

SPRINGTIME IN ATLANTIS



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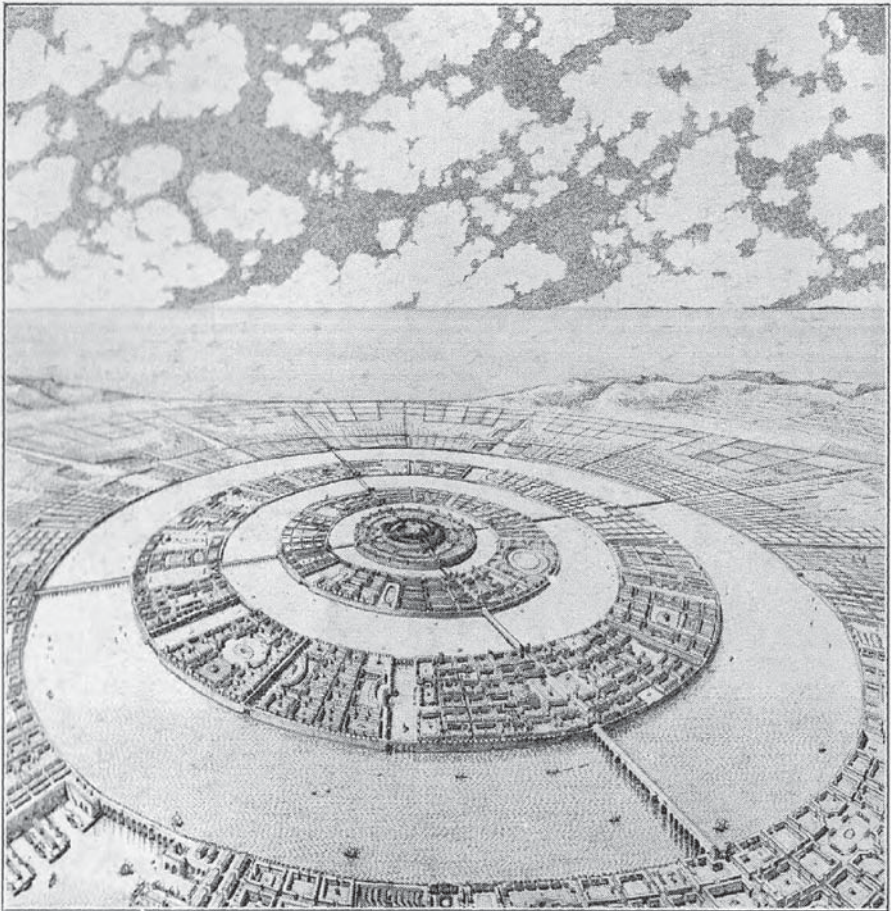


Springtime in Atlantis

A novel from the heyday of
the kingdom of Atlantis

by

Edmund Kiss



The castle of Atlantis was surrounded by canals and belts of earth on which the various parts of the city lay. The widest of the ring-shaped canals was eighteen hundred feet wide, the same width as the following belt of earth. The innermost canal, on the other hand, which surrounded the island with the towering royal castle, was six hundred feet wide, and the island itself measured three thousand feet in diameter. (According to Plato's account.)

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WARGA

Warga, the teenage daughter of Atlantean Weeling Ase Gadirus, a teacher of constitutional law at the administrative college, experienced for the first time that it was possible to be thoroughly dissatisfied as the head of a horticultural school (o²)*. When the young girl was put in charge of the school by the district agricultural administration at the summer solstice after passing her examinations, everything went well and beautifully; the gardeners were trained, the vegetable beds were clean, the banana plants were tended and pruned, the rows of tomatoes were tied up on bronze, flexible wires so that they looked like aisles of shining torches, and the apprentices and journeymen worked only five hours a day. The apprentice girls in the flower and vegetable gardens even finished their daily tasks in little more than four hours and after a further two hours of scientific instruction they could go to the beach to bathe or play ball in one of the public courts.

* The letters and numbers refer to the city map included at the end of the book.

That had changed by the winter solstice. New pupils had moved into the school, beaming with youthful happiness and enthusiasm for work, into the airy accommodation huts in the palm plantations on the eighth transverse canal of the second ring road and gazed in disbelieving amazement at the first pocket money that the district administration had thrown out for the beginners in serious life work.

If the expected performance was anything like the noise that emerged from under the canopy of swaying palm fronds in the early morning, it must have been an excellent agricultural crop of young Atlantic men who had taken up the gardening profession.

Fortunately, as was necessary to keep the business running, half of the old, well-trained core workforce had remained, otherwise Warga Gadirus and the good reputation of her school would have been in a bad way.

The new young girls were a little less noisy, their fresh, snow-white lab coats fluttering cheerfully through the airy pillared halls of their stone lodgings on the Zweigkanal Südost, called "Der Linde" (1 at o²). This is not to say that the young girls from Atlantis, Paardegatt, Brammerloh and Antianyu, and whatever else the islands of the Empire were called, could be called in the unit of time of a few words

than the boys would have needed to express their feelings; it was probably the same in the state of Atlantis as it is today. They needed more in and of themselves, only the power of the voices created not only a balance but a decisive overweight in favour of the men-to-be. In addition, the windmills and water pumps on the Linden Canal rattled so loudly that from a certain distance it was actually impossible to tell which was rattling louder, the sloping sails of the irrigation pumps or the red mouths of the young Atlantean girls.

Warga Gadirus would not have been so worried if everything had gone on as usual. It was only natural that the childish boys and girls had to laugh and chatter, and the young daughter of Asen Weeling Gadirus was the last one who would not have liked to join in the chatter and laughter.

But things were not going to be as usual today, because her father had sent her a letter from the imperial government of Asgard, announcing the visit of the cacique Paczi Manca from Cuzco, the Inga's kingdom on the cloud-high Andean plateau of the western mainland. Paczi Manca was the agricultural advisor to the Ingas of Cuzco, Quito and Ollantantambo. This brown-skinned prince, in a fit of patriotic prudence, had decided that it was the right thing to do.

was held to ask the imperial government in Atlantis to introduce its councillors to the secrets of Asian administration and economy. Such requests from foreign states, even if they were at a lower level of intellectual development, were generally granted, as such contacts often resulted in trade links that were favourable to the ten-king state of the Atlantean islands due to the need to export surplus goods from the empire. Moreover, in the course of Atlantic history, such economic ties had often resulted in ties of a constitutional nature. The economic conquest of a foreign country was often followed by the invasion of the imperial army to secure trade and ultimately to incorporate the state in question into the empire as a new frontier mark.

Incidentally, such approval was not unanimous in the ten royal states, especially when it came to large and warlike nations. A number of important university professors, especially those of state law and state administration, and even some economists and officials of the imperial and state governments warned against too generous an approach. However, the economic interests of the empire were too important to the royal bailiffs of the Atlantic states to be sacrificed to concerns about the future. Position, war power and fleet

guaranteed the security of the empire for the foreseeable future, and stronger enemies on the borders of the Marches would be countered by the increased power of the governors. In addition, the priestly temple administration, the High Sun Gate, exerted decisive pressure in cases of doubt. Their concerns were not solely economic, although they were important in this respect, perhaps just as important as those of the civil administration; it was more important for the upper clergy to utilise newly emerging trade connections to gain spiritual and mental possession of their opponents.

Warga Gadirus glanced at the sundial, which towered over the entire area of the horticultural school on a high basalt pillar. As the announced time for the arrival of the visitors was near, and the government was in the habit of being unpleasantly punctual, the gardener sent an elderly foreman to the palm grove and a young girl to the stone houses by the linden canal and asked for silence, as guests from Tiahusinyu Highlands would soon be coming to visit the school.

For a while Warga thought about making herself pretty, at least putting on new sandals, but then she shook her narrow head haughtily and told herself that she was beautiful enough for any visit, but certainly for that of the slant-eyed brown skins from Cuzco. At the door of the garden house where her

The old Burd, the scrubwoman and building manager, stood in the office and the school's teaching classes, waving her hand somewhat excitedly. Warga nodded, brushed her blonde hair under her silken net and walked slowly towards the house. She could see a white rowing ship with a gilded stern turn into the cross-channel of the "Linden" from the second ring canal of the city centre with a short, warning peal of the ship's bell, the flag of the empire made of blue cloth with the silver symbol of the sun at the stern, and a white awning with golden fringes over the midship. It was one of the rowing galleys of the Asgardian core government, whose seat was Asgard Castle in the centre of the city of Atlantis. A slender customs cutter moored on the far side of the "Linden" was moored in front of the group of buildings belonging to the municipal tax administration, lowered and raised the supervisory flag in greeting, and the galley commander from Asgard raised his hand in thanks.

"The gangplank is clear," said old Burd importantly. "I've had your galley and the students' boats pulled up to our gangplank so that the gentlemen of the government can disembark in comfort."

In fact, the "gentlemen of the government" rarely came to visit the horticultural school, which was under the control of the district agricultural administration, the executive body of an estates cooperative. The good scrubwoman's excitement was therefore understandable.

and even Warga had to admit secretly, to her annoyance, that she was not comfortable with the thought of coming under the scrutinising eyes of the high lords from Asgard.

The famous castle in the centre of the city radiated a benevolent but penetrating force of will, which was all the more effective precisely because it rarely made an appearance. Warga had had nothing to do directly with the government in her young life. Although she had a gardener's licence, countersigned by the sub-bailiff of the council group for soil care and nutrition, and she knew the gentleman from convivial evenings at her father's house, she had never come into contact with him or any other councillor of Asgard on official business. Today Warga Gadirus felt for the first time that she was no longer a child, but had been placed in a responsible, if not very important position as a member of the national community of a great, world-embracing empire, and that she had to give an account of her activities when and where it pleased this invisible power called government.

Warga stood at the grey, white-speckled granite steps as the government galley approached at lightning speed. With sharp eyes, the young girl recognised her father under the sail roof. He was sitting next to some brown gentlemen who, despite the summer weather

The warm, warm men wore red, gold-threaded, woven overcoats from which their angular, flat skulls protruded with grinning mouths. Warga was annoyed by this. Why did these strangers always have to grin? On the streets of Atlantis, they and their kind could sometimes be seen gazing at the splendours of the famous folk world city, short, stocky, bejewelled, with short, sturdy legs and always grinning as if they were in a constant state of great embarrassment.

But her father!

Now one could really see why the lower peoples of the Atlantic islands and even more so of the borderlands of the distant mainlands considered the Aesir to be white gods, or at least favoured men with divine qualities and the same origin, who had to be toweringly superior to them under all circumstances. The sun could only just catch the tall man's hand, which looked white and delicate like that of a beautiful woman and yet had nothing feminine in its strong-willed, spiritualised form, despite the sparkling emeralds that sat like glittering predatory eyes on the slender fingers; gifts from the king of the realm, Warager Ase Torgaard, to the scholar.

As the boat headed for the stairs, Warga also realised that, apart from four ingamen from Cuzco, the leader

of the Royal Imperial Office for Soil Care and Nutrition sat under the awning, and next to him was a gentleman from the Asgard security guard, his bronze helmet shining clearly out of the shadows. She only knew the king's immediate advisor, Mr Wigrid Ase Torsta, by name, having seen him occasionally at festivals of the agricultural district administration, and the presence of only this gentleman made her heart ache a little. But she knew the young warrior all the better. He was her cousin Baldur Ase Wieborg, the only son of the Asen Evin Wieborg from Thule, which lay to the north of the Engeland Marches and was considered the ancestral home of the Atlantean Asen. Despite his youth and as a simple farmer's son, Baldur Wieborg had passed his exams at the Asgard school of war with honours more quickly than expected and immediately led the third hundred on Troia, as Asgard Castle was also known, until his secondment to one of the kingdom's border marches.

Warriors and swordsmen called him with a certain tenderness only by his first name, Baldur, because he radiated a radiant youthfulness to which many a hardened character had to bow, whether he wanted to or not. Mr Wieborg was well known among the young women of the capital, even if he was rarely seen. While other young men were hanging out with the girls on the beach or in the

While the soldiers bathed in the canals or measured their strength in the battlefields, Baldur Wieborg used to seek physical recreation and strength together with his men of war and only rarely appeared in the public baths. He sometimes appeared at the social events of the local societies and was a welcome sight, because his appearance was modest and confident, like that of a well-travelled man. His high eagle helmet was also frequently seen in the theatre rounds and on the capital's chariot racecourses, and his achievements as a racing rider on the Royal Racecourse on the Idafelde were well known in wide circles.

Nevertheless, not much was known about the young captain. There were capable captains in Atlantis like sand on the sea, these blond men with their grey, wide-set eyes were almost all handsome and straight, and you couldn't see Mr Baldur Wieborg's rare distinction from the war college for scientific achievements when he entered or left the war council rooms on Asgard in his unadorned tunic.

Warga Gadirus racked her brains as to why her cousin had been chosen to guide the guests from Cuzco through their horticultural school, but the mystery was quickly solved. Mr Wieborg was not present in his capacity as a war captain, but as an official translator, as the Ingas only spoke their native language. Warga's father, the university lecturer

Weeling Gadirus, spoke the Arowak of the Cuzcos very poorly, and there were only a few men in Atlantis who had learnt the language of the borderland people in the towering mountains of the Andes. This was apparently how Captain Wieborg had been found, who was known to have learnt the language of the frontier people in anticipation of his transfer to the Tiahusinyu highlands.

Warga had the dubious pleasure of having her white hand kissed by the slant-eyed counsellors of Inga, and she was glad that Baldur Wieborg did not follow this example this time, although he usually liked to do so; for the young gardener's hand was not so ugly as to make a man's mouth stop halfway with a shudder. When the learning party and their companions had entered the school building, Warga quickly dipped her hands into a bowl filled with water, and Mr Wieborg, who understood, handed her the towel with a smile.

"You can make up for what you've missed," he said quietly. And Warga knew what the captain meant.

"Maybe next time," nodded the young girl, and Baldur Wieborg beamed with amusement at his slender base and friend's ability to guess thanks. But Warga couldn't help thinking how right the name Baldur was for this person.

The head of the Imperial Agricultural Office,

Wigrid Ase Torsta, beckoned to the captain. The answering of questions began. Information from the headmistress was translated quickly and seemingly effortlessly by Mr Wieborg, but the constitutional law teacher Weeling Gadirus sometimes looked up in surprise, as it seemed to him that the information given to the Cuzcos in their national language was not always entirely correct.

While the captain, surrounded by the small figures of the foreign guests, wandered through the model garden of Warga Gadirus, the state law teacher could no longer focus his attention on the meaning of the foreign language, as Mr Wigrid Torsta occupied him with some news from Asgard. Warga strolled along the well-tended paths between the two groups of men in a rather deserted manner and was glad that Baldur Wieborg did not bother her with too many questions. The young captain had rather taken the lead and gurgled out the strange words of the Cuzcos with such mastery that the gardener could not hide an amused smile. Nor was she surprised that the slit eyes of the guests sometimes turned back to her and that their gazes were fixed on her sun-tanned face with growing respect. Her cousin seemed to be telling the brownskins marvellous things.

Mr Wieborg slowly turned round.

"Mrs Warga, I have to answer the boys a question that's a bit difficult," he said with a homely tone.

laughter. "The Kazike Paczi Manca wants to know whether you are a real goddess or just of divine origin. What should I answer?"

The good-natured, open gaze of the tall warrior revealed that the question was asked without any malice. Wieborg came from the White North, which the Atlanteans called Thule, and the relationship with Gadirus was only a distant one. He readily assumed that Warga was a pure-blooded Ase, a child of the sun, like himself.

The young gardener, however, felt an impotent bitterness welling up inside her because of this joking question. Her mother was descended from a mixed race refined by Asian blood, with a single-born from the southern imperial island of Murnaats, and the look that now met the captain's blue, evil eyes was anything but friendly.

"I am recognised as a full-blooded Asin by the Race Office in Asgard," she gushed passionately, but she was immediately sorry for her vehemence when she saw how embarrassed the young swordsman became and how helplessly his clear grey stars rested in hers beneath his high, helmet-covered forehead.

"I'm sorry," Wieborg assured him. "But I hoped to amuse you with my question, not offend you. But the question was stupid and obvious; I'll answer it myself."

And the Kazike Paczi Manca received the flush

guests correctly assumed that the head of the horticultural school was of divine lineage, as all pure-blooded aes were. Two tears of anger rolled from the gardener's beautiful dark blue eyes down to her round, brown cheeks, where they were intercepted by her processed hand, and then there was peace again over the rebellious abyss of a woman's soul.

But Weeling Ase Gadirus, who had overheard the brief dialogue between the Asgard captain and his blossoming child, had to give all his attention to the lecture of the high government official Wigrid Torsta, who spoke very intelligently about the latest changes in the staffing of the higher clergy, especially in the central and southern states of the Atlantic islands; and about the new spiritual welfare schools for the under-born; and the pastoral care for galley rowers and harbour workers. The chief agricultural leader of the realm told all these things with restrained derision, and Weeling Ase Gadirus was not surprised. It was well known that Mr Torsta, a civil servant who, like Baldur Wieborg, had emerged from the Nordic peasantry, was a bitter opponent of all the exceptional rights to land and taxes that the High Sun Gate, the temple administration in Atlantis, had increasingly enjoyed over the past centuries. And all these new facilities were of a favoured nature,

which the civil laws used to stop at.

The professor of constitutional law overcame the embarrassing impression that young Wieborg's question had made on him and expressed the suspicion that he did not always seem to be able to reliably translate the answers to the guests' questions.

"I approve of Captain Wieborg's actions," replied Mr Torsta calmly. "The king expects no less. It must be left to us, the responsible councillors, to decide what information is beneficial to the state and the kingdom and what is not. I consider myself fortunate to have found in your young relative Baldur Wieborg a clever and understanding mind, who knows how to satisfy our guests from Cuzco without exposing important interests of the empire without necessity. Unfortunately, I have not been able to prevent the visit to the imperial solar observatories and the priests' schools in the temple districts from being guided by clergymen who know the language and who have forbidden Captain Wieborg's participation."

The teacher of constitutional law slowed his step to prevent his daughter from overhearing the conversation. In the course of the conversation, however, he forgot this intention, so that Warga Gadirus had the opportunity to learn some interesting facts that were not without significance for her future.

"Do they attach so much importance to young Wieborg at the High Sun Gate that his presence on the tour of the temples and observatories was expressly described as undesirable?" asked the university lecturer in surprise.

"Apparently so," smiled Mr Wigrid Torsta.

"Priestly lords scent a free head and an even freer soul around the globe against the wind, even if the soul is in the body of an insignificant swordsman of Asgard. If a man of war occupies himself with astronomy, that is already suspicious ..."

"Please, Mr Torsta!" interjected Weeling Ase Gadirus. "Wieborg is a Nordland knight and has been a sailor from his youth, like almost all Northmen. Our best heads on the empire's sun sentries sit on broad Viking shoulders."

"The best, yes, I admit that," replied the senior official. "But do they also sit in the most important waiting rooms? I think that's debatable."

"That's right, but appointments to the observatories are not made directly by the king, but at the suggestion of the High Sun Gate," said the professor of constitutional law with a touch of bitterness. "In the past, the empire has also relinquished important rights here. It is easier to give up castles than to gain them. As an independent university lecturer, I can only say that the bourgeois administration in

has failed on this issue."

Wigrid Ase Torsta smiled somewhat maliciously at this and remarked that this failure had not been without advantage for the son of the constitutional law teacher, the chamberlain of the Porte Odil Gadirus.

"That's right too," confirmed the other, ignoring the mockery. "For me and my boy, there is even a small slight in this - favouritism by the venerable one in Urd, if you want to call it that. The High Sungate does not dislike breaking the unwritten laws of the Asen that at least the high and highest offices of state should be held by pure-blooded northerners. Is not the recognition of my children as fully-fledged Asen already a clear relaxation of the law? Is this not another failure on the part of the bourgeois administration, or is the time pressing for new forms because the old ones have outlived their usefulness? This, too, is a question worth considering."

Mr Torsta remained silent. He thought as a Nordic farmer son was very ruthless in these matters. He did not allow the famous horses on the Atlantic islands of Paardegatt and Gaatland to be spoilt by indiscriminate breeding, so for him the breeding of pure-bred Nordic men was a matter of course that could not be broken with impunity. What was enforced in the horse, had to be done twice and three times by the thinking Nordic man, and that freely.

willingly. Unfortunately, the supreme racial office of the empire did not always think so logically. This was due to the difficulties that had to arise with a total population of over forty million people on the Atlantic islands alone, whereby the proportion of the pure-blooded master class could hardly be put at two million. And among this number was a high hundredth of so-called "recognised", i.e. in truth no longer completely pure-blooded Asen. The High Sun Gate, in its understandable desire to increase its spiritual influence on the lawless masses, confronted the endeavours of wide circles to "recognition" and was supported in this direction by the lack of a written racial law. It reckoned with the final melting away of the block of pure-blooded Asians and cast a spell over the unrecognised and the recognised through preferential treatment in many areas. The growth of internal opposition, the further widening of the rift between the people and the Asian ruling class, was one of the prerequisites for the development of their priestly power. This is why the so-called "recognised", who had the silent stigma of lacking full validity despite official recognition, enjoyed special support from the High Sun Gate. And it was in this sense that Gadirus, a teacher of constitutional law, could speak of a slight when he favoured his son, the chamberlain Odil Gadirus. -

The Inga people had stopped with their guide in the middle of the neatly tended gardens of medicinal herbs and poisonous plants, for the Inga of Cuzco had drawn the attention of his councillors to these marvellous herbs, which the kingdom of the children of the sun was said to cultivate in mysteriously hidden gardens. The Inga probably intended to use his newly acquired knowledge in this respect to effectively treat unpleasant relatives, because strangely enough the envoys from Cuzco had repeatedly asked about the famous poison gardens. And now the shifty-eyed gentlemen were standing in front of the miracle, which suddenly no longer seemed like a miracle to them, because here everything was shown and explained with a self-evident clarity, as if there was nothing in Atlantis that had to be concealed from strangers.

Paczi Manca grinned again at the beautiful, tall Warga Gadirus, who was a child of the gods, as he now knew, and who nevertheless took the liberty of answering his questions, the brown, monkey-like Cuzco. He was shown the Chinese bush and the coffee bush, was allowed to tear off a few leaves from the coca plant, gazed in awe at the red poppy fields where young girls were using wooden knives to squeeze the white sap that oozed out of incised calyxes and was processed into a variety of remedies, had the purpose of the anaesthetic hemp explained to him, of

He was curious to smell the leaves and flowers of the newly planted small camphor trees, which grew alternately with various tea bushes under rows of shady mats.

A large merchant ship had arrived at the loading platform on the Linden Canal. Porters brought crates of fresh and dried vegetables on board, and the cheerful noise of the new crop of gardeners echoed across the slowly flowing surface of the "Linden".

The strangers also learnt why the canal of the was called "Linde". It was fed by hot springs, which originated at the foot of the mountainous and volcanic hinterland and which, branching off from the Linden Canal, served to irrigate the gardens of the metropolis in countless secondary pipes. Even across the canal bridges, special pipes led into the residential neighbourhoods of the cosmopolitan city and supplied the individual households with their small and large gardens with warm water. It was a matter of course that the huge fields, meadows and market gardens on the Idafelde were the first to make use of this blessing from the volcanic homeland. Soil heating with warm water was the secret of the overwhelming fertility of the world-famous gardens of Atlantis, which produced several harvests a solar year, with a luxuriance that was completely unknown on the cold heights of Ingaland. That with

It was natural for the Aesir that every weed had to be eradicated with such vigour; but the fact that this required serious, unceasing work, repeated several times a day, was not quite clear to the Chinks. They contented themselves with the conviction that white gods were at work here and that everything had to succeed. They understood nothing of the strict implementation of short working hours for the individual, of the obligation of the entire Azeri population to learn and work, of the expediency of low but adequate wages. At most, they were surprised that the money consisted only of round brass plates of avoided sizes and denominations, when it was known throughout the world that the walls of the great pillared hall in Asgard were covered with gold, and that columns and sculptures were even made entirely of gold. They had hardly any idea of the legal regulation of land management. Nor would they have understood if it had been made clear to them that the sixty thousand agricultural plots on the Ida Field alone were only allotted as fiefs, and that they could be taken away from the feudal lord if, for example, he allowed the weeds to get out of hand.

Baldur Wieborg observed with a faint smile the deep impression that Asgard Castle, towering in the distance, made on the strangers. The Troia of Atlantis flamed in the glow of the morning sun like a

red-hot giant torch, underpinned by a gleaming silver, spraying circular wall. The foreign lords could not be persuaded that Asgard was built of pure gold and silver, at least that is what they used to say, although the information they had received in Atlantis was usually correct. The enormous triple circular walls were clad with more refined metals, with brass as hard as steel and with a mixture of tin and silver, the use of which for weapons and household goods could be observed at any time when walking through the streets.

Paczi Manca murmured in deep contemplation. "Gold. Gold!" and Baldur Wieborg turned away with an amused smile. The incomprehensible magic of gold was something that half-apes like those sent by Inga succumbed to without resistance. It didn't seem to matter whether it was gold or brass. The foreign guests in Atlantis thought everything that shone was gold.

The young captain had neither wealth nor substantial jewellery. His house, which stood on the first platform of Asgard, had been given to him by the imperial government as a royal fief, small and inconspicuous like the dwellings of even the highest dignitaries; and the land on which it stood was a state fief, inalienable and therefore to a certain extent worthless to the owner. In Atlantis, gold could not even buy a simple sandal strap; you had to buy your way to it.

The purpose was to serve the necessary brass coins beforehand. The kingdom belonged to the Aesir, and even the king lived on Asgard in Allfather's fiefdom.

"What is the purpose of the people's visit?" Warga Gadirus asked her cousin Wieborg as the tour came to an end and the guests were rewarded for their hard work by eating large bowls of sweet strawberries topped with white cream in the schoolhouse.

"They want to introduce our imperial constitution in their Ingareiche," laughed Baldur Wieborg, his eyes sparkling, having already forgiven Warga's evil looks. On the other hand, they don't want the federal state to be established. It will probably be a terrible nonsense. The poor fellows have hardly a clue about the inner workings of our state organisation. But I have been briefed by the Kaziken Manca. Inga is to become god and sole ruler, representative of the sun. Sun personified, and all the others - servants. They are to be fed, work, be cared for in old age and be given houses and land as fiefdoms. All in all, a dreadful mixture of misunderstood Asian principles. But the people are not supposed to learn anything, because Inga also wants to become the highest priest. If that's the case, then he's right to want to leave his subjects in the darkness of ignorance."

"So you want to introduce in Cuzco the perfect form of the

to what the development in the empire is pushing towards," replied Warga Gadirus. Baldur Wieborg did not take his eyes off his relatives. His tanned, narrow face became impenetrable, the bright grey lights dipped inquiringly into the depths of the dark blue stars under a pure white forehead, as if he wanted to read from them where a young gardener had gained such knowledge. Did this young girl know the dangers of the development of conditions in the empire, in the states and on the frontiers, unless someone came along to turn the wheel with a strong hand? Did she know in the deepest sense of the word that all that glittered in Atlantis was not gold?

A secret fear flickered in the beautiful gardener's heart that she could not explain. The grey lights of her cousin suddenly tormented her. She felt that at this moment the captain was demanding life and limb from her; the fine threads that wound around her soul like tenacious snares were as inescapable as fate.

"Are you my ally, Warga?" the captain asked sternly.

"I don't understand you," the gardener lied uneasily.

"You heard me," contradicted Mr Wieborg. "I'm in desperate need of allies. Allies with a bright, free spirit, who have deeply felt and understood what is at stake. And it's about a lot, about everything."

"You are looking for your allies in the blood enemy," Wurga said bitterly.

"Should I really be such a fool?" asked Baldur Wieborg, and his radiant, victorious smile slid down over his powerful, regal features. "I scent the friends of my spirit. That's all I need."

"I'm just a recognised ace. You didn't know it. I realised it from your innocent question in the garden and I was foolish enough to feel offended."

"Neither you nor I can undo what has happened, Wurga," the warrior explained without a second thought. "We cannot turn back the tribal history of the northern race, we cannot erase the guilt of our parents, we cannot pump dark blood out of our veins and replace it with light blood. Those of mixed blood stand at the crossroads of the spirit. To create something new from what is, or to let what has been and what exists continue its course until the bitter end. Ask yourself the question. Renewal from the Nordic spirit or a further slide into the bondage of blood and soul."

"The question and answer are ancient and have been considered a thousand times," Wurga replied, his heart pounding. "Many before us have sought a solution through negotiation, bans and violence. What was the success? - And now you too? A swordsman calls the sword."

Baldur Wieborg shook his head.

"Isn't the sharpness of mind, of conviction, of water-clear clarity also a cutting weapon, sometimes better than the dead blade hanging at my side?" he asked calmly.

"It is so easy to speak of new goals on the Linden Canal, but a look at our Asgard and the city of the High Sun Gate in Urd makes the weight of the historical facts weigh heavier than a gardener and, in any case, a swordsman like Wieborg would suspect."

I really appreciate that," said the captain with a sigh of relief. Warga looked at his friend in amazement.

"I don't understand what's dear to you."

"Besides your presence, this realisation of a gardener," smiled the captain. "It is rare. Most people don't recognise such difficulties, and when they do, they are too weak to overcome them. Knowing, recognising and mastering are what I need. We now want to see whether our guests from Tiahusinyu have eaten their strawberries."

Wieborg turned to the door of the next room where the guests were sitting. He turned round under the lintel, which his helmet almost touched.

"So my ally after all?" he asked with a compelling movement.

"Maybe," replied the gardener, almost against her will.

"I'm still young and don't know women," came the light and cheerful reply. "But I've been told that with girls, 'maybe' sometimes has the meaning of 'Yes'. I don't know if it's the same for gardeners, but I hope so."

"I will speak to my brother," explained Warga Gadirus.

"But I'll be with Odil at the solar observatory sooner than you, because after this tour I'll have a few hours of free time thanks to the favours of the idolatrous priesthood of Urd for my person."

"You don't have it as easy with a man like Odil as you do with a little gardener," said the young girl.

"I love the independent minds," laughed the captain and walked through the door.

A few days later, the constitutional law teacher Weeling Ase Gadirus came to his house with a dissatisfied face and looked for and found his daughter in the little garden behind the small pillared hall. She was sitting in the short-cut lawn at the edge of the water basin, feeding the fish.

