be happy to have a land full of people like you."

He realized how ironic it was he was saying that. He could just say those sentences to his younger self.

Pastor Lucas sighed. "I think there are several reasons, David. One of them is political. Even during the Roman Empire, religion was to be the unifying element of the empire, and anyone who deviated was suspicious, no matter how well he could live. At that time, our ancestors had to flee here, and nothing has changed during centuries. I also think that people subconsciously feel that what we are telling them is true and it irritates them and they are afraid of the change it should bring to their personal lives. And the third sad reason is that Christians sometimes behave like a bunch of idiots, and sometimes they even deserve to be hated. Anyway, I'm glad you're saying that, maybe those few months with us have been good for you."

David sighed, he felt as if the pastor was throwing him out, and he didn't dare ask anything else that night.

Chapter 5

If the pastor had been sad the night before, he had turned into a general the next day. He pulled them all out of bed at dusk and began to give orders.

"David, you will go for the butcher," he said at breakfast. "We have five pigs here and I would like to kill three of them. We will take something with us, we will give something to friends and the poor."

David nodded.

"Pascal's going to get things ready for the slaughter. Jean, visit the two poor widows, to whom we give food every month. Tell them I want to give them a cow and a pig, but let them work a little and get them out of here on their own. I don't have time to hand them over on a gold tray. And there are about five other families to whom I would like to give something from the slaughter. In the meantime, go around and tell them to send an assistant to the butcher. I want to ask the surrounding landowners if they would buy cows from me, I'll see if I manage to sell some. We'll deal with what's left here later."

"Alison, you're packing today and the girls will help you. You won't deal with the pigs, there should be enough other helpers," he turned to his wife.

"Philip, I know you're only nine, but you have to work as a big guy today," he looked at his son. "You're going to put wood in the stove all the time, carry and heat the water, and do whatever Pascal wants you to do, right?"

Everyone nodded, and here and there someone dared to ask just a supplementary question.

"It will be two days way to my brother's with a loaded car, we have to leave tomorrow morning," the pastor continued. "And we have a lot of work to do until then."

David hurriedly drank the rest of his tea and began to dress.

"I'm going half of the journey with you," Pastor Lucas rose from the table.

As soon as they came out the door, the pastor looked at him. "So what about you, David? Have you thought about what you're going to do next? On the one hand, I'm not throwing you out, we'll have to build a house and there will be more than enough work, but I don't know if that's right for you. Sometimes I see your expression when you carry food for pigs, for example. Maybe you should finally look for something that suits you better."

David sighed. "I don't mind any work I do here. Only since I heard the parable of the prodigal son I always feel like a complete idiot when I go to feed pigs. I feel like an idiot from morning till night anyway, but—" David shook his head, not even knowing how to proceed.

"I promised you I wouldn't ask anything," the pastor continued, "but of course I see how you are behaving. It seems to me that you have decided to kill yourself by hard work and that you are trying to forget this way your past, whatever it was. But the parable of the prodigal son has a sequel, and

the son returns home. I can't give you much, but I'd give you money and food for the way to La Rochelle at any time."

"I really can't," David shook his head and sighed.

"All right," the pastor nodded. "Then stay with us for now, if you want. If it turns out that there won't be enough work for you in time, you may be able to continue living with us and look for a job in Lyon. It's about an hour's walk from my brother. What do you say?"

David took a deep breath. "Thank you, I'd love to," he replied.

"There's one problem, David, that we have to get out of here, but on the other hand, I still have both sons in the mountains. I suppose Didier would be reasonable, but we still need to make sure he really left. But I'm worried about Olivier. His wife is expecting a baby every day now and I don't know if they will hesitate. I would need to split in half to take care of both the family and the property here and them. So we still have to go there. Maybe it would be useful if you came with me and took your expensive clothes in all cases, maybe you could help us out of some problems. It can't be done in three days."

David nodded. "Anything. After all, I'm baptized as a Catholic, and even if I don't care about these things, I can tell anyone what they want so I will not be in any danger."

"All right," the pastor nodded. He had no desire to engage in any discussion about faith at the moment. David had had months to understand what the Waldensians believed, and there would probably be time for that in the future.

"Do you know what's the worst thing about it all, David?" The pastor said a little sadly. "That our people have lived here for over a thousand years. Christians fled here from persecution at the very beginning of the seventh century. Life in those high mountains has never been easy, and I myself left the real mountain Waldensian villages some time ago and settled here in the foothills. But even though we've been seeing it harden for a long time, and we knew it might be time to leave, none of us would have thought it would have to be so fast. I don't know if you can imagine it at all. A thousand years — and now we have to leave Savoie in three days." With that, Lucas broke away from him, and David hurried to the butcher.

During the day, David was busy cutting meat and at times helped to pack. They had a single wagon and two horses, and it was difficult to decide what to take with them. There were chests with packed clothes, and the next day they were to add duvets and kitchen utensils. But now they still needed it all.

The pastor walked through the house with a sigh, and David heard him talk a few times with his wife about how long they had saved money for an item and that they would have to leave it here now.

However, his homestead was not high in the mountains and in this respect he had a much easier situation than other Christians. After all, he succeeded with his neighbors, and a landowner bought twenty cows from him for the price of ten. And it was still better to have money for ten cows than nothing.

By the evening, he had sold two more cows, and shortly before they finished the slaughter, a middle-aged man ran to the farm short of breath.

"Did you give my sister a cow and a pig?" He asked the pastor.

The pastor nodded. "How do you take it?"

The man sighed. "I suppose you're going to just leave this house standing here and leave?"

"We have nothing else to do," the pastor replied.

"Look, I've saved some money, just for a little house," the man continued. "Of course, this farm is of much greater value, but I wondered if anything wasn't better than nothing?"

The pastor looked at him in surprise, then urged him. "Come inside."

After half an hour, the pastor said goodbye to the man and smiled at his family.

"It's all better than I expected, but it's clear to me that the thousands of people up there can't have it same way," he looked sadly at the mountains.

"God is really helping us," Alison agreed.

And at that moment, two empty carts appeared on the way to confirm her words.

Four strong men jumped out of them. One of them was Lucas's brother. They both hugged for a moment, then the newcomer asked, "So what do we do?"

Three fully loaded carts left the farm during the morning. David paced the half-empty house thoughtfully, nibbling on bread and meat, examining everything for the last time, as if to memorize a place that had become his second home for a few months.

"Save your strength, it's a long way to the mountains, you'll be happy to be there in two days," Jean smiled at him, packing food to take to the village where the pastor's older son lived. He really hoped he wouldn't find him there anymore.

They said goodbye and David and Pascal waited for the pastor, who was currently arranging the transfer of the house to a new owner. Pascal went to say goodbye to the remaining cows, while some of the animals had already settled on the neighboring farm.

The pastor returned during the morning and spent a while walking with the new owner of the farm, explaining various things to him. Eventually, they all ate together, even though there were no more dishes in the house, only meat and bread, and after lunch, Pastor Lucas, Pascal, and David set out.

Lucas's brother solved the problem of how to be in two places at once, and the pastor now headed far into the mountains, to his former house, where his younger son had lived for years. He was afraid that Olivier would be reluctant to leave with his pregnant wife, and he was ready to force him to do so and, of course, to help him. That's why David and Pascal went with him.

Chapter 6

You might skip the description of the cruel massacre if you want.

The snow was stained with blood. The soldiers were acting like crazy. At first, they mainly used their weapons. They fired at the fugitives, and at those they approached close enough, they cut with

their sabers. As people dwindled and the alpine village filled with dead bodies, they began to invent more torturous methods of killing.

They cut off the heads of ten children in front of their parents. They laughed at their pain and played skittles with their heads. However, the agony of the parents did not last long. The soldiers soon became tired of the game and killed both adults.

The church building was on fire, but soldiers made sure to save the barrels of communion wine before setting it on fire. The alcohol was doing its work and they started to lose the remaining restraint. Two of them grabbed a newborn baby and tested if they could tear the boy into two pieces. They succeeded and they waved pieces of his body triumphantly overhead. The week-old life, for which his mother endured months of discomfort and hours of pain, was over, and another bloody pool was added to the white snow. The soldiers threw the body into the fire.

Another victim of their perversion was a pregnant woman. They cut the baby out of her body alive, and while one of them was examining the tiny body of the five-month-old, the other soldier poured gunpowder into her womb. The child died in a moment. The man threw the little girl away and helped his colleague drag the woman to the church building. They threw her body into the flames.

Some of the soldiers were already tired, so they drove a few of the people into one of the buildings, blocked the door, and set the house on fire. Several of them kept watch so that no one could get out of the windows and shoot those who tried.

Several soldiers rushed into another house, began looking for something to eat and for jewelry.

"What do you think there is in the belly of a heretic?" a drunken soldier laughed and cut a belly of one man. He took the insides out and looked disappointed. "I thought I would find a couple of devils in him!" he explained to his colleague.

"What about his heart?" Another soldier asked. "I'm sure there will be worms!"

The heart also looked normal, but the soldier was not finished with his atrocity.

"Sinful hearts from a heretic!" He began to shout. "Would anyone like a fresh heart? It's still warm!"

It seemed funny to another of the soldiers, who cut off the head of the corpse of a child lying nearby and joined him. "Child's brain! Who wants to buy a baby's brain? We also have other fresh meat for sale!"

"Hey, I'll have some!" Called the guy who was coming to them, dragging a very old woman with him. Another soldier led her husband.

"Have you ever had a woman who is ninety-five?" He yelled at the soldier. "I will give this woman only for a real delicacy!"

The man who had cut the heart out of the body now stabbed it on his saber and went to the fire with it. "I will give you a heretical heart roasted in the fire of the devil's temple for her!" He shouted his offer.

The soldiers laughed.

"I've lived for a hundred years, but I have never seen such a perversity!" the old man exclaimed.

"And you'll never see it again!" the soldier replied. "Actually you won't see anything," he added and killed him with one movement of his saber.

"Look what a hundred-year-old guy looks like!" He winked at the soldiers around him. "A dead hundred year old man!"

The old woman fainted and the soldier frowned. "What about her?"

"Just kill her!" Somebody proposed.

"Don't you want her?" The man holding the woman asked.

"Why?" His colleague looked at him, returning from the fire with a baked heart. "If I wanted to have fun, not with a woman who became old before I was born!"

The soldier shrugged and ended the old woman's life.

"Does anyone want to taste a heretic?" His companion now asked, raising his smoky saber.

The soldiers hesitated for a while and then one took the cup, drunk some wine to encourage himself and then he cut a piece of the heart.

He put it in his mouth and then spat in a theatrical way. "Uneatable! The heretics are good for nothing!"

The perversity went on. As somebody of the Waldensians was alive, the soldiers continued. Their victims were not considered to be people by them and they obeyed the order to kill them with all their imagination. They hung some of them on trees by their legs and let them freeze there. They pinned some with nails as Jesus. They threw others from rocks, tied. By the evening, six thousand dead people were lying in the Waldensian villages.

Snow began to pour on the depopulated villages again. It covered the bloodied bodies lying in the streets and the severed heads of those who had been executed there that day. It also fell on those who scattered in the mountains and tried to find some shelter there.

Only a few people survived directly in the villages in this part of the Alps. They were prisoners that the soldiers deliberately spared and led them to the lord the next day. They were given a choice: either they would go to Mass immediately or to the gallows.

Chapter 7

A blacksmith named Henri was one of the survivors of the massacre. His clothes were dirty with blood and he was sitting in the house of Lucas's son Olivier, in one of the more remote villages where the army had not reached that day. He was crying and smearing tears on his face with his dirty hands.

"They killed my wife," he moaned. "We've been together for five years and we've been praying for a baby all this time. I wanted so much to have a son. And she was finally pregnant. They killed her before my eyes. They held me and laughed at it. And then they cut her belly. They took a little girl out of her. She fit in their hands. She looked like a doll. I've never seen anything like it. I wished so much at that moment that I could at least hold her, but she died in a moment. And they threw her in the snow and then kicked me down the slope into the snowdrifts. I couldn't even bury them," the blacksmith swallowed, holding his wounded hand.

