Gretel and the Dark

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Gretel and the Dark

It is many years before the Pied Piper comes back for the other children. Though his music has been silenced, still thousands are forced to follow him, young, old, large, small, everyone . . . even the ogres wearing ten-league boots and cracking whips, even their nine-headed dogs. We are the rats in exodus now and the Earth shrinks from the touch of our feet. Spring leaves a bitter taste. All day, rain and people fall; all night, nixies wail from the lakes. The blood-coloured bear sniffs at our heels. I keep my eyes on the road, counting white pebbles, fearful of where this last gingerbread trail is leading us.

Has the spell worked? I think so: coils of mist lap at our ankles, rising to mute all sounds, swallowing everyone around us whole. When the moment comes, we run blind, dragging the Shadow behind us, stopping only when my outstretched hand meets the rough bark of pine trunks. One step, two, and we're inside the enchanted forest, the air threaded with icy witch-breaths. The day collapses around us. Phantom sentries swoop from the trees demanding names but our teeth guard the answers so they turn away, flapping eastward in search of the cloud-shrouded moon. Roots coil, binding us to the forest floor. We crouch in a silence punctuated by the distant clatter of stags shedding their antlers.

We wake, uneaten. Every trace of mist has been sucked away by the sun. The landscape seems empty. We haven't come

far: I can see where the road runs but there's no sign of anything moving along it. It's quiet until a cuckoo calls from deep within the trees.

'Listen.'

'Kukułka,' he says, shielding his eyes as he searches the topmost branches.

'Kuckuck,' I tell him. He still talks funny. 'She's saying "Kuckuck"!'

He gives his usual jerky shrug. 'At least we're free.'

'Only if we keep moving. Come on.'

The Shadow whimpers but we force it upright and, supporting it between us, move slowly along the edge of the trees until we come to fields where ravens are busy gouging out the eyes of young wheat. Beyond, newly buried potatoes shiver beneath earth ridges. Cabbages swell like lines of green heads. When we kneel to gnaw at their skulls, the leaves stick in our throats.

We carry on walking, feet weighted by the sticky clay, until the Shadow crumples. I pull at its arm. 'It's not safe here. We must go further. If they notice we've gone –' Keep going. We have to keep going. Surely sooner or later kindly dwarves or a soft-hearted giant's wife must take pity on us. But fear has become too familiar a companion to act as a spur for long. Besides, we're carrying the Shadow now. Its head lolls, the wide eyes are empty and its feet trail behind, making two furrows in the soft mud. It could be the death of us.

'We should go on alone.'

'No,' he pants. 'I promised not to leave –'

'I didn't.'

'Then you go. Save yourself.'

He knows I won't go on without him. 'No good standing

here talking,' I snap, hooking my arm under the Shadow's shoulder and wondering how something thin as a knife blade can be so heavy.

Another rest, this time perched on the mossy elbow of an oak tree, attempting to chew a handful of last year's acorns. Only the sprouted ones stay down. The Shadow lies where we dropped it, facing the sky, though I notice its eyes are completely white now. Without warning it gives a cry, the loudest noise it's ever made, followed by a gasp and a long, juddering out-breath. I finish spitting out the last of the acorns. The Shadow isn't doing its usual twitching and jumping; it doesn't even move when I push my foot into its chest. After a moment, I gather handfuls of oak leaves and cover its face.

He tries to stop me. 'Why are you doing that?'

'It's dead.'

'No!' But I can see the relief as he pulls himself on to his knees to check. 'After enduring so much, still we die like dogs . . . *pod płotem* . . . next to a fence, under a hedge.' He closes the Shadow's eyes. '*Baruch dayan emet*.' It must be a prayer: his lips go on moving but no sound emerges.

'But we're not going to die.' I tug at his clothes. 'Shadows never last long. You always knew it was hopeless. Now we can travel faster, just you and me.'

He shakes me off. 'The ground here is soft. Help me dig a grave.'

'Won't. There's no time. We have to keep going. It's already past midday.' I watch him hesitate. 'Nothing will eat a shadow. There's no meat on it.' When he doesn't move I trudge away, forcing myself not to look back. Eventually he catches up.

The path continues to weave between field and forest. Once, we catch sight of a village but decide it's still too near the black

magician's stronghold to be safe. Finally, even the sun starts to abandon us and our progress slows until I know we can drag ourselves no further. By now the forest has thinned; before us stretches an enormous field with neat rows as far as the eye can see. We've pushed deep between the bushy plants before I realize it's a field of beans.

'What does it matter?' he asks wearily.

'Cecily said you go mad if you fall asleep under flowering beans.'

'No flowers,' he says curtly.

He's wrong, though. A few of the uppermost buds are already unfurling white petals, ghostly in the twilight, and in the morning it's obvious we should have pressed on, for hundreds of flowers have opened overnight, dancing like butterflies on the breeze, spreading their perfume on the warming air.

'Let me rest for a bit longer,' he whispers, cheek pressed against the mud, refusing to move, not even noticing a black beetle ponderously climbing over his hand. 'No one will find us here.'

His bruises are changing colour. Where they were purple-black, now they are tinged with green. When he asks for a story, I remember what Cecily told me about two children who came out of a magic wolf-pit. They had green skin, too.

'It was in England,' I tell him, 'at harvest-time, a very long time ago. A boy and a girl appeared suddenly, as if by magic, on the edge of the cornfield. Their skin was bright green and they wore strange clothing.' I look down at myself and laugh. 'When they spoke, nobody could understand their fairy language. The harvesters took them to the Lord's house, where they were looked after, but they would eat nothing at all, not

a thing, until one day they saw a servant carrying away a bundle of beanstalks. They ate those, but never the actual beans.'

'Why didn't they eat the beans like anyone else?'

'Cecily said the souls of the dead live in the beans. If you ate one you might be eating your mother or your father.'

'That's plain silly.'

'I'm only telling you what she said. It's a true story but if you don't want me to –'

'No, go on,' he says, and I notice in spite of his superior tone he's looking uneasily at the bean flowers. 'What happened to the green children?'

'After they ate the beanstalks they grew stronger and learned to speak English. They told the Lord about their beautiful homeland where poverty was unknown and everyone lived for ever. The girl said that while playing one day they'd heard the sound of sweet music and followed it across pasture land into a dark cave –'

'Like your story of the Pied Piper?'

'Yes.' I hesitate, remembering that in Cecily's story the boy died and the little girl grew up to be an ordinary wife. 'I don't remember the rest.'

He's silent for a moment, then looks at me. 'What are we going to do? Where can we go? Who can we turn to? Nobody has ever helped us before.'

'They said help was coming. They said it was on its way.'

'Do you believe it?'

'Yes. That's why we must keep walking towards them.' Beneath the bruises, his face is chalk-white again. His arm doesn't look right and he winces whenever he tries to move it. There's fresh blood at the corners of his mouth. And suddenly I'm so

angry I might explode. 'I wish I could kill him.' My fists clench so hard my nails dig in. I want to scream and spit and kick things. He continues to look questioningly at me. 'I mean, the man who started it all. If it hadn't been for him –'

'Didn't you hear what everyone was whispering? He's already dead.' Again, the small shrug. 'Anyway, my father said if it hadn't been him there'd have been someone else just like him.'

'And maybe then it would have been someone else here, not us.'

He smiles and squeezes my hand. 'And we would never have met.'

'Yes, we would,' I say fiercely. 'Somehow, somewhere – like in the old stories. And still I wish it could have been me that killed him.'

'Too big,' he says weakly. 'And too powerful.'

I knuckle my eyes. 'Then I wish I'd been even bigger. I would have stepped on him or squashed him like a fly. Or I wish he'd been even smaller. Then I could have knocked him over and cut off his head or stabbed him in the heart.' We sit in silence for a while. I think about all the ways you could kill someone shrunk to Tom Thumb size. 'We ought to go now.'

'Let me sleep.'

'Walk now. Sleep later.'

'All right. But first tell me a story – one of your really long ones – about a boy and a girl who kill an ogre.'

I think for a moment. None of my old stories seem bad enough until I realize there were other circumstances in which an ogre really could be killed. Thanks to Hanna, I know where. And I even know when. All of a sudden, I'm excited. 'Once upon a time,' I begin, but see immediately I can't start that way. It

isn't that sort of tale. He's still holding my hand. I give it a sharp tug. 'Get up. From now on I shall only tell you my story while we're walking. The moment you stop, I shan't say another word.'

One

The town of Gmunden, with its placid lake surrounded by high mountains, was a peaceful summer retreat until the morning Mathilde observed that a certain General Pappenheim had brutally suppressed a peasant rebellion there in 1626. The name stirred up a hornets' nest of resentments. Pappenheim was also the family name of that Bertha creature – the young patient Josef had been so preoccupied with. The one he had never stopped talking about, worrying over, at mealtimes, bedtimes, morning, noon and night, even when his own wife was so heavily pregnant. Why was that? Actually, she had a very good idea why, thank you very much, Doktor Josef Breuer. And she wasn't the only one who thought along those lines. Ask Sigmund. He'd verify it.

Mathilde simply could not let the subject rest. The fact that almost two decades had passed made not a scrap of difference. Neither did Josef's protestations. On and on the argument went, growing more accusatory, weighted with increasing bitterness, until he could stand it no longer and returned to Vienna alone. With the exception of the children's old nurse, and the boy, of course, the house was empty.

At least it was quiet here. Or rather, after so many years, Josef was used to the muted noises from beyond the window. His mind no longer registered the distant rumble of trams or the grind and rattle of horse-drawn vehicles, the street cries, the high-pitched chatter of passing maidservants. Even late-night

revellers and their cacophonic renditions of melodies by the recently deceased Strauss were barely noticed.

Within his consulting room, only the somnolent pulse of the ancient clock usually broke the silence that filled the spaces between patients – and none of those would beat a path to his door until the rest of the family returned, marking the official end of his vacation. This morning, hunched over his desk, Josef became aware of another sound, a tremulous beat, a whisper-soft, allegrissimo counter-melody to the groan of the clock. It seemed so much a part of him that he clutched at his chest, suddenly alarmed. However, it was not, after all, the arrhythmic fluttering of his heart, but merely the frantic escape bid of a rag-winged butterfly confused by the glass. That this realization took so long was a measure of how disturbing he'd found the earlier incident.

It had required enormous effort to unlock the girl's fingers. He'd never before encountered such prehensile determination. The cat was still hiding beneath the bureau. Perhaps it was dead, for during the struggle Gudrun, shrieking with fury, had seized its head, forcibly yanking it free of the girl's hands. Clawing empty air as it fell, the animal added its own banshee howl to the din. Benjamin, lurking beyond the door, had immediately bounded into the room. Pandemonium. And yet the girl continued to stare straight ahead, wordless, blank.

What had the animal done to warrant her assault? Plenty of people disliked cats, and some were reputed to have found them terrifying – Napoleon, Meyerbeer, the dissolute Henry III of England – but there were few who, expressionless and without even glancing down, would seize one by the neck and proceed to crush its windpipe.

Josef rose from his desk with a sigh, keeping well back in the

shadow of the curtain as he opened the window. After a moment's hesitation, the butterfly – a *Großer Kohlweißling*, summer ravager of cabbage patches, against whose progeny Benjamin waged constant war – exited to certain death. He watched it flutter upward, keeping close to the building as it battled against the breeze. Not, after all, a Cabbage White: the sooty black spots on the forewings were too large, unusually pronounced, even for a female. It was a rare subspecies, perhaps, though it hardly mattered. The dying year had a voracious appetite for such delicate creatures. Today Josef could smell autumn on the air, a mixture of woodsmoke and fungus, death and decay. He sensed worms wreaking their transformation in the dark loam beneath the leaf mould. The trees were changing colour. A few leaves had fallen. Faced with the prospect of bleak winter, his mood always veered towards the melancholic, never more so than this year, which marked not only the end of the present century but also the end of love. Mathilde had turned from him. Her moods, this difficult passage marking in turn an end to her fertility, would pass; life would settle down again. But the harsh words, those vile accusations. He tugged angrily at his beard. Things could never be the same between them.