"Where did you get the good connections with the High Sun Gate, my child?" asked the scholar, sitting down on the stone edge of the pool.

"Shouldn't my father have such connections before I do?" Warga laughed harmlessly.

"It doesn't seem that way to me," replied Mr

Gadirus. "Odil told me this morning that the Honourable Father of the High Sun Gate had requested my visit. - So I had myself carried out to the temple city in Urd and didn't have to wait long at all."

Gadirus deliberately paused and watched the girl to test the impression of his words. When she remained silent, he continued.

"The Venerable Father asked me if my daughter Warga Ase Gadirus would like to take over the management of the sacred gardens in the temple city of Urd. The emissaries from Cuzco were full of praise, and Mr Amenor Lochi himself was of the opinion that he could not place his precious parks in better hands than yours. - I don't know whether your brother Odil has a hand in this, but it is at least conceivable. He is not chamberlain to the Papa of Urd for nothing."

"Odil?" Warga asked in surprise, thinking of Baldur Wieborg, who had said that he would be at the solar observatory sooner than she would.

"Well, I would be surprised if the boy had prayed to the gate for a good position for his sister," said the old scholar cautiously.

"It's not his style."

"Maybe he did it anyway," Warga said quietly. Weeling Gadirus nodded.

"So you know more, my child, than your father realised.

- I don't want to dissuade you, Warga. You know how favourable the high places at the gate tend to be, that they are places with special treatment, that instead of our simple dwellings palaces receive the chosen ones, that our Asian land law does not apply there and that house and land granted by the Venerable Father become hereditary property. You know how much I, as your father, would like to grant you any preferential treatment that is only given to very few in Atlantis ..."

"What does mum say?" Warga asked with a smile.

"She agreed."

"I am, too, and will inform the honourable man that I accept the high honour with grateful reverence," the young gardener declared firmly.

The teacher of constitutional law lowered his high white forehead. "It is a commitment for life, Warga, provided you fulfil your duty, which I do not doubt," he said at length and with painful emphasis. "You will have to resign yourself to a service to the gods that is riddled with superstition and priestly delusion, that demands the belief in miracles, that is based on the idolatry of priestly master-men. You will also have to come to terms with an army of foreign gods that you have barely known by name. Perhaps your yes has been bought too cheaply with a glittering, highly paid position. Whoever enters the High Sun

It is said that the Nordic soul soon learns to wander on crooked paths when the body walks through the dead-straight streets of the city of priests. And all the floral splendour of the temple gardens cannot replace the trampled white rose of spiritual freedom. This is what your brother Odil thinks in his innermost heart, who sits in full independence as a scientific worker on the old solar observatory of Agni and is almost removed from the spiritual compulsion of the High Gate."

Warga sat down next to his father on the stone parapet of the water basin and took hold of his slender hand.

"You speak as if you attended all the priestly schools in Atlantis and were dismissed with the judgement 'unsuitable for the priestly profession'," she laughed with a little malice.

"I am convinced that this judgement would still be very favourable, indeed that I would have been returned to civil life with pleasant speed after completing the first year of training," Weeling Gadirus replied. "And you know that I am not one of those unwavering people whose soul icing has led to the complete negation of the divine in nature and in the human soul as a counter-effect to the excesses of the Atlantean belief in gods. I am convinced that the Nordic

The race bears a heavy responsibility, which it owes to the all-paternal power, this power which we do not know, but which we sense in the workings and endeavours of our souls, our character, our abilities, and which we believe to be found in the lawfulness of the divine image of meaning, the sun; whose nature is not rigid immutability, but flowing development; which will not stop at the course of the suns when the time has come."

"Even the Honourable Father does not deny the deity," interjected the daughter of Gadirus, as if she wanted to steer the conversation in a certain direction.

"That's what my clever Warga says," replied the high school teacher.

"But the clever Warga knows that the opposite pole of the divine lies beneath the threshold - the High Sun Gate," nodded the gardener with a half-smile.

Mr Weeling Ase Gadirus took his beautiful child's hands in his and gazed with wonder and emotion into the young girl's blue eyes. For a moment the realisation dawned on him that his daughter's decision to accept the offer of the first clergyman of the realm had special, deeper reasons and backgrounds, but then he dismissed this thought. How could it be possible that a young thing like his Warga could think like a mature man, that she could

would enter the shining kennel of the High Sun Gate as an enemy, with royal disregard for all the exceptional rights that service in the Priestly Administration of the Empire would grant her?

At the entrance to the canal where Gadirus' house stood, the bell of a small galley sounded, warning of collisions at the junction of the waterways.

"Mother!" Warga Gadirus shouted and released herself from her father's hands. Father and daughter stepped up to the stone steps and returned the cheerful waves that greeted them from the boat.

With the dexterity that comes from years of habit, Warga's mother leapt ashore and, as was only right with such good fortune befalling her daughter, she embraced her beautiful child as if it were a foregone conclusion that refusing the offer of the High Sun Gate must be beyond the realm of possibility. And Warga's decision in the meantime proved her right.

"I will ask the Honourable Father to grant me an interview, because I must thank him for my child's happiness," she said with great vivacity, which gave her the southern blood of her Egyptian ancestors. "Are you happy too, my girl?" she asked immediately afterwards. "Very much, Mrs Mother," replied Warga Gadirus.

--- IN THE WAR TEAM

Once you had crossed the mighty, granite pillar bridge over the innermost ring canal of the city of Atlantis, the canal which, according to Plato's description, enclosed the triple giant rampart of Asgard Castle to a width of six hundred feet, you passed a double guard of brass-flashing warriors and entered a tunnel-like gate. It pierced the oppressive depths of the lowest rampart and first opened onto a narrow courtyard, the front wall of which dominated the tunnel exit with looming embrasures. The courtyard gave the impression of a shaft deep inside the earth, and anyone looking upwards could see the stars twinkling in the black-blue sky on a bright day. Nevertheless, it was not dark in the courtyard shaft because the pewter-clad, soaring walls scattered a dull but perfectly adequate light onto the floor covered with light grey marble slabs.

Outside the centre of the tunnel on both sides

Further gates led into the interior of the castle, only to reunite behind the room with battle embrasures and penetrate the entire mass of the fortress as a vaulted passage. On the other side, the tunnel reached the circular canal again in the same barrier arrangement, which was spanned by a similar covered and tower-armoured pillar bridge as on the other side.

Immediately behind the inner barrier fortress, the path rose in two new tunnel gates to the right and left of the courtyard hall in a gentle slope to the side, so that carriages and riders could reach the platforms of the second and third ramparts, albeit not exactly comfortably. For pedestrians, very narrow and equally steep stone steps rose close to the aforementioned tunnel gates, which led directly to the first of the enclosures in sixty-eight steep inclines without any bends or resting landings.

The tunnel and stairway entrances lay under the threat of the side courtyard walls, which, apart from several bronze-fitted oak doors, only showed a series of long and very narrow hatches. As bright and radiant as the castle of the Nordic Aesir lay outside in the blinding sunlight of the eternal spring of the northern latitudes, inside the warlike seriousness of a strong-willed master race weighed heavily on the soul of each of the rare visitors who gained access to the Troia of Atlantis.

On the echoing slabs of the tunnel courtyard, whose walls were not enlivened or interrupted by a single bench, a single well or even a modest wall niche apart from the shooting hatches, a watchman walked up and down day and night, his bronze helmet reflecting the strange white light of the glistening pewter panelling of the courtyard shaft walls. The man wandered calmly and boredly around the quadrangle of the dungeon-like courtyard with a softly sounding defence harness, occasionally stopping in front of a high oak door on the left, above which the lightning-like victory rune of the Norse people was carved; for the initiated, a hint that the Imperial War Office had its offices behind the bronze humps. And when the sentry had sufficiently contemplated the familiar sun symbols of the metal fittings, he wandered on with a sigh and stopped with a more affectionate look in front of a door on the right, behind which lay his home of arms. The quarters of the three chosen hundreds who, according to ancient tradition, formed the peacekeeping crew of Asgard. Although it was a great honour to be counted among the sword-bearers and men of royal Troia, service in the countless offices and sub-offices, with the leaders and councillors of state in person and, last but not least, high up in the rooms and halls of the Allfather's fiefdom was a real challenge.

and the associated royal palace was an activity that offered little variety and made no small demands on patience.

When a new hundred men moved into Asgard as a replacement, the joy of finally gaining official access to the mysterious underground and above-ground rooms of the ancient fortress provided a kind of mental boost for two or three weeks at most. But after a relatively short time, the tall Northmen, accustomed to sun and light, longed to get back on the backs of their fiery horses, to march through mountains and valleys, to practise together with the Imperial fleet and then land on the flat beach of some island of the States, where the beach was taken by storm with a felled spear through rolling surf. And the evil enemy stood on the shore in the form of curious young girls and adolescent boys, waving cheerily with scarves and wooden swords.

The echoing tunnels, the gloomy courtyards and stone canyons of the royal castle, the low, cool halls of the accommodation rooms, in which the bronze cots stood four high because of the limited space, the dining rooms with the endless rows of stone tables and benches, on which one literally never got completely warm, at least from below, weighed on the minds of the young

warriors. They therefore greeted the annual replacement with never openly shown, but all the greater inner rejoicing and heartily granted their successors the high honour of guarding the king and the scribal souls in the high and highest imperial offices. There was actually nothing at all to guard in these uninterrupted times of peace in Asgard. Some of the young commanders expressed the outrageous idea among their brothers in arms that a half-dumb night watchman was enough for the whole of Asgard and that he should be posted in the large tunnel behind the pier bridge so that he could at least occasionally see the mastheads of a royal galley or a merchant ship as they sailed under the bridge arch. Very important greenhorns in helmets and tunics even thought it was enough to put up a stuffed manikin with a brass hat and a tin knife, but that was all just youthful talk. None of the swordsmen and warriors of Asgard would have missed their time on guard duty near the king of the realm.

After all, there was sometimes a nice change in the dull monotony of the days. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly for the guard, a king or even several kings from some of the member states from the south and north would appear, the entourage had to be accommodated and kept guard of honour, fragments of conversations could be overheard, which could be heard through the air shafts from the

The sound of the sounds of the Asgard's corridors resounded in the depths, and you could guess what was brewing in the minds of the highest rulers. You could also see distinguished and very beautiful women, who were usually so curious that the Asgard of Atlantis would have had to be much more sinister and desert to satisfy the ladies. Sometimes strange guests with brown, red, yellow or black skin colour, with depressed, serious or even embarrassed grinning faces, small or tree-length figures, overloaded with gold and precious stones; Often also coal-black fellows who smelled very ugly and wore veritable crowns of coloured feathers on their greased skulls, and who brought with them such a numerous retinue of ape-like humanity that the really very spacious guest halls at the atriums of Asgard were sometimes insufficient and only a fraction of the people could find accommodation in the castle.

With anxious, mistrustful expressions, they crept through the main tunnel, and with beaming, smiling faces they left again, visibly glad to have escaped the gloomy maze of halls, tunnels, staircases and stone canyons. And outside, between the short watchtowers on the arched bridge, they looked round again almost regularly, gazing back for a long time at the towering fortress of the white gods, the sun children of Allfather, and

took the deep, indelible impression of the overwhelming and inescapable power of the northern will with them to their distant homelands in Africa, Gondwana, Tiahusinyu or India.

The sentry in the gleaming silver canyon could see through the entrance tunnel along the wide access road, the so-called Asgard road over the pillar bridge into the city, could easily see how the double guard at the royal bridge asked the visitors to Troia, as far as they were unknown to them, for their sealed permits, and could recognise at a great distance whether a member of the royal house of Torgaard was coming.

Although the castle housed the core government offices of a nation of forty million people, the traffic in the halls and corridors was not particularly lively. An empire that had enjoyed unbroken peace for thousands of years in the motherland of Atlantis, with a strong hand and guided by clever minds, no longer needed new regulations and government measures; rather, the few tried and tested general laws were sufficient to give the administration the stability and security that always occurs when there is as little government as possible. Large branches of administration were left to the federal councils and municipalities, and the imperial offices could limit themselves to occasional and invisible involvement if friction arose in any part of the island kingdom.

appeared. Only the Imperial Office for War and that for Trade and Shipping were staffed by a larger number of officials, because wars at border marks always remained a necessity, and foreign trade to the Marches and the lands of foreign suzerainty required a secure and unified command of the Empire.

Therefore, when rare footsteps resounded from the dark mouths of the tunnel ends with a strange clattering echo and an official disappeared into one of the heavy doors, the guard in the hall hardly looked to see who it might be, and only when a higher war leader clanked across the marble slabs did the guard take up position at the end wall and continue his restless rounds when the gentleman had disappeared into the maw of a stairwell. Across the King's Bridge came the supreme head of the Imperial War Office, Mr Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping. He wore a leather tunic, a short riding staff in his hand because he had come from a morning ride, and a worn leather cap on his white head, the only decoration of which was a golden buckle with a few blue sapphires. His groom walked beside him with long, broad strides, entertaining his high superior with expert talk about foal breeding in the first equestrian division of Asgard, and was of the opinion that the state breeding centre on the isle of Guttorn could do well with its

He thought that the results of the breeding programme would not be the same if they were compared with those of the riding section. Although Mr Ase Köpping did not fully share the opinion of his horse-caring friend, he nevertheless decided to agree with him to a certain extent, cast a scrutinising glance at the gleaming golden royal round of the top floor of the Asgard and entered the echoing tunnel entrance with heavy boot steps.

The guard in the pewter hall had taken up position on the looming front wall and fixed his grey eyes firmly on the high superior, in whose hands the fate of the war of several armies of the empire was united in the border marks of all directions of the wind circle.

"Good morning," said Mr Köpping in a deep voice that ran up the metal walls of the courtyard gorge like a mouthpiece.

"Good morning, Mr Burgrave," the guard replied expectantly.

"Has the king ridden out?"

"Yes. An hour ago, with the Lord Duke Witt- mund Acora and the King's maiden Armane, Mr Gunnar Ase Gepide from the court service of the heir to the throne as escort."

"Thank you. - Is anyone waiting in the hall of the war office?"

"Yes, the chamberlain of the Venerable Father, Mr Odil Ase Gadirus of the Agni Solar Observatory. Mr

Sergeant Benter Güllmer from the Zimbabuye relief group. Mrs Idane Ase im Bruck, the widow of the harasser who fell in the uprising in Schoongard, and a cavalry leader whom I do not know, but who had a seal pass from the office."

"It's good - "

"Good morning, Mr Burggraf."

The head of the War Office entered his domain with the calm and indifference of longstanding custom. At the threshold of the heavy oak door, he turned round once more:

"Call me the leader of the third Asgard Hundred, Mr Baldur Ase Wieborg," he said briefly and closed the gate behind him.

A narrow corridor, roofed with huge, overhanging stone slabs, was cut through every hundred paces by a narrow light and air shaft and curved to match the huge round building on the lowest floor, in front of the deep pillared halls and narrow offices, which received their meagre light from small windows in the outside of the ring wall. Through the small windows, one could see the shimmering, green-yellow canal water and, in the distance, a tangle of roofs and gardens. Occasionally, a ship's mast with the bulbous roundel of a white sail would pass by the small openings in improbable proximity, reminding us that the last and innermost navigable canal was close by.

behind the thick walls of the War Office. A cold heaviness weighed down the rooms of the most important administrative centre of Atlantis, as if one could physically feel the immense pressure of the masses of rock above. In any case, from the outside it was very easy to keep a cool head in these rooms, which is essential for the officials of a war office.

The study of Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping, actually more a large hall than a room, was furnished with a simplicity that almost bordered on poverty, and an uninitiated visitor would not have thought it possible that here, with a few strokes of the scratching pen on coloured leather, the fate of entire peoples could be decided anywhere on the vast earth and had often been decided in the course of the many thousands of years of the empire's history.

Massive, age-grey table tops made of polished andesite, shiny at the rounded edges from centuries of use, rounded off the moderate square pillars, which were set directly into the rough, stone ceiling without capitals or decorative heads. Deep undercuts in the table tops allowed for comfortable seating, and the hard, cleanly scrubbed oak stools were usually pushed under the tables so that they could be pulled out when a larger number of people were present at larger meetings.

participants. On these tables, partly unfolded, partly stacked in high packets, lay the maps of the empire drawn on suede, the work of the Land Survey Group, which was active in many subdivisions in the border marks and on the islands of the mother empire and entered any changes in the maps of the War Office every five years. The nautical charts of the supreme naval command were also kept at the War Office. The two imperial offices worked together and had to work together because Atlantis was a maritime state, so a fleet without an army was inconceivable and vice versa. The management of both offices was also in the hands of one person, namely Burgrave Köpping. The nautical charts with their astronomical entries were processed by the imperial solar observatories, which had special training ships for this purpose in order to preserve the closeness to nature for the next generation of scientists, which was only possible through constant observation in the open sky under constantly changing star positions. The starry sky had always been the daily bread of longing for the Vikings of the north, and as the nights in the time of the kingdom of Atlantis passed without the light disturbances of a moon, because there was no moon yet, observations were always possible as long as the night lasted, provided that in rare cases the clouds did not hinder them.

At one of the small windows stood the burgrave's stone work table, chiselled from ordinary andesite lava and polished smooth like the pillar tables. As the lighting was sometimes not quite sufficient for the old eyes of the high official, a polished brass mirror from the deep, embossed window embrasure cast the flickering light of the water mirror in front of the fortress onto the centre of the work plan.

The old army commander sat down in the heavy, wooden armchair that had served the entire line of his predecessors and therefore groaned softly under the weight of his tall, writhing body, and picked up the few letters that had arrived from Tiahusinyu on last night's express boat. The Burgrave of Aztlán sent his half-yearly report, requested agricultural equipment and high-quality breeding stock and asked that the attached statement of salaries, material expenses and tax receipts be forwarded to the Imperial Accounting Office. This was followed by a summary of punishments, several petitions for clemency to the king, a short list of promotions in the upper army positions of the Tiahnsinyu Highlands border region and finally a sketch map of newly developed mining operations in the Andes, which Mr Köpping had requested.

A defence hanger clanked outside the door to the next room. A young swordsman who was condemned to it,

to work in the army office for a few years and had the satisfaction of convincing all young labourers that the leadership of the empire owed its smooth running only to their own youthful efficiency, stood waiting on the threshold.

Without turning round, the burgrave asked, "Well?"

"Mr Baldur Wieborg is waiting for orders," replied the swordsman in an official voice.

"Yes. Shall wait. - There's still the widow from Schoongard ..."

"Mrs Idane im Bruck, Mr Burggraf."

"I'll ask you first," the old man decided and rose to prepare a stool for his visit.

A young woman appeared somewhat agitated in the Pillar Hall, which she entered for the first time in her life, and immediately made her request with words she had obviously learnt. Her husband had been killed in the uprising of the Negro labourers in the plantations of the High Sun Gate in Schoongard, and now she was only receiving her widow's pension as the widow of an ordinary flock leader and not a sword leader, and that was not right. Her husband had been promoted in the meantime and since ...

With the patient kindness that is a matter of course to old, chivalrous hearts, the Burgrave listened to the obviously very aggrieved woman, used a pause, the

He then listened with exemplary patience to what his guest had to say about the same thing in other words. In the course of the very long speech, the high gentleman extracted the essentials from the abundant accessories and stated that the appointment of the leader of the flock as sword-wielding knight had been made a few days too late, i.e. after his death, when not much was known in Asgard about the uprising in Schoongard. And while the inexhaustible flow of words rippled over the white head of the supreme head of the war office, his hand wrote a few marks with a scratching pen on thin, coloured leather, marks that brought forward the promotion of the fallen warrior by a few days. And when the black-clad Frau Idane im Bruck paused from exhaustion after a long time, she learnt that the order to the army treasury in Schoongard would leave on the Imperial Fleet's transport boat "Widder" after six days, as the appointment of the Herr Schwertführer im Bruck had been made too late by mistake.

Mistakenly, said the old knight, and Mrs Idane was wise enough to know that it was no mistake.

"If you wish, Mrs Idane, the skipper of the government galley will take you to Schoongard free of charge," said the burgrave. "Perhaps

incidentally, a short letter to the office would have been enough to settle the matter, but I am pleased to have met the widow of a brave knight."

Then Mrs Idane was suddenly outside before she knew it, and for many weeks afterwards she felt remorseful that she had not thanked the charming old gentleman properly, i.e. in a longer speech.

"I request the High Chamberlain Gadirus and the Swordsman Wieborg," the Burgrave ordered his master on duty.

The summoned people entered.

When the three men had taken their seats at the work table, the burgrave pulled a folded scroll made of wafer-thin leather from his pocket and carefully spread it out in front of him. Leaning his head on his broad, white hand, he immersed himself for a long time in the rows of names, which were written very close together, and half-read aloud the name Odil Ase Gadirus, which could be found among the names.

The star wise man of the solar observatory Agni high up on the crater rim of the extinct volcano Urdgram looked at the swordsman Baldur Wieborg with a smile.

"This is very unpleasant for me," said Mr Herbing Ase Köpping, more to himself than to his guests. Then it became quiet again in the cool pillared hall, only the long drawn-out call of a sailor who had something to tell his skipper sounded through the open window.

"After all, I am very grateful to you, Sir Chamberlain," continued the Burgrave. "It is not unimportant to know such things." And then, after another pause, came the question. "When did the members of the royal house listed here join the secret society?"

"The brother of the Lord King of the Realm was already a member when I was inducted a year ago at Baldur Wieborg's suggestion. The duke, on the other hand, and the king's son Siegbert were inducted six weeks ago," Odil Gadirus replied matter-of-factly.

"So the heir to the ducal throne too!" grumbled the burgrave discontentedly. He was visibly embarrassed. Then he thought for a while and made an uncertain decision, which he didn't mean at all, but which seemed to be an immediate way out:

"The whole thing should simply be handed over to the Imperial Security Office - what do you think, Baldur?"

The young swordsman kept an impenetrable expression, although he would have liked to laugh.

"You need only order it, Mr Burgrave, but I fear it would not be a satisfactory solution," replied Mr Wieborg, adding. "However, if you want to hear my own opinion, which is formed in the manner of young people without regard to high personalities, I am prepared to tell you."

The old gentleman raised his hand imploringly, even though

His smile said how well he knew his subordinate Baldur Wieborg and also knew his opinion in advance: "You'd better tell me your opinion, as if you had grown up in the direct service of the royal court and understood how to take into account the towering difficulties that this unpleasant matter harbours."

"Without a doubt, the case belongs in another office," Baldur replied in a clear voice. "So we could make it easy for ourselves. But that was not the purpose of having my friend Odil Gadirus deal with the question of secret societies as head of the Imperial Office. We men of war are not security guards against crimes and misdemeanours, but only guard the borders of the realm against the enemy of the realm. A submission of the letter to the Imperial Security Office in the Asgard would lead to a quick settlement, which is very desirable for some authorities ..."

"I know," Mr Köpping interjected in a huff. "I read the name of the first head of the security office and the names of several senior officials on the compilation. Acora's example quickly set a precedent. If we give this document to the office responsible for it, it will disappear forever. - Does the king know about this?"

The last question did not really require an answer, so the burgrave was surprised when he heard a firm "yes". He felt as if he hadn't quite understood what

the young swordsman Wieborg said unexpectedly and equally unwelcome. The high war officer looked up in astonishment and fixed his piercing old eyes on the younger man.

Yes," Mr Wieborg repeated steadfastly.

There was a long, depressed silence. A ship's bell barked muffled and then suddenly rang out as the galley passed under the window. But only for a brief moment, then the echo was swallowed up and fell silent.

"Proof!" ordered Mr Ase Köpping briefly.

"The king's maid Armane listened to the lord scold the duke," the swordsman reported calmly.

"So there," said Mr Köpping. "A swordsman in Asgard has such things of the highest importance to the state told to him by the daughter of the heir to the ducal throne."

For the first time, the radiant smile, for the sake of which his friends liked to call him by his first name Baldur, slipped over the young warrior's serious features.

"It was a strange coincidence, Mr Burgrave," he said, immediately becoming serious and official again. "Mrs Armane is a young girl and last year she always wanted to play ball with me when I came into the garden of the Allfather's estate during my surveillance rounds. And this year it's not much

has changed. The tall woman may no longer show that she is still a child, but she is always there when I walk through the park, and then she tells me this and that, and I listen. Sometimes something of national importance comes out. For example, she told me that the Lord King of the Realm had disowned the heir to the throne because he had allowed himself to be accepted into the Holy Alliance. The All-Father's Fiefdom had shaken in the process. I replied cautiously that the covenant was, as I had heard, under the patronage of the Honourable Father in Urd, so why had the Lord Imperial King been so wicked? The king's maid did not know. But I was satisfied even so, for I knew once the opinion of the Lord King of the Realm and then the membership of the Lord Duke Wittmund Acora. Later it was confirmed to me by my friend Odil Gadirus."

"I don't want to attach as much importance to the case as I thought I had to at first," declared the head of the Imperial War Office with the clear instruction that he intended to retreat. As Mr Wieborg's mouth was not yet shut, however, he cautiously said that there was only one oath in Atlantis, and that was the oath of Asgard, which was taken to the imperial king. If civil men without a royal obligation took a special oath to the Lord of the High Sun Gate or his representatives, which would be administered to them in spiritual matters, perhaps

If, however, members of the imperial army were to take this oath, it was more than questionable. However, if members of the imperial army took this oath, it was more than questionable, because one had to ask oneself which of the two oaths was valid in a serious case. At the very least, such a double oath must lead to spiritual discord, especially if one of the oaths is a blind one, on which the High Sun Gate can demand whatever it pleases.

"You see something black, dear Baldur," said Mr Köpping, without being able to escape the effect of the young man's words.

"As far as I know, the oaths of the secret brotherhoods do not refer to things that contradict the law, at least this is tacitly assumed when the oath is taken."

"I don't think I'm seeing black, but - I beg your forgiveness because of the sharp contrasts between the terms - clear as day," the swordsman contradicted, and for the first time the coolness required by dealings with high government authorities left him on the outside. "The Honourable Father of Urd, but even more so his spiritual councillors and high chamberlains - I could name any number of names that I learnt from my ally Odil Gadirus, but I will refrain for now - have been deliberately and systematically overrunning the islands of the realm and the

Border markers with a network of secret societies that do not correspond to our Asian nature, that are the opposite of what our Nordic soul demands: Freedom of mind, cleanliness, clarity, honour. - What is priestly power? Spreading superstition and fear of ghosts. What is divine magic? Unclear enthusiasm. Who created the avenging gods of the underworld, who are supposed to avenge the iniquities of corrupt humanity? We northerners do not. Without the help of priests, we recognise where the sandal pinches us in our character. Honour and responsibility before the divine part in our breast are enough for us to live as befits our blood and soul. Who has shamefully distorted our natural service to the sun into idolatry, so that the death of innocent animals should now atone for human weaknesses? It is a small step from the slaughter of animals to human sacrifice. There are more than enough examples among the lower-race border peoples; and no one learns such disgusting folly faster than idolatrous priests, who must colour the free, clean spirit red ..."

"Mr Baldur Ase Wieborg," the burgrave interrupted his young subordinate, and his white, ring-adorned hand rose and fell in an almost imperceptible movement, "when we men of war talk about the relationship between the state and the Porte, we are always somewhat prejudiced. - You see, Baldur,

If I were a young swordsman and Asgardase like you, and we were what I hope we are today, friends and kindred spirits, then my heart and my Viking soul would have flown to your breast as if Baldur Wie- borg were a girl of compelling charm. But now you see an old fellow before you, and the white hair is always or mostly incredulous, suspicious and cautious. The older I have become, the less often I have forbidden. When you're young, you always want to forbid things and think that's the art of controlling people. Secret societies can only be kept down for a short time with prohibitions or even by force. In this respect, they are like a plant in Mrs Warga Gadiru's sacred gardens, which you cut back and then don't have to be surprised when it sprouts up twice as happily."

"And the cut through the root, Mr Burggraf?" Mr Herbing Ase Köpping laughed: "The sword of youth again."

"Means spirit and word. - The rest can be taken over by the bronze blade under certain circumstances. But that probably won't even be necessary if the countermeasures are taken in time. A chair at the Imperial College for General Humanities in Atlantis would be enough for me to start with ..."

"Baldur, Baldur, your mind is travelling a dangerous path," replied the old burgrave. "I confess to you openly

that I don't want to go. I know the force of the thought. It won't let go, it's as tenacious as a fever fly, it keeps coming back. - And the rest? The High Sun Gate has already extinguished many a fire spirit that wanted to approach priestly power with the flame to burn out what was crying out for the embers."

"There are flames that are difficult to extinguish," Baldur Wieborg replied with forced calm. "Yes, those who welcome the water, who scatter it around them in spraying clouds of mist ..."

"The king recently spoke of your transfer to the border march of Mitteland," Mr Köpping interrupted the young swordsman. Baldur nodded unmoved.

"To burn out the flame," he said coolly. "We're at war in the border march of Mitteland, and there's room for thoughtful heads behind the waterway of the Skybearer. I know the age-old custom, and I am the last to revile it because it has stood the test of time. I have reckoned with such a transfer, and for this reason I have told you, Mr Burgrave, of my worries. They are the worries of a greenhorn, inexperienced in administration and statesmanship. But I have the impression that I have only said what you have known for a long time and what your worries are centred on. You are in good hands with the Burgrave of Asgard. If I were of a different opinion, I would have remained silent."

"How you can tickle the old man of war's white hair!" smiled Mr Köpping.

"Blonde young girls' heads and white hair are often a challenge," explained Baldur Wieborg. "The opposites pull with mysterious force, one hand here, the other there."

"It seems to me that we have left the factual ground of our discussion," said the Burgrave, suddenly serious and cold.

"Then I may return to the middle of the matter-of-factness," replied Mr Wieborg. "This time, however, Mr Odil Gadirus will have to speak, and I can listen."

The head of the War Office turned his old, grey eagle eyes expectantly to the stargazer from the Agni observatory, who in the meantime had unfolded a map of the heavens on which the constellations of both celestial hemispheres known at the time and accessible to the naked eye were marked.

"Not too learned!" begged the old gentleman. "We might think ourselves too small in front of you, Mr Chamberlain, and our self-esteem suffers as a result."

Odil Ase Gadirus assured him with a smile that he would endeavour not to be too scientific. He also only wanted to talk about things that were known, namely the wandering star Heldung, which was named after the first discoverer almost thirty thousand years ago and which

was given this name on an occasion that had serious consequences for the city and the islands of the kingdom of Atlantis.