Pastor Lucas was nervous, but he still didn't dare interrupt his story.

"What about my brother Didier?" Olivier asked instead of him.

"He was one of those who left as soon as the decree came out. He wanted to meet you," Henri looked at Lucas. "You must have missed him."

Lucas breathed out with relieve.

"Why did you stay here, anyway?" Lucas looked at his son.

Instead of answering, he pointed to his wife Eveline, who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy.

"We sent a delegation with bribes to the lord. We asked him to extend that time for at least a month."

"Whose idea is it forcing people to leave like this in the winter," Pascal shook his head.

"It's an idea of someone who wants to profit from it, of course," Pastor Lucas said. "So that we have to sell our things cheaply and quickly and leave a lot of them here if possible. But I think it's time to save property and time to save lives, and this is the other one."

He paused for a moment and looked at Eveline. "Pack your essentials quickly and get out of here today and bring the elders here right away," he said to his son.

"It's eleven o'clock in the evening," Olivier replied. "Do you think anything will happen until morning?"

"Get them out of bed," Pastor Lucas snapped. "It's time to act, not think about which village will be next."

"And if they object, tell them I'll come kick their asses in person," Henri added, crying again. "We're such idiots, we should have left immediately."

Eveline said nothing more, quickly hurling the most necessary clothes into a large pillowcase as two sleepy, carelessly dressed men came to the room - the elders of the village, Vincent and Paul. But Henri's story quickly woke them up.

"We're not far from where Henri lived," Vincent thought. "They can easily come here tomorrow. I really thought we could negotiate somehow."

"Let's pray if we're going to wake everyone up at night or wait until morning," Paul said, kneeling.

Everyone prayed for a while, and David watched them curiously.

"I'm not sure what to do next," Vincent shrugged as they rose from the floor. "Those who stayed here are often old people, pregnant women, families with a large number of small children. I'll go around everyone and tell them what happened and let everyone arrange as they see fit. What are you going to do?" He turned to Olivier.

"He'll pack a few things and leave right now," Pastor Lucas replied instead of his son. "And the rest of us will go out in the morning to warn people in more distant places."

"Count on me, too," Henri added.

"We have to find you some clothes and also treat the wound," Eveline said, bringing a bottle of alcohol, which was used for similar purposes in this household.

With a sigh, she opened another chest and began rummaging through it.

She pulled out some masks and a box of make-up for the children's show and shook her head. "We have things like that at home, and we'll end up leaving almost empty-handed," she sighed, looking at her husband. "Are we really going to go out tonight?"

Olivier packed thoughtfully. "What would you like?"

"I probably wouldn't fall asleep anyway," Eveline shrugged, "and it's clear night."

"Please stop discussing it and get out of here," Pastor Lucas suggested. "When it's all over, we'll meet at my brother's place by Lyon. I guess Didier will go there too."

"What's next?" Olivier sighed.

"The next thing is that if you do not stop blabbering on immediately and set out, you will be the oldest man in this village whom his father bends over his knee and wallops," the pastor snapped at him.

Eveline laughed.

"I'd quite like to see that," she said provocatively, looking at her husband.

Pastor Lucas walked over to his son, who, with feigned fear, raised his hands in defense and joked. "Well, Dad, I'll do what you tell me."

"I hope so," Pastor Lucas said, placing both hands on his shoulders and staring at him. "It would break my heart if something happened to you. I don't want to listen to stories of someone roasting my unborn grandchild on fire, is that clear?"

Olivier nodded. "What about you, Dad?" He asked seriously.

"We will be careful," Pastor Lucas said.

"Nothing will happen to him," Pascal said, blushing a little.

"How can you say something like that?" Henri sighed.

"I know that Jean is our prophet," Pascal replied hesitantly, "but when we prayed, it seemed to me that God was saying something to me, but I find it strange."

"Just say it," Pastor Lucas urged.

"Oh yeah," Pascal sighed. "If I wanted to think of something, I would seriously say something else, but it seemed to me that God was saying to me: My son, do not be afraid of anything and follow your brother Lucas. Hold to him like a shadow and the angels will lead you to safety, and soon Lucas will eat with the king."

"With the king?" Pastor Lucas shook his head. "With the king of what?"

Pascal just threw his hands in the air and shook his head.

"Great," Henri said. "Even though I don't have much will for life right now, I don't want to be chopped up into a thousand pieces either, so with your permission I will also hold unto you like a shadow."

"What about you, David?" Pascal turned jokingly. "Have you ever eaten with the king himself?"

David laughed with a pretended laugh, and Pastor Lucas did not miss how frightened he looked for a moment.

The soldiers broke into the house at dawn. The sleepy men, who were full of plans yesterday, stared at them blankly for a moment.

"This is the famous pastor," one of them said. "Then take this guy to the cart, the leaders want to have their preachers executed separately."

"I'm his assistant," Pascal said, "I hope I can go with him."

"Take them all away," the soldier ordered.

"Look, I'm a good Catholic," David said at that moment. "I'll get on my knees here and pray to Virgin Mary if I need to prove it, but I've only worked for this guy, and I'm here just because we brought some food here. I think he sometimes uses me instead of a mule," he said deliberately in a slightly contemptuous tone. He didn't feel like being killed for someone's faith that had nothing to do with him.

"So pack your belongings and get out," the soldier suggested, taking his friends away. The pastor looked at David thoughtfully. They could all hear gunfire outside.

David sighed. He was left alone in an empty house, not knowing what to do. He himself was surprised that he had suddenly fought so hard for his life. It was completely subconscious. He thinks about death all the time, but when he almost looks it in the face, he is suddenly determined to live. He did not understand himself. He grabbed a bag of his clothes and thought for a moment. Then he hurried through the stone house and tossed a number of other useful items into his bag. He took Pascal's food basket in the hallway and hurried away.

The soldiers really let him go. They were probably still tired after the previous massacre. They did not torture anyone. They drove people into a barn, locked it and set it on fire. Several people who resisted them were shot, and as he left, David saw Pastor Lucas, who, along with Henri, Pascal, and two elders, was locked in a cart with a large cage instead of a platform. Undoubtedly, it was a cattle wagon that had been confiscated from one of the villagers.

David saw that the soldiers were looting rather than bothering people, and he preferred to stay out of their way. He was the only one who left the village free that early morning. It was a wonder how a willingness to say one prayer can determine one's life.

"God, I wonder if you're going to do something yourself to keep Lucas alive, or if I should help you," he began praying angrily along the way. "I have a plan. Those people are my friends, and I'm not going to sit with my arms folded and watch them drive to the execution."

As he began to pray, he suddenly felt someone's presence. It was as if someone had placed a warm blanket on his shoulders and filled him with peace.

He realized how disrespectfully he was talking to God and calmed down a bit.

"Are you really alive, God? Could you hear someone like me? You know very well what I am. I deserve to die, but I'm terribly afraid of it. I'm afraid of pain and lately I'm starting to worry about having to face you. I have a suggestion, do it for me that I will not have to die at the execution site and I will do for you whatever you want in return."

It was a bit of a strange prayer, but David said it honestly. When he finished, he said "amen," as he knew it from the pastor's house, and pulled kerosene, a box of makeup, a flintlock, and a bottle of alcohol from his luggage. He made fire, poured himself a glass, and hesitated for a moment before putting it to his lips. He didn't know if after such a long time he would still be able to handle what he used to do.

Chapter 8

David had nothing to lose, and neither did the people in the cart. The only thing that could save them would be if they denied Christ. The cart was moving slowly along a winding road leading from the mountains. Those he now considered his friends were taken for questioning and then they should be executed.

The timing was everything. As the cart pulled behind the bend in the road, the coachman and a soldier who accompanied him saw a hooded figure in black cloak standing motionless by the road. The figure raised its head and a flame came out of its mouth. Two dark eyes looked at them from a hideous black face and then the devil headed silently into the woods.

The soldier and the coachman looked at each other in horror, and the coachman spurred the horses on. By the time they reached the next bend, the devil was there again. They saw again the flame coming from his mouth, and at the same moment a circle of fire burned around him. The flames continued to spread, and now the whole road burned before them. The horses began to back and the coachman reluctantly stopped the wagon.

David searched for the right words and prayed quietly. And then suddenly he had an idea. It was as if a low voice whispered to him somewhere inside. "Speak Latin."

After all, it could be assumed that neither the coachman nor the soldier would be educated.

"Aut mors aut victoria," David said slowly and clearly, looking at the men. It meant "death or victory." Then, slowly but very loudly and menacingly, he began to recite everything that had just occurred to him.

He looked at the prisoners and hissed, "Non quamdiu, sed quam bene vixeris, refert." (It doesn't matter how long but how well you lived.)

He took a deep breath and shouted at the imprisoned men, "Honestas mors turpi vita potior." (Honest death is better than a life of shame.)

He could have said this rather to himself. But the flames on the road still scared the horses, the coachman could not pass them, and David's devilish mask was very good. The coachman and the soldier jumped down from their seats and, frightened, took a few steps back. David ran out of Latin wisdom.

He looked hatefully, turned to the captives, and began to recite a Latin tale about a deer: „Cervus aliquando in aqua lacus clari imaginem suam spectabat et verbis stultis cornua alta laudabat, crura autem nimis gracilita et tenuia vituperabat.“

Pastor Lucas recognized him as soon as he had seen him and now he decided to help him. He pointed to one of the elders. "This is Cervus!" He shouted, frightened. "Then take him and leave us alone."

Then he turned to the soldier. "The devil is looking for this guy," he continued, pointing to the man. His name is Paul Cervus. If you don't give him to him right away, we're done."

Paul couldn't speak Latin, and there was a real astonishment on his face.

"Get out!" He shouted at David. "I am God's servant. Depart from me in the name of Jesus Christ."

David laughed mischievously and continued to recite a nonsensical tale about a deer stuck in the trees: Tunc subito latratu canum territatur et celeri cursu crurum silvam intrat. Sed ibi cornibus in ramis humilibus arborum haesitat et a canibus dilaceratur.

"Canibus dileceratur?" The pastor cried with feigned astonishment. "What did you do, you traitor?" Pastor Lucas shouted at Paul now.

"I didn't betray anyone," Paul countered. "But I thought of you-"

"Shut up!" The pastor shouted. "Hell knows you by name. Paul, how could you do something like that? Cervus aliquando in aqua lacus clari imaginem suam spectabat? Are you serious? I wouldn't expect something like that from you!"

The pastor seemed to cry. He shook his head, looking betrayed, and even seemed to have tears in his eyes. David was amazed to find that the pastor was a much better actor than himself. He just accused Paul with a serious face that a deer saw its appearance in the waters of the lake and praised its large antlers.

"I'm no Cervus," Paul defended himself.

Pascal didn't know Latin, but he also recognized David, but it took him a while to figure what to do.

"No one may have said that to your eyes, but everyone knows we called you Cervus behind your back," he told Paul now.

In other situations, David would have laughed, but now it was all too serious. It was a matter of life and death. And this distraction was more than welcome. David walked slowly around the wagon, and the soldier and the coachman retreated a little more.

"Sic cornua, quae nimis laudabat, cervo perniciei erant," David shouted in an angry voice the rest of the fairy tale, and they backed away even more.

David looked at them, then hurriedly climbed onto the trestle and slammed the horses.

"No!" The pastor shouted now in fear. "We are not responsible for anything! You can't let him take us away."

But at that moment, the performance took on a new unexpected dimension.

"I don't belong to them!" The other elder, Vincent, began to shout, frightened. "Save me!" He addressed the stunned soldier, from whom they were now rapidly moving away. "Save me, I've

already signed up for the Catholic faith. It's not my fault where I had been born. I'm not one of them. Virgin Mary, Christ Jesus! Save me, I have nothing to do with those heretics."

Paul looked at the man indignantly. "So you're not one of us? Is there anyone here who is faithful to Christ and who would not be willing to betray his friends to save his own neck?"

"Stop, monster!" Paul shouted at David. "Let us go in the name of Jesus Christ."