What remained? How could his declining years be faced, emotionally lacking, with affection rationed, touch denied? At least there was the steady acquisition of knowledge to sustain him – *suum esse conservare*. Thank God for work. And, as if to underline it, this intriguing case had simply fallen into his lap.

Josef returned to his chair and stared at the virgin page, as yet unsullied by whatever agonizing secrets were waiting to be unlocked. The facts would have to be recorded. He wrote a

single word, '*Fräulein*', and stopped. He scratched his head and looked about him at the familiar faces of his daily companions – the ancient clock, increasingly dragging its feet over the passing of time, the carved-wood deer's head mounted with hugely branching six-point antlers, its gaze fixed on each patient, its ears pricked as if eternally eavesdropping, the portrait of his father, Leopold, watching, waiting. For over thirty years Josef had sat at this desk, never once lost for words. He should simply choose a name, any name, and alter it as soon as the girl's identity was established. But still he hesitated. It was not an easy thing, for to name something established dominion over it. As with an infant, it shaped and moulded with the namer's expectations that which was named. It set apart. It emphasized human aloneness. A pseudonym was different, a mere cloak.

Josef thought back to his first glimpse of the girl in Benjamin's arms, swaddled in a horse blanket, its coarse folds framing her pale and bloodied face, the gashes on her throat a gaping second mouth, the shock of the almost naked skull, her eyes open but unseeing, as though fixed on a grim hereafter. In that moment, she had put him in mind of a broken flower. A flower name, then, for such was almost an endearment. Since she was so pale, so slender, and because it was his favourite flower, they would henceforth refer to her as Lilie.

Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne,
Die liebt' ich einst alle in Liebeswonne.

The decision galvanized Josef into action. Squaring up his notebook, he began to write.

Fräulein Lilie X

Fräulein Lilie X appears to be in her early twenties and in good physical health. Nothing is known about her past life. Her well-kept hands and fine features suggest that she comes from the upper stratum of society. She was discovered unclothed on rough ground near the Narrenturm (27 August 1899). It is difficult to ascertain how long she lay there, but probably no more than twenty-four hours, as what has become known as the Tower of Fools is a favourite meeting place for schoolboys who congregate to throw stones at the lightning rod. Lilie's condition was such that the boys who stumbled across her thought she was dead.

My primary examination revealed an exceptionally slow heartbeat and hardly discernible breathing. She appeared to have no awareness of self or others, neither reacting to the external world nor to the passage of time. Her eyes remained open, but were similarly unresponsive to stimuli. Skin and mucous membranes appeared normal. The teeth are all present and sound. The patient's head had been crudely shorn. There was severe bruising behind the ears and around the left eye. Two shallow incisions had been made in the throat, close together, probably with a small pocketknife. There was further bruising on the lower arms and wrists, partially obscuring a line of inked characters on the left, which appear to be permanent. I also found bruising on the inner thighs and buttocks but no indication of very recent sexual assault. There were abrasions on both left and right scapulae consistent with the patient having been dragged along the ground by the feet. The patient has remained comatose for three days, during which time she has not eaten or taken liquid apart from a few drops of water spooned between her lips.

Josef put down his pen, reluctant to revisit the moment of change. Instead he made his way to the kitchen, drawn by his nose to the prospect of freshly made shlishkes.

The relaxed, almost *schlampig* way in which the house was run in Mathilde's absence was a holiday in itself. To perch on a stool amid the scrubbing and chopping, the beating and mixing, the basting and the tasting, transported him back to childhood, when his grandmother had taken charge of his father's house, especially as Gudrun was familiar with so many old Hungarian recipes. He took advantage of her turned back to palm surreptitiously one of the warm dumplings with its coating of sugar and caramelized breadcrumbs.

'Leave them alone,' said Gudrun, without even glancing over her shoulder, and in the fearsome voice formerly reserved for the nursery. 'They're counted.' Josef said nothing. The old nurse had strict rules about speaking with one's mouth full. She brought him coffee without being asked. 'I've made some soup for the patient.'

'I doubt she'll eat it.'

'She will, if I feed her.' Gudrun stood before him, arms akimbo, glaring.

'It's no good forcing food into her mouth if she can't swallow –'

Gudrun snorted. 'Can't? *Won't*. I'm surprised you're still taken in after this morning's little episode. Vicious, that was. The girl deserves a good hiding. She needs locking up.'

Joseph ignored the venom. 'She'll stay in her room for another few days. I've come to the conclusion that we brought her downstairs too soon.'

'And I've come to the conclusion that she's play-acting, pretending to be dead to the world. You mark my words: there's

more to this than meets the eye. She'll probably wait until we're off guard and then let in her accomplices to ransack the silver and murder us all in our beds. Vienna's not what it was with all these strangers pouring into the city. I told you, plain as plain, you were bringing trouble into the house. Would you listen? No. Am I right? I am. And what's the mistress going to say, tell me that? *Frau Doktor* Breuer won't want her nicely brought-up daughters associating with a wench who's probably no better than she should be –'

'The girl was brutally attacked,' said Josef, in an attempt to stem the flow.

Gudrun moved the plate of shlishkes out of reach. 'There's no need to raise your voice.'

Josef was on the verge of forbidding force-feeding and then beating a hasty retreat when Benjamin clumped in carrying a frail piled high with vegetables, distracting Gudrun, who turned her bad temper on his muddy boots. The young man grinned, ignoring the ensuing threats.

'How is she now, *Herr Doktor*?'

'And you'll scrub the floor until it's clean enough to eat off,' Gudrun finished, adding: 'Never mind her. It's the cat's health you should be asking after. If the poor creature's still alive.'

Her eyes gleamed. Josef recalled that she'd never liked the animal. He set down his empty cup, nodding as Gudrun hovered with the coffee pot. 'Thank you.' It was not his practice to discuss patients, but Benjamin's quick action in bringing the girl . . . in bringing *Lilie* . . . here earned him the right to enquire. 'Physically she's much improved. The bruising –'

'I told him already, the bruises are fading,' Gudrun put in. 'Almost gone, thanks to me. And those nasty cuts on her neck

have more or less healed.' She sniffed. 'I can't shift those ink marks on her arm, though, no matter how hard I scrub.'

'They're tattoos,' Benjamin muttered, rolling his eyes. 'Tell her, *Herr Doktor*. She takes no notice of me.' He glanced defiantly at Gudrun. 'They're tattoos. They won't come off.'

'Sailors have tattoos,' Gudrun said scornfully. 'There's a reason for that, which I won't go into. No reason for one to be on a young woman's arm.'

'Perhaps it's decorative,' hazarded Josef. 'People have decorated their bodies with tattoos since the beginning of time. They used to pierce the skin with thin sticks and sharpened bones. A painful process, I should imagine, but I understand a New York man's invented a tattooing machine.'

'Must still hurt.' Benjamin winced as he unlaced the offending boots.

'Leviticus 19 verse 28,' declared Gudrun. ' "You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the Lord." '

The two men glanced at each other, but said nothing. Josef had taken the presence of those marks to confirm Benjamin's suspicions that Lilie could not possibly be a Jew. It mattered now that Vienna had lapsed into one of its periodic bouts of anti-Semitism: taunts and slogans, occasional skirmishes – nothing new. This time he suspected it was being fuelled by Mayor Lueger for his own political ends, and exacerbated, as always, by ill-educated Roman Catholic priests exercising their fervid imaginations to embellish age-old myths of ritual murder, including sacrifice of Christian babies. The blood libel trial of Hilsner in Bohemia hadn't helped. The similarities between the state of Anežka Hrůzová's body – throat slashed, clothes half torn off – and that of Lilie had prompted the boy to act quickly for fear

of reprisals against the Jewish community. Lucky for them it was Benjamin's younger brother and his friend who'd found her: within an hour the girl was safely concealed within the respectable Breuer house. Benjamin was to be commended for taking their late-night conversations so seriously.

'Anyway,' Gudrun continued, plunging her knife into the heart of a cabbage, 'what self-respecting woman wants a string of lines and numbers decorating her wrist when she could have a nice bracelet? Whatever she is, the girl doesn't look like a savage.'

'Lilie,' said Josef. 'I've decided we should call her Lilie.'

'Lilie,' echoed Benjamin, savouring the word. 'Lilie. And has Lilie recovered since this morning? How is her mental state?'

'Never mind that,' said Gudrun. 'What about this soup?'

Josef stood. 'I'll take it up now.'

'Let me go. I'll get her eating, see if I don't,' Gudrun promised.

'No,' insisted Josef. 'Since she took water only from me, I should feed her.' He was immediately oppressed by a sense of déjà vu, and a tiny frisson of something akin to fear ran the length of his spine. This was history repeating itself. He remembered long passages when Bertha had accepted food only when he extended the spoon. Perhaps it might be better . . . then he remembered Mathilde's offensive accus-ations and turned his back on good sense. 'I will feed her,' he said, more firmly this time.

'Then I shall carry the tray,' Gudrun said, just as firmly, fixing him with her eye. 'You shouldn't go alone.'

Josef's mouth tightened. For a moment the voices of his wife and Gudrun seemed to fuse into one. 'The young woman needs no protection from me.' He avoided looking at Benjamin.

'It's your reputation I'm thinking of, *Herr Doktor*. What with the mistress away.'

They trudged upstairs, both breathing heavily, both oppressed by their age. On reaching the guest-room door, Josef knocked out of courtesy, but Gudrun shoved past him, balancing the tray on one generously padded hip. Lilie was exactly as they'd left her, sitting bolt upright in the chair and staring straight ahead. Her eyes were wide open. Dull. Blank. The only difference Josef could find was that her left hand lay loosely cupped in her lap.

'Some water first.' He held the glass to Lilie's lips. Meeting no response, he pushed a small spoonful of water between them. It spilled from the corners of her mouth, trickled down the sides of her neck, fingered under the plum-coloured fabric and continued stealthily downwards. Josef looked away. Gudrun had dressed the girl in out-grown family garments. Dark shades didn't suit the girl's pale complexion; some other arrangements would have to be made. After a moment he refilled the spoon.

'This time drink it,' commanded Gudrun. 'Hurry up, the soup's getting cold.'

'Shouting won't achieve anything.'

'How's it going to look if she starves to death, *Herr Doktor*? What then?' Gudrun leaned closer. 'No good sitting there, mooning over whatever happened, my girl. Chances are you brought it on yourself anyway. What's done is done. Get up and get on with life, that's what I say.'

'Enough,' said Josef. 'From now on, please remain silent at all times in Lilie's presence.'

'Very well.' The direct order didn't stop Gudrun tapping Lilie sharply on the back of the neck as she passed. It can't have hurt, but Lilie responded immediately with an audible intake of breath, jerking her head vigorously to one side and wrig-

gling her shoulders. A soft pink, the colour of wild-rose petals, crept up her cheeks. Her eyes brightened. She blinked and focused, not on Josef, who sat opposite her, but on an area somewhere above his left shoulder.

'*Vous êtes qui?*' Lilie's voice was low, melodic, totally pleasing to Josef. He stared back, transfixed by her irises, which were a curiously intense blue-green, almost turquoise, with a ring of amber flecks around the pupil. Now that her face was animated, he realized Lilie was possessed of a rare beauty, her features perfectly symmetrical and in proportion. A hazy recollection of some painting hovered on the precipice edge of memory. He struggled to remember the artist. '*Vous êtes qui?*' she repeated, and still receiving no answer: '*És ön? Cine esti tu? Kim?*' Her voice rose a fraction. '*Kim pan jest? Kdo ar tebe? Wer sind Sie?* Who are you?' Her lips continued to move but Josef was unable to pick out any words.