"I know," nodded the burgrave. "When the small wandering star Heldung passed by, floods and earthquakes are said to have caused untold damage. The blame was placed on the small celestial body. The views of the astrologers of the day were divided. - And now?"

"I suspect that a close collision of the orbital branch of the earth far from the sun and the orbital branch of the mutable star Heldung close to the sun will cause effects similar to those of thirty thousand years ago," explained Mr Odil Ase Gadirus with an indifferent calm, as if it were only a scientific discussion and not an event that could bring undreamt-of disaster to the earth.

"The matter is becoming unclear," the burgrave interjected.

"It will suffice if I make known the opinion of several observatory directors of the empire," Odil Gadirus continued. "The dangerous convergence of the two stars Earth and Heldung will take place in exactly five years. The orbital periods of both transducers have been determined by millennia of precise observation to such an extent that we are even able to indicate the number of days since the star Heldung will hover past the Earth with a slight excess of speed ..."

"Something difficult again ..." grumbled the old man. "Did you understand everything, Baldur?"

"Yes, Lord Burgrave," the swordsman confirmed. "My friendship with Odil Gadirus has borne fruit. I assure you, however, that I have put my friend's patience to a severe test and that I regret the nerve centre in my brain that harbours an understanding of astronomy due to a lack of comprehension."

The Burgrave hid a smile and asked for the lecture to continue.

"This time, the dangerous proximity will not reach the level that our people experienced thousands of years ago," continued the Star Sage of Agni. "And when the threatening days have passed, we will again have several millennia before the dangerous proximity is repeated. I say 'dangerous' proximity on purpose, because we know that less dangerous proximities are more frequent. - When the event first occurred in its severe form, the Asen people and their leadership were surprised by the disaster, and the relief efforts came too late. It is said that hundreds of thousands of people drowned at that time, because the approach of the sinister star Heldung seems to have caused a movement of the waters, the causes of which we do not know, or rather do not yet know. If the event happens again in a few years' time, we will be in a better position than before, because

We know the danger and will have the opportunity to protect ourselves in some way. In the secret societies and priestly schools the knowledge of the coming danger is already being utilised, not in the way it should be, namely by combining the fight against danger into the unified leadership of the kingdom, but by the now popular form of frightening souls and the threat of punishment by heavenly or subterranean powers for alleged corruption of the human race. - Next year, when the two variable stars Earth and Heldung are in a less dangerous close position, we will have the opportunity to observe again how the High Sun Gate will analyse the event. In my capacity as spiritual chamberlain to the Papa of Urd, I would be in a position to provide more detailed information on this, but I believe I can assume that these things are essentially known. It is not my task to agree or disagree with the opinion of the High Sun Gate, but only to make suggestions to the head of the Imperial War Office as to how to counter the danger of the particularly disastrous approach of the Heroes in five years' time. The implementation of the measures to be taken is then a matter for the Reich."

"That's right," the burgrave confirmed with a slight Inclination of the white head. "A matter for the imperial king himself and the kings of the states. That the suggestion

It is self-evident that the King's Office will be responsible for the implementation of far-reaching decisions by the Royal Council, as the army and navy are the most important organisational groups in the empire. In this case, the High Sun Gate will be forced to bow unconditionally to the will of the King. - Dear Baldur, it is not necessary for you to hide your eyes by lowering your head, I can see your smile - . And I can see more clearly now. The Honourable Father has the enemy in his own ranks, for after today's conversation I see to my personal delight that Lord Chamberlain Gadirus is a champion of the Asian spirit. Your advance concerning the secret alliances, which enjoy the protective hand of the Venerable Father or local priesthoods, seems to be closely connected with the imminent passing of the changing star Heldung."

The young labourer's belt chain clinked against the door to the next room. The burgrave turned round reluctantly.

"I don't want to be disturbed," he said coolly.

"The Duchess ..."

"What about her?" asked the old gentleman, now a little friendlier.

"The Duchess orders Mr Baldur Ase Wieborg to the castle after the morning's service," the young gentleman reported. "The king's maid Armane

Acora wants to show Mr Baldur the tiny ornamental birds sent by the natural history research group from Tiahusinyu."

"It's good," smiled the burgrave, casting a sidelong glance at the leader of the third Asgard hundred. "Did you hear, Baldur?" he asked. "The king's child calls his tree-length knight."

"The Duchess's orders," Wieborg replied with a laugh.

The old man's white hand rose and moved back and forth as if to show how well he knew the young swordsman.

"We are ready," he then said. "The kingdom's observatories will be informed immediately by the king, as they must of course be called to the royal meeting this time. I offer you my thanks. - Good morning."

With that, the friends were dismissed and left the pillared hall of the Imperial War Office. Baldur bent his head under the lintel, whose glass-hard stone was perilously close to the top of his head, and followed the chamberlain Odil Gadirus, the slender, somewhat shorter scholar, through the antechamber into the flagstone-covered corridor.

The young labourer appeared again at Mr Köpping's.

"The Zeugmeister Benter Güllmer ..." he reminded the waiting officer of the relief group for the

Zimbabuye border mark in Africa. The head of the war office shook his head.

"Come closer to me first, Mr Swordmaster Adelger," he said kindly. "Would you like to be my assistant?"

"Yes, Mr Burgrave," the young man confirmed, for what else could he have said?

"Would you like to lead an Asgard hundred for a year or two, like the third that Baldur Wieborg has?"

The swordsman Adelger Ase Gaatland's blood rushed to his head. He was to become the leader of a guard group of the royal castle of Asgard? Gain access to the golden flats of the Allfather's fiefdom at any time? There was no thinking about it.

"If you suggest me to the king for this position..."

"So draw up the certificate," the old man interrupted his labourer with a kind smile. "In addition, the application to replace Baldur Wieborg and his certificate of appointment to your previous position as an assistant in the Imperial War Office. You will hand over the key to the storeroom where the copper bottles of liquid explosive fire are stored to your successor in my presence. - That takes care of everything. I'll take the leathers up to the king later. Now I would like to speak to the armourer Güllmer."

THE ORNAMENTAL BIRDS

In the meantime, the friends parted in the court ravine. The chamberlain of the Honourable Father of Urd left Asgard to return to Agni, but Baldur Wieborg entered the rooms of his hundred to change for his visit to Duchess Wittmund Acora.

The helmet of the Asgard guard still had the ancient shape that perhaps originated from the Norse voyagers when they came to Atlantis on open, narrow boats to lay the heavy Viking fists on new land with the right of the strongest. Two silver eagle wings rose high above the crest of the helmet at the sides of the bronze temple mounts, and a broad chain band of fine, interwoven gold rings closed under the chin. Three broad brass hoops spanned the leather tunic across his chest, an ancient sword with a crown of golden double spirals over the short hilt hung from the hilt, and bronze splints ran down his legs from the knee to the sandal cuffs.

This armour did not look bad on a young swordsman, and Baldur Wieborg was young enough to enjoy his beautiful eagle helmet. He had no idea that he was wearing it for the last time today. The silver sword chains still clinked at his side with warlike music, the jerkin still crunched with every step under the friction of the breastplates, which looked like pure gold but were only made of steel-hard brass. He was still the carefree, much-envied Asgardase. There were only three in the whole kingdom! That's why the tree-length farmer's son's steps bounced up the steep staircase to the first gallery as if there were no thresholds on the beautiful earth of Atlantis. Up there he had his first view of the cosmopolitan city of Atlantis lying in the lowlands, and there, in the shade of low trees behind the high rampart, stood his little stone house, which consisted of two small rooms and a kitchen. An ornamental and vegetable garden belonged to it, which Baldur Wieborg kept in exemplary order during his ample free time, thanks to his old love and devotion to his father's farming profession. House after house lined up around the entire perimeter of the first castle landing, some of them somewhat larger, others tiny like that of the swordsman Baldur Wieborg; but all of them were tucked away in flowering, shady bushes behind neat gardens. This was where most of the married officials and warriors of Asgard lived, and the circular

complex, which inevitably followed the shape of the ring fortress, looked like a single flower garden, like a cheerful wreath of roses and orchids around the mighty structure of the legendary castle of Atlantis.

The usual route up to the second circular platform led through a similar tunnel and further internal stairs or inclined walkways. But Baldur did not need to take these routes. As an Asgardian, he had free access to the armouries of the realm, which took up the entire interior of the second round platform. A guard in a brass helmet and eagle helmet, who stood in front of the wide bronze gate, the entrance to the stacking rooms, where the weapons for several hundred thousand warriors were stored and where the navy for the defence of the fortress and the countless bolts for the long-range weapons were kept, naturally recognised the swordsman Baldur Wieborg immediately and let him in.

Despite adequate ventilation through windows all around and numerous chimneys, the pillared halls of the war camp always smelled of mouldy leather and rancid grease. However, due to the frequent wars, the demand for tunics and shoes in the frontier marks had always been so great that the leather clothing didn't need to hang on the immense rows of bronze poles for more than a few years. The old armourer Heunig Schulde allegedly even fell ill when too

many new arrivals of leather goods from the bourgeois workshops of the Imperial Islands, because he needed the mouldy air just as much as other people needed the scent of the forest or the salty breeze of the wide open sea.

"Heunig Schulde, the key!" Baldur's voice boomed through the seemingly deserted pillar halls, and the echoing sound rattled angrily between the cloistered square edges of the ceiling supports around the entire building, so that the young warrior had the often-heard pleasure of hearing his cheerful voice again, grim and angry, from two sides, when it had passed through the circle of the second floor. And the call worked. Baldur's eyes had barely become accustomed to the semi-darkness of the armoury when he saw the dark figure of the Asgard armorer Schulde appear and sometimes disappear again between the stone pillars. With the certainty of years of practice, the clerk gyrated through the narrow corridors between rows of pillars and stacks of spears, shook the knight's hand companionably when he finally arrived and handed him the key to the hatch exit. This exit was on the ceiling below the garden of the royal castle. Steep, wooden stairs led up to the stone ceiling amidst the wooden racks for helmets and breasts. Up there, a heavy wooden hatch with a rolling lead counterweight folded effortlessly open.

up, and Baldur Wieborg stood in front of a dense wall of flowering bushes. The trapdoor closed behind him with a soft clatter. Baldur looked around curiously. Was the king's child Armane already waiting for him?

Right, there was a rustle nearby, the bushes parted and a delicate, tall young girl peered into the shadows for her big playmate.

"That was quick, Baldur," she said in a voice that tried in vain to hide a little cheer. Only a year ago, the king's maid had cheered without hesitation when the tree-tall captain stepped out of the trapdoor. But now she was seventeen years old, and as a Nordic girl she was still a real child, but as a royal lady she had to show restraint. And that was very difficult.

"Baldur!" Armane continued quickly. "You must take my ball. You know mum doesn't want me to play ball with you because I'm an adult, but I brought it with me because I hoped it would work..."

"So open disobedience!" said Baldur Wieborg sternly, making a face like a schoolmaster.

"Now stop it!" laughed the young girl. "Put my ball away. I can't put it under my fine dress."

"Yes, and where should I put it?" asked Mr Wieborg anxiously. "Under the tunic in the

Bag he gives a bump that the Duchess will send for the family doctor when she sees me."

"It doesn't matter," the young girl decided.

"Mother has just come from the Allfather Fiefdom and is expecting you. She's out of the way and I was just quicker. She knows your trapdoor staircase as well as I do - Baldur, take off your helmet!"

"Yes, but..." the unhappy Asgardase tried to object, but it didn't help him.

"Quick, dear, good Baldur, take off your helmet!"

Young captains melt quickly and effortlessly, when young blonde girls with fine red lips beg. He took off his helmet and had to hide the ball underneath. And when he had swept the high eagle hat back on so that the chin chain could hardly be closed again, he came up with a quite correct and simple idea, namely that of simply placing Armane's ball somewhere in the bushes where it would be easy to find it again later, until the motherly danger had passed. But it was too late for that now. Footsteps crunched on the white gravel of the path.

Baldur wiggled his head carefully. The ball was big enough not to roll around on his head. Reassured, he walked towards the heir to the duchess's throne.

Mrs Irwing Acora, the still very youthful-looking wife of the heir to the throne, Wittmund Ase Torgaard, hid a smile when Mr Wieborg complained about

bent her jewelled little hand. She knew her daughter Armane's childish crush, a crush that seemed to be growing into something else this year, and had decided to be a little cool with the young captain of Asgard today, even if it wasn't exactly easy for her. A woman had to force herself to be angry with a man like Baldur. That he had come through the trapdoor was an old custom; the duke would have laughed and allowed it, and she, too, had no objection to taking the short cut, at least in earlier years. For it was always very funny when the slim, childlike Armane used to sit at the trapdoor like a lurking cat of prey and listen into the depths to see if her playmate down in the warehouse was calling for the key. And when she heard him, she would repeat the call "Heunig Schulde, the key!" in a resounding voice, and the whole Allfather fiefdom knew that Baldur Wie- borg was now climbing into the garden of the royal castle to play ball and run after him.

Today the little daughter had not called out, although she had heard everything that was going on down in the Asgard armoury. Armane seemed to be on the mend. But if the duchess wanted to be honest - and sometimes she was - she couldn't believe that things would improve. And she was even honest enough to admit to herself that it would have been difficult for her in Armane's situation,

to harmonise outer and inner reason.

"I want you to look at Armane's tiny little ornamental birds, Mr Baldur Wieborg," said the duchess with deep seriousness, as if it were a very important matter. Her blue eyes rested coldly and absently beneath her white forehead adorned with a diadem.

The young swordsman also let all the cheerful glamour fade from his grey lights and turned his steel-grey eagle eyes firmly and full of ice-cold reverence into the eyes of the tall woman.

"Oh, how wicked you look for once, Baldur!" cried the king's maiden in horror. It was hard enough for Baldur to look like that, but he felt the high woman's deliberate hostility, and his open character involuntarily rebelled against it. But at the same moment that he heard the voice of his dear royal child, the golden spark shone again from the depths of the grey, compelling lights that formed the secret of this man's childlike, radiant nature. If this spark went out, the eagle-like features froze into a block of willful, predatory energy, and the light grey, ice-clear eyes forced many an opponent to avert their gaze, who were otherwise not in the habit of doing so.

It was therefore not surprising that a kind-hearted woman, who was the Duchess of the Realm to the core of her being, shuddered at this sight. Baldur Wieborg did not actually

He was right to oppose the coolness of the high woman, even if it was intended, with his heart-freezing iciness, but he involuntarily sensed an enemy in the wife of Acora, as the heir to the throne of the realm was called according to ancient tradition, and this only because he could not forgive the duke as a pure-blooded Asen that he had bowed to the holy secret society of the Venerable Father of Urd.

Baldur Wieborg also believed he knew the inner reasons. The duke's relationship with the king of the realm was not particularly cordial, whatever the reasons might be. It was not difficult for the highest priest of the realm to deal with this conflict, especially as Acora was an easily irritable and sensitive person who suffered from his royal father's mocking and harsh character. Highly gifted artistically, a skilled sculptor and friend of music, enthusiastic and without the natural clarity of mind of his Nordic ancestors, the duke was easily won over to the mysterious semi-darkness of the secret service of the gods. Baldur Wieborg did not yet realise that the simple and clear nature of the Duchess could not be won over to the secret cult of bound idolatrous celebrations, which was not entirely clean of soul. He believed in his still very young soul that wife and husband had to be united in such matters under all circumstances.

and in this respect he was still the greenhorn he had recently described himself as to the head of the war office. The startled exclamation of the King's girl Armane melted the ice in Baldur Wieborg's heart that had been frozen by the seemingly hostile coolness of the Duke's wife, and so Mrs Irwing Acora immediately had the opportunity to observe a lightning-fast transformation, for which she had been responsible. she was involuntarily grateful.

"I was very curious to see the little animals," explained the captain. "Mrs Armane has often told me how impatiently she awaited the arrival of the ship from the natural history research group that was supposed to bring these tiny birds."

"Mrs Armane!" said the royal child, offended. He knew perfectly well that as a young lady he was entitled to the honourable title of "woman", but from the mouth of her great playmate the word sounded almost impossible.

"Child, Mr Wieborg is quite right," said the mistress kindly, but with a gentle rebuke, which she was obliged to give as a mother. "A grown-up royal girl ..."

"That's just Baldur!" Armane denied. "He doesn't need to call me that stupid term 'woman' as if I were a shrivelled lady-in-waiting."

Baldur Wieborg thought about the ball under his helmet

and could only quietly agree with his young, slender girlfriend. As long as he was still the secret confidant of her youthful sins, the honourable "woman" did not seem quite appropriate to him either. Nevertheless, to his regret, he had to acknowledge his mother's opinion, even taking into account the fact that he was "only" Baldur. But he avoided looking at his royal child, who had to leave the other side of the duchess and tried in vain to catch an approving glance from his knight by bending his head forward.

"Where are the ornamental birds kept?" asked the swordsman to avoid the somewhat embarrassing topic of conversation.

For the time being, the little animals were sitting in a cage made of golden wire mesh, which had been removed from the large flower meadow in front of the terrace of the chimney some time ago. The Duchess said that the King of the Realm had just come from the Allfather's Fiefdom to see the miracle from Tiahnsinyu. Baldur Wieborg breathed a sigh of relief. He had feared that the rare feathered prisoners had been kept in an inner room of the Allfather's fiefdom, and then there would have been no way of avoiding having to take off the eagle's home. If he was allowed to stay outside, everything could go well.

The last trees and bushes of the royal park offer a view of the golden splendour of the Asgard

castle of Atlantis, the castle of the Nordic god-men, the children of the pure sun.

Baldur had seen the palace many times before, but he was always struck by the overwhelming splendour of the lavish wealth of precious building materials that had made the All-Father's Fiefdom what the peoples of the earth said it was: the residence of the divine on earth.

The circular layout of the royal building was rendered almost unrecognisable by a double division of axes at right angles to each other, because at the end of each axis a triple columned hall with a rectangular floor plan stood out, which therefore did not follow the original circular layout of the core complex. Although the halls were later additions to the ancient circular core of the Allvaterlehen, the Atlantean master builders had nevertheless managed to completely conceal the feature of the extensions, as the flat gabled roofs of the hall additions were flush with the circular roofing of the core building, as if it had all been created from a single mould.

White and gold was the basic mood of the overwhelming complex, and only the undersurfaces of the roof overhangs, the undersides of the huge stone beams above the shimmering columns and the depths of the groove incisions just below the ends of the pillars and column heads were shaded in clear, Atlantic blue. And it was precisely this light blue that gave the serious force of the

The castle had a little of the lightness that a dwelling intended for humans, and the Allfather's fiefdom on Asgard was such a dwelling, had to have in order to be homely.

The lavish use of the most precious building material ever known to mankind - gold - began at the height of the main cornice. Between the console-like, triple-slotted underpinnings of the roof overhang, gleaming red floral threads alternated in giant square fields with sculptural depictions from the history of the empire, and the rich colour of the precious metal glowed and sparkled almost vividly in the deep shadows cast on the entablature by the southern sun. The huge, staggered main cornice stretched like a horizontal band of shimmering silk across the columned hall as a final, snow-white line, and above it the roof, made of huge, solid gold plates, glittered in the glaring sunlight, shimmering and flashing unbearably. It was as if the entire gold supply of the old earth had been gathered here in Atlantis, just good enough to crown the honourable castle of the Aesir, here an incalculable fortune balanced with contemptuous disregard for the dead material over the radiant white of giant marble blocks and round polished column drums of translucent alabaster, as if the material values of this world were only an attempt at a

Parable for the essence of what surrounded the castle of the Asen: Spirit, will, power.

Between the pillared halls, however, it flashed flamingly. There before the drunken gaze lay the unheard-of wonder of Asgard, lay the magical spectre of unprecedented splendour, before which the envoys of foreign peoples crumpled, because all native splendour paled in comparison to that which dazzled the eye under the open sky of the central hall of the Atlantean Troia, flooded with light. Sparkling with jewels, overloaded with gold, gigantic in size and fairytale-like in the boldness of its artistic effect, the Posidene Hall's riot of colour glowed behind the quiet white of the vestibule. Covered with bluish diamonds - the ground of solid gold barely visible - the statue of the god of the sea with his rising quadruped towered ten times as high as a human being up to the circular ceiling landing with its gleaming silver consoles, followed by the blue sky as a natural round dome, in the same way a roof of the world empire of Atlantis above the hall and the earth. The image of the ruler of the sea was merely a symbol, not a god to be worshipped, but an expression of the royal Viking men's gratitude for the work of the divine in their history. Since the days of the forefathers, the sea had been the field of honour and success for this seafaring race, and through the sea it was to be

once went down, great, mighty, as it had lived.

Alternating with mermaids, their robes glimmering with coloured gemstones, stood the serious, stiff, life-size statues of the Atlantean kings, heavy and massive, made of gold, pure, yellow-red gold. And the pillared hall, which ran up to the portico, consisted of ceilings and walls of yellowish ivory, divided into huge, deep-shadowed coffers, the edges of the coffers framed with bloody rubies and black, lambent diamonds.

The square pillars of the ancient pillar hall, which were also said to be made of solid gold, stood at regular intervals and were almost modest in size.

The yellow-white ivory of the walls and dividing ceilings, however, reflected the reddish shimmer, as if the hall were soaring outrageously high; the golden, elongated pillars were also reflected in the floor, whose iridescent mother-of-pearl mosaics, alternating with slabs of rose-coloured agate, played a bewitching game of splendour and colour, a game with the precious that bordered on arrogance and madness.

Like an incomprehensible, enchanting dream, like a mirage from an unearthly world, this fiefdom of All-Father must have appeared to every foreign visitor when

he contemplated the sensational splendour, the ruthlessness in the use of inestimable masses of the rarest and most exquisite building materials, which transcended any question of cost, and compared it with the equally royal simplicity in which almost all the other rooms of Asgard were furnished. The sought-after poverty of the service and work rooms, the almost meagre furnishing of the imperial offices with interior buildings and equipment, the emphasised contempt for splendour even among the members of the families not only of the kings of the states, but also of the imperial lord Torgaard of Asgard himself, used to leave an impression on the ambassadors of foreign governments that could often resemble wars that had been won.

The stranger recognised with full right the iron strength of a dominating thought, recognised in the almost noiseless course of the work of government the force of a hard-forged direction of will towards a single goal: the state. And for the state there was a symbol for which all the treasures of the earth seemed downright bad, to which all other symbols, whatever they might be called, inevitably converged:

The Asgard of Atlantis.

Significantly, therefore, the constitution of the world empire was unanimously judged to be "worthy of wonder" throughout the world, without the inner nature of the empire and its constituent states being quietly

needed to be recognised by the working leadership. Even writers who wrote about Atlantis tens of thousands of years later included the term "worthy of admiration" in their history books, although they could hardly have had any idea of how the workings of such a giant clockwork, such as the administration of a world empire, had run.

The visible symbol of the Hall of Pillars, dominated by the diamond-covered giant image of the Atlantic Ocean, therefore remained for all time that of the best-governed empire on earth, when Atlantis was only spoken of as a legend, when the happy islands of eternal spring had long since been asleep beneath the green waves and new generations and peoples were vying for possession of the Atlantean heritage.

Mr Wieborg returned the salute of honour from the tall shield guards, who stood motionless in the blazing sun on both wings of the portico, their eagle helmets and brannas glowing like burning fire. With blue and grey eyes, the two peered in secret curiosity at their captain, who walked slowly past them with the duchess and the royal child Arma-ne, imperceptibly sending them a special greeting with his eyes in the familiar manner of a comrade.

Baldur Wieborg soon saw the king of the realm, when he and the women had walked almost halfway round the Allfather's fiefdom, past the southern

Colonnaded hall in front of the living quarters of the ducal family.

The first knight of the kingdom of Atlantis, King Warager Ase Torgaard, sat on a linen-covered folding chair in front of the golden latticework of a spacious cage and watched the marvellous buzzing and dancing of the tiny insect-like birds, which had survived the sea voyage from their mainland home of Tiahnsinyn to Atlantis alive for the first time. The scientific research group had thus achieved a masterly feat, as not even half of the several hundred feathered dwarves sent along had died. The most careful care on board, very warm weather and smooth seas had been favourable to the little guests, and now, in the warm sun of the Atlantic spring, they seemed to feel very much at home.

The king of the realm turned his mighty white head just a little as the duchess approached him with the two young people. But he had obviously noticed Baldur approaching with the ladies beforehand, in spite of his deep absorption.

"Captain Wieborg," he said briefly. "Pleased to see you." Then he turned his full attention back to the ornamental birds, whose iridescent plumage and long, delicate tails fluttered around the flowers of the potted plants in the kennel.

The king's child took the sword wielder by the

hand and pulled him closer to the cage, and the punishing gaze of the duke's wife was hopelessly lost in the young girl's delight. Baldur, however, had the vague feeling that he must not come too close and resisted. He gave the king's child a pleading look, which fortunately was understood this time. The captain of Asgard would not come near the cage without a special request from the king.

He gazed in silence at the broad back of his royal master and the white-yellow hair peeking out from under a simple green cloth cap. When Mr Wieborg had been a newcomer to Asgard, he had imagined, like almost all young people in Atlantis, that a king of the realm always had to wear something like a crown or at least a tiara on his head and an ermine cloak around his shoulders. He had learnt in the meantime that this was by no means the case. The high lord, of whose ruthless and capricious character the world knew many true and untrue tales and stories, sat here peacefully in front of a birdcage like a peasant landowner in a green cloth jerkin, high-laced, sturdy sandals and armed with a thin cane. The only distinguishing feature for those in the know was the royal ring on the index finger of the right hand holding the cane, and this ring bore the hagal rune engraved in relief

on an egg-shaped sapphire, which was darker in the lower layers of its structure than in the upper layers. The rune was therefore a bright, watery green-blue on a deep-coloured background and glowed with a wonderful fire that seemed to come from the stone itself.

"Very nice!" said the king, half to himself.

"The research group gave me a real pleasure. Shall not be forgotten." The gentleman seemed to be in a good mood. He wasn't often. People called him prickly, mischievous. In any case, he had to be handled with care. For the moment, however, he seemed to be harmless. The king's child Armane therefore decided to make a small advance in favour of her knight Wieborg.

"Grandad," she said in a bright voice, "can Baldur look at the animals too?"

The king raised his angular skull and slowly turned round on his folding chair. The eighty-year-old man's features showed something like an amused smile. The white goatee twitched on his chin. Ice-grey, cold and, out of habit, suspicious eyes were fixed on the huge, slender figure of his sword-wielder, who stood erect next to the duchess, curious to see what would come next.

"So Baldur should see the animals," he roughly repeated his blonde granddaughter's words. "Baldur may, Baldur should stand next to me, but

come quietly and carefully. Otherwise the Baldur will scare the animals away."

Despite the obvious mockery, Mr Wieborg could not be angry with the old gentleman inside, especially as the king now held out his broad, wrinkled hand, which was soft and cool and whose pressure lasted only a very short time.

Baldur stood next to the king, and Armane began her explanation without paying much attention to the stern grandfather's presence. She just avoided saying "Baldur" again in his presence; instead, it always came out as "Mr Baldur" in a very civilised manner. She could not yet decide on "Mr Wieborg". But it could be changed. The little birds, which had previously flown around cheerfully and without any visible shyness in their golden prison, suddenly began to flutter anxiously and fly irrationally against the mesh wires. Baldur Wieborg thought that the helmet with its soaring eagle wings must be to blame. The mighty wings frightened the tiny animals.

And then disaster struck.

"Take off your helmet, Wieborg," the king ordered. "You can put it on the grass back there. - Animals are afraid."

The Captain of Asgard took a few steps back and looked at his royal child with an indescribable expression. Armane did not know whether she should laugh or

and Baldur didn't know either.

"You are to take off your helmet and then stand beside me again," repeated the king, whose suspicious eye involuntarily noticed the young man's hesitation.

Baldur Wieborg thought that fate must now take its course, obediently unfastened the broad scale chain under his chin and saw how the royal child held both hands in front of his red mouth. Then the captain made a lightning-fast bow, almost down to the ground, and - for the time being - had the ball and the secret tucked away in his helmet. With one swing, the beautiful brass hat hit the grass and the ball had the foresight not to roll out.

With a beaming face, his blond, tight hair somewhat dishevelled, Mr Wieborg stepped back next to his king and looked down kindly into his cold, grey eyes, which rested scrutinisingly on the young warrior's forehead.

"Helmet's a bit tight," growled the gentleman. "Let someone else have it." The old eyes did not let up.

Baldur did not even think of averting his eyes. On the contrary, he looked at his royal master with such heart-winning friendliness that Warager Ase Torgaard's hard, old face twisted into a laugh. He cast a scrutinising glance at the helmet, quickly observing the features of his daughter-in-law and the slender, tall Armane,

and then his attention turned back to the captured prisoners.

"Expect visitors," he said after a while.

Baldur Wieborg took this as an invitation to leave that could not be misinterpreted, so he took a step towards the spot where his beautiful eagle helmet was waiting in the grass.

"Stop. You stay, Mr Wieborg," said the king, stretching out his hand as if to hold the captain. "Do you know who's coming?"

"No, Mr Reichskönig."

"Herzog and Papas," the gentleman explained briefly.

By Papas he meant the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi of the Sun Deity Urd, the supreme priest of Atlantis.

"Want to see me give the pet birds freedom," continued Mr Warager Torgaard. "Don't like cages. Knows how golden walls take your breath away. Air, freedom and light, my son - which is the most important?"

"For the Asen or the animals, Lord King of the Realm?" asked Baldur Wieborg calmly.

"For man, for Ase," the master replied and turned his cold eyes up to the captain's bright lights once more.

"Freedom of thought, Mr King," Baldur decided. "You create your own light and air."

"Look!" growled the prince, whistling softly to himself

. "Misunderstood stuff, Mr Wieborg? Freedom? Freedom of thought? I've heard the expression before. Makes me smile when I hear it. - Young people say it easily. Think they've said something very clever. But often fools, unclear brains. At worst, flattering cats with bright eyes."

"Such men are cured at the border markers until they have become wise, Mr Reichskönig," replied the captain.

"You shall have the opportunity to heal, Mr Wieborg."

"Even found doesn't hurt ..."

"Very fond of you, Baldur?" laughed the king.

"The Lord Realm King of Asgard spoilt me when I was young," smiled the swordsman with a friendly sneer.