"Could I do it somewhere else?" David said in a hoarse voice.

"Turn left at that crossroads, young man," Pastor Lucas instructed. "Then I'll tell you where to go next. We have to get out of here as soon as possible."

They were far enough away from the soldier to whom David had taken the prisoner, and Pastor Lucas began to laugh. Paul looked at him blankly, and even Vincent took hint what was going on.

Pastor Lucas looked at him and sighed. "Look, I don't know you very well, and I understand how scared a person can be. I also don't feel like dying at all. This young man is not a devil, but our friend. And we have to get out of here. We don't have time to talk to you about your faith or your behavior. You're a grown man, and you've had to hear all about it over the years. But I hope we can agree that you let us go and we let you go and no one will cause anyone unnecessary trouble."

Vincent sighed. He was obviously a little ashamed of his behavior. "I just wanted to save my property," he admitted hesitantly. "You know they said that whoever converts to Catholicism within twenty days does not have to leave. I didn't want to go anywhere. I'm almost seventy. And my life is not worth much. I used to know Christ, but it all comes to me as a vague memory. I have problems with alcohol and my wife can't stand me. But I really wish it was all different. I miss the years when Christ was close to me."

Vincent said it all in tears, then turned to Paul. "I used to pray and I wanted to put everything in order, and I realized that it meant to admit everything, to give up my position. And I was so scared of all that shame. It seems stupid to me now."

David continued to drive according to the pastor's instructions, listening to the man with interest. Before stopping on a remote forest path, all the men gathered around the crying Vincent, laid their hands on him, and began to pray for him.

Pascal looked strange during those prayers, and Henri urged him. "Any other word from the Lord?"

Pascal nodded. "Don't look back like Lot's wife and do not return to the place of destruction. Those you were ashamed of are already dead. Your wife also died this morning. Stay with your sister in Geneva, there you will live the rest of your days, and before you die, I will change your name. You will no longer be the one who is ashamed and runs away, but the man to whom others run for comfort."

Vincent stared at him with his mouth open, and Pastor Lucas asked softly. "Do you have a sister in Geneva?"

"I have," Vincent nodded, "and this boy certainly can't know anything about it."

David stopped the wagon and looked at them all with interest. After a while, they managed to break the lock with stones, they freed themselves and said goodbye to Vincent. Vincent shook hesitantly the hand of the devil who had saved them.

"What are we going to do next?" Henri looked around at the others.

"First of all, we have to help David wash off all the paint," Pastor Lucas said when he saw David trying to clear it by snow and wasn't very successful.

Chapter 9

"I wouldn't expect you to be such a good actor," David looked appreciatively at the pastor when he was finally clean.

"I didn't feel like dying," Pastor Lucas shrugged, "even though I think your performance will confuse the two men."

"What was that supposed to mean, David?" Pascal looked at him. "First you say you're not a Christian as soon as you see the soldiers, and then you take such a crazy risk for us? It's a real miracle that something like this was successful and of course we owe you, but why did you do it?"

David shrugged. "You are my friends. That is probably enough as a reason. But you should know that before I started, I prayed sincerely for the first time. And I'd like to know more about it all. I watched you closely the whole time and it all deeply affected me," he admitted.

"Anyway, thank you, David," Pastor Lucas said. "But now is not the time to talk. We need to decide quickly what to do next. And what do we do with that wagon and the horses?"

"Let's pray again," Pascal suggested this time, even though he was the youngest after David.

They prayed together for a while and begged for wisdom, and David joined them hesitantly. He thanked God for his help and asked him to know what to do next. And he didn't like what had occurred to him.

"One name came to my mind during those prayers," Paul said. "Not far from here lives a farmer with whom we had a good relationship. He's a Catholic, but he's a honest guy, and I feel we should go to him."

No one else had a better idea, so they set out. They arrived there in about twenty minutes, and because they were afraid to continue with the wagon, they agreed to leave it there. In return, the farmer packed them with food, and also helped them disguise themselves a little.

They left with important but sad information. The Prophet Jean was a much better-known figure in the area than David had known. And he was now trapped in a nearby castle. The local lord intended to send him as a special gift to the authorities.

After lunch, everyone was on their way again. Paul felt he should go to warn his friends in another remote village and then wanted to go to France to his relatives. And Pascal received another personal instruction from God, and this time even stranger than before. And it was the word for David.

"God tells me you have to set Jean free," Pascal told him seriously. "So that the one who sows with tears can look at his sheaves with joy."

"Why does it all sound so weird?" David shook his head.

"I'll explain it to you when we have another Bible again," Pastor Lucas winked at him, and instead of answering, David pulled a book from his bag, which he had carried with him for some time.

David read Psalm 126 in fascination:

When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad. Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

"Does that make sense?" Pascal asked, a little hesitantly.

"It makes a lot of sense," David replied, "but I don't know how such a thing would be possible. I also feel that God is showing me something and I don't like it at all."

"You know, I've personally seen several times that it's worth trusting in God," Pastor Lucas said in his simple way. "He knows much better what is best not only for ourselves, but also for a wide range of people around us who are affected in some way by what we do. Some people would like to trade with God and perhaps promise to do something when he fulfills their wishes, but this is not the way to go. It is best to surrender and obey him."

Henri blinked quickly several times. "Thinking about it like that, I think I felt we should leave when the decree came out," he admitted. "But I was too smart for that. And in any case, it isn't very useful to try to be smarter than God."

David listened in surprise. Only a few hours had passed since he had been trying to make a deal with God. Before saying goodbye in the evening, David prayed aloud in front of his friends for the first time: "God, I give my whole life into your hands. I will do everything you tell me and I will not impose any conditions. Do what you want with me. Lead me and I will follow and obey you."

David went to the castle, where Jean was to be imprisoned, in his original clothes, dressed as a young gentleman. He was lucky that he had worn something different with Lucas all along, so his expensive clothes hadn't suffered in those months. He just felt uncomfortable in them. Over the months, he had become stronger and his coat was tight around his shoulders but he was also slimmer and his pants were too large. The ordinary clothing of the working people was much looser and more comfortable, and he had trouble getting used to his clothes again.

He wasn't entirely sure what to say. He felt he should not lie unnecessarily but on the other hand, he thought there was a difference between telling a lie to his friends and a war trick. That's why he finally came up with a story that he went to visit someone, and while the stagecoach had a break, he got lost. The stagecoach left without him and he had no idea where he was or how he would get to Lyon.

He said it all a little embarrassed, but the landlord had no problem with his story and offered him to be his guest for the evening. He explained where he was and offered to be taken to Lyon the next day by his own caretaker, who travels there every week. David thanked him warmly, and he felt a little guilty for misusing him like that.

Yet, on the other hand, he felt that God was in it with him. It was weird. Thousands of Christians have been dying in cruel torment in recent days, and survivors headed with bare hands into the surrounding lands. David had no doubt that many of them would not even get there in the harsh winter. And yet he felt it was vital to save Jean. He didn't understand how it was possible that rescuing a 22-year-old boy was so important when thousands of others could easily have died and no one had helped them.

But after all, if it didn't work out, it would only fulfill his own desire to die. Now he was ready to face death and stand before God. He knew that he was washed with the blood of Christ and that he was reconciled to God. He humbled himself before him and confessed his sin to him. He understood that God knew everything anyway, but as he acknowledged it all, something was happening in him. And no matter how embarrassed he was, he felt God's love and acceptance.

David was not afraid of death, but he still feared physical torture and execution. He realized that he had no problem dying sometimes. Perhaps most frightened at the prospect of execution was that he knew it would be for example the next day at eight o'clock in the morning. He shivered at the thought. He couldn't help but imagine again the shame and pain it would have been for his father. He imagined what it would be like to know that the moment was to come in a few hours, to wait in terror for the moment when the executioner should end his life.

He shook his head to shake off the thoughts. Instead, he walked over to the guest room window and looked at where Jean was tied. He realized that such thoughts must be on his friend's mind. He didn't know how to free him, but he didn't move away from the window and watched the courtyard carefully.

In doing so, he began to pray incoherently. Very quietly, he told God about everything that was going through his head. He moved his lips, but no words came out. He prayed for the wisdom to free Jean, and at the same time he wondered a little why he felt that urgency.

Then he began to ask God again to take him from this world in some natural way. But again, images of him returning home came to his mind. He tried to persuade God not to want it from him, and he still felt that it was exactly what he was supposed to do. After a while of such prayers, for the first time, he really began to consider it. He just stood for a moment, looking at the heavens, and finally surrendered.

"All right, I'll go back to the island," he said at last. "If you want to see me executed, so be it."

He felt he shouldn't talk to God like that, and after a while he turned his eyes to heaven again hesitantly and sighed. "I really want to obey you, but it's very difficult for me. Could you help me with that and at least confirm it? Or give me more strength? Or do it instead of me?"

And at that moment he had the impression that he had heard God's voice very clearly. "Confide in your friends."

He stood stunned. He didn't hear it physically with his ears. Rather, it resonated inside him. But it was clear and loud. And much more convincing than the dim impression that he must return to the island.

"I guess I could do it," he said quietly, and at that moment he was surrounded by God's peace. And he began to hope, a little foolishly, that the others might tell him something other than what he felt. Maybe he doesn't have to come back. In those months at the pastor's house, he already knew

some Bible stories, and he hoped he might be as fortunate as his namesake, King David. How is it possible that every murderer ends up almost automatically at the execution site, but David could live on even after a murder, and the Bible still mentions him in some places positively? But those thoughts seemed silly to him, so he stopped thinking about what would happen in the distant future and began to imagine a little more the very moment in which he would tell Pastor Lucas or Jean what had happened. He realized he could do it, even if it was hard. For the time being, he decided to follow God step by step.

It was getting dark, he had been standing by the window for several hours. He watched Jean tied to a circle to which horses were tied from time to time. There was probably nothing like a prison in this small castle. The night had advanced, he saw a single soldier in the courtyard, and suddenly he felt that God was clearly telling him, without further notice, "Now."

He took a quick step out of the building, slid quietly out the door, and at that moment the soldier got up and headed in the direction where David knew the toilets were. It was a great timing and he was beginning to hope it would work out. He had no big plan. All he could think of was running to the walls with Jean and jumping into the castle moat and running away. The moat was frozen at this time of year and covered with a thick layer of snow. He had to hope the guards didn't shoot them. Although he himself might have preferred it. But as he walked quietly to Jean, he realized that if he had to tell everything his friends, it was just another confirmation that he would survive.

He saw no one at the gate, and the courtyard was now empty. He walked quickly to his friend. Jean saw him during the day and maybe even expected him. He looked at him curiously, but neither of them said anything. David quickly drew a small dagger and cut through Jean's ropes. Then he pointed toward the stairs leading to the walls.

He didn't see anyone at the gate, but it was clear to him that someone was there. He preferred to stick to the original plan and together they went to the walls. They were almost up when the soldier returned to the empty courtyard and started to shout and call for help. David hoped they could quietly jump down from the walls, but instead they came out only a short distance from another guard, who aimed his rifle at them.

David lunged in front of Jean and the guard pulled the trigger at that moment. And at the same time, something miraculous happened. David was suddenly surrounded by bright light. He thought he was dying, but it was as if an explosion of brightness and power had thrown him away. He heard the sound of a whistling bullet passing him as he fell over the walls as if someone had pushed him there. He fell into the snowdrifts. Jean landed beside him. They were staring at each other blankly for a moment.

There was a shout from the walls, but it was not a call for help. The soldier, dazzled by the unnatural light, screamed in terror. No one tried to stop them, and no one shot at them anymore. The only man who could pull the trigger at that moment fell to his knees and began to pray.

David and Jean were startled by his scream. They scrambled out of the snowdrifts, then ran away as fast as they could on their trembling legs. David felt as if somebody was pushing him. Within ten minutes, they ran through the village and into the darkness of the forest, where after a while they encountered Pastor Lucas, Henri, and Pascal. Relieved, they set out on and at the same time they both began to talk excitedly about what had happened. They both felt a strange fear mixed with joy.