'Forgive me, *Fräulein*. My name is Josef Breuer. I am a physician –'

'Josef Robert Breuer,' said Lilie, looking directly at him for the first time. 'Born Vienna, January 15th 1842, graduated from the Akademisches Gymnasium in 1858 –'

'That is correct,' said Josef, a little startled. 'And what is your name?'

'I have no name.' Lilie turned her left arm so the wrist faced him. 'Just my number.'

'Number?' snorted Gudrun. 'How much more of this nonsense –?' Josef shot her a warning look before turning his attention back to the girl.

'Everyone has a name, *Fräulein*. It is what distinguishes one human being from another.'

'Why do you assume I'm human?' Lilie inspected her cupped

hand and slowly opened her fingers, revealing a white butterfly, its blotched wings ragged but otherwise undamaged for it immediately fluttered away, joining several others dancing aimless figures-of-eight against the ceiling. 'So many,' she murmured. 'Thousands, millions, one for every stolen soul. Already there are too many to count.'

'Ah, yes,' agreed Josef, 'the butterfly has long been associated with the human soul. In Greek myth –'

Lilie closed her hand. 'Not butterflies. They're flowers.'

Josef glanced at Gudrun. Tight-mouthed and resentful, she sat down, pleating the hem of her apron between her fingers. He cleared his throat and steered the conversation back to the girl's feeling of exclusion from the human race. He smiled. 'I see no reason not to assume you're human.'

'I am not part of the human race. First I was an idea. Then I came into being charged with a very important task.'

Josef nodded, but made no comment. 'And were you born here in Vienna? No? Then can you remember where you spent your childhood?'

'I wasn't born. I was created just like this.'

'As were we all,' agreed Josef. 'The creator of the universe –'

'Do you think I'm an angel?' asked Lilie, staring straight in front of her. 'No. I'm not that either. I'm sure you've heard of Olimpia –'

'Ernst Hoffman,' murmured Josef, nodding sagely. 'She was the beautiful automaton in his short story *"Der Sandmann"*. Of course, but –'

'She could only say "Ah, ah." Think of me as being more like that, but much cleverer. A machine made in the image of an adult human female.'

'I see.' Josef cleared his throat. 'Made.'

'Half baked, if you ask me,' muttered Gudrun, flicking away imaginary dust.

'Very well,' said Josef, pointedly raising one shoulder against Gudrun's interruption. 'Since you have no name, I shall call you Lilie.' He waited for an objection, but none came, though her lips moved. 'Now, Lilie, tell us about your task.'

Lilie turned the full blue-green of her gaze on him. 'I've come to find the monster.'

'Ah. And this monster – is it in Vienna?'

'No,' said Lilie, 'but he's coming. Look.' She opened her hand, and to Josef's amazement another of the curiously marked butterflies hung poised for a moment, its black markings reminiscent of the empty eye cavities of the skull, before spiralling up to join the endless dance above their heads.

'Where –'

'This soup will be stone cold in a minute,' said Gudrun, and rattled the spoon against the bowl. 'Eat. That's what we're up here for.'

Josef snatched it from her hand and held it out to the girl. 'Will you eat something, *Fräulein*?'

Lilie glanced at the soup and wrinkled her nose in what might have been distaste. 'Machines don't need to eat.'

'There's plenty in Vienna would be glad of that soup, let me tell you,' huffed Gudrun, taking the gesture personally. 'I'll give you turning your nose up at good food. Just who do you think you are?'

'Silence, Frau Gschtaltner!' roared Josef. 'Not another word.'

'Huh,' said Gudrun, and folded her arms over her chest.

Once again, Josef thrust forward the spoon, handle first, willing Lilie to take it. 'Come, Lilie, eat just a little.' He didn't want to repeat history by feeding her, but since she continued

to stare at the opposite wall, supposed there was nothing else for it. By now the girl must be hungry. He stirred the soup and took a small spoonful, carefully avoiding the congealing fat. 'Open your mouth, Lilie.' It was a very pretty mouth, the lips well-shaped and generous, so full of promise that Josef could almost imagine how it might feel to sate his own hunger there. His heart lurched. The spoon juddered violently, spilling most of the liquid. 'Open your mouth immediately, Lilie,' he said, more forcefully than he'd intended. 'You must eat.'

It emerged as an order. And perhaps this was the way it would work for Lilie immediately obeyed. The thought both alarmed and exhilarated Josef. He could hardly bear to watch the shallow bowl of the spoon pressing down on her lower lip as he fed her. Occasionally the pink tip of her tongue emerged to lick away a glistening trail of soup droplets. Twice Lilie turned her head away, but the insistent spoon pursued her. Josef stopped only when he observed that she was holding the liquid in her mouth rather than swallowing it.

'Good.' He surreptitiously ran his fingers beneath his damp collar. 'Rest now, Lilie. We will talk again later.'

Outside the door Gudrun eyed him severely.

'You should have let me deal with her. Start pandering to her nonsense and there'll be no end to this foolishness.'

'The poor child will recover soon enough.'

'No fool like an old fool,' said Gudrun, taking the tray.

Josef flinched. Had he made himself so obvious? Then it occurred to him that Gudrun would never have dared to speak to him with such disrespect if Mathilde had been here.

'Send Benjamin to me.' He omitted the courtesy that would have softened the command to a request. Not that it redressed the balance. 'And prepare something more substantial for the

girl's evening meal. Cold meat, fruit, cheese – anything she can pick up with her fingers.' He couldn't go through all that again.

'And will you be in there talking to her later?' Gudrun flushed crimson before Josef's glare, but she didn't drop her eyes. 'If so, I should accompany you.'

'Send Benjamin to me,' he repeated, without answering.

The boy couldn't have been far away. Josef had barely settled himself before he heard the heavy clump of work boots along the passage from the kitchen stairs. And, newly cleaned or not, that was something else Mathilde wouldn't have tolerated. He opened the door before there was time for Benjamin to forget about knocking.

'What have you found out, Benjamin? Any talk of young women going missing?'

Benjamin shook his head. 'Nothing. Well, nothing apart from the Grossmanns' scullery maid. She ran off ten days ago. Their cook reckons she got homesick and went back to her father's farm. Couldn't be Lilie, though.' He looked at his hands. 'Hedda is much older, and ugly as sin, with a backside the size of a tram. Nothing else. Couple of whores found dead in Spittelberg.'

'You'd better keep trying,' said Josef, after a moment's thought. 'Someone must know something. She didn't fall out of the air. For the reasons we discussed, I don't want to involve outsiders unless it's absolutely necessary.' He carefully lined up his pens. 'So far, Lilie hasn't said anything sensible about her family background.'

'A girl like Lilie, you'd think there'd be people out looking for her.'

'I don't believe she's from Vienna.' Josef replayed her few short answers in his head. There'd been traces of a strange

accent. He couldn't place it. 'Of course, she may have been brought here, perhaps against her will.' He leaned forward, lowering his voice. 'That other matter we spoke of . . .'

'I'll try,' said Benjamin, 'but it won't be easy. I can't just walk in. Fat chance of getting work there – apparently the pay's so good the servants hang on to their jobs. Anyway, I've heard tell they won't take on young men because of all the girls.' He hesitated. '*Herr Doktor*, it would be a simple matter for you to join the club.'

'No.' Josef clenched his fists. 'Out of the question.'

'They say many of Vienna's top men are members. *Herr Doktor* Schmidt, *Herr Professor* Voss –'

'*No!*' Josef almost choked on the word. Rumours abounded about what went on beneath the Thélème's well-polished veneer of respectability. Foreign women . . . and men . . . prepared to engage in unnatural acts. Sexual coupling turned into theatre. Orgies: the loosening of Saturn's restraints as in the ancient temples. Josef swallowed hard. Those who frequented such places were either degenerate, a state surely denoting lack of purpose, or poor, sad creatures having no other recourse to sensual warmth; to be numbered among the latter would be to grind salt into his emotional wounds. He visualized *Frau* Voss with her sharp nose and lipless mouth, *Frau Doktor* Schmidt and her shifty-eyed piety. How would others judge Mathilde if he – No. Besides, a poisonous word dropped here, a venomous nod and wink there . . . even Mayor Lueger wasn't immune: Vienna was growing fast, but salacious gossip travelled faster. He would lay himself open to ridicule, to blackmail. All those that he held dear might be exposed to scandal. 'No,' he repeated. 'No, that place is a pit of depravity.'

Benjamin turned scarlet. 'I only meant to see if Lilie –'

'It could give certain factions more ammunition than they need.'

'Nobody need find out.'

Josef looked hard at him. 'And how did you discover that the doctor and the professor were members?'

'Well, everyone knows . . . Oh. Yes. Sorry.' Benjamin coughed gently. 'I'll go back. See what I can find out by hanging around the kitchen door.' He was silent for a moment before asking diffidently: 'Is she . . . is Lilie all right? One minute Gudrun says she's a thief waiting until we're off our guard, the next that she's a raving lunatic, harping on about being made of clockwork or something. Is that true? Is she really mad?'

'Time will tell,' Josef said vaguely. 'If I'm to find out what happened to Lilie, she must be questioned extremely carefully. She may not remember yet. She might be hiding something. In either case she must be induced to confide in me.'

'Of course, *Herr Doktor*. I understand.'

'Patience is called for. Such things can't be rushed.' In many ways it was akin to seduction. To his horror, Josef found his imagination was still conjuring up voluptuous pictures of what might be happening even now in the Thélème. The writhing images had Lilie's mouth. Her eyes. Her neck. Those marks on her arm – they were like cattle brands, livestock – an appalling thought. He jumped to his feet and opened the safe, keeping his back to the boy. 'You'll need more money, since you're going back into the coffee houses, Benjamin. The taverns, too, I suppose.'

'Do you think she's married?'

'Who?' Josef thought of Lilie changing the monster's pronoun from the neutral 'it' to the revealing 'he'. In his professional capacity, he'd examined her carefully. He knew what he knew.

Undoubtedly there was a brutish man in this somewhere but there was no ring on her finger and no mark where one had been. 'You mean Lilie, Benjamin?' He turned to face him. 'I doubt it.'

'Wait for me, *Herr Doktor*.' Gudrun laboured up the stairs after him, clutching a work basket. I promised to come with you, and come with you I will.'

Josef drew himself upright. 'There's really no need –'

'I won't utter a word,' said Gudrun, shouldering past him. 'Not a word. I shall sit by the window and get on with my mending. Quiet as a mouse. In silence.'

'Very well.' Josef knocked on the door and entered quickly before Gudrun could blunder in. The girl was sitting exactly as before: hands loosely clasped in her lap; eyes wide open and blank. 'Good afternoon, Lilie. I thought we might have a chat. How are you feeling now?' He raised his voice when no answer came: 'Lilie, you must speak to me. Answer now, please. Do you hear? How are you feeling?'

Lilie inclined her head. 'A machine has no feelings.'

Josef waited until Gudrun had settled herself by the window with her darning mushroom and was busily jabbing a large needle into the heel of one of his socks. He left the question of emotional response for the moment. There was another, more promising topic that might yield results.

'Tell me about the monster, Lilie.' She stared at him for so long without blinking that Josef found himself opening and shutting his eyes at twice the normal speed, as if to ease her ocular discomfort as well as his own. 'Tell me about the monster. What does he look like?'

'He is small and dark.'

'Small, yes.' Unusual. Dark? Josef thought back to children's tales. A picture of a prancing devil presented itself. 'And does he have claws or horns? A tail? Huge teeth?'

'No.'

'Do you see him in your dreams or in everyday life?'

'No.'

Josef frowned. 'Where is he then?'

'He is somewhere else.'

'Somewhere in Vienna?'

'No, but he will come here soon.'

'To find you?'

'No,' said Lilie. 'He isn't looking for me. I am looking for him.'

'Oh? And why is that?'

'He won't recognize me. I'll be able to put an end to it before it begins.'

'Ah,' said Josef, wondering what Lilie imagined had rendered her incognito. The lack of hair, perhaps: women often attached disproportionate importance to the effects of a different style. 'Are you frightened of him?'