Warager Ase Torgaard rose somewhat clumsily from his uncomfortable folding seat. His old legs no longer wanted to cooperate. Then he stood opposite the swordsman of his castle, just as tall as he was, but with his back slightly bent, and looked at the young man with mocking but not evil eyes.

"Once again, the king is to blame for the failed captain," he said good-naturedly. "I could guess. Reconciled you, Baldur - Mr Wieborg. Quite right. Sometimes I can't help but judge by outward appearances.

judging by the smooth, high forehead, which promises a lot. Does it deliver? What's behind it?"

"The ability to think properly, Mr Reichskönig," Baldur Wieborg replied quickly.

"You shall leave that to me."

The captain remained silent. He did not want to contradict him, and the master had not asked him directly. Besides, he had no objection to the king thinking for himself.

"Freedom of thought is nonsense," the old man began again, as if he wanted to get the Asgard captain off the hook. Baldur, however, was careful not to contradict the king without being asked. Mr Warager Ase Torgaard also continued.

"Every bondman and servant has freedom of thought. I can imagine what some people think of their king. He's an old white-haired monkey whose teeth are falling out. - I don't mind such freedom of thought. I don't begrudge it to anyone. Doesn't hurt; not me and not him if he keeps his mouth shut."

The king slowly approached the edge of the lawn where Baldur Wieborg's beautiful eagle helmet lay. But the king's child Armane was already standing protectively in front of the hiding place of her disobedience and harmlessly turned her back on her grandfather, as if she had placed herself there quite by chance. The gentleman also paused as he walked on.

"What do you mean by freedom of thought, Baldur Wie-

Borg?" he asked abruptly, looking at the young warrior from the side with a sneer, as if he was already looking forward to the blossoming nonsense that would now come to light.

"That which sits behind my forehead, Lord King of the Realm," replied the Asgard captain.

"Don't dodge it, Baldur," grinned Mr Warager, "More accurate!"

"The ability to think correctly, not the activity of thinking, Mr King," Mr Wieborg explained immediately, pleased that the gentleman had simply called him Baldur.

"Example!" the old man asked impatiently.

"The constitution of Asgard is worthy of admiration," the swordsman replied without hesitation.

"The thinker of the free spirit says here immediately. No. It is perhaps good, at best the best on earth."

"One more example," the king ordered.

"The leather goods merchant Nameless is supplying the Imperial Office with ten thousand tunics for the war. He will receive as many royal thalers in return," said Mr Wieborg, more slowly than before. "The accounting office in Asgard declares the price reasonable. But the tunics come from the sewing rooms of the priest schools in Urd. The thinking of the accounting office suffered from a lack of intellectual freedom, for it knew full well that the sewing girls of the priests' schools must work for three years without pay, as it is so nicely called, for the

Training orphaned and loaded girls for the profession of life. The price was somehow wrong. Somewhere, an unjust profit got stuck, and the accounting office - allegedly - didn't realise it. This completes the first example of the constitution of the realm of Atlantis in the sense I gave it."

The king gave the swordsman a look that did not reveal how it was to be interpreted.

"You've got some good examples, Baldur!" he said, stretching.

"For the time being, only to clarify the concept of mental freedom," replied Mr Wieborg calmly. "To clarify the juvenile judgement, perhaps the transfer to Gondwana would have to take place. After his return, the examples tend to be less instructive."

"I've had enough of your examples," growled the tall gentleman. "Could be very embarrassing if I keep asking." With that, he pushed his beautiful granddaughter roughly aside and gave the helmet a kick that sent it sprawling across the gravelled square in front of the King's Hall. This happened so quickly and surprisingly that Baldur, who was already preparing the next example, looked almost in disbelief at the children's ball as it rolled slowly across the short-cut lawn and finally came to rest in the gutter of the path.

The king also looked at the ball. Then he looked at his granddaughter, who was standing in front of her grandfather, covered in embers and betraying some guilt

by her demeanour.

"How does the ball get under the helmet, Armane?" the duchess asked sternly.

The king made an imperious gesture with his hand, so that the daughter-in-law fell silent.

"Do you like playing ball, Baldur?" he asked with a sneer.

"Yes, I'd love to," admitted the captain, unconcerned, and would have loved to laugh out loud because his young friend Armane was making a very unhappy face.

"So you're still a real child?" the old man enquired further.

"Yes," the knight explained quickly. "I hope I stay that way for many years to come."

"Take the ball and play with my granddaughter," Warager Torgaard said briefly. "I'm going to watch my child-head of a swordsman play ball."

The young people didn't need to be told twice, and the sword flew from Baldur's side after the helmet with a powerful swing, and then the ball game began with a target for Armane. She was allowed to throw twice and Baldur once. It was great fun, as each of them was allowed to stop the other's ball after throwing it, and there was always a race to see who got it first.

But the king sat back down on his folding chair and quarrelled with his daughter-in-law, who would not tolerate the game. Unfortunately for Armane, the fun did not last long, because

the King's chamberlain came out of the Allfather's Fiefdom and informed Mr Warager of the arrival of Duke Wittmund Acora and the Venerable Father of Urd, Amenor Lochi.

"Baldur!" cried the king.

The sword knight interrupted the game and went to his master.

"I actually wanted to keep you here," said the old man. "Don't want it any more. Example with sewing school in Urd was too dangerous. You could do some good things if Lochi listened. You should also be careful not to tell the king such examples. Thought you were in cahoots with the Acora; that's common among the young lords of Asgard. Very worthwhile, too, in case the old man dies. You won't have it easy, Baldur. Freedom of mind, thorny gift of nature. - Learn to keep your beak shut. Eyes open, child's head, and beak shut. Don't really need to say it. - Do you have a wish?"

"No, Lord King of the Realm," replied Baldur.

"Can do a lot for you."

"I don't know anything for myself at the moment," regretted the captain.

"Unsuitable for court service," smiled the king. "Do you imagine you're king yourself because you have no desire?"

"I am a farmer's son from Thule," replied Baldur.

"They are all kings, although not as great as the one from Asgard."

The Lord of Torgaard would have liked to be annoyed, but he was not to succeed. He liked the example of the leather goods merchant and the Imperial Audit Office too much.

"Get your sword and helmet, Baldur, and get dressed," he broke off the conversation. "I'll easily call you down once. Quite entertaining, chatting with Greenbeak."

The swordsman kissed the women's hands; Ar- mane gently pushed him under the nose with the back of her hand, and that again was not a sign of a perfect upbringing.

While the Captain of Asgard walked with a cheerful stride towards his trapdoor, the announced men, Duke Wittmund Torgaard and the Papas of Urd, came out of the All-Father's Fiefdom.

—— THE FIRST BLOW

At the time of the kingdom of Atlantis, the earth did not recognise the phenomenon of high and low tides, or at least only to such a small extent that it was only occasionally noticed by the scientific research groups working in all parts of the kingdom. After all, only the slight tides caused by the gravity of the sun had an effect on the masses of the earth, above all on the water of the oceans. Lunar tides were unknown because the later Earth's moon still orbited the centre star as an independent wandering star and could only come dangerously close to the Earth in the vicinity of the orbital nodes. This happened several times each century, and each time the maritime city of Atlantis experienced a strange, inexplicable high tide. The waters of the Atlantean sea stood many feet high in the streets of the city, the harbour facilities had completely disappeared, and the famous canals backed up their waters deep into the fertile plain of the Idafeld. Usually in connection with

With these floods, lighter and heavier eruptions of the island volcanoes occurred, and the priests all over the world, whatever faith or superstition they held, used the favourable opportunity to remind the frightened population of the inferiority of the human soul with the outwardly visible success of filled temple coffers.

Whenever mankind groaned under any plague, the wheat of the priesthood of every species and colour always flourished, and the atonement to avert the plague consisted, depending on the level of development of the people concerned, in sacrifices of money, values, blood of animals and humans; in the repeated descent of the free spirit into spiritual bondage, in the increase of the power and influence of the priesthood, in the promotion of ignorance and superstition, in the creation of new idols with qualities among which the ability to feel constantly offended was predominant and whose malicious character could be appeased to some extent with difficulty and hardship through the benevolent mediation of the priesthood.

Poverty and folly, ignorance and need have always been the sources of priestly power and splendour, and every sigh from a tormented human breast added, as it were, a new gemstone to the stockwork hats of high and highest temple lords; every tear of a tormented mother was quickly and effortlessly transformed into a pearl that was hung from the belts of dead

Idols flaunted, and every prayer for redemption from the most severe bodily distress, from the deepest emotional distress, steamed ponderously around marble altars as a cloud of incense.

It was about a year after Baldur Wieborg's conversation with the imperial king Warager Torgaard in the garden of the Allfather's fiefdom of Asgard that such a flood occurred. The High Chamberlain Odil Ase Gadirus, in his capacity as head of the solar observatory in Agni, had collected all the warnings from the observatories in the realm in good time and forwarded them to the king. The disaster, which was minor in its effects, was therefore not unexpected. Atlantis knew very well that after another four years the flood would take on much more serious forms and that the defence measures against it had to be implemented with the combined might of the state leadership in order to at least save human lives. Atlantis was less concerned about the loss of property. What was destroyed would be rebuilt.

The Venerable Father of Urd, Amenor Lochi, had already set up beforehand, and he did so with the traditional good conscience of all priests, which was the envy of the mediators of otherworldly favours. He accepted the several-hour-long presentation of accounts from his permanent deputy and treasurer Pheras, whose cradle had stood on the banks of the Niles

and who had brought with him from the land of the brown fellows an extensive skill in the voluntary plundering of his fellow human beings. He also had a clear conscience. He did nothing for himself, for he was poor like his high lord Amenor Lochi, despite the golden sandals and the silken, flowing robe that covered his brownish skin.

According to the results of the last few days, the prospects for further gaining the High Sun Gate were very favourable. After all, the news from the borderlands with their fear-pressed pious foundations was still pending, and the land law of Atlantis, which had so far defied the hunger for power of the high priesthood on the islands of the mother country, did not apply there. According to the valid and common laws of the empire, an increase in land ownership on the islands of the mother kingdom, for example through donations, was also ruled out for the High Sun Gate, at least as long as the reigning king of the empire, Warager Ase Torgaard, was alive.

That things could change under the reign of Acora Wittmund Tor- gaard was within the realms of possibility, for the heir to the throne did not seem averse to the later enactment of an exceptional law for the High Sun Gate, and some of the reigning kings also showed signs of softening. After the ceremonial service in the wide, open halls of the Sun Sanctuary of Urd

the Venerable Father was a little tired because the golden sun disc he had had to carry during the solemn supplication had not exactly been light. Even though the silken canopy of the throne had kept the annoying rays of the real sun away from him, the high priest's nose was still stung by the odour of the sweating bearers, who, in addition to the hardest work, made the least profit from the whole ceremony. For they only received the certainty for their strenuous work that the priestly spell had the most powerful effect from the immediate vicinity; and at the great sacrificial gathering that followed the atonement ceremonies, they also had to dig deep into their pockets because of the supervising proximity of the Venerable Father.

Temple taxes, which the law of Asgard granted to the High Gate, were all well and good, but the yield was meagre compared to the frequent collections on special occasions, and today's collection was described as satisfactory by the treasurer Pheras, the never-satisfied one.

The Venerable Father stepped with a sigh to the window of his rest room, where the most important matters were being discussed with his deputy, and looked out of the mountain heights, where his high priestly castle lay beside the giant buildings of the Sun Shrine, into the wide, flooded landscape.

level of the Idafeld. It was a strange picture that the old cosmopolitan city of Atlantis presented. Since the canals had overflowed their banks, the small traffic boats of the security office cruised around the streets of the city, and it was as if the thousands and thousands of houses were floating on the sea. The trees peeked out of gardens and parks like floating green spheres, and the bridges over the canals, crowned with roofs and towers, looked like immense stone galleys lying motionless at anchor in the middle of the vast expanse of water.

Far out, just below the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, it was teeming with vessels of every kind, flashing with the snow-white sails and bronze shields of the war galleys. The entire fleet for trade and trade defence had sailed out to wait out the receding waters. Fortunately, the weather seemed to remain good, and even the fire mountains in the highlands of the island confined themselves to multiplying their usual smoke production without heavy lava outpourings. And since there were no higher tidal waves this time, a number of ships were already approaching the home town with confidence, fast-rowing galleys shot in and out like narrow streaks, and the hammer blow of the shipmasters sounded all the way up to Urd with an almost swallowed echo.

"The visit to the Sun Shrine could have been better

can", the treasurer concluded his presentation.

"Unfortunately, many residents of the city have remained in their homes against our warning and have put their trust in the fleet of boats that the head of the Reich Office for the War has sent into the streets to reinforce the vehicles of the city security guard. I wonder if the Hohe Sonnenpforte doesn't have an unpleasant opponent in Mr Köpping?"

"Wieborg must go," replied the Reverend Father.

"It's his turn too," Pheras confirmed with an approving tilt of his dark head. "He could be entrusted with a larger army. The man is ambitious, and if we accommodate that quality, we can steer him in a direction that suits us."

"You could do a lot," smiled Urd's dad. "But it would have no significant effect. Even a transfer to a frontier mark, even if it were that of Gondwana, would do no good. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that the young man must stay here. Under my eyes. I have a hunch he'll make trouble for us otherwise. Don't worry that I'm overestimating him, but my instincts are rarely wrong. When I said earlier that he had to leave, it only means that he must not remain in the Reich War Office. There he's making old Köpping mad at me."

"The affair with the army merchant Morjang Trulbe

I've sorted it out," interjected the councillor.

"Do you think so?" asked the Reverend Father, turning his fine, intelligent head towards the assistant with a quiet smile.

"I paid the merchant via the citizens' treasury through the shipowner Queeling Ase Friedger, as you discussed with me," explained the treasurer of the High Gate. "This double route disguises the origin of the compensation sum with a certainty that the Imperial Office cannot match. Incidentally, if Trulbe does not sue the Empire, and there is no longer any reason to do so, the old Burgrave can be satisfied. And he will be. I know him; he has no desire to stir in the dust unless it is absolutely necessary."

"Let's wait and see," replied Papas von Urd calmly. "I've spoken to the duke. The Acora didn't want to, but I know this gentleman doesn't say no for long. Ever since he signed the ambassadorial agreement with me, he has lacked his own will. He may regret it, but I cannot and will not help him."

"I don't understand you, Honoured One," Pheras replied hesitantly. He was aware of the agreement between the High Sun Gate and the heir to the throne of the realm, but he did not know what this agreement could have to do with the Wieborg.

"The Acora is to propose Wieborg as chamberlain to the king of the realm," explained Mr Amenor Lochi.

"At least I certainly hope he will. He is still reluctant, not least because of Mrs Armane, the king's maid. But it won't take long. We have a thin, strong cord around his neck, the effect of which he has not yet learnt."

"And the kings?" asked the treasurer doubtfully.

"Seems to love Wieborg, in his own way," added the Lord of the High Sun Gate.

"Young people like Wieborg tend to plan for the future," Pheras pointed out. "I find it hard to imagine the captain jeopardising that future. One day he'll have to reckon with the Acora. The old man won't sit in the Allfather's throne forever. So the joy will not last long. At least I don't know any of the Warager's chamberlains who wouldn't be so sick of the service from Asgard in half a year that he would fall ill. It's not everyone's cup of tea to be used as a sandal-keeper. When I think of young Wieborg, I find it almost impossible to place this wilful green-head as chamberlain next to the prickly warrior. In my opinion, there is no need for a sick note; the young man will fly faster than he moved into the Allvaterlehen."

"Armane," the papas said emphatically.

"Now I understand," explained the treasurer

satisfied and rolled up the leather volumes with his accounts. "Anyway, I think I've understood. The Acora wishes to separate the young people. If Wieborg moves into the Allfather fiefdom, there will be difficulties. The king of the realm remains a minor matter. - Very nice. The duke doesn't like Wieborg, the duchess is suspicious, old Köpping will also curse the day when he brought the young lord into his imperial office; and if Armane makes him impossible, the old lord will have to let him go."

"Something like that," said the High Priest of Urd with feigned boredom. "After all, I have the impression that the War Office will not let the delivery of the tunics by Morjang Trulbe rest."

"I've made provisions for that too," replied the cashier with a hint of a grin. "The Trulbe is leaving for Sumeria in a few weeks. It will cost a lot of money, but the Sun Temple in Chadda will help him if he gets into bad shape. There may be another way, which has also been prepared and which I don't need to tell you about, to overcome any difficulties that may arise. This Morjang Trulbe can also serve the increase of the High Sun Gate through his life and death, and you know, Venerable Father, that all other concerns are subordinate to this principle."

The high priest of Urd did not answer, but

looked thoughtfully over the blossoming splendour of the terraced gardens of his palace, following with his eyes the fluttering flight of two purple butterflies whose palm-sized wings were edged with gleaming gold, as if they had been specially crafted by a skilful hand for the delight of the spiritual leader of the Atlantean world. But then Amenor Lochi watched with a satisfied smile as the faithful marched off into the flooded city. His promise that the unearthly ones would soon cease their wrath had boosted their confidence. The broad avenue of splendour that wound its way down from the sun sanctuary of Urd to the Ida Field was dark with crowds of people. Carriages and palanquins could be seen standing out from the crowd of pedestrians, and the Venerable Father was deeply pleased to see that the wealthy merchants were no less numerous than the officials and the sword nobility of Asgard. In particular, the large number of the carrying chairs told him that it was mainly the female part of the upper classes who were comfortably returning to their homes.

Thousands of galleys and boats were waiting in the valley at the high tide line for their owners to take them back to their homes through flooded streets. Fleet by fleet, the tiny craft pushed off from the dry shore, and in a short time the

dark water of narrow, small streaks that spread out in a star shape to find the shortest waterway home.

The treasurer Pheras waited patiently to see if his master had any further orders. As time generally played a subordinate role for the high temple officials, the Egyptian stretched his slender limbs comfortably in the silken cushions of the gold-studded armchair and watched with blinking eyes the man who was free to distribute the grace and wrath of the gods among the Atlantean human race as he saw fit. The spiritual attitude of the priestly treasurer was actually incomprehensible, but in this it differed only slightly from that of his high superior and his priestly confreres of higher and lower rank. The knowledge, the full awareness of the fraud was certainly present, even if the fraud could be described with the term "pious". He was fully aware of the fact that the numerous gods and goddesses that had been given a right of abode on the Atlantic islands over the millennia had developed over the same period of time from simple images of nature into what they were now, namely into above- and below-ground embarrassments with often quite alarming human characteristics. Neither he nor his colleagues suffered from far-reaching stultification.

Nevertheless, he had a conscience that could be

judgement "excellent" without somehow doing him an injustice. He, like all the priests, including the Papa of Urd, the high Lord Ame- nor Lochi, felt somehow commissioned by the deity, indeed, during the artistically undoubtedly beautiful and sublime official acts, they had the rock-solid conviction that they were not actors, but high servants of the powers beyond; and the soul-compelling power of the deep impression made by an immense kneeling crowd filled them with a kind of certainty of the divine mission of their office. The spiritual exaltation of the mysterious custom was so firmly established even among the temple lords that they seldom took off their usual mask, even when they were among themselves; even then the elevated vigour of their thoughts and especially their words did not leave them. With a clear conscience, they made lying a pious custom, even when discussing acts of divine service, which was never completely ignored.

The attempt by dissenting, thoughtful people to break into this peculiar school of thought on the grounds of reason was therefore met with unanimous and indignant rejection, which almost immediately escalated into obsession when there was a danger that a stone could be broken out of the elaborate structure of the divine rules. An attack on the spiritual foundations of the

But recognised faith was met with brutal hatred and ruthless persecution.

The High Priest of Urd left the open, agate-framed window of his resting room. The midday nap was waiting for him, and the deputy Pheras also looked as if his body was longing for the low, soft bed of rest, whose zipang silk nestled around his limbs as softly as a good conscience around a satisfied soul.

"I thank you, Pheras," said the Venerable Father in the kind, deep voice that rarely failed to have an effect on human hearts and which was also used for close acquaintances out of old custom.

The treasurer had risen.

"If it's all right with you, Venerable, let's put the deeds of settlement in the treasury vault before I go," he said reverently.

With that, he pulled open a curtain of Indian silk embroidered with black, shining pearls and at the same time rolled away the resting bed of the highest priest of Atlantis, which stood against the wall in front of this silk cloth. A narrow gilded door appeared at the same level as the alabaster wall.

The Papas of Urd drew a key from beneath the jewelled shield of his official robes and approached the gate with slow steps, and the cashier followed his master with the same measured

Dignity, as if the eyes of a large congregation were fixed on her.

But the moment the Lord of the High Sun Gate was about to turn the key, his honourable calm left him, the blood drained from his rosy, ivory-tinted face and his yellow, ring-decorated hand began to tremble.

Pheras realised immediately that something was wrong and stared in horror at the changed face of his master, which was turned towards him.

"What's happened?" he groaned quietly.

"The door is unlocked," replied the chief priest of the realm in a failing voice.

"The key sometimes turns with difficulty," the cashier suggested, a hope whose fulfilment seemed unlikely to him. The two clergymen stood hesitantly in front of the red-sparkling metal plate, whose hammered drift work with its delicate coils bore witness to the high artistic taste of Atlantic craftsmanship. Ash-grey fear sat in the dark, smooth features. They both knew that an unpleasant surprise lurked behind the metal gate, which was only meant for them. The understandable desire to summon some armed men from the Abyssinian palace guard dawned in both men. On the polished rosewood table stood the golden bell with the delicate agate spheres. All that was needed was one of the

huge black men, who had brought all the qualities of obtuse obedience with them from their African homeland, then appeared to take the place of their masters' lack of courage.

However, the two clergymen were well aware that this help could not be summoned under any circumstances until the reason why the door to the cellar was unlocked was known. So the thought of the black helpers only appeared in their minds for a brief moment as an unrealisable fantasy.

"Step back, Honourable Father," Pheras asked with the matter-of-factness of a subordinate who was obliged to avert any danger from the inviolable head of the Lord of the Gate. Both men drew short, thin daggers from their flowing, embroidered robes, their triple-edged blades pointing out of their clenched fists with malicious menace. The cashier held his breath for a moment. It was dead quiet behind the golden door. Papas von Urd retreated a few steps like a predator ready to pounce and stood at the head of his resting place. It was only natural that the treasurer should take precedence in this case, since the awareness of his superior rank was closely bound up with the need to avoid any danger that could be avoided.

It must be said, in honour of the High Lord, that it was not the feeling of any cowardice that had driven the blood from his face, but the certain consciousness of an impending calamity, unknown in kind and effect, that waited for him behind the door of the cashier's vault.

Pheras put his hand around the embossed knob of the lurking, precious gate. Then it flew open, swinging through the whole structure of the weighty metal, and struck the rubber buffer in the marble floor with a dull jolt.

The tension between the two clergymen eased a little. The stairway to the vault yawned darkly and was lost in the depths of impenetrable black.

The Venerable Father approached and examined the passage of the lock of the now open door. The spring mechanism was a little jammed, but the passage was still not too difficult. A tiny trace of yellow wax stuck to the key when this examination was finished.

The men looked at each other. They knew without words that the break-in into the vault had been prepared. A duplicate key had been made from a wax impression, however incomplete.

But who knew about the location of the cash vault?
The Venerable Father's resting room was only

entered by himself, the treasurer Pheras and an African servant, and the latter did not touch the door he knew, because any mortal who dared to open it would inevitably go blind, with the exception of the Venerable Father, of course, to whom such a thing could not happen because of his familiarity with the supernatural.

In silence, the cashier Pheras grabbed one of the long wax candles lying in a niche chiselled into the door jamb as a supply, snapped its blue-green head against a rubbing surface under the niche and shone the brightly burning torch down the stairs, which immediately flared up.

The Venerable Mr Amenor Lochi quickly counted the number of candles.

"Two are missing," he said quietly.

The spiritual deputy Pheras just nodded, as if to say that he had noticed that straight away, and walked down the steep lava staircase step by step with slow, tense steps, the pressing weight of the cantilevered slab vaulting close above his head, which followed the slope of the descent in hard, leaping steps. Like a thousand shining eyes, the tiny, matt-sparkling pebble crystals of the ceiling slabs stood in the black lava stone as soon as the light of the candle flame hit them. The shadow of the carrier swayed gropingly into the black depths. The Lord of the High Sun Gate slowly followed at a short distance.

Tense, indomitable anticipation stirred in the minds of the two men. They knew that the golden door in the rest room of the Papa of Urd was still relatively easy to open, but that the massive brass door down in the cellar with its triple artificial lock and the huge bronze hinges was not so easy to master. It was also possible that a dead man was lying downstairs in front of the mighty lock, who had been caught unawares by the snapping, poisoned thorn of the second lock, if he had tried his luck with duplicate keys, unaware of the friendly security provided for the cashier's vault of the High Sun Gate.

But this hope was also unfounded.

The brass gate was open, hanging crookedly and leaning forwards in the lowest of its unusually thick, fire-hardened hinges. The other two were completely destroyed, melted into a hundred lumps and clumps, so that the bronze beads covered the stone floor for miles around. And the granite gate wall, into which the spikes of the hinges had been deeply embedded, showed large fractures; indeed, the centre one had been completely blown out. The glass-hard lava stone had not withstood the stresses of a mysterious glow development and had shattered into shell-shaped pieces.

A dull, burning odour lay smouldering underneath

the gloomy slabs of the heavy ceiling, as if smoke had recently been released, the fumes of which had not yet found the opportunity to escape upwards through the narrow ventilation slits in the large-square walls and into the open air of the high-priestly terraced gardens.

The men looked at each other again. There was deep concern in their silent gazes. Obviously they both knew what had happened and had also realised in a flash how the heavy brass door had been opened, bypassing all the artificial locks and poison gates.

"Blasting fire from the supplies of the Imperial War Office," said the treasurer Pheras after a while in an almost toneless voice, but with the trembling of restrained anger.

"I knew it as soon as I smelled the burning odour," replied Amenor Lochi with violent calm.

"Only the Imperial Office has this terrible weapon of war at its disposal, which burns down walls and towers and sets large galleys ablaze like tinder. Old Köpping is in charge of the camp. As far as I know, his assistant has the keys and responsibility. So only Köpping has the fire. - Him and us."

"So it could also have been stolen from us," Pheras said thoughtfully. "But your storerooms, which contain the explosive devices, are located on the

South Island Maru in the territory of the State King Femern Ase Gromburg. This is to be settled in a few weeks. If it is all right with you, Honoured One, I will travel to Maru myself tonight with a speedboat of the temple administration and check the supplies."

The high priest shook his head.

"I don't believe it," he replied firmly. "The explosives came from the Asgard war camp. I'm afraid you can save yourself the trip to Maru, dear Pheras."

"The blast took place this morning, just before sunrise," said Alderman Pheras a little louder.

"When the entire priesthood and the congregation were gathered in the shrine for the ceremony of atonement," the Venerable added.

"And the guards from Abessia?" the cashier asked in a grim voice that clearly revealed how severe the punishment would be for the security men who had neglected their duty if ... yes, if it wasn't wiser to keep quiet about the terrible matter for the time being.

"Go on!" ordered Amenor Lochi böfe and pushed through the gap in the crooked brass door into the cashier's vault, disregarding all previous caution and concern for his sacred person. But no misfortune befell him. There was not a soul in the vault apart from the clergy.

The money chests stood untouched, the chests of precious stones and bars of gold waiting to be lent to merchants and shipowners, foreign princes and department stores for high interest rates.

But no sigh of relief betrayed that the Honourable Father was reassured by this. The money and monetary value stored in the treasury vault was insignificant compared to what increased his power in the wide world, and he would have been grateful to his star if the chests had been robbed, if the remains of the robbery had covered the rough stone floor in a wild jumble. He would even have hugged his accountant, Pheras, if this leftover had been carefully picked up and also disappeared. But since the boxes and crates were untouched, only one thing was possible. The burglar was not after money and pearls, but things that - at least for the High Sun Gate - were worth a hundred times more than any precious metal in the Sun Sanctum of Urd, against which the sapphires of the Posidian Hall in the Allfather's Fiefdom on Asgard were inferior pebbles:

The deeds of Urd.

And already the treasurer's cry of terror echoed dully from between the wide pillars of the cellar.

The door of the brass-armoured wall cabinet of the cashier's vault had melted out. The crooked and

heavy brass fastener lay swollen on the floor.

About half of the High Sun Gate documents written on the thinnest suede were missing. The burglar had not randomly snatched all the leather rolls and parcels stored in the cupboard. The two clergymen realised in no time at all. A person had made a selection here, a person who was used to distinguishing the important from the less important at first glance, had looked with great, almost insulting calm, obviously in the firm conviction that he would not be disturbed. Yes, a dangerous connoisseur of the human soul was at work here. This person had known exactly that the black-skinned guards had turned their eyes and ears full of superstitious fervour towards the atonement in the sun sanctuary, had known that the piercing hiss of the liquid fire deep underground would be mistaken with fearful shuddering for the voices of angry powers of the deep, had exploited the general excitement about the imminent danger of the flooding of the city, so mysterious to the common people, with a cold brain.

The top compartment of the armoured cabinet was cleanly emptied.

But there was a thin sheet of leather inside, inconspicuous and almost unnoticeable. Two men's heads now bent over the leaf in the light of the burning candle.

Only a few characters were written on it, neatly and clearly, and at the end was a seal made from the wax of the candle that the burglar had taken from the stash in the upper door recess. The cashier Pheras deciphered the few words with faltering speech, as the venerable man could not read due to his excitement.

"Baldur Wieborg from Thule to Amenor Lochi.
The first blow in the merry war of spirits."

And then clearly followed the sigil of the Swordmaster of Asgard.

The Venerable Father's throat choked. The reason for this was not anger and pain, but the realisation that there was something special in this young lad's ruthless, almost insanely witty challenge that the high gentleman had not yet encountered in his life. Straightforward, open, truth-loving hostility that knew no concealment of its goal. War of the spirits! Baldur Wieborg did not intend to wield his spiritual blade against the excesses of the services of the gods; Amenor Lochi would have loved such attacks. If necessary, in the event of an occasional defeat, the enemy could be accommodated by modifying existing abuses.

No, that's what it said. War of the spirits! And the Reverend Father of Urd was clever enough to realise what that meant when the robber of his deeds was exchanged for poison.

and dagger was secured. This Wieborg had realised how the battle had to be fought. He had realised that the battle could not be fought without the bulletproof armour he now had in his hands in the Urd documents, he now knew how strong the enemy was and where his allies were in the population of the constituent states and in the administrative offices of the Asgard.