But still, David didn't do what he should. It occurred to him that maybe this was the right time to confide. However, he didn't want to ruin this glorious moment by admitting he was a murderer. And the next morning his determination began to fade.

Chapter 10

The night was bright and they walked for hours without rest. By morning, they were so far from the mountains that they reached places where there was no snow. They lit a fire for a while and slept on the edge of a remote forest for a few hours, then continued on foot towards Lyon. They preferred to avoid people that day. But their journey went smoothly and they talked for hours about everything. When they heard a cart in the distance, they hid, but in the afternoon their vigilance began to wane and supplies needed to be replenished. Jean and David went to a village in the evening to buy bread while Pastor Lucas borrowed David's Bible, sat on a stump, and read. Henri and Pascal saw a lonely cottage in the distance and went to ask if they could sleep in the barn.

After a while, Jean returned alone and frowning.

"What happened?" Lucas asked. "Where's David?"

"The guy behaves really foolishly," Jean said angrily. "We came across a group of soldiers in the village, and he told me that it would be great to find out what was going on, and instead of avoiding them, he went to the pub with them. It seems to me that he thinks nothing can happen to him. Especially after we've experienced that miraculous salvation. I'm really mad at him. He didn't listen to me at all. And he said some time ago that he doesn't want to drink alcohol until death!"

The pastor jumped up from the ground angrily. "I will not tolerate such nonsense here!"

"And what do you want to do? To go there for him and tell him it's not being done?" Jean frowned.

"See, that's a great idea," the pastor agreed.

"You can't run in there and pull him away from them," Jean looked at him.

"And why not?" The pastor smiled. "He could be my son. I think I'm going to do a scene there. I think I'm really enjoying acting. Hold this for me."

He rammed David's Bible into Jean's hand and, without further explanation, broke a strong hazel rod and headed for the village. He didn't have to play his indignation much. He really didn't like that kind of behavior.

Jean looked behind him and shook his head with a smile. Then he took the Bible and decided to read something as well. He opened it and watched with his mouth open the dedication that was written on the first page.

Pastor Lucas put on the most angry expression he could manage and burst into the pub. He was sure that the more attention the soldiers paid to his performance, the less they would look at him. He didn't like walking among people unnecessarily.

"What are you doing here?" He shouted at David from a distance and walked over to him. David looked at him in surprise and, a little guilty, pushed aside another pint the waitress had just placed in

front of him. He was just thinking about how to avoid further drinking. He learned nothing at all from the soldiers, but he did not know what to say so he could leave.

"I wanted to go anyway," he said, a little shyly, and looked at the pastor.

"Don't you remember what you did last time when you got drunk?" The pastor continued angrily. "One would think that after something like that, you would never drink again for the rest of your life."

David rose slowly from the table, and the pastor noticed that he was staring at him with sincere terror.

"This is fun for adults and not for a 17-year-old boy," he continued. "I clearly forbade you to approach a pub. So get out, I'll deal with you outside."

Then he looked at the waitress and asked. "How much does he owe you?"

"Let it be," one of the soldiers said. "He only had one beer."

"I think we can invite him for the show you're up to here," another soldier said cheerfully. "I thought you were older, boy."

"Anyway, it looks like you'll get a good reward, lad," another laughed, looking at the rod in the pastor's hand. "If you get a really rich share, then you can contribute to the next round."

The soldiers began to laugh, but David just stood there, pale as a wall, looking at the pastor.

"I said out," the pastor shouted at him, grabbing his arm and leading him to the door.

Not far from the pub stood a log on which wood was chopped.

"Let's finish the show, make it look believable, okay?" He turned to him quietly and headed there with him.

David just looked at him silently. He seemed to have completely dropped out of his role. The pastor turned his back to the pub so that nobody could see that he was not actually punishing his "son." He bent him over his knee and hit him very lightly a few times over his bum. David didn't react. But a few people inside considered it an interesting spectacle from a distance, and the soldiers who had drunk with David before went out curiously. The pastor noticed them and sighed. He had to hit him harder. David, who didn't notice his audience shouted in surprise. The soldiers laughed mischievously.

"Enough! Please!" David said after the next blow. "I will obey. Please stop."

The pastor released him and looked at him inquisitively.

"So let's talk now, young man," he told him, but this time he meant it. "Follow me."

He headed with him from the village, but they didn't reach Jean. They sat a short distance from the road on an uprooted tree.

"What's wrong, David?" He turned to him seriously. "I wanted to get you out of there. We haven't agreed on anything like that. Plus, you recently said something about not wanting to see a drop of alcohol until you die. But when I addressed you there, you looked at me as if you saw a ghost. For a moment, I had the impression that I had unknowingly said something that really touched you. I

really had no intention of hitting you, but you stopped cooperating altogether. I thought you'd pretend a little."

David leaned forward and rested his head on his clasped hands.

"Tell me what you did," the pastor said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Whatever it is, it must have a solution."

David cried. "It doesn't have a solution," he said heavily. "I killed someone. Just a few days before I met you. And the man was also a preacher. I don't want to be executed. Even though I try to do one dangerous thing after another, I still live. Why do I have to have so much luck? Everyone else would be long dead, and I can't get killed at all. What else can I do to die normally? I don't want to be surrounded and to be dragged somewhere to the execution site and thus to embarrass the whole family. Why can't God just take me from this world?"

The pastor sighed and thought frantically for a moment. This was the last thing he would expect. "I have no idea what I should say," he finally admitted. "But whatever you have to go through, I know you don't have to be alone for any of that."

"I know all along that this will happen one day, that I will have to hand myself over to justice," David admitted.

They were silent for a moment. The pastor looked inquisitively at David, but he could not lift his head and look him in the eye.

"I can't help you avoid what awaits you," the pastor sighed, "any unbeliever would advise you to run away and live with it, but I know you couldn't. I've experienced this before. I had to help lead a person to death who had become my brother in Christ but had killed someone before. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. But he surprisingly claimed that he did not find the right peace until he confessed to the murder. At the time, they wanted to convict someone else for it, and he didn't have much time to think about it. He was afraid, of course, yes, but I still saw his peace beyond all understanding. I can only promise you that if something like this awaits you, I will be there with you. And Jesus will never leave you for a moment. Would you like to tell me in more detail what happened?"

David nodded. He looked at the pastor and smeared tears on his face with the back of his hand. The pastor handed him a handkerchief. David wanted to start his story, but noticed that Jean was coming to them.

"I don't want to disturb you," he said when he saw what David looked like. "I just wonder, David, why do you have my father's Bible with you? Do you know him? Where did you get it?"

David looked at him in horror. It couldn't have been worse.

The pastor quickly guessed what's going on.

"David, did you take that Bible from the man you hurt?"

David nodded.

"What did you do to Dad?" Jean asked anxiously.

"Wait, Jean," the pastor interrupted. "When was the last time your father wrote to you? Do you remember how we had that prayer meeting in the fall where we prayed for him? When was it?"

"I remember that exactly, because it was my birthday the next day," Jean replied. "It was October 17th evening. Just a few days before, I received a letter from him, and then he didn't write to me again, but you know that there are fifteen of us, he writes to me twice a year."

David swallowed, finally taking his eyes off the ground and looking at them.

"When did this happen, David?" Pastor Lucas asked.

"It was that evening," he replied.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Jean wanted to know.

David shook his head. "I was terribly drunk. My fiance wanted to cancel our engagement because of her faith, and he got in my way and started preaching to me," David sighed and added quietly. "I don't remember all the details, I'm just sure I killed him."

He looked at the ground again and very reluctantly described what had happened that day. Jean sat down next to him and listened in silence.

When David finished, it was Jean who put his hand on his shoulder.

"David, that can't be true," he said slowly. "You say yourself that you were drunk, that you were only there for a while and you saw him lying motionless on the ground, and then you ran away. Exactly the same evening we prayed and I suddenly had a very intense feeling that we should pray for him. It took about a quarter of an hour, we prayed for his life and I felt that he had been in great danger. And then I suddenly felt an incredible peace. I had the impression that God was telling me almost audibly that my father would be all right and that I would see him again."

David looked at him blankly.

"I've experienced things like this before," Jean continued. "Don't forget they locked me up the day before yesterday. Even then, I knew that God's promise would not fail and that somehow I would still see him. That I can get out of here safely. That's why I'm not scared all that time. God keeps reassuring me that we will be able to get to safety. Whatever you've done, I think you're wrong, David."

David looked at him hesitantly. "I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry about all this."

Jean smiled. "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love him. You see how God can use something like that. After all, thanks to that, you saved the lives of all of us. I think it's a big compensation for any damage you could have done to my father if you returned him his son. What do you say?"

"I wish you were right," David said quietly. "But what if you're wrong?"

Jean shook his head. "In time, you will learn to distinguish God's voice from your own ideas and wishes. I'm really sure of that."

David played with a twig in silence, then looked at Jean hesitantly. "Pascal told me yesterday that he had a word for me. That when I set you free, my grief will turn into joy or something like that. I hope I'm not just thinking it could be that way."

Pastor Lucas took David by the shoulders. "The first thing we'll do when we get out of here is find out what really happened, okay? Jean has a sister in Lyon after all, and she might know something."

David nodded and the pastor continued. "And you stop taking senseless risks. Is it clear? You've seen today that I can play the role of an angry father quite credibly, and if you do something stupid, next time you could really get that beating."

David looked at him shyly, then laughed for the first time in a long time.

"I could have told you before," David said after a moment's thought. "Yesterday I clearly felt that God was telling me to confide in you, but the longer I put it off, the more I didn't want to."

They sat by the road for a while, talking, and David felt that the winter had never seemed so beautiful to him. Pastor Lucas saw his smiles and the relief and watched him happily. It had been several months since he had first met the troubled young man, and the pastor had never ceased to marvel at the miracle that Jesus came into people's lives, broke their shackles and gave people new hearts and new hope.

After a while, Henri and Pascal returned and told them they had found a place to stay.

Chapter 11

They arrived in Lyon a day later, and although Pastor Lucas longed to meet his family, their first steps led to Jean's sister Maria. It was much more important to find out if she had any news from the island of Le pays des Cygnes.

Jean also asked her right away.

"When was the last time Dad wrote you? Do you know anything about him?" He asked urgently. "Sometime in the fall, I had a strong feeling that he was in danger and that I should pray for him, and I have not received a letter from him since."

"Dad's fine," Maria replied, "he wrote to me sometime in December."

David exhaled with relief and she looked at him in surprise. He leaned against the wall and felt his legs tremble. It was one thing to hear that God was showing something to Jean, but now that another living person with real news had confirmed it, it was more tangible evidence for him.

Instead of talking again, Pastor Lucas took him by the shoulders and asked Maria. "Please keep talking, we'd like to hear it all."

Maria looked at David a little incomprehensibly, but then turned to Jean. "That feeling of yours was right, because some drunken idiot broke his head with a bottle sometime in October, but he's fine."

"Did he write anything more? What was wrong with him?" Jean asked.

But Mary shook her head. "You know Dad, a Christian every inch. Instead of writing properly how he was, he cared about the boy who did it and wrote me to pray for him. He was supposed to be the future king of the whole country, but he did something else there, and instead of marrying the princess, he was to be condemned to public flogging. If they ever catch him."

David sighed. "You don't even know how sorry I am," he looked at her apologetically. "That incredible idiot is me."

"You were to be the future king?" Jean turned to him in surprise.

But Pastor Lucas was interested in a completely different part of Maria's sentence and looked at him earnestly. "What else in the world did you do there, David?"

"Please come on, everyone," Maria interrupted, "we won't talk between the doors."

"Me too?" David looked at her hesitantly.

"Sure thing," Jean commanded him, though he was only a few years older than he was. "We all intend to talk to you."

David looked at him a little frightened, but Jean laughed. Then he turned to his sister. "You should know that David saved my life, so I think, despite everything he's done, he deserves dinner."

Then he took the reluctant David around his shoulders and pushed him inside the house.

"You know what's interesting, David," Jean turned to him at dinner, "that when we prayed for Dad in the fall, we also sensed that something very important was being decided at that moment. We even prayed for the future king of the land that God would protect him and draw his heart towards him. I felt that God was putting it on our hearts."