Lilie shook her head. 'Fear is a human weakness. I have no feelings.'

'It's hard to believe you're a machine, Lilie, since you look exactly like a real human woman. And a very comely one, if I might say so.' The girl's face remained without expression but a prolonged clattering of bobbins from the window seat said far more than words and Josef immediately wished the stiff compliment unvoiced. 'Like Galatea,' he added, 'who though not a machine was made by human hands.'

'Pygmalion only sculpted one Galatea,' responded Lilie. 'I am one of many. There are thousands with the face and body

that you see before you. Machines such as I are provided with a pleasing female likeness unless otherwise requested. Since we are neither dead nor alive our appearance remains a matter of indifference to us.'

Josef leaned his elbows on his knees and made a steeple of his fingers. 'Galatea was brought to life by Aphrodite. How is it that you are able to move, breathe, think and speak?'

'Electrical impulses,' said Lilie, rubbing her left wrist, 'as in human bodies.'

'But,' he persisted, 'what equivalence exists for the divine spark whereby a human infant quickens?'

'It's the same thing. Nothing but an electrical charge.' She looked directly at him. 'Such as a bolt of lightning from the *Blitzfänger*.'

'From what you say' – Josef's eyes flicked sideways, irritated by the outbreak of huffing and tutting from near the window – 'the only difference between a human and a machine such as yourself seems to be the existence of a soul.'

Lilie shook her head. 'All the soul cares about is experiencing every variety of pain this world can offer. Souls are so greedy for pain they don't care whether the body is natural or man-made. In a natural body it can feel the pain. In a fabricated one it observes the effects.'

'But there are pleasures, too,' said Josef, profoundly shocked. 'Love, friendship, service, knowledge.'

'Pleasure is only a pathway to pain because it must always end in . . .' Lilie looked up at the ceiling and Josef's eyes followed her gaze. More of the butterflies must have entered through the partially open window, for now fifty or more fluttered helplessly against the plaster. Gudrun would have to take a brush to them. The garden must be overrun with the creatures.

'In –?' he prompted.

'Death,' said Lilie. 'Fear of dying brings humans the greatest pain. Death is implicit in every form of joy. Of course, it also brings the end of pain.'

'And what happens when a machine dies? Does its soul return to God?'

'God is a human invention,' said Lilie.

'That's enough.' Red-faced and trembling, Gudrun thrust herself between Josef and Lilie, still shoving her sewing inside the work basket. 'I'm not listening to any more of this wickedness. What would your father say, *Herr Doktor*? What would he say?' She turned on Lilie. 'I'll bring you food later, Miss. Eat it or not, as you please. I refuse to take part in your nasty game. And by the way, don't expect me to get you ready for bed this evening. You're quite capable of looking after yourself.'

Josef found himself on the other side of the slammed door without working out how it had been achieved.

'I'm surprised at you, encouraging that sort of talk, *Herr Doktor*,' said Gudrun.

'A type of pantheism, perhaps,' murmured Josef. 'She's a well-educated young woman.'

'She can read, if that's what you mean. Every book's been off the shelves in that room. I can tell. I won't explain how. It's enough to say I've only one pair of hands and this is a big house.' Gudrun pursed her lips. 'Unless, of course, she was looking to see if anything had been hidden behind them.'

Two conversations with Fräulein Lilie took place today after I discovered that, while gentle persuasion has no effect, a direct order is instantly obeyed. It became apparent that the young woman has been well-educated and is of high intelligence. However, whatever occurred

in her past has led her to detach herself from emotional response. Lilie avers that she has no feelings, either negative or positive, that she has, in short, turned into a machine. Her elaboration of this fantasy involves a gloomy and joyless view of the world, backed up by simple logic gleaned from atheist literature. Lilie also referred to a man who is likely to have been responsible for the attack on her. She identifies him as a monster and courageously asserts that she will find him in order to see him punished. I am confident that considerable progress has been made and that Lilie is ready to receive treatment.

Two

Papa says I should be glad that we've come to live in such a beautiful place. There are many important people here. People that matter. People who will make the future better for everyone. I'm not glad at all, and I don't think he is either. As we were leaving our proper house, Papa said I must stay in the car with my toys and books while he locked up. After a bit I followed him back inside and heard him walking around talking to Mama, which was very silly because she isn't there any more.

'What else can I do, Lidia?' he asked the bed. 'It's the last thing I want to be involved with, but these are dangerous times.' He picked up Mama's hairbrush and ran his hand across the bristles. 'How else can I keep her safe?'

I popped out from behind the door. 'Keep who safe, Papa?'

Papa got very cross and marched me back outside. 'It's about time you learned to do as you're told, young lady.'

'Don't want to go.' I tried to stop him putting me into the car. 'No! *No!*' I screamed so loudly the lady from the house next door threw open her windows to look out. Papa pushed me on to the back seat and started the engine. He tidied his hair and mopped his forehead, watching me in the car's little mirror.

'Be a good girl and we will stop somewhere nice on the way.'

'Won't. Don't want to.'

'Very well, Krysta.' Papa sighed. He sighs a lot more than he used to. I knelt on the seat, watching our house get smaller and smaller until it isn't there any more.

This new house is big, with fine new furniture and no dark corners to hide in, unlike our real home, which Greet said was impossible for one person to keep clean. A cat with a family of new kittens lives downstairs. Outside, we have a garden with flowers and trees instead of the noisy street. Beyond its walls there's a big zoo, but not the kind that has lots of visitors.

'There are lakes and forests, too,' Papa says, raising his voice as I continue to wail and stamp and call for Greet. 'When summer comes we'll go for picnics and gather berries. And in the autumn we'll hunt for mushrooms – *Steinpilze* and *Pfifferlinge*. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'No. No! *No!*' Who would thread the wild mushrooms on strings now that Greet has gone? Who will tie ribbons in my hair? Who will tell me stories? I throw myself on the floor and kick my legs.

'Stop that, Krysta,' Papa says sharply. 'You're a big girl now, not a baby.' He picks me up and sits me in a chair. I scream and drum my heels against the seat. His eyes dart from me to the door. 'Stop! Any more noise and you'll get a smack.'

I stick my thumb in my mouth, sniffing and hiccupping. Papa takes out a handkerchief and tells me to blow.

'That's better.' He walks to the window and looks out. 'I'm only here for your sake, Krysta,' he says very quietly. 'If it wasn't for you . . .' He sighs again, and adds in a louder voice: 'At least it's safe here. You can play anywhere you like. All the dangerous creatures are behind the walls, and there are guards with fierce dogs to make sure they never get out.'

'When will my Greet come?'

Papa frowns. 'Greet can't come here. This is a special place.'

'Don't like it. Want to go home. Want Greet.'

'Enough. Do you know what happens to bad little girls who don't do as they are told? One of these days you'll find out. Then you'll be sorry.'

I'm lonely without Greet.

I don't miss her shouting and flicking me with the dish rag, or the way she dragged the comb through my hair and made me drink my milk even when it had skin on it. Even though he sometimes threatens to, Papa never smacks me like Greet did. Instead he sits me on his knee and talks for a long time about being nice and how good little girls are supposed to behave. But he doesn't do cuddles like Greet either. He holds my hand. Sometimes he kisses the top of my head. Greet gave me big, squashy cuddles and tickled me when she was in a good mood. She kissed me goodnight and tucked me in – unless I'd made her cross. Then she used to shout: 'Get up those stairs out of my sight and let's hope the evil one doesn't carry you off in the night.' Papa just stands at the end of the bed and hopes I sleep well.

Most of all, I miss Greet's storytelling. Stories for this, stories for that, stories for everything else – she had new ones for each day of the week, ones that went with most of her jobs. There were puffing, blowing wash-day stories and hot, red-faced ironing stories. There were quick stories for making dumplings or Apfelstrudel and extra-long stories for sewing and mending afternoons. People here sometimes read me stories from books. They don't carry them in their heads. They can't do voices like Greet either. She did little honey-cake voices for princesses, crackly burning-paper ones for the witches, great big roars for the baddies, cheerful voices for the brave heroes. They don't sing. They don't make the right faces. Most stories here

are nice and end happily. Some of Greet's were nasty, especially the liver-chopping and fish-gutting ones.

'Once upon a time,' begins Greet, grabbing the whetstone from its tub of water, 'on a farm near Sachsenhausen, lived a man who let his children watch as he slaughtered a pig.' She draws the blade of the largest kitchen knife across the whetstone, tip to heel, with a long quivering *whi-i-i-sh* that sounds like pirate swords slicing the air. Shivers run up my back. Again. Again. 'Later that day, when the children went off to play, the eldest child said to the youngest: "You shall be the little pig. I'll be the butcher." And with that . . .' Greet reaches into a bucket and slaps a bloody mass on to the table. She brandishes the newly sharpened blade aloft. 'The eldest child took a shiny knife and slit his little brother's throat.'

I gulp and shuffle backwards, staring open-mouthed as her blade slices the offal as easily as a breakfast knife slides through warm butter. I want and do not want to hear more. Greet straightens up, wiping her brow with the back of one hand.

'Now, the mother was upstairs bathing the baby. When she heard the cries of her son she ran helter-skelter downstairs. On seeing what had happened, she pulled the knife out of the boy's throat and was so angry that she plunged it straight into the heart of the son who'd played butcher –' Here Greet lunges across the table with the kitchen knife, making me scream and run for the door. 'Then she remembered the baby and raced back upstairs. But it was too late. He'd drowned in the bath.'

By now I'm trembling from head to foot. A small whimper squeezes through my clenched teeth. Greet sweeps the bloody offering into a pan with her bright-red hand.

'The woman was so distressed,' she continues, her voice

mournful, mouth pursed, head shaking, 'that she hanged herself from a beam in the barn. And that evening, when the father returned from working in the fields, he took his gun –'

'Margarete!' roars Papa. 'What's the meaning of this?'

Greet's mouth snaps shut just like one of the Little Nippers in the pantry, but this time she is the mouse. I put my thumb in. She hangs her head.

'Beg pardon, *Herr Doktor*. She does like her stories.'

'There are other stories, Margarete. Pleasant stories. Uplifting ones that tell of the beauty and sanctity of life, of good overcoming evil. You should know better than to frighten an innocent child with such dreadful tales.'

Greet glances sideways at me. Papa, if only you knew . . .

'Beg pardon, *Herr Doktor*,' she mutters. 'It won't happen again.'

'I should think not,' says Papa, his face grim. 'Such tales spring from sick imaginations. Childhood is precious. It's where the building blocks of life are laid. We have a duty to protect our little ones from hearing about such atrocities.'

Every day now Papa goes to the infirmary. When he comes back he washes his hands. He rubs and scrubs until the basin is full of soap bubbles. His fingers go pink and wrinkly. After he has finished drying his hands, Papa runs clean water and washes them again.

Faces here are mostly stern, but Uncle Hraben never stops smiling. He even smiled when he kicked the kittens out of the way. Johanna says he is very handsome, but not nearly so handsome as Papa. On my birthday Uncle Hraben gives me a Negerkuss. I eat it very slowly, first the chocolate shell, then

the marshmallow filling, then the biscuit base. Afterwards I smooth out the wrapper, rubbing the back with my nail until it shines like silver, and he makes it into a ring for me.

'Where is your father taking you this afternoon, pretty Krysta?' asks Uncle Hraben, stroking the back of my neck. I pull away.

'He says it's a secret surprise.'

'Ah. I see. But where do you hope you're going?'

I run to the window and point in the direction of the high wall. 'To the zoo. Greet's uncle, who's a sailor, went to one in America. He saw a polar bear and a giraffe and . . .' I pause, overcome with excitement and anticipation, before continuing in a hushed voice '. . . *and they let him ride on an elephant*.'

Uncle Hraben bellows with laughter. Some of his friends come over and he repeats what I've said. They also laugh. Eventually he dries his eyes and tells me there are no elephants, bears, giraffes or monkeys behind the wall.