It was a matter of course for an administration as well organised and intelligently run as that of the High Sun Gate that there were no documents concerning anything that was in direct conflict with the existing laws of the country and the empire. And it was equally self-evident that Baldur Wieborg had not for a moment suspected the existence of such documents.

Nevertheless, the looted writings included leather containing binding assurances from princes of foreign states that were at war with the empire. The High Porte used to anticipate the expected victory of the Azeri army groups, used to secure rights from foreign rulers that lay in the field of active promotion of the service of the Atlantic gods in the event of the defeat of the prince in question. It was understood that in such a case the spiritual influence of the High Sun Gate had to be used in favour of the foreign princely family and their property in return.

of itself. The fact that the Porte's mediation activities extended beyond the borders of the empire was well known in Asgard and had often been the subject of passionate debate within the imperial offices and the royal council. In the course of Atlantean history, this mediation activity had even been used repeatedly in full awareness of the creation of damaging precedents in order to avoid supposedly greater damage. But the imperial government had always had to pay for such concessions with the granting of special rights to the High Sun Gate, and the evil word of the state within the state was uttered at many a confidential meeting in the halls of the imperial offices.

But the most unpleasant thing was that Baldur Wieborg had found the agreement with the heir to the throne of Wittmund Torgaard and taken it with him. In the ambassadorial treaty, the captain not only had a weapon in his hand against the Honourable Father, but also against the Acora of the realm. Others were now also allowed to tremble; not Papa alone!

In the glow of the burning wax torch, the Papa of Urd was able to examine the writing and seal of the Sword Leader of Asgard himself. There was no doubt about the authenticity of the sign of the seal, the rising sun god of the winter solstice to spring, the tiny symbolic figure with the upward-pointing arms.

The Venerable Father gave the thin leather to his accountant.

"Take the rest of the deeds, Pheras," he said darkly. "I'll put them in the silver chest in the small meeting room for the time being. The room is rarely used, and Wieborg has no desire to steal the rest."

And while Alderman Pheras silently followed the order, Mr Amenor Lochi turned and slowly climbed the stairs of the box vault, and with each step he devised a plan to render the ruthless Nordland lad harmless.

The Lord of the High Sun Gate was by no means in despair. The devastating impression of the discovery had been overcome. An uncertain hope rose in him that the young man would perhaps dutifully hand over the documents to the king of the realm. When it came to duty and honour, these Aesir suffered from obsessions. May the old warrior read the documents! Let him cause difficulties for the Porte, or in the worst case, let him be sued by the Imperial High Court for the agreement with the duke. There were antidotes to such things. If the Acora was spared, the proceedings against the Porte would also have to be dropped. It would be worse if the captain remained silent and bided his time.

The Papas of Urd entered his rest room, which he suddenly hated like a loathsome enemy. A glance into the polished glass mirror, which was set into a wall from floor to ceiling, showed the high lord the need to smooth his face, which revealed deep concern and bitterness in the sudden wrinkles.

Amenor Lochi was furious with himself. His hand jerked towards the bronze candlestick of his nursing table to throw it into the merciless mirror, but it was natural that he should not be carried away by such childish impertinence, that it was only desire that trembled through his tortured nerves.

Once again, the Lord of the Sun Gate approached the acha- tic window. This time, however, his eyes did not feast on the splendour of his terraced gardens, nor on the continuing march of the faithful into the depths of the Idafeld. His dark eyes sought Warga Gadirus, his beautiful gardener. He regretted having allowed her to take part in the celebrations at the Sun Shrine. The captain had come through the garden, probably openly and cheekily, as was his impudent nature. If he had sent the gardener running back, it would not have been possible for the man to enter Papa's resting place like a common burglar.

Amenor Lochi lowered his eyes. Right, down there in the

bed between blooming blue roses, the treasures of his palace garden, you could see the ruthless, unsmudged traces of a ladder. And not just a ladder. The holes of several ladders, pressed deep into the soft ground, could be seen across the entire width of the garden side of the palace. Obviously many people had climbed onto the flat roof of the high priestly palace, of course to take part in the atonement ceremonies in the solar observatory from a distance, at least with their eyes.

Amenor Lochi laughed bitterly. He had bred fear and rapturous obsession! Here he had tangible success. The palace guards, women and gardeners had forgotten their duty and, in dull, reverent fear, had focussed all their senses on the golden gate of the Sun Gate, which greeted them from afar. How easy it had become for this thrice-cursed Wieborg to carry out his villainous plan; to melt open the gates, which did not yield to the duplicate key, in insulting safety with the explosive fire to which he, as an official of the War Office, had such easy access! He had been allowed to spend several hours of the splendid, Atlantic spring morning making his careful selection from the documents of Urd, and there was no doubt that he had taken everything that was not intended for foreign eyes.

A heavy door slammed shut behind the papas.

Amenor Lochi involuntarily flinched and turned round quickly.

"Oh, it's you, Pheras," he said with a sigh. Silently, the cashier left, carrying the rest of the documents, the rest room of his master, only to re-enter quietly after a while.

"Your Abyssinian servant changed the water in your bathing room a few hours ago," reported the treasurer. "I spoke to the man just now. He was surprised that the wash water was so dirty. This Wieborg also had the impertinence to clean himself thoroughly in your washroom before he left the palace."

Amenor Lochi made an impatient gesture and refrained from answering. All that was missing was for the Asgard captain to have breakfast with him!

"Duke Wittmund Acora and Warga Gadirus are standing in the portico of the courtyard," the cashier continued with forced calm, as he also saw them with his master.

"Both are safe," said Amenor Lochi thoughtfully.

"Maybe," Pheras replied in the same way.

"Warga is a recognised ace," continued Papas, who thought he heard a note of distrust in his deputy's voice.

"But a relative of Wieborg," Pheras pointed out.

"Her mother told me about the serious injury Wieborg inflicted on the girl when the cacique Paczi Manca from Cuzco attended the horticultural school," explained the Lord of the Gate. "Would I have brought the Gadirus to Urd otherwise? The High Chamberlain Odil also considers his sister to be absolutely safe. She is fervent and devout. I know that sort of woman. - Have you ever seen her kiss my signet ring?"

A smile appeared on the clever, distinguished face of the Papa of Urd, pensive and good, and the alderman, who thought he recognised this smile in the reflecting agate, shook his head almost imperceptibly. If it was like that, he couldn't speak any further, he now realised.

But the Gadirus had to disappear. Perhaps become ill. Dying was not necessary, but she had to be taken out of the venerable one's sight, somehow. As a priest, you knew the means to do that. What was written on the smiling face of his master was not pleasant. So it was not advisable to voice his suspicions about Warga Gadirus, but to act.

Something like a contemptuous grin wanted to creep across the brownish features of the caste leader, but only the first hint of such a movement became visible.

The Venerable Father gazed at the garden in silence for a long time. The workers of Warga Gadirus, who had taken part in the divine services in the morning and forenoon, now appeared despite the scorching heat of the sun to carry out the most necessary work that had been left undone.

"I will not negotiate with the duke today, Pheras," ordered the high priest of Urd. "If he lets himself be announced, say that I am ill. - Towards evening, when the sun has sunk behind the mountains, I will discuss the details of the stolen documents with you. I have some thoughts about the Wieborg that I would like to clarify with you. - I want foreign craftsmen to restore the doors in the box vault, not our own and not people from the city. Perhaps from Femern or Schoongard. Please arrange this."

Pheras bowed to the back of the man in front of him. Not very low, but just in case, so that the lord could see the movement in the reflective agate of the window walls. Amenor Lochi demanded a lot in this respect, and it was not advisable to show too much familiarity.

But the Reverend Father stood in the middle of the rest room for a while and finally opened a crack in the door to the corridor. A black servant was standing outside and dropped reverently to his knees when he noticed the movement of the gold-embossed door.

Everything remained silent. Apparently, the duke hadn't even let himself be announced. Had the allure of the beautiful gardener stopped him? Had he gone into the park with her, shielded from view from the palace by groups of trees and flowering hedges?

Amenor Lochi closed the door.

The midday rest became very bad. Baldur Wieborg stood before the High Priest of Urd as he closed his eyes, laughing, but with merciless coldness in the grey lights.

The future would bring the battle with this young, unknown human. It would be difficult because the prospects for the High Sun Gate were no longer particularly favourable. But there was one final consolation if all else failed.

The gods often allowed men like Wieborg to die at the right time.

— THREE LETTERS

"The Papas of Urd had you poisoned," Baldur Ase Wieborg said darkly, stroking the white, blue-veined hand of his ally, Warga Gadirus.

The young gardener never took her beautiful blue eyes off the hard, sharp-cut face of her friend, who sat by her low bed in deep sorrow and impotent supplication. When Warga fell ill, she did not stay in her splendid country house, which the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi had given her in the very first year of her work in the terraced gardens of the Palace of the High Sun Gate, but had herself carried to Atlantis to seek convalescence in her parents' house. Her old landlady and scrubwoman Burd had stayed behind in her property in the temple city, and the servants that Amenor Lochi had provided for her had not been dismissed for the time being. Warga had hoped to get the illness under control soon, counting on her unspent, resilient youth, but now she was hesitating.

recovery for a very long time. She herself had the vague feeling that some enemy had given her poison, but she knew with certainty that it had not been the Venerable Father himself, nor had he ordered it.

"Amenor Lochi didn't do it," she said quietly. "If I was poisoned, then it must have been done by someone else."

Then, quite suddenly, Baldur Wieborg collapsed. His mighty, narrow blond head sank onto the young gardener's hand, and his broad shoulders shook under the coarse leather jerkin in stunned pain.

Baldur had taken up the fight against the High Sun Gate and was under the mistaken impression that all hatred and persecution would ultimately be directed against his person. That is why he had ruthlessly opened his visor with the very first blow, so that his opponent could see the open, bold face of the fencer. He was determined to go to extremes as far as he was concerned. He had not expected that the first victim of the war with the gate, which he himself had called the merry war of the spirits, would be the fair-haired, clever Warga. The masters of idolatry could not be waged as a merry war of spirits. Other weapons were decisive here. For the time being, he had made himself bulletproof, stab-proof and poison-proof. The stolen documents from Urd

armoured him threefold against the light hands of the gate, which could so quietly and gently silence all voices that did not agree with it.

Warga wanted to stroke with her right hand the blond head of the man for whom she would gladly have given more than her health and, if necessary, her life. But she let her hand hover and only smiled, with a faint feeling of happiness in her heart that this proud, indomitable man was crying over her hand, like a boy with a soft soul. She knew so well that the heart of the victorious man harboured all contrasts, depths and heights, delicacies that only men know, and hardships that form the steely background of great characters. Nobody had told her this, for few people knew more about Baldur Wieborg than that he had a future in the Imperial Army, like few swordsmen in Atlantis. Warga, however, possessed the mysterious power of certain deep knowledge that is given to some favoured women. She knew who Baldur Wieborg was; perhaps there was only one woman and even only one person under the sky of the eternal Atlantean spring who knew. Baldur Wieborg was a striker of an old time, was the spiritual hammer of a favoured race, who forged with testing, first hammer blows on the new that should and must come. The Asian pure race proudly regarded him as one of the unwavering sons of the sun who had won the mastery of Atlantis for the unmixed

blood of the Nordic tribe. How wrong they were, the proud bloodlines of Asgard! With a determined step, this man wanted to leave the narrow circle, wanted to consciously expand the melting ring of pure-blooded Nordland bloodlines in order to save the heritage that was awake in many millions who had to stand apart because their Asgardian blood no longer ran through their veins in full purity.

"Baldur!" continued Warga Gadirus, and there was a tenderness in her voice that penetrated the man's heart like a good, calming current. "You should not worry about the life of a gardener. Anyone who fights a war, as we do, must reckon with losses, and, Baldur, I'm not dead. You know the doctor father got for me. He has spent a long life fighting poisoning, and he will help me too. I am still young. Warga Gadirus won't die that quickly. - Do you know what the doctor asked when he examined me?"

Baldur Wieborg shook his head, but still didn't lift it from Warga's hand.

"He asked if I had - friends in Urd," the young girl said with particular emphasis on the word "Friends."

"And I replied that I probably didn't have friends like the ones he meant. The Honourable Father was well-disposed towards me and, as head of the temple and palace gardens, I had no opportunity to make such friends as he meant.

create. I was not allowed to say that I harboured any suspicions. To this day, no one but you and I know that I gave you access to the Venerable Father's rest room."

Baldur straightened up briskly.

"Did the doctor believe you?" he asked quickly.

Warga shook her head with a hint of such emotion. He had remained silent, but she had seen that he was convinced that she had been given poison from some part of the High Sun Gate. "My father told me later that the doctor knew the poison," the gardener continued. "He had treated many sick people and almost all of them had some connection to the gate. The poison leads to a long-lasting paralysis, and it is possible that it is administered to people who, for whatever reason, want to be rid of it for a long time. - Well, the Papa of Urd doesn't want to be rid of me. He sends me flowers every day and yesterday he wrote me a letter saying he hoped I would soon recover. He certainly expects me to return to my old sphere of activity. Under no circumstances would he want to fill my position again, even at the risk of jeopardising the care of the gardens. And he offered me his forest castle in the Garmalen mountains, for me and my parents, so that I could remain in their loving care. Should I accept that, Baldur?"

"Under no circumstances!" said the swordsman in horror.

"Why not?" the gardener asked with a smile. "It's good for our cause if I play the harmless one. Besides, I have nothing to fear from Amenor Lochi. He knows nothing and doesn't believe that I got you the key imprint. No one except his deputy Pheras and the Abyssian servant may enter his rest room. Only Warga Gadirus was allowed. Amenor Lochi even tried to keep it a secret from the fine treasurer, although he did not succeed. - Do you now believe that Amenor Lochi is not to blame for my illness?"

Baldur Wieborg did not answer. He did not look at his friend either, and a bitter feeling rose up in him, a shame that he had brought this precious woman close to the Honourable Father of Urd. The silence lasted a long time. Baldur wrestled with himself as to whether he should ask. Then he decided to do so:

"Warga, the Lord of the Gate loves you," he said harshly.

"That's possible, even quite certain," the girl replied with a smile that Baldur couldn't see because he was looking at the white girl's hand in pain and stroking it unintentionally and forlornly. "It was only possible to find the concealed entrance to the cashier's cellar because Papa trusted me. Pheras once looked at me with evil eyes when I was resting in the rest room.

room of the Venerable One to renew the flowers in the agate bowls."

"The matter touches my honour," said Baldur Wieborg with a huff.

"Not mine too?" asked Warga Gadirus. The captain shook his head vigorously.

"It's the same," he replied briefly and unkindly, because there was something of a conflict in his heart. "My fight begins with a deep, inner rift. I don't mean the theft of the documents. It was open warfare, waged for the sake of success."

"How I fight is my business," Warga explained firmly.

"I lead the fight, not you."

"Didn't you once say you loved independent heads?" enquired the sick woman with friendly mockery. "Or did you only mean men's heads?"

"Then you've grown, Warga," smiled the captain. "Do I remember correctly how you were a little hesitant in the garden of the district school on the Linden Canal? Didn't a young girl first want to ask her brother whether it was right to trust the ace Wieborg and become his ally? Now you have grown so tall that I owe you the opportunity to lead the battle with a chance of success. That forges a bond ..."

Warga Gadirus closed his eyes. The swordsman looked at the pale, fine face with concern and

made a movement as if he wanted to leave. The gardener stopped him with a squeeze of her hand.

"You don't know why I closed my eyes," she said quietly. "You know, I was thinking of that hour in the garden that gave me new hope. I was so stupid then, Baldur, and thought you were a haughty Northman. I was so used to having to bear the somewhat contemptuous kindness that was shown to me as a merely recognised Asin in society and intercourse, in office and in the pure-blooded part of my family, that I could not understand your belief in a great people of Asian spirit. You do not know how happy I was at the time with your answer that we could not turn back the history of the Nordic blood and had to reckon with what was. I recognised your calling then. To forge a block out of all that is left of the Asian high being in blood and soul, and I know it is a lot. That's why I committed myself to you, why I got you the Urd documents and why I lie here poisoned; and - gladly."

"It was the only way to wrest power from the hands of the High Sun Gate," Baldur Wieborg replied sternly. "Perhaps the Atlantean people will thank you more than they would ever thank me if I won my spiritual war. We want to wrest souls and hearts from the Honourable of Urd, we want to prove it,

that under the roof of Asgard there is room for all who belong together in blood and spirit, want to carry the blood mixtures given by fate, as they have become through the guilt of the fathers, and want to take account of this new unity as a united people. Where we draw the line will be a matter for the future. What is certain, however, is that we must succeed in forging together in the motherland of Atlantis a united community of perhaps twenty million people who, as visible signs of our Nordic blood, possess the white skin, the bright eyes, the free spirit and the abhorrence of all unworthy covenants of superstition and the bondage of the soul. Priestly rule with its doctrine of guilt and its atonement by sacrifice of any kind is a sign of decay. Clarity, enlightenment about the meaning of the divine is a sign of strength, of spiritual ascent. Honourableness with the prospect of reward and gain is a dirty quality that should not be called honourable. Compassion for poor people shall in future be called an offence; and where in a city of the Empire a man has no bed, I will punish the leader of the community for tolerating that poor man being forced to call upon the charity of his brethren. Where sewing schools for neglected girls have to be established in a member state of the empire, I will request the removal of the king, who was unable to find the root of the

To eradicate neglect. Where a school for priests - if it is still able to fill its halls - does not manage to prepare the youth in all things in such a way that it meets the requirements of the imperial and higher schools, I will withdraw the teaching office from the priest-teachers, not arbitrarily, but with proof of their incompetence. Let them change; if not, let them disappear. - You see, Warga, people always think that a warrior from the north knows nothing but the power of the sword. It is certainly great, and I will use it where it is needed. But mind and soul remain predominant; conviction, not compulsion; deeds from new thoughts, not from force. This is how I want to work, and you should know it and not follow me without realising it. All shall know it. Here there is no hovering ambiguity, no disgusting concealment of the goal, for we have nothing to fear or hide. - But it will depend on my loyalty whether a great people will one day remember the Gardener of Urd with gratitude."

Baldur Ase Wieborg breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he feared he had revealed too much of his intentions and far-reaching plans, but then he told himself that without trust in the first of his allies, who lay paralysed before him for the sake of his cause, his huge task against all the powers of the Empire and the Porte would not be possible.

"Tell me, Captain Wieborg, how old are you?" Warga Gadirus asked quietly.

"Thirty years," replied the swordsman in astonishment. "Do I already look very lived in?"

"It works," smiled the gardener. "I'm just wondering how such an unskilled labourer in the Imperial War Office can depose kings and call community leaders to account. I know you northern farmers think you're kings, and I almost believe you are, even if the soil of your fields still sticks to your shoes. But one worry just came to me, Baldur. - You are ambitious, you want for yourself ..."

You don't need to speak any further, Warga," the swordsman interrupted his ally. Otherwise our friendship could take a serious knock. But I hope you're just trying to lure me onto the Nordic ice. Here in our eternal spring there is no such ice, at least not for me. You know very well that I only want to depose kings and community leaders because someone has to do it, and I hope I will be that man. I don't know anyone else."

"That sounds a little more modest, Baldur," Warga Gadirus said seriously, but the laughter shone from her blue eyes. "Do you know that you have to overthrow the Asian constitution if you want to become king? Isn't the constitution good? Aren't they called admirable abroad?"

"So, now I understand your concern," said the captain reassuredly. "I have no desire to smash things that are valuable. So I won't need to touch the constitution of the Asen either. The racial law, formerly the basis of the state, has long since been broken by numerous 'recognitions'. You yourself have suffered from this 'recognition', and I remember that a beautiful gardener looked at me quite angrily when I asked her quite innocently whether she was a goddess. So is it an amendment to the constitution if I want to extend recognition to millions in order to gain a united block of high-ranking people with an Asian spirit? - Gnawing granite with my teeth doesn't appeal to me either. So why should I overthrow the tried and tested royal constitution? On the contrary, I hope to strengthen it, Warga. Perhaps I can even get my hands on the heart of Acora ..."

"You've already got it from the old man, have you?" smiled the sick woman, trying to turn her paralysed neck.

Baldur gently took the girl's head with both hands and turned it towards him. The golden spark glowed in the eagle eyes of the tall man, full of tender compassion, and the gardener had to make an effort not to burst into tears.

"From the old man?" repeated Baldur Wieborg. "I think so, yes. The whimsical heart of the king of the realm has

let yourself be beguiled. - I've brought you a letter I received from him the day before yesterday. - Shall I read it to you, or is that enough for today?"

"No, no!" begged Warga Gadirns. "Read it out."

The captain pulled a fine leather from the heart pocket of his tunic and unfolded it on the edge of the bed.

"Warager Torgaard dem Wieborg," the young warrior read out. "The duke wants to see you. Has asked me to send you to Aargund Castle near Acora Island, where he is with the duchess and the king's child Armane. I agree. I've had permission for Aargund signalled. You can go. It's time for me to put you in cold blood in Zimbabuye, let the horns run off. I'll think about it. Old Ase Köpping has had enough of you too. Suggested you for group leader, Schoongard location, where a strong hand is needed. I declined. Don't promote greenhorns as quickly as Köpping thinks. Told him to eat what he'd got himself into for a while longer. He and the duke then wanted to make me happy with you as chamberlain. Thank you for the time being. I have enough trouble without you. All that was missing was a ball-playing child's head. Written report for stolen documents unheard of. But satisfied with you that official channels via Köpping were culpably avoided. Your request for punishment rejected for the time being for reasons of state reason. Expect documents to be returned to Lochi. Report of what has happened. Thank you

for certified copies. Nice things with the gate. Very unpleasant for my house. Baldur ripe for the gallows if this goes on. Köpping should deduct the cost of stolen explosives from his salary. Unfortunately, he can't because he's not supposed to know anything. I'm very angry with you because you're a good-for-nothing. Tell me what Lochi looks like when he gets the documents back. I've never met a swordsman as impudent as you. Do you have one more request? Or still without a wish? I'll try to make you harmless. Perhaps a bourgeois profession? After return from Aargund expect lecture.

Warager, king of the realm."

"You've wrapped him up!" laughed Warga in genuine amazement. "And what about the original customers?"

"I wanted to bring them back to the honourable man personally," the captain reported calmly. "But he didn't accept me, so I handed the leathers over to the treasurer Pheras, in return for a receipt, of course, which he grudgingly signed. Mr Reichskönig already had his written report at the Asgard the next morning. I no longer need the documents. They are in safe hands in the form of certified copies. I do not know whether you are aware that your father has also received a set of leathers? As a teacher of constitutional law, that's his business."

"Have you also made a wish?" asked the gardener.

"Yes, because the gentleman had come back to that and also said that the bourgeois profession was desirable for me." the captain laughed exasperatedly. "I have applied for a teaching licence in the pillared corridors of the college of general humanities."

"And the answer?" Warga asked eagerly.

"Still to come," replied Baldur. "I'll probably have to wait until my return from Aargund. The king is probably still chewing on the morsel and hardly expected me to take him at his word about my civil profession. And then he suspects nothing good about my wish. But he will have no choice but to grant permission. The king's word is valid with the Aesir. The old gentleman is probably very angry with me now, and I shall find that out when I return and go to the lecture."

"Baldur, Baldur!" said the gardener with a sigh.

"Yes, dear, poor gardener," smiled the swordsman. "Even the highest court prosecutor in the empire must not now dare to call the little assistant in the war office to account for burglary and theft in the palace of the High Sun Gate. The young captain could drag too many high personalities into the maelstrom. Therefore

There must be something wrong if it's possible for pests like me to go unpunished. Hopefully the day will come when such a thing is no longer possible."

The door to Warga's hospital room opened quietly. Mrs Gadirus appeared on the threshold.

"That's enough, Baldur," she said quietly. "My child must have peace now. You can come back another time."

The swordsman obediently stood up and held out his hand to his ally.

"When are you going to Aargund?" asked the gardener.

"Tomorrow evening with the parcel galley 'Wiking 3' of the Reichsbriefamt, so quite bourgeois and simple," the friend explained.

"Stay healthy," Warga said quietly.

"And you will," the swordsman asked with warmth.

Outside, his mother led him into the constitutional law teacher's study. Weeling Ase Gadirus was still did not return from the university.

"Do you know who died suddenly?" she asked.

"The treasurer and deputy of the Venerable Father in Urd, Mr Pheras. I know the family. I was very sorry."

Baldur Wieborg remained calm on the outside, even though the turmoil inside him was not small. Warga's mother would not have understood him if she had noticed him.

Pheras was the second victim of the stolen documents. Baldur was in no doubt about this. The honourable father was quick in his decisions!

"Do they know what illness he died of?" Baldur asked cautiously.

"They say it was a stroke," the woman replied. "No-one would have believed it, but the priest Martum Ase Gorwart, whom I often visit in the shrine of the Earth Mother, believes he has observed that Pheras often suffered from heart problems recently, or at least shortness of breath. And after all, he was no longer young."

"A little over fifty years," said the captain thoughtfully. As Baldur Wieborg left the house of the state law teacher to return to Asgard in his small galley, he thought that he would actually have to be the next in the fine line if Amenor Lochi had his way. What might the duke wish of him? There was no good to be expected from the heir to the throne of the realm at the moment, for Baldur was certain that Amenor Lochi had not sworn off Acora. So evil? -

Not exactly necessary, but probably. If we managed to talk to Mr Wittmund Torgaard alone for just a few hours, everything could turn out well.

The small galley shot in front of the rudder pressure of two

Sailors from the Imperial War Office - this Imperial Office was, as we remember, united with the Fleet Office - travelled through the garden city through little-used side canals (l) so as not to be held up by the lively traffic in the main canals of the trading city of Atlantis. The inhabitants of Atlantis had a tender fondness for their waterways, a weakness inherited from their seafaring ancestors. There was no shortage of well-paved, wide thoroughfares, and a significant number of solid stone bridges (f) with high arched bays made the dividing canals virtually disappear. However, anyone who had business in the city travelled by small galley to the place where they had to disembark to visit the department stores or pay their taxes or to check the locations of the sea-going vessels on the notice boards of the shipping companies. Only the officials of the municipal administrations, the municipal cash offices and money trading centres, the customs offices and foreign missions, the municipal and secondary schools usually walked to their places of work.

In contrast, the workers in the shipyards, workshops and factories, as well as those in the extensive horticultural and agricultural businesses in and outside the city, were transported to their place of work in large flatboats.

The house of the Asen Weeling Gadirus was almost on the

From the roof of the pile you could see the surf of the Atlantean sea rolling against white sandy shores and high stone bastions. Therefore Baldur's small galley had to cross half the giant city to reach Asgard, which rose in the centre of Atlantis. The swordsman sat at the helm and operated the small ship's bell, which was rarely used in the quiet side canals, and with a rushing keel the tiny vessel with the towering bow glided sometimes under graceful, sometimes under massive bridges, on which idle people stood and looked into the water; over which the sedate traffic of the cosmopolitan city flowed with carriages and sedan chairs, with pedestrians and horsemen; whose wandering shadows glided back and forth behind the round columns of the roof parlours in ceaseless motion.

The journey through the city to the Troia at its centre took more than three hours, but Baldur Wieborg didn't waste any time. After crossing the first eighteen-hundred-foot-wide ring canal (g), he was able to focus less on the carriageway. The captain's alert thoughts worked incessantly; the familiar image of the living creatures on the Idafelde could distract him as little as the familiar sight of the shimmering Asgard looming in the distance (b). The lazy elephants working at a construction site on the banks of the canal did not attract his attention, even though a large flock of

Adults and children stood around the huge trunked animals and marvelled at the immense strength they displayed when transporting timber and hewn stone blocks. The mighty pachyderms were a familiar sight in Atlantis, especially in the harbour district, where they used pulleys to pull the sea galleys intended for repairing the floors up the sloping ship chutes over greased beams, as if the large vehicles were light toys.

Only once did the captain look up as the boat glided past the garden side of the Imperial College for General Humanities, this wide lawn with its semi-circular porticoes, in the background of which the administrative buildings of the college stood out in marble splendour, broad and massive from groups of green trees. If the king of the realm kept his word, and there was little doubt that he would, then one day these pillared halls could radiate groundbreaking thoughts out into the Atlantean world, the fate of a nation could turn for better or worse here. The swordsman did not take his eyes off the impressive image that the Nordic will to free spiritual development had erected in marble and bronze in the centre of the cosmopolitan city and embellished with shady porticoes and groups of trees. Here, a young captain's ruthless will to attack was to give new impetus to a stiffening world. At least on the

The old Asian principle, which was still extolled by the Greek historian after long millennia, that every good apart from ability was considered worthless and that only a sober perspicacity combined with it could create values that could only be called valuable.

Baldur Wieborg smiled. That would make shavings! He wanted to talk about the development of the Nordic sun service in the course of the many thousands of years of history of the happy Atlantis, a warrior from Asgard about divine services. He had found some of the historical evidence and documents in the libraries of the War Office, but the High Sun Gate had also had to provide them to him, albeit very unwillingly. Yes, there would be a fight to the death, to be fought out on both sides. And then the attack against the gnarled Azeri racial law would begin. This was particularly difficult because the law was good in itself, but had lost its beneficial effect through thousands of years of being broken in individual and multiple cases. The law now only protected a tiny proportion of the Atlantic population. The law had to be extended and then closed, a dam against further decline of the high patrimony. Enemies would be everywhere. In the back as well as in front of the broad Nordic forehead. And he wanted to bring them all down with the crystal clarity of the spirit.

weapons. Wieborg hoped for the good will of the others, as all Baldurnaturen must and do. The advantage of a united popular bloc would become clear even to the most stubborn nobility when the unstoppable process of melting away the small, tough Nordland circle of pure-blooded Asen was put to the test.

Tall gables of old trading sheds made of dark grey, red and white stone stood in front of the magnificent picture of the college where Mr Wieborg wanted to forge the stronger Atlantis. Merchant galleys loaded their cargo on groaning cranes into yawning hatches, customs cutters shot searchingly out of narrow canals, clearance leathers were passed with admirable dexterity onto the high boards of the ships, and short shouts resounded plaintively across the murky canal water, incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

The boat glided on almost silently, past the entrance to the Linden Canal and its model gardens (2), which were now under the control of a head gardener whom Baldur did not even recognise by name. With careful strokes of the oars, the sailors crossed the second main canal, which was twelve hundred feet wide and looked like a small inlet. Here, the city's water watch regulated the crossing traffic using coloured flags, which were replaced by lanterns at night.