"Really?" David looked up from his plate and added in astonishment. "Do you think that could mean I still have a chance? I haven't even remembered that in months."

"Were you really supposed to be King of Le pays des Cygnes?" Jean looked at him curiously.

"I thought for a long time that I would really be the king," David said simply. "I was engaged to the king's only daughter. But then she sent me a Bible, started preaching to me, and when I made fun of it, she said she would cancel our engagement. I didn't know it was so important to her. And I was furious, and then I happened to meet the preacher she was writing about. You don't even know how I felt then. It was so important to me to be someone. It wasn't until I hit the bottom that completely different things became important to me."

David sighed. "I can't imagine Annabel ever forgiving me. I think I had said something stupid about hens and geese in front of all her friends. And worst of all, I only half remember it all. In any case, I'm sure she'd love to hear that I've become a Christian, whether she wants me or not. At the moment, I'm just glad that I have a future ahead of me, so I don't really solve which one."

Pastor Lucas took David by the shoulders and looked at him. "What if you really became king? I'm a little worried that I would be in trouble then," he said jokingly. "If my memory serves me right, I've recently bent a potential king over my knee."

David laughed. "I don't know if I survive it when I will meet my own father," he admitted. "It's quite possible that he'll kill me."

"God is the one who reconciles fathers and sons and turns their hearts to each other," Pastor Lucas winked at him. "But if you are the one in your family who has known God, then the first step on the path to reconciliation is, in my opinion, up to you."

Anyway, the atmosphere relaxed a little, and for the rest of the evening they talked about what they had been through in the past few days, and Jean told his sister about his miraculous deliverance.

In the evening, the three of them went to bed in one of the rooms, and Pastor Lucas became a little more serious again.

"Have you ever seen, David, the back of a man who has been publicly flogged?" He asked, pulling his shirt over his back with a sigh. David saw long-healed scars in the places where a whip tore his skin. "I still have nightmares about it. It didn't hurt any less because it was because of my faith in Christ. We have to pray that you can somehow avoid it."

David looked at him thoughtfully and sighed. "I don't want to avoid anything anymore. Until a few days ago, I thought that it was all my end and that I would be executed. All the time, from the moment I met Christ, I feel that I have to face my past. It may be awful, but it's actually amazing in a way. There are various unpleasant things waiting for me, but they can be survived. I didn't hope for that at all some time ago."

"I will pray for you anyway," the pastor said seriously. "Perhaps it could at least be eased."

David nodded. "I will be grateful to you, but I will not run before that, no matter what awaits me. In fact, I don't even know if I can return home."

"Did you do anything else?" Pastor Lucas shook his head a little.

David looked at him guiltily, and then described everything that had bothered him all along.

"I intend to accompany you there. And we can also do it so that I will go and talk to your father first," he suggested when David finished. "I think he'll understand that you've learned such a great life lesson that you don't even need more punishment. Anyway, you're still young and you don't know what it's like to have a baby. To be curious for months about what will be born to you and what the little person will look like. Hold him in your arms for the first time. When I was holding my first child, I was trembling with awe. I remember catching my boys in their first steps, listening to them while they learned to read, dealing with their various troubles, having fun with them as they began to talk, and how I felt when they got married. I always like to see them again, even when they are adults. By that I mean to tell you that it is not an easy thing for a father to avoid his own child, especially at a time when he is very humbly apologizing."

David sighed. "I can't imagine meeting him. You don't even know how terrible our relationship is. I don't understand why it's sometimes so much easier to explain something to people I don't know so much than to him."

"It's simple, David," Pastor Lucas said. "Because it's much harder to fix something that's already broken than building a new relationship. The first is like repairing an old broken house and the second is like building something new on a green field. Anyone who has ever repaired a very old house will tell you that they would rather tear it down and start over. But that's not the case with relationships. The only sensible thing you can do is tell him really honestly everything. Such a thing hurts, but it creates good and deep relationships. I experienced something like this with my brother. When we both gave our lives to Christ, we had to say a lot of things to each other and it was really unpleasant, but we have had a great relationship since then. Much better than before."

David nodded. That night he couldn't sleep and he had to think about it all. But when he finally fell asleep, he slept with a deep, restful sleep as he had not for a long time.

Chapter 12

Pastor Lucas and Jean quickly decided that they could not leave David alone in the given situation. Jean wanted to visit his father on the island, and Pastor Lucas promised David that he would help him through every difficulty that awaited him, and he wanted to keep his word. Only Pascal and Henri were sent that morning to the farm where Lucas's family was.

"I'm so sorry you have such unnecessary expenses for me," David sighed as they settled into the stagecoach. "I can't even promise to make it up to you because I don't know what awaits me at home."

Pastor Lucas shook his head.

"We did better than I expected," he said thoughtfully, "although of course we got about a third of the real price for it all. But God will somehow take care of us. Anyway, this doesn't bother me now. After everything we've heard, I'm glad we're alive at all."

"Then why do you look so worried?" Jean looked at him.

"Pascal has experienced so many of God's warnings and very clear words about what to do in the last days," the pastor sighed, "and it convinced me a lot. In fact, I've always been a bit skeptical about these things. I've heard so many crazy prophecies and ideas that people have uttered as a word from the Lord that I've always preferred to rely on common sense. But I prayed yesterday and changed my attitude a bit. I told the Lord that I wanted to be open to anything he wanted to tell me in this regard. And immediately something terrible came to my mind."

"Honestly, I'm starting to feel like we shouldn't stay in France," Jean said. "Is it related?"

Pastor Lucas nodded. "The word was: just as you experienced people losing their freedoms in Savoie, you will see in your lifetime that the edict guaranteeing freedom of religion in France will be repealed," the pastor said thoughtfully. "I think that's what the Lord told me yesterday."

"Edict of Nant," David added, looking at him questioningly.

"And that means, David, that such a journey is not unnecessary and is not just for you," Pastor Lucas said firmly. "I'm not sure yet whether the place we're going will be Le pays des Cygnes, but I'm thinking about it."

"It must be hard for you," Jean said. "After all, you have laid out your hand at the future king. I have a much better relationship with him, we even had an interesting adventure together."

The only other passenger in the stagecoach slept, so Jean could joke undisturbed.

But David wasn't laughing.

"Jean, please," he shook his head. "It is much more likely that the current king will invite you to that prophesied supper in return for bringing me to him."

David sighed.

"Do you know what I'm thinking, David?" Pastor Lucas looked at him. "It is customary among Christians to tell one another about how we have come to know Christ. It is our testimony of him to others. Everyone likes to listen to those stories. I will never forget some. I once met an old preacher who looked like a university doctor and spoke so scholarly that I felt like a fool. I was sitting in his beautiful house, looking at his family, who treated him with respect, and I thought he might have

been born with a halo around his head. And then he started telling me that he was a well-known robber in his youth."

David looked at Pastor Lucas curiously.

"After all, I wasn't an angel either," the pastor said, pointing to his eyebrow. "Do you see the scar? I was twenty then and I had a fight with a guy in a pub. It was about a year before I believed in Christ."

David looked so surprised that the pastor had to laugh.

"Your princess goes to church, doesn't she?"

David nodded. "And the king lately, too," he added.

"Maybe if you keep these ordinary clothes on for now, no one will even notice you when we get out at the harbor. We could prepare it all wisely. We can't afford you to be arrested and dragged away. You have to have a chance to say something and impress them a little. Such a well-prepared speech in the church would, in my opinion, be a much better negotiating position for what will happen to you next. What do you think?" The pastor wondered. "Of course I don't advise you any cunning or tricks. It would have to be honest, but on the other hand, such a thing can be done wisely."

"I just hope there will be a wide underground channel for me to leave then," David said hesitantly, "Everyone will be laughing at me."

"That's stupid," Jean countered. "They have been laughing at you probably anyway. And if you try to improve it somehow, you'll look as an even bigger idiot. On the contrary, I think it's better if you can make fun of yourself. I think if you joked a little there and said something in the sense that you acted like an ox, but then you at least felt like an equal partner for the cows you cared for, then people will laugh and rather appreciate you for it. Remember that everyone has their problems. You heard the elder Vincent. Who knows what are the other Christians hiding."

David ruffled his hair and nodded. "I will think about it. But in fact I am more afraid of the moment when I will have to face my father and your father too. A king is just a king. He's my dad's friend, but I don't know him that well. I care about the princess, but if she doesn't want me anymore, I will cope it. There are other girls in the world."

"Sure, the king is just a king and Dad's friend," Jean laughed.

David shook his head. "Le pays des Cygnes is a small country, Jean. You can't imagine a king there as a ruler of all of France. Compared to him, he is probably in the position of a mayor of a very large city. You better tell me what your father is like. What do I tell him?"

"You have saved the lives of several Christians, and especially mine, David," Jean said more seriously.

"I think the angel or whatever it was saved us both," David said.

"But would it happen if you weren't there and did not do something about it?" Jean replied. "Anyway, I can talk to Dad before you go there."

David ran a hand over his face. The closer they were to La Rochelle, the more nervous he became. He felt that even if the trip lasted a whole year, it wouldn't be long enough for him to

prepare for everything. At times he tried to reassure himself that within a few days everything would be over, but it still seemed to him that following week would last forever.

And then, as they stood aboard the ship the massive towers guarding the place where the ships had entered the port of La Rochelle began to change into a small point and disappeared from their sight. Nothing helped him anymore. Even when the pastor took him by the shoulders, pulled him to himself and began to pray for him, he still felt terrible.

They arrived on the island late in the afternoon. It was Saturday, and in a way David was glad that the service he was to attend would be the next day. He hoped he wouldn't go to bed the next night in a dusty dirty cell.

From the harbor, he passed the guards unnoticed and in a few moments he stood nervously in front of the old preacher's house. Jean went inside first as he had promised.

The old man ran out after a few minutes with such vigor that it was a wonder he didn't break the door. Subconsciously, David backed away and crouched. But the old man held him tightly in his arms and joyfully said, "Praise the Lord! Our God does truly incredible things!"

David began to apologize, but the old man smiled and interrupted after a while. "Did you really think something like that could kill me? I have a thick skull. And it was worth the joy I have of you now."

David started to cry. The old preacher held him in his arms, and David was glad that the first of the three confrontations has been over.

Chapter 13

The next morning he walked into church and felt it was one of the hardest things he had ever done. Pastor Lucas and Jean walked by his side, but David lost sight of his surroundings. His only goal was to walk forward, where the king and princess sat in a special bench. He felt like everyone was looking at him, but maybe he was just making it up. But as he walked down the side aisle, which seemed very long, he felt as if someone had covered him with a warm cloak. He felt God's presence as strongly as never before. He knew that what he was doing was right, no matter how hard it was. And yet God was with him, and in a strange way he was well. He knew that every other moment of his life He would be with him too.

He finally reached the front. He saw that Annabel had noticed him. But the service was just beginning, and he didn't go to her. He just wanted to let her know he was there. He bowed slightly to her, then slipped into one of the front benches, and although the whole assembly rose at that moment, he fell to his knees and began to pray. He only partially sensed what was going on around him.

He saw the king whispering something to one of his guards, and he hurried away. He noticed that there was even the Supreme Judge of the Land, who now rose from his seat and quietly talked to the king while the choir sang. Sometimes the judge looked at him askance, but when David raised his head, he looked away. Instead, David rather watched Annabel sing, but at the same time she watched what was happening around her.

And then for a moment their eyes met. She looked at him thoughtfully. David would have preferred not to face any of those he knew. But he saw some of his acquaintances and friends around him, about whom he did not know they were active Christians. Yet he still felt that incredible peace, even though he wished it was all over. He assumed they would wait for the service to end, and then arrest him. He preferred not to imagine what was to follow.

The old preacher spoke. He briefly introduced the newcomer and shared his joy at being visited by his youngest son. He then gave the word to Pastor Lucas, who spoke for a moment about the situation in Savoi. Jean then continued and described how they managed to escape the country and what role their brave young rescuer played in this. David sensed everyone looking at him and dared to look at Annabel again. She stared at him, looking quite surprised. He couldn't look away. He wanted so much to know what she thought. He bit his lip guiltily, but kept looking at her. Annabel smiled after a moment.