I take off his ring and put my thumb in my mouth. It's bad luck to cry on your birthday.

'It's not that sort of zoo, *Mädchen*.'

'This one's for a different kind of beast altogether,' explains the man with straw hair and eyes the colour of winter rain. They laugh again.

'What sort of beasts?' I stamp my foot but this only makes them laugh more.

'Animal-people.'

There *are* animals that look like people. The old lady who lives next door to our real house has a pet schnauzer, the fattest dog I've ever seen. Greet said over many years they'd grown alike: now both had hair sprinkled with salt and pepper, both with snouts poking into other people's private business, both

with bad tempers and yappy voices, both the shape of wine barrels. And once I heard Greet shout, '*Männer sind Schweine!*' at the man who brought firewood. Also, one of Papa's friends had big, yellow teeth that made him look like a rat.

'I still want to see them.'

'Too dangerous,' says Uncle Hraben. 'They eat *proper* little human girls, especially pretty ones. Snip, snap – one bite and you'd be gone.'

When Papa came back from the infirmary he still did all the hand-washing, even though he'd promised we'd go out straight away. While he was scrubbing his nails with the little brush I asked if we were going to the zoo, in case Uncle Hraben had been joking.

'No.'

I scowl. 'You said I could choose.'

Papa dries his hands and looks carefully at his fingers. 'Wouldn't you rather come to the toyshop with me? There's something there you might like to bring home. And afterwards we can have ice cream in a café.' He runs fresh water and picks up the soap.

'*Erdbeereis?*'

'Strawberry, chocolate – whatever flavour you like.'

The town is bright, with flowers at the windows and many red flags with bendy-arm 'X's on them fluttering very gently in the breeze. People sitting outside a café smile at us, some stand up to wave, and when we go into the toyshop the shopkeeper leaves all his other customers to serve Papa.

'Ah, so this is the birthday *Fräulein. Alles Gute zum Geburtstag!*' He reaches below the counter and brings out two boxes. Each contains a pretty doll. One has dark-brown, curly hair and a red

frock; the other is blonde and dressed all in blue. 'Yes, many happy returns from all of us. Here we are. Your papa wasn't sure which you'd prefer.'

I look at Papa. He nods. 'Which one would you like?'

'Can't I have both?'

Papa shakes his head. 'No.'

'Want both.' I kick at the brass rail running along the base of the counter. I try squeezing out a tear, but it won't come. 'Not fair. Why can't I have both?'

'You may have *one*,' he says in a tired voice. 'If you can't choose, then we will come back another day. Is that what you want? No. Then hurry up and decide before all the ice cream has melted.'

'Not fair,' I repeat, but I already know which doll I'll be taking home.

The shopkeeper almost imperceptibly pushes the brown-haired doll towards me. She is a bit like Greet, except that her eyes are the wrong colour, but the yellow-haired doll looks like a fairy princess. 'That one.' I point and the shopkeeper gives a little sigh and takes the brown doll away. 'What's her name?'

'You want the fair one. Good.' Papa looks very pleased as he reads the label. 'It says "Charlotte", but you can give her whatever name you wish.'

'I shall call her Lottie, except when she's been naughty,' I say, remembering Papa changing 'Greet' to 'Margarete' when she annoyed him. 'Then she will be Charlotte.'

In the café I take Lottie out of her box to look at her knickers. A tiny blob of strawberry ice cream falls on to her blue frock leaving a mark, but I keep my finger over it so Papa won't notice.

⋆

Just before bedtime, Herta brings me a birthday gift, a book called '*Der Struwwelpeter*'. She says all the stories are about naughty children. I don't like the pictures and neither does Lottie, but Papa reminds me to say thank you. Then I have to sit by Herta, who is hard and lumpy, while she reads me the story of 'The Thumb-sucker' in a voice like heavy boots.

'No thumbkins,' she says, forcing my thumb out of my mouth and keeping a tight hold on my wrist. 'Listen carefully. This story is about a child like you.' I pull a nasty face but Herta doesn't notice.

> *' "K o n r a d," sprach die Frau Mama,*
> *Ich geh' aus und du bleibst da." '*

Herta stops. She taps my leg. 'Sit still, child. Now, shall we continue?

> ' "See how ordered you can be
> Till I come again," said she.
> "Docile be, and good and mild,
> Pray don't suck your thumb, my child,
> For if you do, the tailor will come
> And bring his shears to snip your thumb
> From off your hand as clear and clean
> As if paper it had been." '

It's a stupid story. Nevertheless, I glance anxiously towards Papa when she gets to the part about the tailor. But Papa has his eyes closed. His fingers twist around each other as if they are washing themselves without water.

'Bang!' says Herta, without putting any bang in her voice.

'Here goes the door ker-slam! Whoop! the tailor lands ker-blam!'

Seeing what's coming, I quickly pull my hands away and sit on them. Poor Lottie falls on the floor. Herta laughs.

'Who can tell a mother's sorrow,
When she saw her boy the morrow?
There he stood all steeped in shame,
And not a thumbkin to his name.'

Pulling my right hand from under my bottom, she holds the special sucking thumb between two of her big, square fingers, pretending they're scissors. Chop, chop. 'Better stop your baby habits in case it happens to you. You've got to be a big girl now.'

'Papa wouldn't let the tailor cut off my thumbs.'

'He might not be there to stop him.' Herta flicks through the pages. 'Would you like another story? Look at this one. A very naughty girl is playing with her Mama's box of matches and a minute later . . .

'Consumed is all, so sweet and fair,
The total child, both flesh and hair,
A pile of ashes, two small shoes,
Is all that's left, and they're no use.

'See? All burnt away. Nothing left of silly Paulinchen but a pile of cinders. Can you imagine such a terrible thing?'

'Greet said she would whip me if I touched matches again.' I turn over the page and look at the picture of a black boy holding a big green umbrella. There is a magician in a long red robe and three boys that he turns as dark-skinned

as the first by dipping them in a giant inkpot. 'Can you read this one?'

Herta frowns as she skims the text. She clicks her tongue.

'Please,' I add, in case Papa's listening.

'No,' she says, 'that is not a suitable story.' And with that, she rips out the pages.

At home there'd always been plenty to do – Greet saw to that. Some days she sat me on the kitchen table to pod peas, and made me count aloud the number in each fat green pod as I snapped them open. *'Eins, zwo, drei . . .'* If there were more than eight peas, I was allowed to eat the smallest. When the job was finished, there'd be a story, usually 'The Pea Test', which I liked until it didn't work. Even with ten peas under my mattress. Or I sorted feathers when she was plucking a chicken or goose – quills in the bucket, down in a basket – and then we'd have 'Mother Holle' if I'd done it properly, but 'Mother Trudy' if I'd been careless.

Now there's nothing to do except look at my books, draw pictures, or talk to Lottie. The ladies who play with me or read stories only come when Papa's at home. Even the kittens have disappeared. Every so often, Elke, who plaits my hair in the mornings and baths me at night, comes to check that I'm being good and brings me milk, with cake, or bread and honey. She talks all the time but never listens. Sometimes the zoo dogs bark or the other animals squeal; the rest of the time it's very quiet. The other people who live in this house are at work all day, some in the zoo, some in the infirmary or offices. Ladies work here, too, but they're far too busy to talk. They dust and scrub and take the mats outside to beat them. Everything is very clean and tidy. Nobody kicks things under the furniture out of sight and I can't find any of the fluff under my bed that Greet called 'lucky sluts' wool'.

Lottie says I should go to the kitchen and see if there's a Greet there, so I creep along the passage and look round the door. I see Elke slicing sausage. A big fat lady with a red face is adding up sums; two others are washing dishes. None of them is like Greet. Elke is telling everyone about a film she's seen, about a Swedish girl who falls in love with a rich bullfighter. It's not a new film: the fat woman has seen it before and continually corrects her.

'*La Habanera* was set in Cuba.'

The fat woman shakes her head. 'Puerto Rico.'

'Nobody cares where it's set, Ursel,' says Elke. 'Not when Ferdinand Marian's the star.'

'No, no, Karl Martell was the star. Marian only played Don Pedro de Avila, a wicked foreign landowner, and he died of some filthy disease. Good thing, too, for even though he was her husband, Astrée loved the doctor.'

Elke shrugs. 'Oh, but Ferdinand – such a fine-looking man.' She sighs and presses her hand to her chest.

Lottie is bored now and wants to go into the garden, but something good is cooking in the oven. It might be *Zwetschgenkuchen* – a plum-sugar smell fills the kitchen when Ursel opens the oven door – and Greet always let me eat the trimmings, but the oven slams shut. We decide to wait until the cake is on the cooling rack. Elke hasn't moved. She's still gazing at the ceiling.

'Never mind daydreaming, *fauler Nichtsnutz*,' barks Ursel. 'This isn't the movies, and those sandwiches won't make themselves. As for your Ferdinand, I'm surprised at you. There's something about his appearance no right-minded woman should find appealing. Altogether too dark . . . and that huge nose . . .' She shudders. 'In my opinion, Karl Martell's far better-looking. A much better match – you can see at a glance that he comes from the right stock.'

'And that's the one who played the doctor?' One of the ladies at the sink laughs as she dries a pan. 'Funny thing about doctors, they're either dried-up old sticks or –' She rolls her eyes and laughs again.

'If you're talking about the new one, reckon he's already spoken for,' says Ursel. She nods. 'Yes, spoken for twice over. It'll come to blows between those two, see if it don't.'

Another voice mutters: 'He doesn't seem to be in any hurry to get his hands on either. Perhaps he'd rather do without. And who can blame him? Ugly as sin, the pair of them.' The speaker's out of sight, but her way of talking reminds me of Greet so I push the door a little further open. It squeaks, but at last the cake's ready and the clattering and banging as Ursel takes it from the oven hides the noise. I'm about to take another step into the kitchen but stop when I notice a little old witch sitting in the corner with the black cat on her knee. Her long wand is hooked over the back of the chair.

'You'd be better off keeping that sort of observation to yourself,' says Ursel, throwing down the oven cloth and fanning herself with her apron. 'Walls have ears. Anyway, each to his own, as the monkey said when he bit into the soap.'

'You're right,' says the witch, 'personal tastes do differ, but do you think the monkey actually enjoyed eating soap, or was it all that was on offer? As I see it –'

'What I think,' Elke announces, 'is that both the attendants would be getting more than they bargained for if it meant taking on that spoilt encumbrance of his.'

Lottie yawns. I edge forward, watching the plum juice bubble around the edges of the cake. Then the witch cackles and I jump back.

'From what I've seen of the daughter,' she says, 'his wife will

take some living up to. And her being dead makes him remember her as seven times more beautiful than she likely was.' Her skinny hand keeps stroking the cat and I know she's calling up a storm.

'Pretty she might be,' puts in Elke, 'but all's not right up here.' She taps her head. 'Always talking to herself or standing staring at nothing for minutes on end. Won't eat this. Won't eat that. And what a temper! He lets her get away with it, but it can't go on. She needs the flat of someone's hand across her backside. Kicking and screaming and carrying on – in the old days we'd have said she was possessed.'

'What can you expect?' Ursel lowers her voice. 'They say the bloodline's tainted. Apparently, the mother was an unnatural wife, not to mention parent . . . spent her days playing with paint instead of looking after the home. She was a foreigner – a touch of gipsy there, or perhaps something even more degenerate. This is what happens when folk mate away from their own kind.'

'That's the trouble with men,' Elke says bitterly. 'They choose their wives with their eyes not their brains.'

The witch mutters something about trousers and they all laugh. Unable to wait any longer, I tiptoe behind Ursel and stick my finger in the plum syrup. It's boiling hot, sticky as toffee, and won't come off. I shriek and stick the finger in my mouth, burning my tongue. Elke grabs my hand and plunges it into a bowl of cold water.

'Quiet!' she bellows, as I continue to scream. 'Stop your noise or you'll have something else to cry about.' But my finger is throbbing. It's on fire.