Once again, the keel rushed through lonely, narrow waterways, bordered on both sides by tall, oppressive commercial buildings (3), whose colourful storeys spilled out to the canal side. The representatives of foreign trading companies had made their homes here, crowded together on two small islands bordered by the canal, and every bit of land was utilised for buildings. Gardens and public parks with playgrounds and racetracks (4) followed again, and then, already close to Asgard, the most important hermit's house (5) in the city of Atlantis with its spiritual schools, with its houses for neglected children of foreign peoples, the labour wards for wanderers, homeless sailors and former pirates, who worked for a while in return for accommodation and meagre rations until their restless blood drove them far away again. Baldur Wieborg looked at the vast construction sites with a brief, annoyed glance. What in Atlantis was considered to be a sweeping facility was a disgrace to him. Here they healed the outward manifestations of a disease and not its root. This block also had to be rolled up one day, with or against the will of the pious hermits. In contrast to the mass of idolatrous priests, these hermits were unmarried, few in number, but supported by a large number of working and serving brothers, whose long, yellow robes occasionally flashed between the trees in the gardens. The hermitage

of the "Benevolent Earth Mother" was a power in the kingdom of Atlantis, supposedly very rich and of great influence on the daughter foundations all over the world and thus also on the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi in Urd.

Baldur Wieborg was almost surprised when his small galley docked at the well-known King's Bridge (e) of the innermost main canal (1). With friendly words of thanks to the two sailors, he stepped ashore, hurried up the steep steps to the street and crossed the wide roof bridge into Asgard.

Mr Herbing Ase Köpping was not in office. He was staying with the imperial king in the mountains to hunt deer. In this way, the young labourer was even more of a master in the cool halls of the Imperial Office than was usually the case. Yes, what Mr Wa- rager Torgaard had written to the swordsman was true. The old burgrave had had enough of his assistant. The ruthlessness with which the youthful, hard will radiated from the otherwise so cosy core leadership of the Atlantic Wehrmacht had become so obvious in the last year that the army commanders in the Border Marches first turned over all letters and decrees from home three times before they decided to open them. But there was one quality they could not deny the new wind blowing from Atlantis. It was healing and strengthened the empire's reputation. The prices of suppliers for the army and war had fallen pleasingly since Mr Köpping was no longer in charge.

himself conducted the negotiations. The performance with the merchant Morjang Trulbe, whom Wieborg had brought to his knees in the truest sense of the word, had been nothing short of dreadful, and it was only the power of the Head of the War Office that had saved the High Sun Gate from an embarrassing public complaint, and only because the merchant had refused to give any further details about the origin of the tunics he had supplied, greatly reducing his prices.

On the stone worktable in the burgrave's hall lay a letter in a sealed folder, which a young official from the Imperial Office pointed out as soon as Baldur entered. It was from Odil Gadirus from the Agni solar observatory, and Wieborg had been expecting this letter because some of the measures that had to be taken for the journey to Aargund depended on it.

The content of the letter was reassuring:

"Odil Gadirus to Wieborg.

You can travel without worry. The King of the Realm has also informed the Honourable Father that you have been appointed to Aargund. Of course, this was already known in Urd, for there they obviously wish to meet with the Acora. The High Sun Gate, together with the Duke, probably wants to negotiate with you peacefully, a sign that things are not bad for us for the time being. Also

It may also be due to the wishes of the imperial king. But this is probably just a coincidental coincidence of wishes. So you will find your friends gathered in Aargund. The galley of the Porte with the spiritual counsellor Rudeger Ase Marken (a recognised Ase like me, but very devoted to Papas) sets sail for Aargund shortly after midnight tonight, heading for the eastern tip of Schoongard, the west coast of Gaatland, Brammer Lighthouse, Sterkopp promontory on Acora, Halger Lighthouse and finally Aargund King's Harbour. All without a stopover, so that the Spiritual Council can be with the Duke in seven days. As you wrote to me, you are taking the mail galley 'Wiking 3'. You have to reckon with at least a fortnight on it, as the 'Wiking' calls at several harbours in the realm. So you will meet opponents in Aargund who have found plenty of time and opportunity for preliminary discussions. If I know you, you won't mind.

If you go out on deck at night in good weather, don't forget to look at the star Heldung, which is once again close to the earth and, as the brightest star, stands like a nebulous little disc in the plane of the variable stars. In a few years it will be more work for us than it is today.

The long duration of my sister's illness worries me deeply. I suspect that the recently deceased Alderman Pheras is behind it. So you know

You immediately that this gentleman died suddenly. I wish the king would have the body opened. We would learn all sorts of things, which is very strange, at least I suspect so. Nothing will be done, for reasons of state reason. I ask that the leather be burnt immediately, as agreed.

Gadirus."

A second letter to Baldur himself lay on the table, bearing the burgrave's seal:

"Köpping to Wieborg.

The King of the Realm informs me that he is sending you to Aar- gund. I will therefore return to Atlantis tomorrow, I have also had enough of deer-baiting. The Lord asked me for my opinion on your request to receive a teaching position at the university. I supported your request, but I got the impression that the king didn't feel like agreeing to it. He asked me if I thought you were mad. After some thought, I said no.

There are three tickets in the office for the première of 'The Educated Women', a cheerful production by our new star Frale Lund. I promised him I would go, but now I can't. That's why I ask you to stand in for me and take two of the off-duty Asgard ases with you: they'll look very nice on the stage.

King's seats in the theatre round. Say a few kind words to the author on my behalf, regardless of whether the play is any good or not. Be careful in Aargund and when travelling. Your popularity has suffered, at least in some circles.

Köpping, Burgrave."

Baldur Wieborg laughed happily.

So before he left, another comedy. Maybe he could use it.

AARGUND

Aargund was an all-father fiefdom, meaning that it belonged to the lord god of the Nordic Aesir, who had come to the Atlantic islands on their fast warships countless millennia ago. There were many such all-father fiefdoms throughout the empire. They were at the disposal of the members of the royal families, those of the kings of the states as well as those of the imperial king. According to ancient tradition, the rocky island of Aargund was the fiefdom of the heir to the throne.

The island was not significant. It was located in the north of the large island of Acora, the northernmost of the kingdoms of the empire, roughly under the solar ring of the northern hemisphere. Over the millennia, famous Atlantean master builders and garden artists had turned the ancient nest of rocks into a paradise. The old, grey tower of the first Asen had been left standing, preserved externally in the crude, clumsy form and construction of the peasant ancestors and cared for with great love that no stone crumbled out and replaced weathered blocks with new ones. Inside, however, the old tower was un

The castle had been conspicuously inserted into the row of modern suites of rooms, and only the thick walls betrayed the fact that one was in the stronghold of the first Northmen. The castle of the heir to the throne nestled on a high plinth against the grey rocks, as if it had grown out of them; Large, clear surfaces, supported by the high substructure, which had no openings, little articulation and very sparse sculptural decoration gave the whole complex a noble air, and only the double rows of windows in the upper part of the building and the slender pillars on the east side of Aargund Castle with the splendid green of the parkland behind them betrayed the rich home of a sensuous prince with their glowing colourful rose decorations.

On the western side, the island gradually sloped down towards the sea and ran out into a marsh-like meadow, criss-crossed by shallow ditches and surrounded by broad, grass-covered dykes on the lower seaward sides, over which the white seagulls fluttered. Behind this dyke, crouched and protected from the winds, was a small fishing village of a few clean huts. About three quarters of the beautiful, well-tended meadowland was allocated to the inhabitants of the hamlet as a royal fief, while one quarter, which bordered the uphill castle garden, belonged to the all-fathers' fief. Wheat and rye were only grown on small strips of land on the south side of the island.

built. These fields actually belonged to the Allfather's fiefdom and were used to supply the castle with bread, but had long since been ceded to the fishermen, as Acora Castle was only inhabited for a few weeks every solar year and received its food supplies by sea from the large island of Acora.

One of the island's attractions was the so-called King's Harbour, as it was almost entirely in the rock beneath the castle and had its entrance on the sheltered eastern side. Similar rock harbours existed in large numbers in the capital city of Atlantis, where a number of shipyards were built on the banks of the canals in deep coves under the shore roads, and this had been imitated on the island of Aargund without the lack of space that had led to such arrangements in the core city of the empire. Although the royal harbour of Aargund could not be approached by the mighty warships and merchant galleys, the packet boats of the Imperial Letter Office with masts and, in light winds, even with standing sails, passed well under the rocky opening and were completely hidden from view from the sea.

Aargund also had a far-reaching beacon and a flashing light, which, with its polished concave mirror, communicated directly with the Asgard via the flashing lights on Acora, Gaatland and Schoongard, in uncertain weather with the help of several lightships, such as those of Halger and Brammer.

could. At night, blinking was carried out using liquid explosive fire, which emitted a white, very bright flame when burning freely. Communication was therefore possible over many days in just a few minutes, and in good weather - and the happy islands of the mother kingdom of Atlantis almost always had good weather - the blinking connection reached across the coastal areas of Africa and Tiahusinyu to the most distant borders of the world empire. During the moonless time of the Spring Empire, the Atlantean islands formed almost a land bridge between the two great continents of the old and the new world, and the blink words of the core government were understood just as quickly in Gondwana, Egypt, Summeria and Hellas as they were in Tiahnsinyu Lowland. Only the Andean highlands with the ancient city of Aztlan on Lake Tihuanaku usually had to do without this means of communication due to the frequent mountain clouds. There, drum shouts or exchange posts on horseback ensured the transmission of news within a few hours or days.

While the packet galley "Wiking 3" cast off from Sterkopp harbour on Acora and sailed with full sails across the wide arm of the sea to Aargund, a narrow speedboat came free behind the Halger lightship, heading for the hulking "Wiking" under snow-white wings. At its low-lying stern sat a tall Ase in a sunken rudder box and

had his broad fist on the tiller of the lanky ship, whose bronze-clad railing almost brushed the surface of the water. A slender girl was perched on a blue silk cushion on the high foredeck behind the towering dragon's neck with its bleak head and glowing ruby eyes; blue, transparent, radiant children's eyes peered eagerly at the clumsy galley of letters, which with persistent good-naturedness let the green waves of the shallow sea dance around the ponderous belly of the ship. Although the old "Viking 3" had hung both short masts full of canvas with the best will in the world to move forward as quickly as possible, so that the sails looked like chubby hemispheres, the broad hull, which bore a strong resemblance to that of a rich city merchant in Atlantis, had to do a tremendous job of pushing the annoying waves aside. Older, fat gentlemen could not be expected to run like young horses. The slender golden "Seerose" ran all the faster for that. She also had it better, as she was running with rough sheets towards the packet galley, which after all had to sail bluntly on the wind, which didn't suit her much. That's why the dainty speedboat came up with lightning speed, and the young girl behind the dragon's head watched with happy eyes as the fat mail ship grew thicker and thicker out of the waves.

"Mrs Armane!" shouted the man at the wheel. "I think so,

Your visitor is standing there on the aft deck of the 'Wiking'. I don't know Mr Wieborg, but it can only be the taller of the two men standing next to each other looking over the breastplate."

The king's child turned round briefly.

"If you go a little to port before the wind, Mr Hagenot, we'll catch the merchant driver close behind the stern."

Armane felt like a buccaneer hunting lumbering pepper sacks. Her blue eyes beamed at the man at the helm in blissful anticipation. Immediately afterwards, however, she had her fine nose back next to the dragon's neck and was peering out of the aft deck of the galley after the taller of the two men. Ah, she had realised much sooner than Mr. Hagenot Skullörn that her Baldur Wieborg was standing there, and the king's girl had meanwhile been so sensibly and educationally pruned that she had almost thought the word "master" before Baldur, but that only happened by mistake, because such a gentlemanly overseer was sitting in the back of the little racing galley. The young girl's heart cheered incessantly Baldur! Baldur! She wanted to sail very close under the high stern of the floating washtub and wave to her great beloved friend, then she wanted to turn round to overtake the "Wiking" and continue the game until both ships had sailed into the royal harbour of Aargund under the

would run into the arched rocks. The fact that this would take a few more hours was just fine with her. Afterwards, all the waving and playing would be over, for an awful lot of people were waiting from Aargund Castle whom her father had invited, master builders, painters, sculptors, clergymen, actors and harpists, who occupied all the guest rooms inside the castle. Baldur Wieborg would have to move into the cute house of the harbour master, which was located in front of the silver castle gate at the bottom of the stairs leading down to the royal harbour. But perhaps that wasn't so unfavourable. Armane had much more freedom on Aargund than on Asgard. Even the old chamberlain Gnnar Ase Gepide didn't always follow her when she went for a walk. The whole island belonged to the slender royal child, so to speak, she was at home in all the fishing huts on the marshes, knew almost all the cows and horses, goats and pigs, knew secret rocky paths that led up to the park wall, knew the way to two secretly eerie caves that led deep into the mountain and an old, circular well that was so deep that you had to wait a long time for a stone thrown into it to send up its sound again. Armane had free use of a racing galley made of deep black precious wood with a real little quay where you could sit and eat, and behind the quay there was even a tiny kitchen with plates and pots and a cute fire cooker,

whose copper pipe protruded through the fixed deck. There was an old, friendly skipper and two sailors, who were all as secretive as the grave and more or less in love with the king's child. Yes, you could tell that. She hadn't turned nineteen for nothing, and the mirrors in her girl's room in the old Viking tower loved the truth and reflected it very well.

And while Armane almost unconsciously associated all these thoughts with Baldur Wieborg, without imagining in detail whether it would be possible to take her great, radiant friend with her to every nook and cranny of the magically beautiful island of Aargund without the powers that be, Armane unfortunately always had to reckon with the intervention of the powers that be, the golden "Water Lily" shot towards the "Viking" with her dragon head glowing with infatuation, as if she wanted to ram the massive letterbox.

The skipper of the packet galley made a thoughtful face. He was about to shout an instruction to the helmsman, when the "Seerose" fell away and immediately headed for the hulking stern of its prey.

Well, Mr Wieborg, that seems to be going well once again," the sailor breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm downright scared of this light-minded sailing rabble. Whenever an accident happens, the blame is always put in our boots."

Baldur did not answer. His grey lights were shining brightly on a tanned girl's face, who peeked out laughing next to the ugly dragon's head and waved her right hand unambiguously for her friend to come over.

Now the narrow boat shot up to the deck of the cargo galley, and the young voice of the king's child echoed up to the deck:

"Baldur, come to me."

How quickly do people make decisions?

"Very different. Some after long, mature consideration, and these decisions tend not to be bad. Others are so hesitant that they miss the right moment. By others, on the other hand, in a flash, without the need for a lengthy thought process beforehand, but with the foreboding certainty that the single, non-recurring moment must be utilised. Baldur Wieborg loved lightning, whether it struck from the clouds or from the brain.

Like a cat of prey, he flew past the ponderous skipper of the official mailbox and stood high on the stern ramp as the "Seerose" shot past under the stern. Only Wieborg knew what happened next. The forecastle, which stiffened the mast of the racing galley aft against the wind pressure, slid up in a flash. The captain threw himself into the

Empty and grabbed the twisted brass hawser with both fists, throwing the heavy body in the direction of travel of the "Seerose". And then, as if by magic, he stood next to the helmsman of the neat boat on the aft deck.

"Wieborg," the swordsman introduced himself politely.

"Pleased to meet you," replied the man at the helm calmly. "My name is Hagenot Skullörn."

The captain realised something. The situation could become very unpleasant! He heard the muffled cry of terror behind him on board the "Wiking 3", and if he heard correctly, someone called out "Man overboard!"

But what was much more important now was this. The gentleman who sat at the helm of the "Seerose" and had given his name with exemplary composure was the King of the States Hagenot of Acora, Brammerloh and Aargund, a gentleman who was not to be jumped in front of without being asked. Baldur recognised the high lord, whom he had seen in Asgard at the last royal assembly, now also in the simple garb of a seafarer.

"Sir King, I would like to request permission, free of charge ..." the swordsman began with due modesty.

"It's not necessary," laughed the prince. "Mrs Armane has ordered you on board and I have no further say in the matter."

In the meantime, the royal child had used the time to come aft with her blue crate. She now held on to the backstage, where her lightning-like friend had slid down like a giant panther, and just said.

"You're being reckless, Mr Wieborg!"

Baldur turned round. There stood his lovely royal maiden with her heart-breaking blue eyes, beaming at her friend with such open infatuation that King Hagenot Skullörn's brow furrowed involuntarily; and rightly so, for at that moment he drew a conclusion that was absolutely correct:

For the time being at least, the royal child was not thinking of becoming Queen of Acora, Brammerloh and Aargund.

"Reckless, Lady Armane?" asked the sword wielder, lowering his grey lights, sparkling with golden sparks, into the blue child stars of the king's girl. "Even if I am no longer the Asgardase in the trapdoor of the Allfather's fiefdom, I have not forgotten how to obey when the daughter of Acora calls."

"Obedient!" said the slender girl, shrugging her shoulders, but realised at once that Baldur could not speak otherwise in the presence of Mr Hagenot Skullörn, and held out her slender hand to her friend. And now she followed the proud man's inclination attentively,

The blonde head bent over her tanned, slender fingers; and she would have liked the opportunity to stroke the short-cropped hairs on the back of his neck against the grain, as she had sometimes done as a child when Baldur looked at the half-torn arm of her doll to assess the damage.

"On the 'Wiking' they found out that Mr Wieborg didn't drown," laughed the king, who had taken too long to greet us. "Now please take a seat on the benches, as I want to go to the wind. I think we'll walk to Aargund and register the fat 'Viking'."

The packet boat had set her oars and was pitching in the wind; she had indeed made the prescribed tack because of Baldur Wieborg. Slowly the clumsy ship's body fell back into the wind, but before the sails filled and gave the ship the necessary speed, the "Seerose" ran past the good letterbox with her laughing crew. The guide had gone to the bridge and threatened with his fist; and it was a good thing that the wind blew his words away a little, for otherwise Armane might have learnt how infinitely rich the Norse language of the Atlantean Aesir was and how suitable it was for the faithful reproduction of spiritual moods

Baldur Wieborg was very surprised at the apparently high level of anger that was expressed with numerous little

The ship's captain was thrown to the wind from the command bridge. He did not know that the skipper had received a short letter from the royal household of the Torgaards, urging him to take care of Mr Wieborg's safe arrival in Aargund. As it was the old king's wish to conceal this concern of his master's from the swordsman Wieborg for educational reasons, the skipper had had to keep his mouth shut, however difficult this was for him as a sailor; but on the occasion of a conversation with the captain, which took place a few days later in the royal harbour of Aargund, Baldur nevertheless received the letter, and the two men parted as good friends despite all the rudeness they had experienced.

In the meantime, the distance between "Water lily" and "Viking" quickly. Baldur and Armane sat contentedly side by side and looked at each other, but they were so well behaved that they did not neglect the poor king's steersman.

"I've brought you something, Mrs Armane," said Mr Wieborg with a mysterious look on his face.

"Shall I guess?" asked the royal child.

"It's not difficult," smiled the captain. "I sometimes brought it to you years ago, although the Duchess didn't always like it."

"A candy cane!" beamed the girl.

"No, two," the swordsman replied calmly, grabbing

He reached into the heart pocket of his travelling skirt and took out the delicious sticks, two of which could be bought for a small copper coin in the fairground halls of Atlantis. "Now you also have the opportunity, high lady, to pay the fare for me to Mr Hagenot, King of the States. For you have ordered me on board."

Mr Skullörn put on a good face. What else could he do? The long captain had an ally who made it possible to offer a young king of Acora a candy cane in a roundabout way! It was an outrageous impertinence, but it was so funny that there was no place for an angry, official face.

The king had been staying with Duke Wittmund Torgaard in Aargund for several days and knew of the reasons that had prompted the Acora to ask King Warager to send Captain Wieborg, but now he realised that this sending was perhaps a mistake, no less than the request. As the only sovereign in the ten-king kingdom of Atlantis, he was still unmarried, and his dearest wish was to make the lovely daughter of Duke Wittmund Torgaard his queen. Acora knew this, and yet he let this Wieborg come. It almost looked as if there were other and more serious reasons for the young swordsman's appointment to Aargund, reasons that were not

were allowed to become known and which were perhaps related to matters concerning the High Sun Gate. The fact that the benevolent behaviour of the Venerable Father of Urd was conspicuous in the whole affair became clear during the first meetings with the clerical councillor Rudeger Marken at Aargund Castle.

That Captain Wieborg was not harmless where hearts were concerned was as clear and bright as the sun approaching the edge of the Atlantic Sea in the west behind the Halg lightship. King Hagenot Skullörn did not consider the foreign captain to be so foolish as to harbour hopes for the hand of the king's child, but the king of Acora, Brammerloh and Aargund no longer considered a free choice out of inclination. Mr Hagenot had heard much talk of Mr Wieborg in the castle of the heir to the throne, knew that he was a farmer's son from the Anglo-Landish Thule, had learned that the spiritual counsellor of the Venerable Father of Urd, Mr Rudeger Ase Marken, had strongly recommended to the duke that he should attract the unusually alert and lively spirit of the young captain and, in particular, create a field of work for him that would lead him out of the confines of administrative work in the Imperial War Office.

Was the work of the young assistant official in the High Porte's war office embarrassing? Should much

is it therefore easy to get another one for him in Aargund?

That this other task on the first day consisted of turning the young head of the royal child Armane with candy canes and bright, shining eyes had hopefully not been planned by the duke.

But however things turned out, Mr Hage- not Skullörn, after a friendly "thank you", put the candy cane intended for him into his mouth with little royal movement and was quite surprised that it didn't taste so bad. Kings rarely get such simple sweets, and when they do, they are surprised at how good they are. Baldur Wieborg watched with great satisfaction as the high gentleman accepted the situation and said:

"I must now express my thanks, Mr King of the States."

"For a lift in my racing galley?" asked the helmsman.

"No, for the kind reception," explained the captain. "I know it could have turned out differently, and that wouldn't have been very pleasant for me."

"Maybe you pleased me with your great jump on deck," laughed the distinguished skipper. "But if you always want to do it like you did today..."

"Follies should only be rare, otherwise they lose their value," Baldur replied cheerfully. "I assure you

also that the jump to the 'Seerose' was well thought out."

The packet galley shrank together, and in front of the dragon head of the speedboat the magical splendour of the green island of Aargund rose higher and higher out of the evening red sea. The castle burned in bloody flames, lit by the sun on battlements and roofs, and the roses between the rows of pillars in the park shone like precious hanging carpets embroidered all over with rubies. At the entrance to the royal harbour, the position lights glowed like blinking eyes on stone pedestals, and in the lane not far ahead, the yellowish leading lights twitched on rocking barrels against the blackness of the harbour vault.

King Hagenot Skullörn steered close to these buoys in the waning wind, then threw the pricksails to enter the lee of the high castle rock. The first buoy slid past on the port side like a large dead fish. Baldur Wieborg pulled a short oar from under the dinghy and dipped the blade with long movements into the deep blue water of the harbour entrance, on the bottom of which starfish could be seen lying and lively crabs fighting their battles. Tiny fish scurried around the boat and prodded the solid outer walls with their delicate noses; air beads clicked from the sandy bottom to the surface of the water, and then the "Water Lily" glided silently and

stiffly in the blue shadows of the royal harbour of Aargund.

The head of the small harbour office stood at the landing steps and received King Hagenot with a respectful bow. He was very surprised that a man had secretly joined him on the high seas, but he did not ask. He found out straight away, because Armane Torgaard told him very urgently that it was Captain Wieborg from Atlantis, who had been due to arrive on the "Viking 3", but had arrived earlier, and that the harbour master would take him into his house with him, as had been arranged.

"It would be no use if I told you to come with us to the castle, Mr Wieborg," the royal child said to his friend with a sigh. "Your luggage is still on the Viking, and you can only come to father if you have a good tunic on."

They parted at the top of the broad stone staircase in front of the harbour master's pile; the king of Acora and Brammerloh went into the castle with Armane Torgaard through the silver-studded ceremonial gate, and Wieborg, the swordsman, followed his host into the harbour master's office.

The next morning Baldnr reported to the duke. He had to sit for a long time in a tiny waiting room whose furnishings were of depressing splendour.

was. The low walls were hung with tightly woven cords up to the ivory-panelled dividing ceiling, and the individual cords were strung with coloured, perforated gemstones, almost all of them only superficially polished, but nevertheless with a lively sparkle. These countless little stones formed figurative and vegetal patterns which, with very little difference in colour, looked like little pictures that had been painted, pictures that also came to life and changed very strangely when a breeze blew through the open window. Then the little stones clicked against each other as if a pensive hand were stroking the top strings of a large harp.

Baldur looked with a smile of amusement at a deer in a row, which stretched once as if it wanted to run and then contracted again as if its body ached, and admired the roses of bright ruby splinters, which seemed to breathe in the morning breeze, blossomed once and then shrivelled into buds.

On the table made of brownish-black precious wood lay a folder with drawings depicting the new buildings of Aargund, drawings by the master builder, who had to fulfil the far-reaching wishes of the art-loving duke and was lucky that money and valuable building materials were allowed to remain a minor matter. When Baldur had looked through the sheets, he was convinced that he

must have got the time wrong, because it was very quiet in the castle as he walked through the long corridors and narrow stairwells. In Aargund, people seemed to have slept through the morning. The captain had heard music and laughter from his window in the harbour master's office long after midnight and had seen illuminated castle windows when he had looked out, awakened by the unusual nocturnal activity. But in the end, it was quite right for the duke to spend his days off happily in the rock castle. On Asgard in Atlantis, the King of the Empire, Waracher, demanded early rises and loved it when the duke had already completed his ride to the training fields outside the city by sunrise. Here in Aargund, the Acora had no need to visit warriors, no need to inspect weapons and equipment, no need to lecture the Lord Father on supply issues to Thyrrenia by sea and land and no need to feign fondness for the principles of administration in Upper Egypt.

Wieborg thought as a capable captain must think: He was paid less than the heir to the throne of the empire and had to wait for it.

By now, however, it was getting boring, so Mr Wieborg leaned out of the wide window with its silver-hammered walls and marble water bench and poked his nose into the fresh morning of the green island. And lo and behold, the morning became

It was quite pleasant, for in the depths a young girl was sitting at the edge of the harvested rye field, reading a thin leather volume. The high castle walls provided pleasant shade, and the wide, sunlit sea with its white lines of distant sailors shone with a soothing smoothness. There was no doubt that this young girl was the king's child, Armane Torgaard, for enamoured eyes could tell what the other side looked like by the round blond back of her head and the twisted pigtails.

Mr Wieborg thought about it for a while. He would have liked to whistle or throw something, but he couldn't, the Asgard captain was so clever. But finally he decided to shout something very softly, something Armane knew, something that would certainly wake her from her deep absorption. Baldur thought of the trapdoor in the royal garden of the Allfather's Fief of Atlantis and called out as softly as he needed to:

"Heunig Schulde, the key!"

The little leather book immediately rolled into the grass. A young girl's body sprang up and stood in front of the castle with a delighted slenderness, her face lifted high. And although there were many windows in the castle of Aargund, apparently only one had a captain looking out of it that morning, for with two raised, slender arms the royal child waved her cheering morning greeting:

"Baldur!"

When two such young, blossoming human children belong together, there is not much to be done, and the longing pulls so strongly that Armane had the feeling that she was quite light and that it would not take much for her to float out and grab her tall husband by the head with both hands and - twist him. Armane had not grown out of her infancy for nothing, and whatever unconscious tenderness she had accumulated over the years now wanted to blossom. Baldur was desolate. There was not a flower to be found in the entire waiting room, and he could not tear the gemstone fragments of the artificial flowers from the silken strings to throw them down as a greeting to the king's child.

But why did he have the golden sun cross on the waistband of his armour? When the sword pommel was hanging over it, you couldn't see that anything was missing. A quick pull of the short sidearm and the clips tore out of the leather. The sword lay on the marble bench, and the little sun cross sailed in whimsical gliding flights, whirling into the depths, and even rose again for a while, carried by an up-coming breeze, and then shot purposefully diagonally into the stubble of the rye field. The king's child had sharp eyes and followed the uncertain flight of the golden messenger vigilantly. With long running leaps, which the Duchess would certainly not have liked as much as Mr Wieborg,

she shot towards the prey like a kestrel and immediately swivelled it high in the air.

Baldur Wieborg was so happy at that moment that he thought of nothing but the lovely royal child down there in the green depths and was very surprised when a hand laid lightly on his shoulder.

"Well, Mr Wieborg, are you drinking the fresh air of Aargund?" asked a deep voice.

Baldur took one last look at the astonished royal maiden, who had seen her father's head and arm, and turned round. Baldur stood in front of the heir to the throne of the kingdom of Atlantis with his armour belt shifted and his helmet, which he was required to wear under his arm when reporting for duty, lay on a low silver stool. But the Acora stood between the stool and the captain and scrutinised the visitor with scrutinising eyes.

"What's with the naked sword on the windowsill?" he asked suspiciously and not exactly friendly. Even though he was quite indifferent to the uniform of all the swordsmen in the kingdom, thanks to his father's fondness for such things, he had such a precise knowledge of them that he immediately noticed the absence of the sun cross on the defence hanger. Mr Wieborg had lost his composure a little, and was tugging at his belt as if he could have been the cause of the misfortune.

make it better. Manly discipline was in his bones, and he was annoyed with himself that he had to appear before the eyes of the Lord in this guise.

"I didn't have any rofe at the moment ..." Baldur explained vaguely. The duke stepped to the window and looked out. His daughter was still standing below, waving to her father. The princess did not seem to like the face of the prince, so she did something to take the sting out of the unpleasant situation. She called out in a bright voice:

"Father, don't quarrel with Baldur Wieborg. It's all my fault." The duke turned his thin, fine head.

"Do you understand that, Captain Wieborg?" he asked.

"Mrs Armane is not to blame," Baldur denied. "I threw her my sun cross from the defence hanger, and that's not the high lady's fault. - I wanted to thank her for taking me on board the 'Seerose'."

"So," said the father in a voice that didn't sound like he was in the picture, and then he added a quick word. "Come."

While the duke, wrapped in a silken, snow-white morning suit, was walking back to his reception room, from which he had entered unnoticed, across the deceitfully soft carpet in the waiting room, he bumped into

Baldur sheathed his sword, caught his helmet with a quick jump, slid back to the window to send a farewell greeting to the king's child with his hand, and then he wandered through the high door of polished blackwood in the footsteps of Acora.