And that single smile gave him the strength to get up clumsily when it was his turn. He thought his legs weren't obeying him at all, but Jean had just finished speaking and urged him to come and say something too. Some time ago, he hoped that as few people as possible would know about everything that had happened, but now he stopped worrying about what people thought. He stepped forward, looked around the full church, and began to talk about everything he had done and experienced. During the speech, he calmed down a bit, began to speak in a firmer voice and more loudly. He spoke not only of his shame, but of all the incredible things that had befallen him and of his deep confidence and personal experience with the living God. When he had finished, he reached the balcony where the king and the princess sat. He wondered for a moment whether it was appropriate to kneel before men or just before God. But his legs still wouldn't obey him, and he wanted to show his respect for her, so he knelt in front of her.

"Your Highness," he looked embarrassed at Annabel, "I don't know if you can ever forgive me for everything I told you then. It's up to you to have me punished in public, but I'd like you to know that I'm very sorry about all this."

Annabel nodded and smiled a little. David stood up and looked at the king for a moment. The king looked back at him for the first time, and he also looked thoughtful rather than angry.

The old preacher started to speak again, but David returned to his place, and as the program continued, he did nothing for the rest of the service other than watching Annabel discreetly. He thought the worst was still ahead of him, but her smile gave him the strength to face it.

The service was finally over. David remained hesitantly seated. Lots of people got up and started leaving. Jean sat down next to him and squeezed his arm. David didn't know what to do. The judge began to talk to the king again, and then everyone, including Annabel, looked at the door at the same time. There were loud footsteps. Someone was coming. David was sure it was the guards who were coming for him. He swallowed and clumsily got up from the bench. Then he took a deep breath and turned. And he found that the man everyone looked at was his father. David had never seen him look so serious. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up at him questioningly and ruffled his hair nervously.

"Father," he said hesitantly. "I'm really sorry about all this," he said with embarrassment.

"Take off your coat," his father told him.

"What? Here?" David looked at him, startled and subconsciously backed away a little.

"Here," his father confirmed, "at least everybody will know that there is still such a thing as justice. Maybe you only consider me an old fool, but I still have the strength to wallop you."

David looked at him in shame. It sounded like some stupid note he'd written in his diary.

Count Paon began to unbuckle his belt.

"Isn't he a little old for that?" Princess Annabel asked.

"If I'm not mistaken, one is never old enough to be publicly beaten on a pillory," Count Paon said grumpily, "so I don't know why he should be old to be beaten by his father. And with all due respect, I think that's just my business."

"He-" Annabel began, but David shook his head.

"Please stop it," he looked at her, and instead of speaking again, he slowly began to take off his outer garment, staring at his father. All the time he was on the run, he wanted nothing more than to return home. He would do anything for it. And he thought that at the moment it meant obeying his father. Otherwise, there would never be a place for him in his family again. He would only have bare hands and zero chance of ever marrying a princess.

Not only did he take off his ornate heavy outer coat, but he also took off his undershirt. He hoped his father wouldn't take it as a provocation. He did it as a gesture to show his subordination. He just glanced quickly at Annabel. She looked taken aback, but she didn't dare say anything else. She or no one else. He felt his hands tremble a little as he placed his clothes on the church pew. He noticed Pastor Lucas looking at him earnestly and a few other friends. No one left. It was as if the whole church had froze in place with fear. He would like to say something, but he didn't know what at all. He stood just a short distance from the balcony where the princess sat, so he just looked at his father in silence and nodded slightly to let him know he was ready, then leaned his hands on the balcony and turned to him his back.

He didn't even have to ask how upset his father was. A sharp blow gave him the answer to that question. He gasped involuntarily and quickly bit his lip. With such an audience, he wanted to handle the beating without any sounds. But the intensity with which his father covered his back with blows almost took his breath away. After a moment, he stopped counting them. He just tried to take a deep breath and somehow endure all the pain. He didn't know what hurt him more. Whether his father's beating or the whole humiliation. On the other hand, even in the middle of his father's rampage, he realized that a few days ago he had been afraid of an executioner, but now he knew that he had his whole life ahead of him. He will leave all this old behind him in a while and will continue to live a completely different life with Christ. But the pain didn't allow him to think about it too deeply. He was glad to be on his feet.

The princess was the first who couldn't stand it. "Please leave him alone," she cried.

But the answer was just another blow. David's legs shook and he hissed in pain. And she came to him and placed her palm on his hand. This simple gesture finally stopped David's father and he lowered his hand.

Embarrassed, David stood still. Count Paon walked over to his belongings and threw his shirt violently at him.

"Get dressed," he growled at him.

"I suppose you won't want anything to do with me anymore, Father," he looked at him hesitantly. "Let me just repeat that I'm really sorry about all this. And if you had found any stupid notes in my stuff, I would be grateful if you could burn them."

Count Paon looked at him for a long moment. David stood there disheveled and out of breath, looking at him mildly. Perhaps for the first time in years, he saw in his gaze something he could not describe in words at first. David looked much more like a little boy looking at his dad than the defiant young man with whom he had conflicts all the time. It was as if some invisible barrier between them had been broken.

"If I didn't want anything to do with you, I wouldn't be here," he said more mildly.

David couldn't stand his stare and lowered his head. He felt tears welling up in his eyes and blinked quickly several times.

"What's next?" He asked hesitantly. "May I go home?"

The question did not belong only to his father.

The judge cleared his throat and now turned to the king. "Your Highness, you have stated that this young man will not escape public punishment in any way, but it seems to me that the Count has spared your executioner the job. I don't think it's necessary to arrest him anymore."

"Look at me, David," the king motioned now.

David raised his head and looked at the king with teary eyes. Count Paon noticed his chin tremble.

"If this ever happens again, be sure you won't escape public punishment," the king said loud enough for the whole church to hear. "If you ever forget to watch your tongue again, your father will not come for you, but my guard. Is it clear?"

"Yes, sir," David nodded, ruffling his hair. "Something like this will never happen again."

"I hope so," the king nodded. "You're free at the moment, and I consider the matter settled."

"Thank you, sir," David nodded, bowed slightly, feeling a great relieve.

Then he turned shyly to his father. He felt humiliated in front of someone from whom he had hidden all his feelings for years. And now he felt at his mercy.

Count Paon studied him thoughtfully.

"What's next, Father?" David repeated his question.

"I think it will be best if you get out of here for a while," said Count Paon after a moment's thought. "I'll send you to university, and then I'll marry you to the first sensible girl that gets in my way."

David nodded. "As you say."

Count Paon handed him the outer coat and he began to dress.

"So, let's go home now," he looked at his son.

David smiled slightly. As he spoke, Princess Annabel quietly descended from her seat. Count Paon did not see her, and when he turned, he crashed into her and nearly knocked her to the ground.

And as he apologized, Annabel looked up at David, smiled, and then winked at him.

David started to laugh. He couldn't help it. With that laugh, it was as if all the tension, fear, humiliation, and pain of the past moments and days were gone.

Count Paon turned sharply.

"Why are you laughing so stupidly?" He snapped at his son. "I think if anyone here has no right to laugh for a long time, it's you."

"I am sorry," David looked at him pleadingly. "It's just that you had just promised to marry me to the first girl to get in your way. And I'm really curious how you're going to convince her to marry me. I haven't succeeded much in this direction myself yet."

Count Paon turned to the princess. She looked amused.

"I'll borrow him for a while, okay? Before you send him somewhere away," she said, motioning for David to follow her. She sat down in an empty church pew, and David sat down in the pew in front of her and looked at her, embarrassed. He felt incredibly humiliated by everything that had happened, but on the other hand, he still felt that peace of God and somehow felt that he was all the more himself. He didn't have to hide anything and pretend any more. Everyone now knew what he was like and they could take him exactly as he was. And in a way, it was a relief for him. He had always cared what he looked like in front of people, but now it all fell from him like a heavy burden.

"Annabel," he began softly. "I am so ashamed of everything, but at the same time I would not exchange what I experienced for anything in the world. As a result, I have the unshakable certainty that God is real, and I know that will make everything different from now on. I apologize again."

"I'm proud of you, David," Annabel said seriously. "You made a great impression on me today."

"Proud," he repeated, shaking his head. "I didn't do any of that because I would be a hero. I thought I was a murderer and tried to kill myself by taking the risk."

"I prayed for you the whole time. I'm glad you're finally back," Annabel looked at him. "But you made me happy mainly by the way you managed to deal with everything today. Earlier, when you made a mistake, you just made excuses or made fun of those things. I like the way you behave now."

David smiled. "This was all too serious to make fun of it, don't you think?"

Instead of answering, Annabel took his hand.

"Did you do it on purpose?" David asked. "When you got in his way?"

"I wanted to take his word for it," Annabel smiled. "And I wanted to make you laugh a little too."

David nodded and looked at her questioningly. "Does that mean I still have a chance? Is our engagement still valid?"

Annabel brushed a loose strand of hair from his forehead and smiled. "More than ever, you silly."

David smiled. "When I was gone, I often thought of you. You know, before I liked to boast with you. But when I was there alone, I often remembered how funny you were and how happy I was to talk to you. I'm sorry I was such a fool."

Annabel returned his smile.

David looked thoughtfully. "You know, I'm glad you still care about me, but I can't quite imagine that your father would agree. Will he allow it at all?"

Annabel laughed. "You are not the only one who has ever done something wrong. Dad wasn't a saint either. After all, at your age, he almost sank one of the most expensive royal ships, which he borrowed without permission. And he broke his cousin's head once. So calm down, David."

"Who do you know this from?" He asked in surprise.

"From Dad, he tells me what he did as a boy," she replied incomprehensibly. "Have you and Dad never talked about such things?"

David shook his head, and at that moment he really envied her. He looked sideways in the direction of his father. Annabel saw where he was looking and sighed.

"I'm sorry about the beating," she said sympathetically. "If Dad knew how you were going to change, he certainly wouldn't say anything like that, but you know that if the king says something, he can't just call it off. I don't know if you even noticed that he was there when you cursed me then, but he was furious. He said in front of everyone then that he would have you flogged in public as soon as you sobered up. Arranging it like this with your father was probably the only way to get out of it a little sensibly so you wouldn't end up on the pillory."

"Do you mean he asked my father to do it?" David looked at her blankly.

"I didn't realize it at first, and I wondered a little why Dad had sent for your father," Annabel explained, "but he took me aside during that beating and explained it to me."

David looked toward his father, who now stood on the other side of the church, chatting with the king. He understood that he was not looking at an angry savage, but at his savior. After a while, the father and the king laughed together, and David felt a new sense of respect for him. At the same time, he felt God's presence strongly again. And he knew what he had to do next.

"I was so scared I didn't realize it at all," he admitted. "And I'd love to keep talking to you, but now I have to finally talk to him in the first place."

"I really like you this way, David," Annabel smiled. "You came back like someone else."

"I'm afraid I only came back for a moment," David said. "You know, I really hope we have a future together, but I also don't think the time has come yet. When my father talked about the university, I felt it was God's way for me."

Annabel sighed, then nodded. "I'll write to you, okay? And when you know when you're leaving, come say goodbye."

"I will, madam," he said jokingly, kissing her hand. Then they both went to where their fathers stood.

The king and princess then said goodbye to them, and David looked at his father with a heavy heart.

"Could we stay here for a while?" He asked. "I have a lot to tell you, and I'm afraid I'll lose courage before we get home."

Count Paon nodded and sat down. David sat down in the pew in front of him and looked into his eyes.

"You read the diary, didn't you?" David asked.

The count nodded.