'How long's she been standing there?' asks Ursel.

'Long enough,' says the witch, and cackles so loudly that the cat leaps from her knees. She leans forward and taps my leg with her long magic wand. 'You can stop now, Krysta.' The

pain eases straightaway and I stop wailing. She stares at me. 'What are you doing sneaking about in here?'

'I want some cake.'

The witch raises eyebrows like hairy grey caterpillars. 'Do you indeed? And what else do you say?'

'*Give* me some cake now or I'll tell my papa.'

Everyone looks at Elke. Her mouth turns into a thin, straight line and she is suddenly taller. 'No, there will be no cake today or tomorrow. I shall speak to your father myself. You are a very rude little girl. Unless you learn some manners you'll come to a bad end.' She points at the door. 'Go to your room and don't come in here again without asking permission first.'

I kick the table and slam the door. Upstairs, I throw my cup and plate on the floor, squashing the crusts into the mat, and pull my clothes out of the wardrobe.

'Bad Charlotte,' I say, and stand her in the corner.

The soap tastes nasty. I tell myself the story of poor hungry Hansel and Gretel, left all alone in the dark forest. My gingerbread cottage has a very big oven and I push Elke, Ursel and the skinny old witch into it and close the door.

After Papa had finished all the hand-washing, we went downstairs together. Johanna came to sit beside us. I wished she would go away but she wants to talk to Papa. She was puffing a bit, like Greet did after she'd chased me upstairs to give me a smacking. Something had made her cross. Papa listened and nodded, nodded and listened. After a bit he excused himself, saying he had to fetch something from our rooms when really he was going upstairs to wash his hands again.

'Now you and I can have a little talk,' says Johanna. She makes a grab and sits me on her knee. 'Shall we play *Kinne Wippchen*?'

She has the same violet scent that Greet used on her afternoon off, but Johanna's got a nasty smell living underneath the nice one. Her nails are painted bright red to match her mouth. There are small brown stains all down one side of her skirt. I don't want to play, but now Papa's gone I'm afraid to say no.

'Brow-bender,' she says, tapping my forehead, 'eye-peepers, nose-dreeper, mouth-eater, chin-chopper –' Johanna pokes my eyes, pulls my nose, covers my mouth, hits under my chin with the side of her hand. I struggle to get away, but she holds me tight, tickles my chin and pushes up my nose. 'Knock at the door,' she says, 'ring the bell, lift up the latch, and walk right in –' And with that, Johanna pushes her finger hard into my mouth. It tastes dark and salty. I don't want to play any more and struggle to get down, flailing my arms and crying for Papa. But Johanna forces me to stay where I am until she's done the *Take a chair*, *Sit by there*, and *How do you do this morning?* Then she begins bouncing me in the air, higher and higher the louder I shriek . . . until Papa returns and she wraps her arms around me, kissing my cheek. 'That was fun, wasn't it? Run outside and play now. I want to talk to your papa.'

I have promised to be good so that Papa will take me to eat with the grown-ups *inside the zoo.* Through the big gate we go, and I look everywhere for the animals that look like people, but there are only dogs. When I ask Papa where the cages are he tells me to be quiet and sit by the window. There is lentil soup with bits of bacon and some omelette. It doesn't look nice and I won't eat it. Papa talks to his friends and I make a family of turtles out of squished-up bread . . . until I notice a naughty boy outside digging in the mud with his fingers. He pounces on something and I press close to the glass, trying to

see if he's found buried treasure. A worm . . . a dirty worm. And he eats it straight down.

'Papa! Papa!' I pull at his sleeve.

'Not now, Krysta.' He carries on talking and turns towards me only when he's finished. 'Well?'

But it's too late. The boy's gone. I shut my mouth tight and refuse to say anything.

Johanna's hands are clean. No one has made her cross today. She pats her knee and opens the new book. 'Come, *mein süßes kleines Mädchen*, I have a story for you. Take your thumb out. If the wind changes it will stay in there for ever.'

I want to say no but last time she pushed my thumb into the mustard pot. Papa laughed.

'*Der Rattenfänger von Hameln* – have you heard it before? Then listen carefully.' Her jacket smells of rusty nails. The buttons stick in my back. She opens the pages and puts on a different voice. 'There was once a beautiful town called Hamlin on the banks of the river Weser. The people there were happy, hard-working and prosperous until the night when a plague of filthy rats crept inside its walls. Big black rats, fat brown rats, greasy rats, lazy rats, dirty rats covered with fleas, rats with huge noses, rats with great hooked claws. Rats do not work or grow their food. Instead, they ate every last grain of wheat in the granaries. They stole food from the stores and the homes of the townspeople. They even took bread out of the mouths of the children. They bit the babies in their cradles and sucked their blood. Look, there is a picture.

'Finally the people went to the *Bürgermeister* and demanded that he rid the town of this terrible plague of vermin. What could he do? It was all very well setting traps and killing a few

of the beasts, but by the next morning so many more filthy rats had arrived that he might as well not have bothered.

'Then one day a stranger dressed in red and white and black came to Hamlin. "You will never prosper while your town is overrun by these vile creatures," he said. "I can rid your town of vermin. My kind of music will cause every last one to leave and never, ever return." And of course the *Bürgermeister* agreed.'

Her voice rises and falls. Other people come and go. They talk and eat and stamp their feet. The filthy rats tumble into the waters of the Weser and are drowned, so that the town is clean and bright again.

'See?' She points to the picture of happy, smiling people, hard at work. 'It will come,' she says. 'It will come.'

Papa returns from work. He nods and takes a drink. Johanna continues to read. She watches him from under her lashes and the story changes, her voice growing solemn.

' "If you do not keep your promise," says the piper, "then I must take your children away." He raises his pipes to his lips and played a different tune. And all the children came running. They followed him through the streets and over the fields.' Johanna pauses. She looks at my father. 'And there was nothing their parents could do.'

My thumb is back in my mouth now. In the picture the children have disappeared through a magic door in the side of a mountain. Only two are left, a boy who had been too busy with his game and the little girl who went back for him. I begin to cry.

'What's the matter?' demands Johanna. 'Not crying for the rats, I hope? Are you sad for the poor mothers and fathers?'

I shake my head and weep for the children who could not find their way out.

Three

In spite of his show of confidence, Benjamin had no concrete idea of where to begin the search for Lilie's identity. He stood, irresolute, outside the house in Brandstätte, still smarting from Gudrun's caustic assertions that his so-called investigations were simply a ruse to avoid real work. Perhaps he'd head south to Graben, find himself a quiet spot by the Plague pillar to sit and plan his next step . . . and relish, as so many times before, that carving of a cherub plunging its flaming brand into the pestilent old hag at its base. Still undecided, he looked east, towards Stephansplatz. The great cathedral there was dedicated to a Christian martyr whose name, according to the doctor – though it was sometimes hard to tell whether the old man was teasing – could well be derived from the Greek *stephanos*, a crown, but was more likely to have come by devious pathways from *strenue stans*, meaning 'laudably standing and instructing and ruling over old women'. Benjamin straightened his shoulders. It was undoubtedly a joke, a sly dig at the reigning kitchen tyrant, for these days even the doctor wasn't immune from Gudrun's sharp tongue, but at least it had nudged him towards a starting point, for there was another 'old woman' in Leopoldstadt – neither old, nor female, but awarded the nickname because of his obsession with gossip. Hugo Besser called himself a journalist; others labelled him a scandalmonger . . . and worse . . . nevertheless very little escaped him.

Benjamin stepped aside for a passing carriage, then hastily – before Gudrun, who had a nose for these things, emerged with a bucket and shovel, demanding that he collect the steaming pile of freshly deposited horse shit for the currant bushes – turned north into Bauernmarkt. It was late in the day and the market was over. A few flower-sellers lingered, hoping to catch the eyes of young husbands hurrying towards their homes. A solitary street vendor, anxious to sell the last of his pretzels, twirled aloft his carrying pole. Benjamin turned Josef's money in his pocket but wasn't tempted. At least he'd had the good sense to eat before announcing his plans.

The temperature dropped as he approached the canal. Curdled mist rose to devour the sloping banks, swallowing whole trees, licking at the pillars, leaving the bridge damp and slippery. When Benjamin glanced back, the inner city seemed veiled by a gauzy curtain where the mist hung like a lingering ghost of the old defensive walls. As the light faded, the mist advanced, biting great chunks from the earth. Minute by minute the buildings were rendered more ethereal until they were floating free of time, a city not yet fully imagined, a rootless island with the great spire of the cathedral tethered to the clouds. So, in such weather, it must have looked in the distant past; so it would always look, come what may. Benjamin shivered. He blew on his hands and plunged them into the pockets of the warm coat *Frau* Breuer had given him. It had belonged to Robert, her taciturn eldest son, and was only a little out of style, so that, Benjamin persuaded himself, as long as nobody's gaze dropped to his boots he could be taken for somebody.

Thoughts of the warm and fuggy tavern quickened his steps but as he drew nearer to the familiar landmarks of his child-

hood Benjamin's pace slowed again. He hadn't been back to this ugly misshapen little island for months precisely because crossing the Donaukanal felt like plunging back into the impoverished stew of yesteryear. The city's. His own. The face of the *Altstadt* might be refined, her silks and satins embellished by the most exquisite embroidery, but her undergarments – in the shape of the old ghetto – were threadbare, filthy, unfit to be seen. Moreover, they were bursting at the seams with incomers crammed ten to a room. He'd heard of beds being rented out during the day while their owners worked. And these were the fortunate ones: the rest were forced to settle for the crude shelter afforded by the city's labyrinthine sewers.

Benjamin went on reluctantly, taking shortcuts past shabby street-corner markets where stallholders would continue extracting every last Krone from unwilling spenders long after daylight had fled. Unlike the market in Karmeliterplatz, trading was mostly in small change: a Gulden was a rarity here, where women fresh from the pawnbroker's agonized over the price of suspect meat and beggars counted out their reckonings Heller by Heller from sacs hidden among their rags. Quaintly dressed incomers wandered in small groups, intense but purposeless – but it was those clad crown to toe in orthodox black that had the locals looking askance, drawing aside and muttering. Averting his eyes, Benjamin dived into even narrower backstreets, only to be confronted by an ancient building crusted with the scabs of bodged repairs, one wall rendered a slimy greenish-black thanks to a leaking gutter. Someone had scraped letters into the filth: *Hinaus mit den Juden*. Benjamin grimaced: Out with the Jews. Once again, the stink of new envies and old hatreds had joined that of over-boiled cabbage and underwashed bodies.

At the intersection of two alleyways a gaggle of small boys played some incomprehensible game with a spinning bottle. A heated argument broke out and within seconds the group had split into uneven halves, pelting each other with sticks, stones and fistfuls of mud, and flinging the usual taunts.

'Yid, Yid, spit in your hood, tell your mummy that is good.'

'*Christ, Christ, g'hört am Mist!*'

A woman emerged shouting from a nearby building, throwing a bucket of dirty water in their direction, whereupon the pack re-formed and abandoned the place, jostling, clinging to each other's elbows, giggling. As twilight thickened, night creatures emerged from the shadows. They wore masks of flour with brick-dust rouge, caricatures of women, posturing and beckoning in the circles of pea-soup light cast by the lamps. Benjamin thought of Lilie and broke into a run, turning this way and that by routes remembered from his younger years, until he heard the sharp double note of a guard's whistle followed by the harsh *whoosh* exhaled from a departing train. The tavern he sought was no distance at all from the station. He stopped to draw breath before taking the steps three at a time.

The *Kneipe* was almost full, the atmosphere hovering at changeover point between that of its markedly different daytime and evening clientele. Sedate business meetings, quiet perusal of newspapers and coffee-fuelled discussions were giving way to the livelier bawl and bluster of serious drinking, the wild propounding of extreme political theories peppered with outright sedition. Benjamin was well aware that it wouldn't just be his old friend gleaning information here.