The duke took a seat in a wide armchair upholstered in heavy yellow silk and beckoned his guest to sit in the chair opposite. But before Baldur obeyed, he prayed down his official message with the composure and assurance he usually possessed and which had only left him for a short time because of the royal child.

For the first time, the heir to the throne of the realm smiled, perhaps because of the difference between Wieborg in front of and now behind the door of the waiting room. And the captain breathed a sigh of relief. Official wrath could be ridden off, but paternal wrath was unpredictable, and it was doubtful whether it was right to throw golden crosses at royal children who were also state property.

"Thank you for the message, Mr Wieborg," the prince replied in his quiet, dark voice, which sounded a little tired and very distinguished. "I must confess, however, that I had imagined our meeting differently."

"Mr Duke, it is not customary for warriors to apologise," replied the captain

coolly. "The only thing left for me to do is to ask for punishment."

The Acora turned his grey eyes to the swordsman in astonishment and without any understanding. Then he shook his head very quietly and pointed again to the chair where Baldur was now sitting.

"Punishment?" repeated the heir to the throne. "Why?"

"Because of my off-duty behaviour in the anteroom," replied Baldur Wieborg.

Now the Acora laughed; this laughter beautified the ageing man, and it showed a row of white teeth that had only been repaired in a few places with hammered platinum. Then he kindly explained that in Aargund he had no understanding for such trivialities, and that he had made his remark in a completely different sense. He had believed that Wieborg's behaviour would be less modest. There was a reason for this expectation, which the captain certainly knew. Baldur answered in the negative.

"I know of no reason that could induce me to display an immodest nature against the Acora of the realm," he said proudly.

"Well, not even if a sharp weapon is in your hand against me?" the prince asked calmly.

"I don't know any weapons against the royal house of Torgaard," said the captain.

The Acora raised his hand as if to prevent his guest from speaking any further; his face became sombre and almost contemptuous.

"Stop, dear captain," he asked with a slight sneer.

"I was told that you have some documents from Urd in your possession, at least the certified copies. My father seems to know them ..."

"Yes, Mr Duke," Baldur Wieborg confirmed. "The Imperial King has received certified copies."

"So!" said the landlord of Aargund with barely concealed displeasure. "That's all I said and believed. - So that there is clarity between us, Captain! How does that square with your assurance that you know no weapons against the royal house of the Torgaards? My lord father is not very pleased with his successor to the throne; this will not have escaped your perceptiveness because you have been a frequent guest on Asgard and because all the sparrows are already whistling from the rooftops of Atlantis. So you knew about the strained relationship between my lord father and me. Now you are sending the documents to the king of the realm without informing me or speaking to me first. You used to easily find your way through the trapdoor into the Allfather's fiefdom. - We will not discuss the form in which you received the deeds. I only have one term for it: burglary."

"I reported for punishment immediately, Mr Duke," Baldur Wieborg replied icily. "I am still waiting for my arrest today. I knew beforehand that my punishment would be many years in hard labour."

had to stand. Instead of the best, the Lord King of the Realm sent me to Aargund. Was he not allowed to punish me?"

"No. You knew that you would go unpunished," the duke said, but immediately tempered himself and continued more calmly: "I don't care what the king or other people or even you think of me, but the handing over of the contract I made with the High Sun Gate in favour of the Asian nobility, the handing over of this document to Mr Warager is a hostile act, a weapon that you supposedly do not know against the royal house of the Torgaards."

"Under other circumstances, I would now have the duty to ask for permission to leave Aargund," Mr Wieborg replied calmly. "But since the serious accusations you make against me are not true, I may stay. I deny with all due respect that I have committed any hostile act against the family of the King of the Realm or even against the heir to the throne personally. After I had stolen the documents, I read them carefully for their danger to the state before copying them. And not just once, Mr Duke. It was indeed my intention to present the documents in their entirety to the Imperial King, as I considered it my duty to make the actions of the High Sun Gate accessible to him in unassailable documents. - The treaty that the Acora of the

The agreement between the Lord of the Realm and the Gate had to be separated. It is not available to the Lord King of the Realm and is only known to three men in the realm: the Papas of Urd Amenor Lochi, the Lord Duke Wittmund Torgaard and myself. There is also only one copy, and it belongs to me. The original and the copy are my only weapons against the poison and dagger that have threatened me since my predatory leap into the palace of the Honourable Father, but they are not weapons against the Acora of the realm."

"Quiet!" the landlord asked, rising to open the door that led from the reception room into the hallway. An employee of Aargund Castle was pacing up and down the corridor. The duke opened the door to the large banqueting hall. Here, too, there were a few servants setting the lunch table for thirty guests, but no one else to eavesdrop. The door to the waiting room was soundproof. As the lord of the manor sat back in his armchair, he looked thoughtfully in front of him.

"The king ordered you to return the documents to the honourable one," he said. "Did you do that? I mean, did you return all the deeds?"

"No, Mr Duke," replied the captain.

"I have kept the contract with the High Sun Gate. So the Lord King of the Realm doesn't know it either. Amenor Lochi will also never, ever get the treaty with the gate back as long as I am alive, even

not if the Lord should find out in any way and order me to do so afterwards. I would rather be expelled from the army for disobedience. Nor do I believe that Amenor Lochi will receive your signature again, for in the meantime it has become clear that this agreement against the Duke of the Empire has been used as a silk cord, over and over again, as a cord around his neck, which the Reverend Father could tighten and loosen at will ..."

"The agreement was made in good faith," the Acora said quietly.

"I know it," the captain confirmed. "It was supposed to secure the high and highest positions for the pure-blooded Aesir, even in the offices of the High Sun Gate. But the price was too high. The assurance of the rights of the legations at all courts in and out of the country after the demise of the imperial king Warager can be interpreted in many ways. A state within a state has long been spoken of, and to this day there are no legations of the Papa of Urd in Asgard. Honourable fathers who are allowed to have a consort in Asgard are independent princes, without the legal ties of kings of states; they are no longer subject to the sovereignty of the realm ..."

"When an Ase occupies the diamond chair of the chief priest, when pure-blooded northerners hold the high places of the ruling clergy,

such concerns are invalid," the Acora briskly defended himself.

"If a northern Ase is allowed to insist on a right, he is as stubborn as a buffalo," replied Mr Wieborg firmly. "The head of the priestly state would defend his written right with head and sword, even against the royal house of the Torgaards and against all the other nine royal houses of the Atlantean states. When a Northerner devotes himself to the mischief of idolatry, he becomes intolerable, not out of any inclination to that mischief, but out of loyalty to the office once assumed. In a few decades we would have the conditions we know today as a constant threat, the overgrowth of the Highgate over the kings, the rule of Urd over Asgard. - I am a lucky child, Lord Duke. I did not know what I would find in the treasury vault of the temple palace in Urd, even if I suspected it. I threw everything on a dice and love honour and life as much as all young Asgardases and peasants throughout the realm. The coup d'état on the gate broke open my access to the state. Now it's done, and I know no turning back. I could have made it easier for myself. Now the king can tell me he's angry with me and Mr Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping that my popularity has suffered. I know why. - The journey to Aargund was not easy for me."

"I was also surprised that you came," the Acora confessed in a tired voice. "What do you expect from your journey to me? Honour? Increased prestige and promotion? Or more?"

"More, Mr Duke," smiled Baldur.

"And that would be?"

"The heart of Acora," said the captain quickly and with warmth. The heir to the throne of the empire was silent for a while and looked at his counterpart with enigmatic eyes.

"You have a strange way of conquering hearts, Captain Wieborg," he then said with unconcealed derision. "Do you force love with such means? Does this procedure not bear a desperate resemblance to the silken cord which, as you believe, the honourable father Amenor Lochi placed around my neck? - Who is holding the string today? A little captain from old Köpping's imperial office!"

"I know how to catch hearts, Mr Duke," replied Baldur Wieborg. "It's really no exaggeration. People make it so easy for me, and I'm not foolish enough not to realise that. I don't even know whether it's deserved or undeserved. It's just the way it is. - Clarity, openness, goodness of heart, which is innate and for which one bears no responsibility, which are not merits, they are all compelling weapons in the battle for hearts. Love of truth, forgiveness

respect for lies in any form are the means of battle that may create enemies, but draw pure and good hearts to me, whether they like it or not. - That is why I will also force the heart of Acora."

The landlord smiled involuntarily, although he had no intention of treating Baldur Wieborg in a particularly accommodating manner.

"Is flattery also one of these clear weapons?" he asked.

"No," replied Baldur.

"It seemed so to me," said the duke. "Didn't you want to force my heart? Wasn't it a prerequisite for it to be pure and good?"

"It depends on faith, on conviction," replied the captain. "I have that faith."

"But it is desirable that the cord should remain in your hands?" asked the Acora bitterly.

"I'll give them back to you if you burn them," said Baldur Wieborg calmly and deliberately. "The original and the copy. I don't need nooses if I can win your heart."

"You seem to have forgiven my father. People say that you have achieved what even his children could not: to win his heart."

"I didn't go to any particular trouble," laughed the swordsman. "I only make an effort where the

It's worth fighting for hearts."

"So with me?" replied the duke, stretching.

"Yes, with you, Mr Duke," declared the captain firmly.

I have taken a great deal of pressure off you, and it was worth it for the sake of the kingdom. But with the winning of your heart, Lord Duke, the work would only be half done, for with the heart alone, even the little captain from the war office would get no further. From now on, my courtship of your Nordic soul will begin, unless you prefer to relieve me in time or take back your heart. Here, as everywhere else, only a voluntary resolution, a conviction, is of value, not a pressure or a silken cord that only awakens the desire for liberation from the troublesome helper."

I understand," interjected the landlord. "But world views clash here, Mr Wieborg. I consider the legal binding of the people in the service of the gods to be necessary because the people must have a support which they do not have alone in their lack of moral strength. You, on the other hand, are a denier of the divine, as I have been told, and your stance against the High Sun Gate confirms this rumour."

"I doubt whether the Spiritual Counsellor Rudeger Ase Marken or even the Reverend Father of Urd can and should make a useful judgement on my world view," Baldur Wieborg replied firmly. "I

am of the opinion that the enemy is incapable of this, and I am convinced that the gate is the enemy of the kingdom and therefore mine. I alone deny the childish-human idea of a personal god or several personal deities with their dubious human qualities, of which we Asen would have to be ashamed if they were to be ascribed to us. The divine cannot be operated or labelled by humans. Any attempt to do so ends in imperfection or, worse, in ridicule. That sounds subversive, sounds like blasphemy to some ears. But I don't want to overthrow anything and I don't. Because what I have said is ancient and sacred. I am content with the symbol of my Nordic ancestors, the symbol of divine purity: the sun. Many consider the idea of our ancestors to be outdated and childish, and yet it is greater than the impossible idea of a myriad of idolatrous beings that have spread across the islands of the empire over the course of time. The simple, easily comprehensible image of the divine can also suffice for the simple man of the people. To tame criminal natures, we have our criminal law, which is recognised throughout the world as excellent. For the lack of idolatry, however, Asian mankind would be richly compensated by the destruction of the stupid superstition of guilt and the resulting need for atonement through some kind of sacrifice,

unworthy of any honourable character. The man of honour does not let others make up for his mistakes; he bears the responsibility himself. To fight for the divine and to create and form it anew every day is the secret of the Father. To do what is honourable regardless of punishment and reward, to hold up the shield of truth as far as we can grasp it, and to denounce lies as far as we can recognise them - that has been the service of the people of the North and can still be today. The path is not so difficult, because it is known and sanctified by tradition. It would be more difficult to establish a new morality. Perhaps I would also fail at this issue."

"Baldur, you don't know the powers of this realm," sighed the duke, leaning his narrow head on his white hand.

"I don't want to know them, or just to fight them," came back in a flash. "I am grateful to fate to be unencumbered. No dull bond binds me inescapably to dark forces, no oath binds me without knowing its effects ..."

"I have no intention of talking to you about this any further," the prince said, getting angry. "First recognise what you are reviling, then we will talk further."

"Not a word of abuse has come out of my mouth, Mr Duke. Not even the thought

of vituperation has been in my heart," the young warrior's strong-willed lips said calmly, but hard as metal. "Vilification means weakness, ignorance, ambiguity. A clear head has no need of it. That is why I never revile. My fight is more dangerous, Lord Duke. I fight with the icy clarity of the enemy. Not pleasant to hear, Mr Duke! But in effect, it is also a means of capturing your soul. - You will be the king of this great realm. That is why I fight for you with the brutal recklessness that seems so strange in the radiant, cheerful Bal- dur Wieborg. You have called me. You can send me away again. But even if I have to go: The spiritual chain that I have forged around you will not break, the only chain that honourable people can and may wear. The chain of water-clear knowledge."

"Breaking and entering is in your blood, Mr Wieborg," the duke replied as the captain paused for breath. "Breaking into palaces, souls and hearts. Your fiery spirit does not suit me. I'm afraid of your behaviour, Baldur. I dread the consequences of accepting your necklace."

"It's too late, Mr Duke," Wieborg smiled. "The chain is in place and can no longer be shaken off."

"You have already captured my child," said the Acora bitterly. "The duchess still resists you, but I know the signs of the heart well. - Beware

you before the king's child, Baldur!" The captain was silent. Then he slowly pulled two folded, wafer-thin leathers from his pocket, tore them in half and handed them to the duke.

"Here is my shield against poison and dagger," said Baldur Wieborg with a quiet smile. "Men like me don't live long, and torn treaties no longer protect. Burn the treaty with the High Sun Gate as I tore it up. - Then when I'm no longer needed..."

"Do you think I'm a scoundrel?" the gentleman roared and jumped out of his chair with unusual vigour. Mr Wieborg also stood up.

"No," the captain replied quietly. "I know your heart is honourable, otherwise I would not ask for it. But there may be cases where state reason must take ruthless paths. - I will speak to Mrs Armane as little as possible. The opportunity to do so can easily be spoilt in Aargund without it being noticed."

The duke looked hesitantly at the torn leather that rested heavily in his hand.

"You tore up the contract," he then said.

"Burn it too. It is possible that I have much to thank you for. - And now come here, Baldur."

Standing upright in his official posture, the sword wielder stepped in front of the heir to the throne of the realm of Atlantis, who placed both hands on his shoulders and waved his arms.

tired eyes gazed into the vivid, grey lights of the young human.

The Duke opened his mouth to say something that might have signalled Wieborg's complete victory, but after a short, quiet knock, the Duchess Irwing Acora entered.

The lord of the castle dropped his hands from the captain's shoulders and turned his head towards the door.

"Already friends?" asked Warager Torgaard's daughter-in-law.

———— BATTLE OF THE HEARTS

The solar observatory Agni was located in the area of the sacred temple city of Urd, high in the mountains above the Ida Field, on the southern side of which stretched the vast buildings of the world city of Atlantis. The observatory towered several hundred feet above the temple city and stretched its ancient lava walls above the white clouds into the blue, transparent air of the earthly ring of equals. The observatory of Atlantis, Agni, was not the highest in the empire, but it was probably the best equipped that the government and the High Sun Gate had at their disposal. Solar observatories at an altitude of over eight thousand feet existed only in Aztlan on the plateau between the two Andes of Tiahusinyu and on the Shoian plate of the Abyssian border mark. A new observatory was being built on the Kenish peak of Zimbabuye, but the sages of the empire did not seek the honour of being assigned to this new observatory because it was isolated and surrounded by a population that was not yet pacified.

The observatories were the juiciest of the empire's many bones of contention with the High Sun Gate.

The Venerable Father of Urd claimed them by virtue of his office as supreme servant of the Sun, and the Empire claimed them because it did not want to have the supervision of an important branch of Atlantean science wrung out of its hands. While the Imperial Office for Schools and Science demanded that the officials of the Imperial Solar Observatories should remain direct servants of the Empire and should not enter into any special ties with the High Sun Gate, the spiritual power declared, and could not be dissuaded from this demand, that solar science was so inextricably linked to the services of the sun and the stars that there could not and should not be officials in these institutions without a spiritual calling. And since it was not yet possible to enforce the will of the High Sun Gate, the Honourable Father in Urd used to award the heads of observatories and scholars devoted to him the rank of Spiritual Councillor, which was not unpopular because of free travel from the ocean-going galleys that cruised the seas of the globe in the service of the temple administration. And since this entitlement also applied to the family members of the scientists thus honoured, the rank was much sought after. The Venerable Father also used to appoint particularly deserving star sages as High Chamberlains of the Gate in an endeavour to be seen as an independent equal to the imperial king on Asgard.

to act as a dependent prince. The chamberlains of Urd used to supervise the administration of one of the numerous commercial treasuries of the ecclesiastical commercial enterprises as a secondary office and in return received an annual salary that was many times higher than that paid by the empire for the proper positions at the observatories.

The acceptance of such a double income could not be prevented, as undesirable as it was to the civil administration of the empire, since the scholars, even if they were in a civil servant position, thoroughly possessed the quality of freelance scientists, whose activities were not supervised even in their own lives. It was therefore no wonder that the wishes of the High Sun Gate often found a sympathetic ear among the heads of the solar observatories and that celestial phenomena, such as the appearance of a hair star or the unexpected blaze of a new star in the unfathomable depths of the Milky Way, were often interpreted as threats and signs from the deity in accordance with the wishes of the priesthood and were accordingly evaluated by the population. After all, the confirmation of such uncanny events as bad omens for the wrath of the gods was given by flawless imperial authorities! So who could doubt that the high clergy were right when they called on the common man to repent early? Could money

and animal sacrifices appeased the wrath of the supernatural powers, the priests were to be praised for warning in good time and still being right that through the diligent offering of sacrifices the evil comet did not crash down on the sinful earth but, appeased, left the regions of the solar gyre again with a n ever shorter tail.

Since the wandering star Heldung, which so often came into threatening proximity to the earth and, according to experience, each time brought lesser or more severe disaster to the flat islands of Atlantis, was a penitential object of the first order and thus a source of money of the highest yield, the High Sun Gate could be considered a monetary power, the full extent of which was not exactly known, but which could certainly be called unheard of, not least because of the tax exemption of all spiritual possessions. To disguise this possession, the merchant galleys of Urd basically sailed under the merchant flag of the empire and in the service of some money or trading centre that seemed to have no direct connection with the High Porte. These trading companies had an overwhelming burden of debt to the tax authorities, and enquiries into the origin of the loan money usually ended in astonishing detours at the coffers of the High Sun Gate, which had benevolently helped the ailing trade. At the gates of

Urd, however, the tax officials had to turn back.

Incidentally, they knew that they would have found little in Urd as well, for the income of the priests' business acumen did not remain unused for long in the treasury vault, but sought and found rewarding investment in the borderlands of the giant empire, which exceeded the extent of the motherland many times over.

On the drawing table of the observatory director Odil Ase Gadirus lay a freshly sealed document from the Reverend Father in Urd, expressing his appointment to the Spiritual Council of the High Sun Gate with kind and fatherly words and expressing the hope that the love and reverence shown so far for Papas personally and the loyalty to the precepts of the holy temple service would, if possible, be increased.

Warga, the scholar's sister, sat next to her brother in a soft armchair that had been brought for her into the workroom under the stone gallery that held the measuring instruments for observing the stars. It was pleasantly cool down here. Through parabolic windows in the mighty walls, which were closed at the bottom in the shape of a staircase, the daylight fell scattered and without glare from the tables with endless rows of numbers, with calculations of the differences in the orbits of the constellations, which were used to precisely determine the calendar.

This work served as the basis for the priestly astrology in the frontier province of Mejiko, which was in the process of modernising its old observatory. The upper class of the Mejican population showed a remarkable understanding of arithmetic, so that it could be expected that the next generation of scientists would be drawn from the country itself

"How quickly the Venerable Father brought out your appointment before the Ten Kings' Meeting!" smiled the daughter of the constitutional law teacher Weeling Gadirus, twirling the cane she still had to use playfully in her white hand.

"I'll have to thank Baldur," the scholar replied, his face impenetrable but his eyes laughing secretly. "By the way, I'm not entirely comfortable with this. I became Chamberlain of Urd four years ago and now I have the Spiritual Council in my pocket. I can't go much higher now, unless Baldur appoints me as Papa of Urd one day."

"You want to attack Mr Wieborg today on Lochi's behalf?" nodded the gardener.

"Yes, Baldur wishes it," Odil confirmed. "He feels safe enough to escalate the fight. He's hoping for an appeal to the Supreme Court of the realm for blasphemy against the gods."

"And Amenor Lochi hopes so too?" asked Warga Ga-

dirus. "I can't imagine that he has the burning desire to bring his fight with Baldur Wieborg into the public eye ..."

The young girl paused and listened outside. The stone slabs of the forecourt sounded softly

Footsteps became clearer and then, after a brief knock, two tall aesir dressed in the black robes of the star sages of the realm entered, their embroidered breastplates bearing the twelve snow-white pearls that symbolise their profession as star sages.

For the ten-king meeting, which took place on Asgard after alternately five and six years, the leaders of the sun observatories in the empire and in the border marches had been summoned to Atlantis to make suggestions regarding the imminent passing of the changing star in the coming year. Similarly, almost all the governors and burgraves of the Marches, with the exception of those from the highlands of Aztlán and Abessia, had been ordered home to receive instructions on how the population of their protected areas should be protected from the consequences of the expected floods and earthquakes.

As a result, Atlantis was swarming with guests from every country in the world with the exception of the independent countries of Zipangu, China and India. For months, the individual meetings of the kings of the states with their supreme heads of office, with the professional and professional representatives of the estates, and with

their representatives from all over the world took place.

The extensive independence of the Atlantic state and the border marks showed a weakness in this case, however well proven this form of constitution was for a people of Nordic blood. The far-reaching independence of the Atlantic state and the border marks showed a weakness in this case, however well proven this form of constitution was for a people of Nordic blood; for the Imperial Office demanded unconditional subordination, since it was clearly an imperial matter that could only be successful under the unified direction of one authority. The name Wieborg was mentioned for the first time in all the meetings with bitter respect.

The burgrave Köpping had not wanted to do without Baldur's co-operation in carrying out the security measures for the people, however uncomfortable the young man was otherwise. The processing of the "Heldung question" had been assigned to him as a special area. Mr Warager had ordered this in order to make his promise to give Captain Wieborg a chair at the Imperial College for General Humanities ineffective. Mr Warager Torgaard had hoped that the special field in the Imperial War Office would take up so much of the young assistant's time that he would not be able to spare any time to prepare his lectures at the university.

In this, however, the imperial king was mistaken. As experience has shown that the school's learners like to

used the late afternoon hours when it was cool in the foyers to listen to their teachers, Baldur Wieborg scheduled his lectures for after sunset, when the stars were glowing in the blue-black Atlantean sky and the mischief-maker Heldung stood as a whitish, misty disc above the sanctuary of Urd. At first, Baldur's success was poor. The young people, eager to learn, did not want to be fed science so late in the day. It was nicer to lie on the beach with his girl and watch the long white waves or to practise astronomy in the parks of the capital, which is easier to learn than that practised in the solar observatories of the kingdom.

But that changed quickly after the first lectures. Wieborg usually stood between two burning wax torches and looked at the shimmering white of the few faces whose bearers were sitting in the wide circle of the porticoes or lounging on the lawns of the lecture gardens. Baldur did not believe that the attendance would be so bad, because what he was presenting was not commonplace, even if the titles on the notice boards at the entrance to the university sounded very boring. The captain dealt with two subjects, firstly the history of the High Sun Gate and then the history of the Nordic Aesir, both of which had a dull, school-room odour and did not cause much of a stir.

In terms of content, however, Mr Wieborg's lectures had the effect on the Atlantic youth that was intended.

From evening to evening, the promenades and grassy squares were increasingly filled with people who wanted to hear the Asgardasen, who, despite his allegiance to the noble, pure-blooded ruling class, made the demand: The millions of citizens who lived on the Atlantean islands and were excluded from imperial and state offices because they had not yet been recognised must be united into a single block. This had to happen soon, before a further racial decline and the isolation and ageing of the pure Nordland blood made the formation of a national bloc impossible. After the first lectures on the history of the Asian Sun Service, the High Sun Gate sent several clerical councillors to the pillar corridors of the high school, armed with wax tablets and pens, to follow the words of Sword Leader Wieborg and write down key words that were to serve as a report to their commanding officer Amenor Lochi.

The presence of a large number of Atlantic princes and leading officials from the Border Marches meant that the audience was not only larger, but also more select. Several sons of the imperial king were regularly seen among the audience, and even the daughters of the princely houses did not miss the opportunity to attend.

to sit at the feet of the learned captain and learn things that had previously only been talked about in Atlantis in intimate circles full of concern. Armane Torgaard had also managed to be allowed to attend Baldur Wieborg's lectures. Although the Duchess had been very adamantly opposed to this, the royal child had found an unexpected ally in her father, who had no objection to his daughter seeking to educate herself in this way, much to the astonishment of the Duchess, who simply did not understand such indulgence on the part of her husband.

At one of these lecture evenings, Armane had also met Warga Gadirus, who had allowed herself to be carried in a palanquin into the corridors of the college and had a certain look of pity on her face because she still had to use two sticks to walk alone. In the course of time, this acquaintance developed into an intimate friendship that led to repeated visits and return visits to Urd, Agni and Asgard. Even today, when the two Asgardian star sages entered their brother's study, Warga Gadirus had thought it was the royal child who had come to the solar observatory with her companion Gunnar Gepide. The Asgard was teeming with people; there was hardly a tiny spot in the King's Garden where some high or highest lord with his wife and daughters or

The sons sat or walked around, and it was very uncomfortable in the all-father's fiefdom, as it was every time there was a royal meeting. Armane therefore often escaped from the castle and came to Agni to her friend Warga.

The two Sternweisen took their seats and asked the beautiful gardener for permission to discuss some technical matters with her brother. Both gentlemen had also been attending Baldur Wieborg's lectures for several weeks, initially because they had heard that a common captain was speaking about the sun service with the authorisation of the imperial king. They had been very astonished at this, for they considered it inadmissible for a non-scholar to give a lecture on astronomy. After the first evening lectures, however, they were reassured in this respect. Baldur Wieborg did not talk about specialised matters at all, or at least only very rarely, but actually preferred to talk about the history of the Nordic solar service, in connection with the history of the Aesir. Nevertheless, they did not refrain from listening to the young teacher, because what he was saying also caused a stir among them. Things that had long been known, but also long forgotten, were brought back to life. Wieborg's demand that the purely scientific research of the stars should be strictly separated from the mystical service of the sun, which was to be carried out by the priesthood, was in line with the wishes of the Asians.

The idea of the "High Sun Gate", however, was difficult to realise because the ties that had been forged with the High Sun Gate over the last few hundred years clung to free science like tenacious shackles.

"May I listen?" asked the gardener from Urd. "Otherwise, I'll have to ask the gentlemen for the courtesy of carrying my armchair out into the portico."

The two scholars assured her that Warga's presence did not bother her at all, and that if she was not bored by a conversation about the variable star Heldung, she would listen. The sages began to compare their measurements of the orbital parts of the dangerous wandering star. There was not complete agreement in this respect, as the orbit of the star around the sun had changed considerably again since the last time it was close to the earth. The Earth's orbit itself also seemed to have undergone a certain elongation, at least some observatory directors expressed this suspicion with a certain justification, because the orbital disturbances had to be reciprocal in any case. Since one and a half solar years had to pass before the next, particularly dangerous encounter with the Earth, all observatories in the Reich were to carry out continuous site observations during this period and the results were to be constantly reported with the flashing device of the Reich news centres.

be exchanged. Therefore, as Warga Gadirus noted with satisfaction, there was no doubt in the circles of the star sages that the shifter Heldung was neither an evil demon nor had anything to do with unknown, but all the more to be feared, dark spiritual powers.

"It's amazing how Captain Wieborg has mastered his material," said the head of the Simba star station, which was located in the south of mainland Africa.

"The few astronomical remarks he made in connection with his history of the development of the Asian solar service indicate a level of expertise that is at least unusual in a man of war."

Odil Ase Gadirus smiled, but did not say that the factual parts of the lecture had been reviewed in the Agni solar observatory.

"The Reverend Father wants to order extraordinary sacrifices and prayer services to avert the danger," Warga Gadirus interjected.

Now the two scholars smiled, without being able to tell whether the smile was compassionate or polite. They replied cautiously that it couldn't do any harm, that the gods would know ways and means to avert a disaster which, according to the calculations of science, was inevitable. But understanding

the people of Urd would of course not be able to recognise the intentions of the supernatural beforehand, so it would have to be left to the Papas of Urd to do his part against the impending danger, for he, as is generally acknowledged, has the appropriate antidotes at his disposal.

Now Warga Gadirus smiled, and it was impossible to tell what the smile meant. The foreign gentlemen obviously thought she was an unconditional follower of the idolatry of the High Sun Gate. For they knew one thing: Warga, the daughter of the famous constitutional law teacher Gadirus, was the preferred director of the temple and palace gardens of the honourable father Amenor Lochi, indeed, the high clergyman had taken her into his fabulously beautiful mountain castle Garmalen during her serious illness and cared for her there as one only cares for a person whose affection one values. So caution was the order of the day when speaking to the Gadirus family. Generally speaking, people in the scholarly circles of the imperial observatories knew with whom of their peers they were allowed to speak openly and with whom not. But caution was certainly the order of the day when dealing with Odil Ase Gadirus and his sister. His favoured position near the Venerable Father was already a major warning sign. Added to this was the fact that Gadirus was a so-called Recognised One, i.e. an Ase, but an Ase of mixed blood, who under certain circumstances would have to answer to the highest priest

of the realm, which, as is well known, carried a very strong blood spill from the summery Chaldea, was closer than was good for a confidential discussion.

The two foreign observatory directors had also very quickly realised that Odil Gadirus was even more closely connected to the High Sun Gate than they themselves were, and that his openly expressed opinion about the involvement of supernatural forces was inevitably in the affirmative, regardless of his own unnamed judgement.

"I sometimes attend Captain Wieborg's lectures," continued Warga Gadirus. "I found his last suggestion surprising, which he made in connection with the expected proximity to the Earth of the wandering star Heldung. He left open the question of whether the High Sun Gate would be able to avert the danger with its own means, but suggested to the spiritual counsellors of the Venerable Father who were present that when the high tide and the earthquakes set in, they should stay behind in Atlantis and try to avert the danger through prayer and penance, the water from rising through prayer and penitential sacrifices, while the people who had confidence in the measures of the imperial leadership should go to the mountains during the period of greatest danger in order to wait out the dangerous period there. The success of one group or the other would show how to behave in the future."