"I'm really sorry," David looked at him apologetically, and began to re-tell him a little incoherently what he'd been through over the past few months. "You know, I always thought all that talk about Christ was just bullshit. But I really feel that something has changed inside me," he explained as he finished his story. "Even in the most difficult moments, his presence helped me do the right thing. It's not just an empty phrase when I dare say I won't let you down again. I believe he will give me the strength to do so. I have no idea what awaits me next, but I believe that Christ is giving you back a completely different son than the idiot with whom you had problems all the time. And you don't even know how much I appreciate everything I've ever had and how I wanted to go home the whole time. And I don't mean just for money or comfort. I really realized what a privilege it would be for me to help you take care of everything you've built here."

Count Paon studied him. He was so distant for perhaps years. But this young man, who was now looking amicably into his eyes, seemed exchanged. The count not only listened to his narration, but he noticed all the small gestures by which David had inadvertently convinced him of his sincerity. He saw his embarrassment, the way he often nervously ran his hand through his hair, how he sighed, looked away at the most personal descriptions, and then regained his courage to look at him again. As he finished, he stared into his eyes, biting his lip.

"What actually happened, David?" He asked thoughtfully. "The last time you looked at me like that was maybe when you were ten or twelve. I've always felt like I was talking to the wall ever since."

David looked thoughtful and looked away for a moment.

"I'd really like to know it," his father said. "When and why did you actually start treating me like an enemy?"

David thought frantically. In a way, it was hard for him to describe it all.

"Do you remember how you once fell off a horse into the mud when I was about twelve?" He began hesitantly.

The count nodded.

"Then we walked home together and we made fun of it all the time and we laughed a lot. I always like to remember that. I was fine with you then. I knew I needed you and that it was okay. But then later I felt more and more dependent on you, but I wished I wasn't."

David picked a speck he had found on the sleeve of his coat, played with it and thought frantically. "When I was about fifteen," he continued, "I got drunk for the first time and got spanked for it. I remember how hard you talked to me then. As if you never made a mistake yourself. I remember leaving your office stubbornly then, and I felt that I could no longer talk to you about any

of my feelings at all. And I don't think I've ever done it again. It was as if I had slammed the door from my heart then, pulled out the handle, and threw away the key."

David looked at his father, and Count Paon felt all his old pain and how difficult it was for him to tell him this.

"And what was I supposed to do then, David?" He looked at him thoughtfully. "Should I have told you about how I used to get drunk, set fire to a barn, and how my father gave me a beating? Should we have talked in a friendly way about which of the two of us was punished more then?"

David smiled and looked at him curiously, then nodded. "That would probably be best," he agreed to his father's surprise. He studied him with a smile for a moment, then asked. "Did you really set a barn on fire?"

"Sure," Count Paon answered.

David leaned forward, reached for his hand, and took it in his.

"Why didn't you ever tell me that?" He asked.

"I can imagine how you would obey me and respect me after that," said Count Paon.

David shook his head and continued a little annoyed. "But that's what you're wrong about. I don't know if you can even imagine how hard it is to admit a mistake, and after today I could tell you about it. It's one of the hardest things one can do. And worst of all is to humble yourself in front of someone who pretends to be perfect and has never spoiled anything. It's much easier to speak to someone who admits he's a human and is also able to say that he did something wrong."

Count Paon smoothed his beard thoughtfully.

"Even if you tell me everything you've ever done, it still doesn't change who you are," David continued. "You are still my father and you can scold me and at the same time say that you did something wrong yourself. Do you know which of my punishments I like to remember?"

The count raised his eyebrows a little. "Can you like to remember a punishment?" He asked.

David nodded. "My mother's grandfather was much more open in this than you were. He spanked me once too. I was really small then, and he took me on his lap and told me about something he had done as a boy and how stupid it was. And then I thought he was the most wonderful grandfather in the world."

Count Paon leaned forward and placed a hand on his son's shoulder. David flinched in pain. The count quickly withdrew his hand and sighed.

"Speaking of punishments, did you understand why you got beaten like that in public?" He asked.

David nodded. "When I talked to Annabel, I realized that you had come to save me from something worse. I was so scared before that it didn't occur to me before that."

"I may not have handled various things very well with you, but I have certainly always dealt with them, at least in private," Count Paon reminded him.

David nodded. "I know, Dad. And thank you. I've seen the back of a man they've publicly flogged, and you can't imagine how scared I was."

"I know you've received a harsh beating too, but it's unmatched," Count Paon nodded. "If I spared you, it would just look like a farce."

"Do we have to talk about the beating, Dad?" David asked, embarrassed. "I expected it because of the diary anyway, even if there was nothing else."

"Your diary was a useful reading, David," Count Paon said. "Leaving aside all the insults that come to your mind in the first place, at least that's how I saw what was going through your head, and I also began to realize that I had a share in your stubbornness. For a long time, you seemed to me like a closed book, which now began to open in front of me, and I would be very happy if it never closed again."

David nodded. He looked at his father with that innocent look and smiled. This time it was Count Paon who ruffled his hair a little embarrassed and looked away for a moment.

"We'll probably have to do something to make sure I'm not like a closed book," he said. "I think I have a fairly large supply of stories you've never heard. I could start telling you on the way home. What would you like to hear first? About that burnt barn? Or how did I almost get kicked out of school? Did anyone ever tell you about how your mother didn't want to marry me?"

"I'd really like to hear that," David said. "I know you want to send me away soon, but I'd love to talk about everything before then."

"So do I," his father smiled at him, then added, "what do you think of that possible study?"

David shrugged. "Until a few days ago, I thought I had no future at all," he admitted. "And I've definitely seen how miserable people can live, so I definitely appreciate you wanting to take care of me after all. When you said that, I felt very strongly that God was telling me that I should obey you in everything, so I suppose such an experience would certainly not hurt me."

"Did God tell you to obey me?" Count Paon repeated after him.

David nodded.

"I'm starting to like God like that," his father winked at him, rising from the church pew.

David also stood up and smiled at him.

"For the first time in a long time, I feel like hugging you," Count Paon admitted, "but I do not dare touch you."

But David did not wait for anything and hugged his father. The count stroked his hair and placed his hand on his back very gently. David then pulled away and stared into his eyes for a moment.

"I don't think anything has ever been as difficult for me as this conversation. It may have hurt even more than the beating," he said at last, "but you can't imagine how wonderful I feel now."

Count Paon smiled. "I think I can imagine that, David, because I feel the same way."

Instead of talking again, David hugged him once more.

"I think some of your friends are waiting for you," said the Count. "Go talk to them for a while and then we'll go home. I will stay here for a moment."

David looked around the empty church. Apart from the two of them, there were only the old preacher, Jean and Pastor Lucas.

David walked over to them, and when he looked back, he saw his father kneeling on the pew. He smiled contentedly.

"Go talk outside," the old preacher suggested as David approached, "and I'll stay here if your dad wants to talk to anyone."

"I'd be really grateful to you," David nodded.

He headed out with his friends. Several people were still standing and talking outside. He saw Laurent nodding to him and saw that everyone was looking at him with interest and compassion. He realized that the Christians around him were, in a way, his family too. He could vividly imagine the speech of an unbelieving crowd if he were punished on a public pillory, but here he perceived acceptance and understanding. And he realized that he had found a place where he could really feel safe with all his mistakes and his past.

"So, David?" Pastor Lucas looked at him inquisitively as he saw him looking around.

"I feel like I've just come out at the other end of the Valley of Shadows of Death," David admitted.

"I'm really relieved not to have to accompany you to a pillory," said the pastor.

"But it wasn't easy either," Jean said, asking sympathetically, "How are you feeling?"

"Beaten and content," David admitted. "I'm glad it's all over. My father and I talked a lot. You recently told me that there was something in the Bible about the hearts of fathers leaning toward their sons and the hearts of sons toward fathers, and I almost didn't believe it was possible, but it is. Before, I thought it would completely destroy me. Talking to him was actually even harder than I expected, but it was definitely worth it."

Pastor Lucas wanted to take him by the shoulders, but David flinched.

"Don't touch me much now," he said with an embarrassed smile.

"I don't think any of us will forget about today," Jean said thoughtfully. "I was really happy to see you talking there. I know how you were afraid of it."

Instead of answering, David smiled and looked gratefully at the heavens. He had a home, a father, a future and a whole life ahead of him. He hadn't hoped for any of that before.

After a while, his father left the church with the old preacher, and David realized how happy he was to see the two alive and together.

"Dad, I have such a deep theological question," Jean said, sighing a little. "When, actually, is a man old enough to no longer be beaten by his own dad?"

The old preacher raised his eyebrows a little and looked at him questioningly.

"You know, I'm a little ashamed to see what David has been through bravely today, and I've never admitted to you that I broke that expensive vase from Grandma. And as the pig broke his leg then, it wasn't by itself." Jean looked at his father a little hesitantly.

"Don't tell me, son," he said, taking him by the shoulders. "I guess I'll have to talk to you a bit."

"I have one great belt that I probably won't need anymore," Count Paon joked.

"Certainly not," David corrected, smiling at him. The count put his arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

Then Count Paon looked seriously at Pastor Lucas and offered him, "Come and accompany us home. I know that because of you I could hug my son here today. We'll talk about what I can do for you."

"I'd love to," the pastor nodded, "if only for a moment. A few days ago, someone predicted that I would be dining with the king, and he really invited me to dinner today. But I'm sure I'd like to have lunch with the future king of this island before," he winked at David.

"He still has plenty of time for that," Count Paon said. "I've always been overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising a king out of him, especially since I've seen him boast about it."

David smiled. He saw that they were really finding their way to each other. Not only did he know that his father understood him, but he was also beginning to understand his father a little.

"I know it will be a long time before I'm ready for such a task," David admitted, "but I really haven't remembered it in all those months. When you feed pigs somewhere, you don't feel very royal. All I wanted was reconciliation and that I could ever return home."

"Come on then, son," Count Paon smiled at him.

And with those words, they set out on their way home — something David had only dreamed of for months. And he felt he had found a home several times. In a way, the church became his home, and he also knew that he had a completely different home somewhere in heaven. But now he was looking forward to his father's house, and after a long time he was sure that he would really feel at home there. He could look his father in the eye and tell him everything he was going through and thus his heart found the home too.

Epilogue:

Thirty years have passed. It was the year 1685. King David was standing by the window of his study, looking sadly at the shores of France when an angry Annabel burst in. She had something on her mind, but when she saw David's face, she stopped.

"Did something happen?" She asked. "You look like someone died."

"Not yet," David shook his head, "but—"

"Pastor Lucas?" Annabel thought as David hesitated.

David smiled sadly. "He's fine, as far as I know. He may be almost eighty, but he's still bright. Do you remember how he once prophesied that freedoms would be abolished in France? I just learned that Louis XIV. issued the Edict of Fontainebleau and declared Protestantism illegal."

"Really?" Annabel sighed and walked over to him.

"I'm wondering how to help those people," David continued. "We have to arrange a ship to sail here and there for free and to find some land for them. They will certainly flee from France. I hope there will be no bloodshed there."

Annabel nodded and, like her husband before, looked to the French coast.

"I love the country, I've studied there and I have so many friends there," David continued, running his hand through his graying hair and shaking his head as if to drive away bad thoughts. "Anyway, you seemed to have something on your mind."

"Our only dear son made me pretty upset again," Annabel started explaining what she had originally come to see David for. "He was fooling around with his friends again, and just for fun, they let a whole herd of pigs out of the corral. One of the pigs was injured and had to be killed, and those people chased the other for several hours. And if he was at least sorry, but I saw him smirk. He tried to look remorseful, but he can't pretend well. I'm really angry."

David sighed. "Send him here to me, please, I'll deal with him. I think it's time for a good life lesson. He's thirteen, this has to stop."

"What are your plans?" Annabel asked.

"Work," David grinned. "I think I'll ask Jean to take him to their farm for a few weeks. That will cure him. It is time to know what proper work is and what value each such animal is for ordinary people. What's more, his namesake can't work too much any more and he'll be happy to talk to him for a long time."

"See, that's a good idea," Annabel smiled. "Why keep getting upset and persuading him or punishing him. This could work. He really can't act like this. After all, he is the future king of this country."

"Nothing teaches you as quickly as when you have to take care of stinking pigs," David winked at her. "I know that. But it's one thing to listen to my stories and it's another thing to try it for himself."