Hugo was in his usual place, crouching so perilously close to the tavern's roaring fire that his clothes were permanently

singed. With his massive shoulders and unkempt hair he resembled a vast spider – though he ingested tales rather than spun them. He'd always been stout; now, though, Hugo's backside barely fitted on to a settle meant for three – and yet, it was rumoured, not a morsel of solid food passed his lips. It was also said that he rarely left this building. In the early hours he ponderously heaved his bulk upstairs; perhaps he never slept either. Long before midday he was back on his bench, raising his first tankard and dispatching the snot-nosed kid curled on the hearth like one of the *svartálfar*, the dark elves, with a sheaf of closely written articles for his editor. Benjamin grinned and loped towards him.

'*Sittlichkeit und Ernst*.' It was their usual greeting.

'A fart to morality and sobriety,' retorted Hugo, without looking up. It was the usual response. He seemed no drunker than usual. 'And what demon belched you back to Matzoh Island from the fine boulevards? Missing the stench? Last time you graced us with a visit you were after a character reference.' One hand slid the magazine he'd been reading out of sight, but not before Benjamin recognized the unmistakeable bright-red cover.

'*Die Fackel*?'

Hugo grunted. 'Beer,' he demanded, kicking the dozing boy, who immediately scrambled to his feet and, working his bony elbows against the crowd, went in search of a waiter.

'What do you think of it?' persisted Benjamin, who'd read the doctor's copies.

'Man after my own heart. Says what he thinks. Even about me, the cheeky bugger! And since what Kraus thinks make sense, he won't last the year out.' Hugo leaned back and surveyed him. 'Looking good, I see. Life as a servant suits you.'

Benjamin's spine twitched. 'Not for ever,' he said stiffly. 'I've got plans.'

Hugo shrugged. 'Dangerous things, plans, my young friend. We're sailing into troubled waters. The signs are all around us. In such times be grateful for small things. And remember, small things are only small when we don't have to go without them. You eat regularly. That's more than most do. You have a warm bed. Well, as warm as it can be when you sleep alone.' He raised a wild black eyebrow. 'You do sleep alone, I take it, *Herr Doktor* and his *Frau* being so bloody respectable, and all that?'

'Beer!' shrieked Hugo's grimy elf, banging his small fist on the table.

A skinny waiter set down six tankards. Benjamin looked to see who else might be joining them but it appeared the harassed fellow was simply saving himself additional journeys. A mild argument over the alleged piss-poor quality of the brew commenced, during which the scrawny boy retired to his corner, retrieving a hunk of bread and some half-eaten sausage from his sleeve. Saved by the commotion from having to defend his sleeping arrangements, Benjamin closed his eyes, hugging to himself a frenzy of fervid imaginings. When he opened them, Hugo had already emptied one of the tankards; a few droplets still clung to the gingery whiskers that refused to grow into the desired leonine beard despite being encouraged by constant stroking and tugging.

'Fire!' shouted Hugo. The boy scrambled to throw more logs on to the blaze. A thin dog squeezed between Benjamin's legs and attempted to snatch the remains of the bread. It was rewarded with a clout that sent it skidding a man's length along the floor. The boy dipped the retrieved crust in Benjamin's full tankard before devouring it, and then dropped to the hearth,

showing his bared teeth to the vigilant dog. Hugo regarded Benjamin, who'd pushed away the contaminated tankard, with incredulity. 'Drink up.'

'Thanks.' Benjamin surreptitiously pulled a different vessel towards him and took a long swallow of beer. Every muscle responded to this unaccustomed pleasure. In an instant, all the tension generated by his never-ending struggle against the plague of rats and caterpillars invading the garden, Gudrun's haranguing, his discomfort at coming back to the area his family had struggled so hard and for so long to leave, drained away. Bliss. 'Ah.'

'Panacea,' said Hugo, reaching for a second dose. He peered between the heavy tankards, searching the table's battered surface with its ancient scars and carved graffiti into which spilled dregs gathered in puddles, then frowned and directed a ferocious scowl at the dozing chimney-corner elf. Three extravagantly clad girls walked past, examining the two men closely. After a few yards they turned in a flurry of high-pitched giggles and sauntered slowly back again, plumping up their chests and lingering by the side of the settle.

'Women,' observed Benjamin in an attempt to guide the conversation to the desired area.

'Well spotted,' sniggered Hugo, throwing back his head to drain his second tankard. He made an abrupt dismissive gesture with one hand. The girls scowled, tossed their heads and moved on. One turned to spit contempt over her shoulder, her gaze pointedly moving from Hugo to the small boy.

'*Schwuel!*'

Hugo shrugged. '*Kneipenschlampe!*' To Benjamin, he said: 'Tavern sluts. Whores. They pay a hefty percentage of their earnings to the landlord.'

Benjamin scrutinized the three departing rears. 'They don't look like local girls.'

'Czechs, probably, but since women everywhere are born more or less equal in terms of the attributes demanded by their profession, why would they need to be local? We have twelve nationalities or more crowding into this cesspit end of the city, a veritable Babylon of peoples – Hungarians, Turks, Galicians, Moravians, Bohemians, Bukovinians . . .' He started ticking them off on his fingers, then abandoned the effort in favour of seizing a fresh tankard. 'And there's no accommodation for them.' Hugo raised his voice. 'Decent basic housing, that's what our illustrious Franz Joseph should force the city to spend its money on, not this Secession rubbish. Buildings with owls on . . . I ask you. And that Majolika Haus covered with flowers and twirly bits. Very nice, I dare say, but who among us can afford an apartment there? Meanwhile, homeless people will freeze to death on the streets this winter.' He leaned forward. 'It's a scandal. If you ask me, the wrong bloody aristocrat shot his few brains out at Mayerling.'

'Oh.' Benjamin stared at him, appalled, before glancing quickly at the neighbouring tables to see if anyone reacted to this slur on the monarchy. A blond young man on the other side of the fire sat smoothing his chin as he read a book. The dark-haired one sitting a few feet away seemed to be looking straight at them, but a second guilty glance revealed he was dramatically wall-eyed and could be looking anywhere. The noise level was steadily increasing. With any luck, no one had heard. Benjamin tried to relax.

'Heading for trouble,' opined Hugo. 'Dazzling riches flaunted cheek by jowl with the most loathsome poverty. It can't go on.'

'No,' agreed Benjamin, still ignoring the invitation to get political. 'As you say, those girls could be anyone, from just about anywhere.' He paused. 'They might have run away from home. Or been kidnapped. Lost their memories, even.'

'Most of them would probably like to, if they're servicing the scum that comes in here.' Hugo thumped his drained tankard against the table. He seized another and pushed the remaining one towards Benjamin, belching loudly as he leaned over to clout the boy. 'More beer!'

Benjamin quickly finished his own drink. This time Hugo ignored the waiter, who slopped a cloth across the table and slammed down more tankards without ceremony. The boy returned with his ragged shirt folded up to form a sac full of gleanings, bread crusts, sausage ends, some sweaty slices of cheese, a *Salzgurke* with a bite taken from one end. His feet were bare. Perhaps Benjamin grimaced, because Hugo narrowed his eyes and leaned forward.

'The brat does better than most. That's why he sticks around. Think I want him forever hanging on my shirt tails? No, I bloody don't. I can hardly hear myself think above his constant chatter.'

Benjamin laughed. To his knowledge, the kid had uttered a single word in the last hour. Apart from that he was silent as the grave, barring an occasional bout of sniffing. 'Don't know how you put up with the noise. You're philanthropy personified, my friend.'

'Can't leave them all to die,' muttered Hugo, sending a chill up Benjamin's spine. 'We're on the road to Gehenna when the whole world turns a blind eye to children's suffering.'

'Gehenna,' echoed Benjamin. In the Talmud it was Gehinnam. He no longer adhered to the religion of his forefathers,

but remembered the terrifying images summoned up by the Book of Isaiah. Gehinnam was the burning place. It was a vile place of child sacrifice, of pitiless live immolation. The passage still brought night terrors that made him glad to be living in a civilized country in enlightened times. 'And the king,' he muttered, 'shall cause his children to pass through the fire.'

'Your Gehenna, our Hell,' said Hugo, after a short pause to quench his prodigious thirst. 'Same bloodthirsty God threatening the same miserable hereafter unless there's a whole lot of bowing and scraping and self-denial. Slave religions, all of them.' He glared from the table to the boy chewing on his scraps. 'And that's the second time the little sod's forgotten.'

'Forgotten what?'

'Obstler!' roared Hugo, aiming a blow. The boy ducked and ran.

'You mentioned missing girls,' said Benjamin in an effort to get the conversation back on track. 'Anyone in particular? Girls from good families, I mean.'

Hugo's bleary gaze sharpened. 'I didn't mention anyone missing. What's your interest, anyway?'

'Might be a reward,' Benjamin said ingenuously. Hugo snorted.

'You're out of luck then. This city mops up missing wenches. Vienna's lousy with pimps and madams. Little wonder, since every well-heeled *Frau* dismisses her maids when the family leaves for their summer residence. What happens to the poor bitches if they haven't got homes to go back to? Do they care? No. It all provides easy pickings for the *Hurenböcke*, the filthy pimps. Summer's the time when raddled old madams trawl the parks and riverbanks harvesting young women – offering sympathy, a meal, a temporary roof over their heads. Next thing

they know they've got new careers, flat on their backs in Bulgaria, Turkey, Rumania, and even here.' Hugo paused to drink, tipping the tankard at such a precarious angle that liquid spilled from the sides of his mouth, trickling down the sides of his neck and under his collar. He dried his face on his sleeve and produced another spectacularly loud belch. A tall, sharp-featured man glanced down at him, his lips pursed into a moue of disgust as he passed.

'And are there any records of these maids?' asked Benjamin, shifting uncomfortably. Even kindly Frau Breuer had dispensed with plump little Greet before departing for Gmunden. He'd been sad to see the kitchen maid go – she was hardly more than a child, full of songs, old folk tales peppered with her own wild inventions – but he hadn't given her subsequent welfare a second thought. The journalist shrugged and spread his hands.

'Why would there be?'

'Just wondered.' Benjamin scratched his head. So Lilie might have been somebody's maid – a *superior* maid, of course – who'd suddenly found she was without a job or home. Perhaps she'd been caught in such a trap as Hugo described, and escaped. That would explain the distressing state he'd found her in. Yes, that was it. They'd beaten her. They'd taken away her clothes along with her memory. But to her credit she'd refused to give in. Lilie was too sweet, too pure, to have been involved in any . . . his mind slewed away from the details, though in truth he frequently dwelled on far more elaborate fantasies concerning the two of them. It occurred to him that he'd stand more of a chance with a maid, superior or not, than the runaway daughter of a well-to-do family. A good thought, that. Not entirely fuelled by alcohol and warmth. However, he was no nearer to discovering Lilie's real name. And it mattered.

How could anyone live without knowing who or what she was? Benjamin blinked and sat up, realizing that Hugo was still holding forth.

'Another few weeks and all the nice big houses in the *Altstadt* will be opened up again. We'll have a new influx of young girls fresh from the provinces, eager to scrub floors and gut fish. Country wenches. Not, as you say, from *good* families, whatever that might be. Moneyed, I suppose you mean. But innocents, all the same.' Leaning his chin on his elbow, he stared narrow-eyed at Benjamin for a long moment before adding: 'Why don't you start again and this time try asking the question you really want answered.'

'I don't –'

'Fallen for a whore, have you?'

'She's not –' Benjamin stopped dead. The blood rushed to his face. Fool. Shouldn't have had the beer. He wasn't used to it. 'No,' he said, firmly. 'There's no one. I was talking hypothetically.'

'There's a long word.' Hugo raised an eyebrow. 'You're still intent on educating yourself, I see.'