Annabel snuggled to her husband for a moment and buried her head in his shoulder. Then she looked up at him. "I prayed so much after those four girls that God would give us at least one son, and sometimes I feel like we got two in one. I have to admit that one boy is enough for me. When Suzanne was born, I was sorry for a while that we had so many girls, but now I'm thinking that having another boy would turn me completely gray. I'll go for him."

A few minutes later, thirteen-year-old Lucas slipped shyly into the king's office. He looked hesitantly at his father and subconsciously crouched down a little. If he ever dared to be rude towards his mother, then in his father's presence, his humor usually passed quickly.

David studied him for a long time.

Lucas bit his lip and lowered his head.

"How did such stupidity ever occur to you?" The king said after a moment.

Lucas shrugged, looked at him shyly for a moment, then looked away.

"Do you know how much such a pig costs and what it means to those people?" David frowned. "Do you really think it's fun? Do you still laugh at it when your mom talks about it with you?"

"I didn't laugh," Lucas defended. "It's not my fault that she's so funny when she's angry. She screams at me like a girl. I don't understand why she can't talk to me normally!"

"Go to the stables and saddle two horses there," his father motioned. "We'll take a ride together."

"Why cannot we talk here?" Lucas asked.

"We are not going to just ride. I just sent a servant to get you some ordinary clothes," David informed his son. "I'll take you to Jean's farm and leave you there for a few weeks. I plan to explicitly ask him to put you in charge of pigs. I think it will benefit you. I should have done it earlier."

Lucas opened his mouth in astonishment and looked at his father. "Seriously, Dad?"

"Seriously," David said. "The Edict of Nant has just been repealed. People will quite possibly die, some will flee impoverished from France with only a fraction of what they would receive for their property under normal conditions. They will start with bare hands over again. And it will be also here. And none of them needs a bunch of angry boys who don't know what to do to destroy even the little they have out of boredom. Who else was there with you? Andre and Eric ? Your cousins?"

Lucas nodded.

"Anyway, you don't have to worry about them not being punished. I will ask my sister to arrange for them a similarly unforgettable experience," King David continued. "We'll meet in a few minutes in the stables. You can go."

"Well, yeah," Lucas said reluctantly, and with a sigh he headed for the door. Other times he might have argued or begged, but he saw how deadly serious Dad looked today. After all, if the Edict of Nant was just repealed, all the fun ends and he cannot soften his father.

King David went to the stables just a moment later, carrying a bag with a neatly folded pile of clothing, usually worn by servants. As he left the castle, he glanced for a moment at the tower of the Waldensian church, smiled a little, and shook his head. There were times when he remembered so vividly everything he had experienced there thirty years ago. He didn't even know how it was possible that so many years had passed. When he closed his eyes, he could think of it all in detail. At times he still felt like a young man, yet he was looking in the mirror at his graying hair every morning. He realized he was almost as old as Pastor Lucas when they first met. He was the father of six children and the eldest of his many daughters was twenty two and she was pregnant.

"Time really passes quickly," he said aloud, walking slowly and thoughtfully to the stables to join his son. Lucas was a little jealous of his father that he was grown up and no one told him what to do any more. He himself felt that it would take perhaps a thousand years for him to be an adult. He felt that the time passes incredibly slowly.

David swung into the saddle and headed for the farm of pastor Lucas, which was about half an hour away from the castle. Jean has managed it instead of his father-in-law for a long time already.

Lucas watched Dad talking with Jean, laughing and shaking his head. But when Jean reached him, he looked serious.

"I hear you're in trouble, young man," he said.

Lucas looked at him shyly and bit his lip.

"Anyway, farms like this are a great place for people who need to clear their heads a little," Jean winked at David. "I know you know it a little bit here, but one of my boys will show you around anyway in a moment."

Jean left for one of his younger sons, and David turned to Lucas: "Jean and I have agreed that you will be here for a month. Your mother and I will come to see you in a week. I hope you understand why I do it, right?"

"Yeah, Dad," Lucas looked into his eyes. "You think farm work is a panacea, I understand that."

"I want you to get to know the lives of ordinary people a little bit and realize what it all means and what the animals mean to them. Plus, Jean is a good friend of mine, so I know you'll be in good hands. So obey him and no further nonsense, okay?"

Lucas sighed and looked away. "We didn't do it because we don't value anything as you think. We argued about whether the pigs were smart or not and if they could return home on their own."

"Really?" David asked, shaking his head incomprehensibly.

"Yeah," Lucas agreed. "I didn't mean to tell you before when you asked because you might think of sending me here. But as it occurred to you anyway, I can tell you now. It really wasn't because we wanted to cause some damage."

David stared at Lucas for a moment, trying to understand the logic of a thirteen-year-old boy. „Didn't it occur to you to ask Jean as we come here so often?"

Lucas shrugged and shook his head.

David smiled. "You'd end up here anyway, you're right. You'll learn more about pigs in that month than you like. But don't worry, it will be soon over. And at least you will have a life experience. In thirty years, you will be boring your own children by retelling it all over and over again."

David pulled him to himself and Lucas smiled. He looked at his father for a moment, knowing that his father understood him. He hated trouble, just like everyone else, but he still managed to feel closer to his father in some of those moments than ever. And then he felt satisfied with where he was and who he was, and he didn't want the time to pass quickly any more.

David ruffled his hair in a friendly gesture and pushed him toward Jean's son Christian. He himself headed for the old man, who at that moment was walking slowly out of the stables.

Pastor Lucas smiled at him and David sighed a little.

"I'm afraid I'm bringing you bad news," he said, barely greeting him. "Do you remember how you said that God had shown you that the Edict of Nant will be abolished in your lifetime? It just happened."

"Really?" The old pastor stopped for a moment, glancing involuntarily at the far shores of France. "I wonder if Christians will always have to flee somewhere like wild beasts."

The two men sat on a bench together, and the old man began to pray quietly. David joined him, staring at the distant shore.

"You have a lot of work to do, King," pastor Lucas said when they were done.

"I think you do as well," David replied. "I feel that God is showing me that your task on this earth is not over. Those newcomers will need help in every direction. You have a lot of experience that you can pass on to them."

The king and the old pastor remained seated on the bench for a long time, engaged in a quiet conversation. Pastor Lucas raised his eyebrows a little in astonishment when he saw his thirteen-year-old namesake, dressed as a simple servant, walking into a sty with Christian. David bit his lip to keep from laughing when he saw his son's expression.

„Educational stay,” he explained.

"He looks like you," Lucas smiled. "And he certainly looks as annoyed as you did years ago."

"Sometimes being a father is harder than I thought," he admitted to the pastor.

"I think you're doing well," Pastor Lucas replied. "Both as a father and as a king. I'm happy for you, David. If taking you then was the only thing I've done in my life, it wouldn't be all in vain."

"You've done a lot more for a lot of other people," David smiled. "You are like a second father to me, especially when my own is long with the Lord."

"I often imagine what it will be like to meet Jesus," Pastor Lucas looked up at the heavens, "all the more so because I know the moment is getting closer and closer."

"I've been thinking about it more often lately too," David agreed. "But on the other hand, I am now full of what is happening in France. I wonder what's next? How long will it all take? Will there ever be freedom again? What will the next century bring?"

"I assume that neither I nor you will experience any fundamental changes in this direction. The Edict of Nant was valid for 87 years. And all that politics seems to be as a heavy cart," Pastor Lucas said. "Once it moves, it usually takes decades for it to stop or turn around."

The king looked again in silence at distant France. He had no idea how true the pastor's words were. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which finally again guaranteed Protestants freedom in religion in France, was issued in August 1789. According to it, no one should continue to be harassed for their religious views. But another 104 years passed before that happened.

At that time, the youngest son of the boy David was trying to bring to his senses, was as old as the old man David was now talking to. And the two men who had been sitting together on the bench that late afternoon had long known the answer to what it's like to meet Jesus.

The end

Note:

The description of the persecution of the Waldenses comes from a book by Comenius (History of the Severe Adversities of the Czech Church). My goal is not historical work, of course I try to ensure that books that take place in the past do not contain complete nonsense, such as someone in the thirteenth century having mashed potatoes, but I wondered if they would have bottled alcohol at this time. But when I couldn't figure it out, I decided I wouldn't deal with similar details.

In the work "A Brief History of the Slavic Church" Comenius explains relationship of the Unity of Brethren to the Waldenses who lived on the borders of Moravia and Austria. Unity established relations with them as early as the second half of the 15th century (1467), and the Waldenses consecrated their three chosen men to bishops and gave them the power to consecrate priests. Unity liked the purity of the Waldensian teachings, and they even considered connecting with them. However, they accused them of compromising and going to "papal temples" in an effort to avoid adversity. Unity reprimanded Waldenses in this regard, and it was agreed that they would discuss this controversial issue at a special meeting. However, this matter was revealed, the Waldenses faced adversity because of it, their bishop Štěpán was burned and the others scattered to Brandenburg and from there later to Moravia, especially to Fulnek. Due to these negotiations between the Moravian brothers and the Waldenses, the Moravian brothers were sometimes mistakenly called the "Waldensians".

In their homeland the Moravian brothers were better known as the Unity of Brethren but I suppose they are more known as Moravian church abroad. Moravia is part of the Czech Republic. In the past there were many Protestants in this area but after political changes in 1618-1628 Moravia became much more catholic than the rest of the country. I deal with this issue in my other book „**Brotherhood of Time**”.

There is an excerpt from it bellow:

Peter Frost thought that the principal probably had a very modern weapon. He wasn't sure if his shot hit him, because the moment he pulled the trigger, the light dazzled him, but he didn't want to go back. He scrambled out of the water and, with a slightly calmer head, decided to call in S.W.A.T. But his cell phone didn't work, despite being said to be waterproof - someone seemed to be saving on police equipment again, preventing him from doing his job properly.

"Hey, guys," he called to the two students, "don't you have a cell phone? I don't have a signal here or it has broken because of the water."

"What doeth the fobdoodle want to tell us?" One of them asked.

"What is in thy cell? A foal?" The other hesitated, shaking his head." Why dost thou have a foal in thy cell?"

"No, he's talking about a signum - a seal," the first muttered, asking aloud, "Dost thou need a scribe?"

"I need to call Prague," the policeman repeated his request.

The men burst out laughing.

"Try to climb a tree," one suggested. "If thou makest a loud call, thy voice may be heard in the neighboring village, but in Prague?"

"Dost thou see his clothes?" The other whispered softly. "I believe he is crazy and surely he is drunken, too."

One of the guards walked over to Frost, poked the strange guy in the sign in his chest, and asked, "What is a police?"

Peter Frost knew about the local school, that students were learning about the past through various games, but now he was not in the mood for it.

"Enough, boys," he said to the young guards. "This is a serious matter, I really need to call S.W.A.T."

"I can swat thee, if thou thinkest thou might sober thus," one of them offered with a laugh, hoping he finally understood the weirdo a little.

Mr. Frost frowned. "It's nice of you to love that school, but I'm investigating something important here, so it would be nice if you stopped playing we were in the fifteenth century for a while, or whatever year you pretend it is."

"It's the year 1625," the guard tried to be a little helpful to him, "I'm sure thou art very drunken when thou art not aware what time it is."

"Thou art are in the lands of the Czech crown," added the other man, convinced that the fool he was talking to had completely lost his head, "and our ruler is-"

"I know very well what year it is and that Milos Laird is the ruler here," Frost snapped, "this is thwarting the police investigation," he continued angrily, "and I don't like your stupid jokes anymore. You're lucky you're not of legal age yet. So if you would kindly let me in now, I would like to continue with my work."

Mr. Frost was no longer the only one who ran out of patience, but one of the guards made one last polite attempt to help him: "Matthew is the laird of this estate, I don't know any laird called Milos."

The policeman shook his head angrily and wanted to add something else, but as he did so, he glanced at the hill on which a brand new lookout tower was to stand. It was the dominant feature of this region and he did not see it anywhere.

Excerpt from the book INFERNAL PLAN (Apocatastasis 1):

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.