Benjamin said nothing. The damage was done, so, since Hugo was footing the bill, he concentrated on emptying his second tankard and reached for another. His plan of one day entering the university as a student must remain a secret. Nobody, not even *Herr Doktor* Breuer, who had encouraged him to read more widely and even, to Gudrun's disapproval, given him the freedom of his library during the summer, knew about that.

'Sometimes,' said Hugo, 'more can be learned by people's silences than their words. It's the gaps in the conversation you have to listen to most carefully.' He waited, then added: 'Here's what I've learned so far. You –' He laughed and took another

swig. 'I'm joking. Don't look so worried. It's obvious you've come across some pretty wench who claims to be in trouble. She's spun a story that's brought out the knight in shining armour. Am I right?'

'Well . . .' said Benjamin, and stopped.

'Put your cards on the table, Sir Galahad. What is it she needs you to find out? Has she done away with a carping housekeeper jealous of her youth? Fleeing a brutal husband, perhaps? Or is an embezzled employer on her seductive tail?'

'Nothing like that.' He gulped desperately at his beer. 'She's just –'

A glass of Obstler was set before him and Benjamin followed Hugo's example, downing it in one swallow. He choked and was still clutching his throat when the sharp-featured man walked slowly past again, leaning to one side as the room tilted, his nose grown incredibly long, sniffing out trouble. Benjamin attempted to draw Hugo's attention to him, but the effort was too great. Besides, his glass had been miraculously replenished . . . and again. The walls buckled, receding and advancing at an alarming speed. The noise of the tavern ebbed, flowed, and finally broke over him like an angry seventh wave. He shook his head hard, like a dog trying to dislodge a particularly troublesome flea from its ear, and glared at his glass.

'It's only distilled fruit juice,' Hugo said reassuringly. 'Home-grown schnapps.'

Benjamin saw that the journalist's familiar had emerged from his place among the cinders to perch, smirking, on the arm of the settle. 'What's he laughing at?'

'Nothing,' said Hugo. 'Ignore him.' One beefy hand wiped the smile off the boy's face. 'You were telling me about your young lady.'

Benjamin lifted his heavy head and looked carefully round. Suddenly everyone was listening. The three parading girls had paused, ostensibly to warm themselves at the fire, where another tavern slut joined them, her clothes in artful disarray, winking at Benjamin, squeezing his arm as she manoeuvred around his seat. The woman's large breasts pushed into his shoulders and she laughed aloud when he politely moved the chair forward, giving her more space. Back came the fellow with the long nose, moving past as slowly as possible. The wall-eyed man continued to stare. And now the blond man on the other side of the hearth closed his book and sat with his hands folded, waiting.

'She's not my *young lady*,' he said, very carefully and in a stage whisper. 'A friend found her . . . wandering around. She's lost her memory. Can't remember her own name.'

'Or so she says.'

Benjamin clenched his fists beneath the table in the effort not to spring to Lilie's defence. He nodded. 'That's what she says.'

'Pretty, is she?'

'Beautiful.'

'Uh-huh. And what about her clothing? Rich? Poor? Any clues there?'

'None,' said Benjamin, adding, before he had the chance to think better of it: 'She wasn't wearing any.' He immediately wished the words unsaid. The level of noise in the tavern hadn't diminished and yet a curious stillness seemed to hang over the table.

'You've got yourself –' Hugo laughed. 'Or should I say, *your friend* has got *him*self, a runaway whore. And probably a dose of syphilis into the bargain.'

'No,' muttered Benjamin, knuckling his temples. 'She's no whore.' An image of Lilie's pretty face danced before his eyes. Conscious that so far he'd achieved nothing on her behalf, he cleared his throat and tried again. 'She must have been held prisoner somewhere –'

Hugo laughed; his small familiar dutifully followed suit.

'For ransom, I presume?'

'No. Yes. *Maybe.* Why not?' Benjamin glowered. 'This isn't funny.'

'Very well.' Hugo straightened his face. He pursed his lips as if giving the matter serious consideration. 'Many brothels – no, hear me out – many such establishments curtail freedom when the novice is unwilling.' One stubby hand drew another draught of beer towards him. 'But I hear the inmates of a certain misnamed gentlemen's club are slaves in all but name. Unlikely that she escaped from such a place – from what I hear the security is better than that of many banks – but it's a possibility, I suppose.'

'You mean the Thélème club? I thought of that.' The words dropped into one of the curious hushes that sometimes fall in noisy, crowded places and Benjamin felt rather than saw heads turning. His eyes slid sideways and met those of the blond man, who was now pocketing his closed book. He noticed for the first time the man's curiously cherubic face, as if the statue on the Plague pillar had stepped down and, in taking on life, matured a little. One of his cheeks bore a duelling *Schmiss* and Benjamin felt a twinge of envy. Girls couldn't fail to be impressed by such a scar; it was a badge of personal bravery and gallantry. A smile played over the man's lips; he nodded and drew on a cigarette, surrounding himself with a cloud of aromatic Turkish tobacco smoke. Was he offering friendship?

Benjamin felt drawn to him, and yet something in the fellow's eyes suggested he would not think twice about plunging the flaming brand into anyone that got in his way.

'Hair colour?' repeated Hugo.

'What?' Benjamin looked at him, confused. 'Oh, hers . . . it's sort of golden.'

'Might be, in that case. Apparently, those at the Thélème have very specific requirements. The stamp of Jerusalem isn't favoured there.'

What was that supposed to mean? Benjamin tried to get his fuddled thoughts in order but the atmosphere had changed again and he saw that Hugo's attention was elsewhere. Or rather, it was everywhere, for the journalist had returned to work. His eyes darted here and there, sizing up customers, lingering on one, dismissing another, his head turning this way and that as he homed in on a dozen or more conversations. For the most part his face remained impassive, though occasionally his lips twitched and once he scowled.

Others had now begun pulling chairs and stools up to the table, moving in close with the air of those with weighty secrets to impart. Try as he might, Benjamin couldn't make out a word until a woman joined them, stiff and prim, radiating respectability, tightly buttoned from her high neck to her well-polished boots. Disapproval of her surroundings had tightened her mouth into a thin, reptilian slash. Her refusal of a drink was accompanied by an expression of such intense disgust that the proffered liquid might have already been filtered through somebody else's kidneys. Her eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot from crying, perhaps even from tears unshed. She drew her shawl more tightly round her meagre bosom as she took in the plunging décolleté of the powdered and perfumed

woman at the fireside, who was now lifting her skirts to warm her haunches.

Benjamin found the prim woman's presence incomprehensible. He watched her pale fingers agitatedly screwing a fold of skirt into tight knots as she spoke; saw Hugo's face become grim and observed that he, like the snot-nosed boy, who was now wide-eyed and nervously licking his lips, was hanging on every word. The woman grew steadily more agitated. At one point she stopped and covered her face with both hands as if unable to continue. After calming herself, her voice became harsher, more distinct, and Benjamin caught a single word: Hummel. It was a name that had preoccupied Gudrun over the past weeks, for Juliane Hummel was branded Vienna's most monstrous and unnatural mother. Twelve months ago she and her husband, Joseph, had received a police warning concerning the mistreatment of their four-year-old daughter. A year later, the child was dead. Already the papers hinted at unimaginable levels of cruelty and neglect, but the official cause of death was blood poisoning, and premeditated murder had yet to be proved. Evidence or no evidence, Gudrun wanted to see the pair of them flogged and hanged. Thinking to take home some sensational titbit, Benjamin dragged his chair further away from the noisy altercations at the fireside.

'They often left Anna at home all day,' the woman said, through bloodless lips, 'locked in a filthy shed without food or water. I used to push bread and little cakes through cracks in the door. When Juliane caught me, she got him to nail boards over the gaps. I saw her hit the little one's hands with a red-hot poker and laugh while she did it.' She looked down at her own hands, as if surprised to find them unscarred. 'They tied her, naked, to a tree – like a dog – and put a little dish of food down

for her, just out of reach. One bitterly cold winter day they made her stand in a tub of cold water from dawn until it grew dark. And when they beat her, they muffled her screams with rags tied round her head, thinking we wouldn't know what was going on.' Every last vestige of colour drained from the woman's face as she clutched Hugo's sleeve. 'They meant to kill her. It was no accident. Day after day, I went to the police and told them Anna was being starved and tortured to death. Nobody would listen. They won't listen now – I'm nothing, only a gardener's wife. Will *you* listen? Will you tell Vienna what really happened?'

Benjamin swallowed hard. Either the woman was mad or there were unguessed horrors being perpetrated in the back-streets of this city. Hugo met his eyes.

'Gehenna,' he said, softly. 'Hell. Sheol. Hades.'

Benjamin nodded. He needed a drink, but every tankard and glass was empty. No, what he needed was to get out of here. Without another word, he stood up and stumbled towards the door, followed by curses and catcalls as he fell into tables and tripped over chairs.

A hand descended on his shoulder as he reached the entrance. Benjamin pulled free, spinning round and bringing up his fists. The size of the man who'd accosted him put paid to any ideas of successfully fighting his way out of trouble, but he kept them up all the same. Two steps behind the huge man, tucked into his shadow, lurked the sharp-featured fellow with the long nose. Away from the tavern's lights he resembled a weasel, but his authority became evident when he stepped forward. He flicked his skinny fingers at Benjamin's bunched fists.

'No need for that.'

'What are you after?' demanded Benjamin, sobering up fast. 'I've got no money.'

'Judging by the state of you, any you did have is about to be pissed into the nearest gutter.' He drew close enough for Benjamin to smell peppermint on his breath, only faintly masking the odour of fried fish. One bony finger shot forward to prod his sternum. 'You're keeping bad company, Benjamin. Don't think I don't know what you've been up to.' The finger jabbed again. 'Your fat, shit-stirring friend imagines he knows everything, but let me tell you, nothing goes on in this city without me hearing about it. Nothing. I've got my eye on you, boy. Go home, unless you fancy sobering up in the cells.'

'You're police,' said Benjamin, only now taking in the bulky man's grey uniform, the grenade insignia. 'But I haven't done anything.'

'Wallow with pigs and expect to get dirty. My advice to you is – keep away from Besser and his kind.'

'All right, sir.' In spite of the lingering emphasis on 'pigs', Benjamin deliberately kept his voice even, his demeanour reasonable. He reached for the door. 'I'll go straight home, sir.'

'Give my regards to *Herr Doktor* Breuer.'

Glancing back, Benjamin saw that both men had already been swallowed by the crowded tavern. He started to make his way through the maze of backstreets, wondering how much, if anything, they knew about Lilie. After a few hundred yards he came to the lamp where he'd seen the clown-faced whores earlier. They were still eager for business, but to his surprise both suddenly turned their backs on him. One minute he was upright, staring towards the soft glow of the *Altstadt* and wishing himself home, the next he was lying on wet cobbles

regarding the Seven Sisters high in the heavens. Pain rushed at him, wild as a runaway carthorse. He groaned, reaching a hand towards his aching skull, the movement interrupted by the large boot stamping on his wrist. Benjamin shrieked.

'Keep your nose out of things that don't concern you.' The voice seemed to come from a long way away and was accompanied by the distinctive aroma of Turkish tobacco. 'Gentlemen's clubs aren't for you or your ilk. Neither are the women in them. Understand?'

'Ye-*es*.' The man released his wrist and what felt like a sledgehammer crashed into Benjamin's ribs. He rolled on to his side, trying to escape. The next blow was unerringly aimed at his kidneys, landing on the side of his back, between his ribs and pelvic bone. Black chrysanthemums flowered in mid-air and he felt himself falling into a deep chasm. The small hands searching his pockets brought him to himself.

'Get his coat,' whispered a voice, close to his ear. 'Good cloth. We can sell that easy as anything.'

'Clear off.' Benjamin struggled on to his knees, pushing them away. 'Fucking old whores.'

'Fucking drunkard,' came their sharp retort as he doubled over, puking.

Gritting his teeth, Benjamin finally got himself upright. His pockets, like his stomach, were now empty; they'd taken every last Heller of the doctor's money, his pen, even the used handkerchief.