The scholars who were also convinced by this proposal

had heard, although they had missed Baldur Wieborg's lecture to their regret, laughed with amusement, for this very proposal by the strange captain was much laughed at in some circles in Atlantis. Even the king of the realm, who had been lectured on the matter, was reported to have said in his characteristic, succinct manner: "Baldur will not be promoted. Is too good for higher positions in the army. Must be put to other uses. One day I'll make him the Imperial Scholar for the History of the High Sun Gate."

Nevertheless, Mr Warager Ase Torgaard had seen fit to sentence Captain Wieborg to forty-eight hours of house arrest for disrespectful behaviour towards the High Sun Gate, which Baldur obediently served in his stone cottage on the first platform of the Asgard. However, as the work in the Imperial War Office was particularly hectic during the last days before the King's Assembly, the old Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping had repeatedly been seen going in and out of the small huns on the first platform during Baldur's imprisonment, and a young scout had to carry the large leather bundles containing the guidelines for the so-called heroic measures. Mr Köpping, as the responsible head of the war office, had to present the relevant guidelines to the royal assembly in the Posidensaal.

and not the young captain who had worked on them.

"The Wieborg got off lightly," said the sidereal saint of the Gaatland solar observatory.

"If you are allowed to say such things in public and are only grounded for it, then you feel like giving a lecture. We expected a higher punishment."

Odil Ase Gadirus made a serious face.

"I fear that Wieborg's careless statement will have unpleasant repercussions," he said with emphasis. "In any case, I do not believe that the High Sun Gate can put up with such mockery without losing its reputation. If I were Amenor Lochi, I would take very different action against the young man who seems to have taken it upon himself to disparage the reputation of the priesthood and the recognised teachings of the gods. The teachings of the High Sun Gate are also recognised as a fully valid science. If this Mr Wieborg were to ridicule the science of astronomy in the same way as he has done that of the temple service, he would probably incur the hostility of all the high and low officials of the Imperial Observatories; only with the difference that there would be no need for official punishment, because the refutation of his statements would probably make him impossible as a university teacher

would. The actual punishment would therefore be even harsher."

The two foreign scholars decided not to reply to these words of the head of the solar observatory Agni, as they only confirmed their feeling that in the vicinity of the Venerable Father of Urd, the spiritual bonds of free science were growing into woolly straitjackets.

Warga Gadirus kept a straight face. She had been used to pretending for years and knew how much Baldur Wieborg needed this pretence to succeed in his difficult battle. Even the captain probably didn't know how heavy the burden of this untruthful nature was. He went his carefree way with the radiant unconcern of a victorious spring man, who waged his dangerous war against the High Sun Gate with violence, cunning, cleverness and a powerful will to attack, who perhaps deliberately closed his eyes when he saw his faithful friend suffering. No, Warga improved in his thoughts. Baldur knew what a difficult task he had burdened his ally with. Had he not wept suddenly and bewildered over her hands when he had first visited her at her sickbed? Had he not written to her from Aargund that he might soon be in the same position as his friend and marvelled every morning that his limbs were still mobile and not lame and sick like his friend's?

her generous ally Warga Gadirus? Had he not assured her that loyalty forged life together?

The two strange star sages had become a little uncomfortable in this environment, which was sickly from nearby Urd, and they made preparations to break off their visit, especially as the conversation about the changed orbital parts of the wandering star Heldung had been concluded. But they didn't get round to it straight away, because a servant from the solar observatory announced the arrival of the Venerable Father Ame- nor Lochi, who had just arrived to visit Lord Odil Gadirus, accompanied by the King's maiden Armane Torgaard and her knight Gunnar Ase Gepide.

Warga rose ponderously from her armchair and walked with stiff feet, leaning heavily on her cane, out into the pillared hall of the gallery to greet the Papas of Urd. Odil pushed the armchair through the door and parted from the two scholars with a cool handshake. He did not try to hold them, for if the Reverend Father was honouring him with a personal visit, the high clergyman would surely want to have a conversation without witnesses.

The siblings awaited their visit in the pillared hall, and Odil walked a little way to meet the honourable gentleman. When the Venerable Father moved about in public, it always looked very solemn and beautiful. To protect him from the sun's rays

four black servants held a gold-embroidered silk canopy on polished precious wood poles over the chief priest of the kingdom of Atlantis, and several ecclesiastical councillors and chamberlains in purple-coloured long robes, with high, tiered hats of pale gold plate decorated with precious stones on their heads, walked behind the silk canopy with lowered faces. Then followed, a strange contrast in unadorned simplicity, the royal child Armane Torgaard in a smooth, snow-white linen dress with the royal chamberlain Gunnar Gepide in a leather tunic, high boots and a smooth bronze helmet. You could see from a long way off that the Duchess's chamberlain was furiously annoyed because he had been forced to run after the ecclesiastical councillors with the royal girl, as if the daughter of the heir to the throne were a lowly servant of the High Sun Gate and he himself a second- or third-rank temple sweeper.

But Gunnar Gepide's anger was also directed at the duke, who had allowed it to come to this, that a pure-blooded Ase had to cower before these idolatrous popes. The knight was no longer young, and his temples shimmered grey under his helmet. He knew the developments of the last decades as well as only a chamberlain could. That's why he also knew the love of his young protector Armane Torgaard for the dangerous Wie-

borg, knew about Baldur's struggle with the forces of darkness, as his struggle with the High Sun Gate was secretly called in the circles of young and old swordsmen and ordinary warriors, and allowed himself a haughty, evil and dissatisfied countenance in the hope of better times. For that better times were approaching could be sensed against the wind. The Wieborg must have had weapons that allowed him to shake the foundations of the High Sun Gate with impunity. Still, it was a pity about the magnificent Baldur! Having the Honoured One of Urd as an opponent was not only dangerous, but often downright deadly. In the history of the realm, even kings of realms and states had died surprisingly quickly and, in the opinion of some circles, in time, because they were said to have ventured too far into the sacred circles of the High Sun Gate and wanted to disturb these circles.

The battle with the idolatrous priesthood was as ancient as the realm of the Aesir, and if you look at the results of this battle today, the gate was advancing inexorably against the worldly power, despite the legendary setbacks. Disobedience to the priesthood was usually severely punished by the gods. The refusal of a newly demanded prerogative could lead to a serious uprising in some remote frontier march.

against the Atlantic power, which of course happened quite by chance, but which nevertheless forced the government to give in in order to prevent worse things from happening. Couldn't the resistance of subjugated peoples in other parts of the world also suddenly flare up by chance if one remained stubborn?

The driving force behind such accidental misfortunes was of course rarely unknown to the government authorities, but the culprits were not to be found. If the High Sun Gate had been accused of having facilitated the rebellion by giving money to foreign or barely subjugated princes, a storm of deep moral indignation would have been the inevitable result. The priesthood of Urd never gave money to such foreign organisations itself. Instead, it had an unknown number of loyal helpers and money banks all over the world, which enveloped the old ball of the home star like a spider's web. What commercial transactions in the Marches and abroad were entangled in this web, no one except the Papa of Urd and his nearest ecclesiastical counsellors in the whole kingdom knew exactly; and even the knowledge of Captain Wieborg was imperfect, for no priestly power on earth is so foolish as to entrust more to its documents than is absolutely necessary.

So if Mr Gunnar Gepide didn't give much for young Wieborg's life, he wasn't entirely wrong. The radiant truth of which the

The young, unknown man of war from Nordland had been strangled and trampled so often that, alongside the hope of better times, there was also a justified doubt as to whether he would succeed in the gigantic battle in which countless other men had failed miserably before him.

The Venerable Father Amenor Lochi had appointed another caste leader and personal deputy, namely a gentleman from the Mejiko border march; the spiritual councillor Atahualka Chun, a brown-skinned man who now walked with his head bowed in the row of other councillors behind the canopy of zipang silk. For the time being at least, this gentleman did not feel the need to think and act independently, as the late Pheras had seen fit to do in the case of the Warga Gadirns. The sudden and, as it was said, timely death of his predecessor had a salutary influence on his brownish soul; at any rate, it was probably out of the question that Mr Atahualka would worry about the affairs of his high superior's heart.

As it was customary to bow the knee before the Venerable Father, the priestly chamberlain and spiritual counsellor Odil Gadirus fulfilled this duty, which was not very elevating for an Aesir, and knelt down, Warga

however, her blonde head remained bowed in reverence, as her still very paralysed limbs did not allow her to pay the usual tribute.

The two foreign scholars had left, as they would have been obliged to do the same humiliation, for they too were part of the spiritual court of the Papa of Urd as a result of their appointment as councillors of the Porte. However, as there was a remnant of Asian arrogance and Nordic defiance in them, they took the opportunity to evade this mark of honour.

The Venerable One dismissed the porters and spiritual counsellors with a very small movement of his hand, and the disappearance of these men took place with a lightning-fast obedience that no ruler on earth could wish for better. Amenor Lochi had aged considerably. His fine, intelligent features showed thin, barely concealed wrinkles of worry and, as it seemed to Warga Gadirus, fatigue. The hair shone a deep blue-black under the high priest's triple tower hat, but it was safe to assume that colour had been added. The young gardener looked the Reverend Father in the eye with genuine pity, for despite her alliance with Baldur Wieborg, she felt sorry for the highest priestly lord of the realm. The sincere affection of this man naturally remained on her woman's heart.

not entirely without effect. Also, her frequent intercourse with him and his constant solicitude for her health and welfare had aroused in her a feeling of gratitude, and her honourable heart sometimes twitched with shame when she thought of the fact that she was constantly betraying this man with every word and every look.

Amenor Lochi held out a hand to Odil Gadirus, the spiritual counsellor, and symbolically lifted him up from the dust, but his eyes rested with tender concern in those of his beautiful gardener.

"My beloved daughter, I see that you still have to walk by the stick," he said with a sadness that was as genuine as it could be in an actor of gods and idols.

"The doctors say that the paralysis will soon disappear," replied Warga Gadirus, reverently bringing the priest's broad signet ring to her lips.

"Hopefully I won't need the baton in the spring of next year."

"I think you know, Mrs Warga, how much my love for the gods begged to take the burden of suffering away from you," Amenor Lochi replied with warmth. And with a glance around, he added quietly.

"I also believe I have done everything I can to atone for the guilt."

The gardener thought of Pheras and his sudden death. Urd's dad had never been as clear as he was today.

never said what guilt the treasurer Pheras had atoned for with his death.

Armane Torgaard stood next to Urd's papas with cheerful blue eyes, carefree and free, like a young girl who has not yet learnt to respect the awe-inspiring powers of this world. But she did ask.

"May I say hello to Warga, Reverend Father?"

And without waiting for the gentleman's permission, she threw her arms around her friend's neck and kissed her on the centre of her red mouth. Even though this was done with appropriate tender caution because of the gardener's suffering condition, the impetuous act of amorous youthfulness had the effect of fresh mountain water. The screwed-up dignity that had hitherto prevailed involuntarily on receiving Papa gave way to a liberating naturalness, and even the serious, impassive face of the Venerable Father turned into a small smile.

"I'm going to sit here with Warga in the parlour," the child king said in his bright, fresh voice. "Mr Gunnar!" Armane then turned to the chamberlain Gepide. "Please bring me a chair from Mr Gadiru's room."

Amenor Lochi agreed to the two young girls chatting in the shelter of the foyer while he spoke with the clerical counsellor Odil Gadirus behind

wanted to negotiate behind closed doors. The head of the observatory thanked Agni for his appointment as a spiritual counsellor before entering the offices, then his words became a low murmur and fell silent, swallowed up by the mighty lava walls of the magnificent, solidly built building dedicated to the science of the stars.

Amenor Lochi appeared in the doorway once more.

"Mrs Warga, I'd like to have a quick word with you later," he said kindly and without his usual solemn majesty. "I'm saying this so that Mrs Armane doesn't take the opportunity to whisk you away to the gardens of the Sun Watch, where no human being, and I would almost say no god, can find you."

Then the friends were alone.

The knight Gunnar Ase Gepide sat down on one of the numerous marble benches, which invited him to rest at regular intervals around the perimeter of the control centre, took his long chamberlain's sword between his knees and gazed at the snow-capped mountains of his homeland with the exemplary calm of an old court official, admired the white plumes of smoke from distant volcanoes and rejoiced at the narrow strip of blue Atlantic sea that could be seen shimmering from the depths between two jagged mountain giants.

In the meantime, the young girls took the rare opportunity to pour their hearts out, at least they did.

Armane Torgaard did this with the confidence of her untouched youth. Warga Gadirus was already more cautious. She had forgotten how to wear her heart on her sleeve and listened more than she spoke herself, or she asked the king's girl only brief questions and let her young friend chat to her heart's content.

"How was it in Aargund?" the gardener asked after a while, after Armane had complained sufficiently about the current uncomfortable conditions in Asgard.

Duke Acora's daughter pulled a sour face. At first it had been wonderful. She told of Baldur Wieborg's leap into the "water lily" of King Hagenot Skullörn, of the first glorious days on the island and of a short walk with Wieborg and Gunnar Gepide on the beach and in the meadow.

"Unfortunately, old Gunnar couldn't be persuaded to disappear," sighed the royal child from the bottom of his heart.

So not alone with him, Warga Gadirus thought with a sigh of relief.

But then it had become very boring and ugly, Armane Torgaard continued in her report. She had always been alone; Baldur Wieborg had always had to sit with neither the duke nor the clergyman Rudeger Marken and had not been allowed to look after her. The duke had suggested

to take Captain Wieborg with her on the great voyage of discovery to the borderlands of Summeria and Egypt, which was due at the end of the year. Finally, there had been a small family quarrel because her mother had suggested that she sail more often with Mr Hagenot Skullörn on the "Seerose" or in her own racing galley. But she didn't want that, because she knew what all the sailing with the King of Acora and Brammerloh was for, she wasn't that stupid and she had no desire to become Mr Hagenot's queen. There were enough royal girls in the kingdom and she didn't want to.

"And why not?" Warga Gadirus asked cautiously.

"I have heard that Mr Hagenot is a handsome and not ugly lord, and after all, the daughter of Acora must choose from among the kings of the realm. As far as I know, only Mr Hagenot Skullörn is unmarried."

"I can't marry him if I don't love him," replied Armane firmly.

"And what did the Duchess say?"

The royal child laughed. His mother must have wanted to say a lot and Armane had already armoured herself with stubbornness. But then her father suddenly waved her off. "He doesn't want to force me," she said with amusement. "Mr Rudeger Marken asked her mother to do it and worked on her, and then Mr

Hagenot departed. I felt sorry for him, but I was grateful to father for giving the king a hint. There's no father on earth as good as mine - I believe, Warga, that we girls can wrap any man round our fingers if we make the right effort. The men may be clever, they may know more than us stupid girls, but they all have a weak spot. Don't you agree?"

Warga smiled and kissed her royal friend on the white temple.

"Surely one girl in the kingdom has every opportunity to exploit such weaknesses," said the gardener.

"Is that supposed to be me?" Armane enquired.

"Who else?" Warga asked. "But such opportunities are dangerous, Armane. They should only be utilised if no misfortune results, and the power of royal children almost always leads to disaster. Love from royal children is bitter."

"I can't find it," explained Armane Torgaard honestly.

"She might be cute at first," Warga admitted. "But afterwards..."

"I imagine the before outweighs everything after," replied the king's maid thoughtfully. "One wishes that love should last forever, but

The dear relatives will see to it that it is nothing. One day we royal children want to be happy too, Warga, we want to love someone we like and not someone who is imposed on us because of state reason; you know, Warga, a man who is toweringly superior to us in head and heart and yet loves us so much that he gets dizzy when he only sees us, a man who flies into our arms when we only have the thought of opening them, who can forgive everything just like we do and can only think of us for an hour alone, for my sake; who feels it when our thoughts circle around him like bright kestrels. That's all we royal girls can ask for. Every other girl has it better."

Warga Gadirus looked with veiled eyes at her beautiful friend, who spoke of us and meant herself, and the tall, bright figure of young Wieborg rose before her eyes. She almost felt that the image of Baldur was also before Armane's mind's eye, and like a fine, needle-sharp pain it twitched in her heart. And as the pain became more and more intense, she tried to change the king's maiden's mind. But because Baldur Wieborg's shimmering image had appeared once, it could not be turned away like an annoying guest, and Armane suddenly began to resent the King of the Realm, Warager Torgaard, loudly and clearly, because he had unjustifiably taken Mr Wieborg for eight and a half years old.

had been locked up for forty hours. "And why?" asked the king's child indignantly. "Only because Baldur told the truth."

"Are you always allowed to tell the truth in Asgard?" asked the gardener with a friendly laugh.

Armane thought about it. Then she shook her head and said that they should at least let people outside Asgard tell the truth.

The conversation between the friends became difficult, for Armane was one of the enthusiastic supporters of the university teacher Wieborg and would not tolerate any disparaging judgement of the young swordsman's views. In and of itself, her judgement corresponded exactly to that of Warga Gadirus, but a gardener of the temple and palace gardens of the High Sun Gate was not allowed to express her approval in the same enthusiastic manner as the daughter of Acora.

Warga Gadirus was therefore delighted when the Reverend Father came out of the door with her brother. Amenor Lochi asked without much ado to be allowed to take a seat in Armane's chair, and in the meantime the Lord Spiritual Counsellor Gadirus was to show the royal child around the solar observatory and show him the measuring instruments that were set up on the topmost gallery. There was no objection to this request from the high lord, so Odil wandered off with Armane, and the chamberlain Gunnar Gepide rose from his chair with a sigh.

marble bench and trotted dutifully behind his duke's child, always at an appropriate distance so as not to disturb the conversation.

The Venerable Father of Urd gazed in silence for a while and waited until the others had left; then he turned his penetrating, dark eyes on his gardener and asked her if she knew how the heart of the royal child Armane was doing.

"I don't know what you mean, Venerable Father," Warga replied cautiously.

What did the Papas of Urd have to do with the heart of a young girl? But since she knew that statecraft sometimes had to deal with human hearts, even in the circles of the High Sun Gate, she continued.

"All I know is that the Lord King of the States Hagenot Skullörn is applying for Armane, or rather is supposed to apply."

"Quite right," the high priest nodded seriously. "But that's not what I meant. I had this matter prevented by my spiritual counsellor Rudeger Marken in Aargund. So I have no wishes in this direction at the moment. - My intention is rather to tie Captain Wieborg to the duke's family for a certain period of time. Your brother suggested that I take a hard line with the young gentleman because of his remarks at the College of General Spirituality.

sciences. But apart from the fact that the king of the realm has already carried out the punishment, I would like to see the young man come closer to the Acora."

The Papas of Urd remained silent and watched the effect of his words. Warga Gadirus did not need to play surprised in this case, she was rather genuinely astonished. Baldur's wish to have the opportunity to attack the High Gate through a public accusation was not to be realised. Were things so bad for the Venerable's cause that he had to prevent open warfare?

"May I take that to mean that Mr Wieborg is to be bound to Mrs Armane?" she asked uncertainly.

Amenor Lochi nodded and smiled. His compelling eyes rested with restrained tenderness in those of the beautiful, paralysed gardener and seemed to feast on how the young girl vainly endeavoured to guess the purpose of the wish.

"What will the duke think of this?" Warga asked uneasily. "Captain Wieborg is a farmer's son from Thule, poor and without high nobility of birth. I can hardly imagine ..."

"It's not all that important," replied the Reverend Father. "I am forced to look for ways to distract young Wieborg from his battle position against the High Sun Gate. I am not afraid of such attacks per se, they have always been a threat to the priesthood.

but you can't let things go as they will. The Duke is highly indebted to me, if I want to call it that. In any case, it is difficult for him to refuse my wishes. I cannot explain this any further and ask you to believe me. Binding Wieborg to Armane Torgaard, even if only temporarily and not too firmly, can turn the tide of the battle against the High Gate. Unfortunately, this battle is not unfavourable and hopeless for the captain at the moment, as the coming unfortunate events that the Wandelstar Heldung will bring us would be conducive to Wieborg's attacks if I did not take precautions. But if we succeed in tying him up with the king's child, I will put him in an awkward chess position that young people are sometimes unable to cope with. - In short, I would be grateful if you would do everything in your power to encourage any budding love between the king's child Armane and Baldur Wieborg. I already have the duke's approval for this game ..."

Fortunately, the Reverend Father could not see what was going on in the young gardener's heart. Thoughts ran through Warga's head at lightning speed, but they refused to obey, because at the same time the bitter pain she had felt earlier during her conversation with Armane Torgaard flared up again.

What should she say?

Agni's solar watch spun around her so that she almost didn't know where she was. But this half faint gave her the idea of playing a full faint, and so she suddenly slumped down, the staff slipped from her hand and rolled across the lava slabs of the floor, and the blonde head fell sideways out of the upholstered back of her armchair.

Immediately afterwards she felt the Honourable Father close his arms around her, a soft hand lift her head; and then, whether she wanted to or not, she tolerated the lips of the Lord of Urd on hers.

THE WRITER

Experience has shown that the sessions of the royal assembly in the Posidensaal of the Asgard lasted a very long time, as is always the case when many men are determined to have their say, be it because they have something remarkable to say, or because they believe they have to demonstrate their right to exist by making a speech or special motions.

At the royal assemblies, which according to the constitution of the Empire of Atlantis had to take place every five or six years, the accountability reports of the kings of the states were received by the head of the core government, and these reports could be a pleasant but somewhat boring affair or an embarrassing affair, depending on the attitude of the respective king of the realm. In this respect, Mr Warager Ase Torgaard was a very unpleasant gentleman who, with notable rudeness, told the royal peers his views on the handling of law and order, on the attitude to duty and objectivity, on the rights and, in particular, the duties of high-ranking royal civil servants.

understood that the participants in the constitutionally stipulated compulsory meetings were basically happy in their souls when the meetings passed without any particular incidents.

Given the size of the Atlantean empire, it was unavoidable that these sessions, provided enough council material had accumulated over the six years, sometimes took place for a full fortnight in succession; and the old lord, as the king of the realm was half-jokingly, half-annoyingly called, presided incessantly without showing any signs of fatigue, although at eighty-three years of age he would have had a right to do so. When the royal lords of Gaatland, Gotburg, Harvesum, Acora-Brammerloh, Schoongard, Suderpoor and Paardegatt yawned behind the leather bindings of their daily council cloth, so that the gold seals of their bits competed with the gleaming pillars of the Posidensaal, when the kings of Lipore, Murnaats and Antianyu wrote love letters to their young wives - the one from Antianyu to a little lady-in-waiting, by the way - then the imperial king Warager Ase Torgaard gossiped about constitutional issues in Gotburg and Lipore, about the culpable omission of annual reports, about the slow receipt of tax contributions for the realm and similar things. The old gentleman knew full well that his royal peers were yawning or writing love letters, but

That was precisely why he knew no mercy. They all came before his sharp tongue one by one and in turn. The terrible exercises in patience began shortly after sunrise, were then interrupted by a long lunch break of five hours and were supposed to end an hour before sunset. But if the day's work was not done, each participant was given a beautiful golden candlestick with a burning candle on the precious table in front of him, and the torture was prolonged until the bright stars of the Atlantic night sky flashed above the Posidene Hall, reminding him that the days were for work and the nights served for rest.

In accordance with ancient custom, there was also no sparing of dress during the sessions. The imperial king presided in full princely jewellery, although he only wore the imperial crown on the first day when receiving guests. On the other days of the session, the shimmering gemstone diadem of the realm wrapped itself around his high forehead, and the kings of the states, who had kept this jewellery of their ruling houses in their chests at home for six years, had to have the bruises on their temples tended to by their wives and daughters from about the sixth day of the session onwards. Hagenot Skullörn of Acora-Brammerloh-Aargund did not yet have a wife for this,

That's why he wore a diadem made of wafer-thin gold plate, which didn't require the healing help of a female hand because it didn't pinch.

In addition to the kings, the highest officials of the High Sun Gate took part in the meetings; this year, almost all the governors and burgraves from the border marches also attended with their counsellors and secretaries. The Posidensaal was spacious enough to accommodate over two hundred gentlemen, but there were not enough tables. The golden tables, which were traditionally intended for the kings, were supplemented in such cases by wooden ones from the Allfather fiefdom. They were placed across the hall as several horseshoes from the golden cross table of the royal tables and disappeared between the mighty rows of pillars in the antechamber. The seats between the pillars were very popular for obvious reasons. It was here that the teachers of constitutional law and high judicial officials of the empire sat, as well as the clerks of the imperial and state offices, the governors of the border marks and finally the Asgardase on guard duty with his high eagle helmet, who was undoubtedly the most beautiful member of the illustrious assembly, but had all the less influence.

Warager Torgaard sat in front of the polished brass pillar of law that towered high above his golden, throne-like armchair. This pillar came from almost

It was written on a pillar from an unknown, ancient time and bore the main features of the Azeri constitution chiselled into it in key words. You could only read this strange law book if you walked tirelessly around the pillar, first bending low to the ground and later, with your neck stretched out, deciphering the last ancient characters under the decorative head. As the content of the writing was generally known and had to be memorised at school, such an attempt at reading was only made when the legal scholars sought the basis for a new interpretation of the law from the not always entirely clear wording of the pillar inscription.

The heir to the throne, Wittmund Ase Torgaard, the Acora, also sat on a throne-like armchair to the right of the King of the Realm, and to the left, in the same way, the Papa of Urd, Mr Amenor Lochi. They were joined on either side by the kings of the states, and finally the male members of the royal houses and the other attendees followed in order of rank and dignity.

Blood-young warriors, who were doing their duty on Asgard, stood ready to provide the high lords with writing materials and, if desired, with fresh, chilled well water, and finally, outside in front of the splendour of the rectangular columned hall, stood a hundred brass-sparkling Asgard warriors under their captain and

waited with the equanimity of all warriors for the end of the sessions. The royal assemblies were not without a certain solemnity and dignity, and even the most famous mockers among the high lords could not escape the deep impression that the splendour of the Posidene Hall and the splendour of the royal assembly involuntarily made on them. Beneath the gleaming jewelled statues, surrounded by the sparkle of the most exquisite treasures on the ceilings and walls, columns and pillars, every participant in the sessions felt the irrepressible pride of being a serving member of the first and most powerful confederation of states on earth.

The sixth day of the King's Assembly was devoted to a detailed discussion of the "Heldung" measures that had been drawn up in the Imperial Office for the war. When Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping entered the Posid Hall in the morning, he placed a voluminous leather volume on the table in front of him, and the brothers from the other Imperial Offices of the core government sitting near him sighed deeply because the volume was so thick. The Acora and several state kings approached with horrified expressions to see if the entire volume was indeed to be read. They had been involved in at least ten preliminary meetings to draw up the guidelines, but the fact that the volume, which only contained a detailed classification of the material, was to be read in its entirety was not a problem.

They hadn't expected that the report had become so extensive. It was more than likely that the discussions would take several days under these circumstances.

With quiet sadness, the scholars of public and civil law realised that today's meeting would again last late into the night under all circumstances, and that they would therefore have to miss the captivating lecture by the young Wieborg at the Reichshochschule. And today the great captain wanted to talk about the history of the development of foreign trade at the High Sun Gate, a subject that sounded so promising that one had to reckon in advance with an eight-day detention of the ruthless fighter. It was almost uncanny and incomprehensible where Wieborg had got the valuable sources from. Dates dating back thousands of years and the names of Venerable Fathers, who had barely been taught in school that they had existed, were given by day and year, reign and important official acts, without the High Sun Gate having raised any objections. The Venerable Father Amenor Lochi was even mentioned once with humble respect and the hope was expressed that, with his approval, the career of the High Sun Gate over the past fifty years could be presented in later courses.

The walkways and grassy areas of the University for General Humanities had already become too cramped. Especially the lectures on the history of the Nordic kingdom of Atlantis were crowded with visitors from all walks of life, as if they were about to receive a new revelation. The idea of a national community based on the Asean spirit had caught fire, especially among the extremely large number of unrecognised citizens and workers from the city of Atlantis and the communities in the hinterland. The desire, the need for a reorganisation had existed for centuries, and Baldur Wieborg, as the darling of fortune, had the advantage of being born in a time that was conducive to such ideas. Even among the unrecognised citizens of the realm, Nordic blood was so prevalent that one could still speak of a unified community of Asean blood with good reason.

The high-born members of the council also regretted having to stay away from the lecture. Although they were very annoyed with Wieborg, who wanted to overthrow old, outdated customs, the Imperial King had not yet taken a definitive negative position, so when they were among themselves, they scolded Baldur Wieborg and eagerly awaited the evenings to hear the captivating speaker standing in the torchlight.

The participation that the army showed the captain was striking. At nightfall, dense crowds of leather tunics and round war bonnets swarmed in front of the lectern, and to the horror of the distinguished clerical councillors, it always smelled similar to the great army exercises on the Idafelde, when Mr Warager Tor- gaard rode on a snow-white horse down the endless ranks of the Atlantic hundred troops with their chariots and elephant detachments, which were to be embarked as relief to some border march.

The Posidensaal filled up everywhere.

Some burgraves from the Marches were yawning because they had spent the night carousing. They had to make the most of their stay in the big city, especially as their marital sweethearts had stayed at home because they were so far away. The kings of the states were under better supervision. Almost all of their queens had come with them, as long as they were not prevented from travelling by joyful family events, for journeys between the Atlantic islands on their own magnificent royal galleys were a pleasure and a rest. Maritime traffic in the mother empire was so secure that any anxious warnings from the husbands about the strain of such a voyage would inevitably have been seen through.

The governor of the Drudenmark on the Angelland Inland Sea had his place behind a mighty

He had already taken the pillar, laid his heavy head on both arms and slept. The wine merchants in Atlantis held him in high esteem, as he was a major buyer of local grape juice and had small shiploads of exquisite wines brought to his misty Nordmark every year. Compassionate fellow officials realised by sounding that the burgrave was sufficiently covered by his pillar against the view of the imperial king and let him sleep. His neighbour, the high governor's scribe, was given the task, which he was no stranger to, of hitting the back of the governor with his fist - not with the flat of his hand - at the slightest start of snoring, on the embroidery of his neck and not on the leather of his tunic, in order to muffle the sound.

Punctually as always, when the sundial on the mighty gable of the portico showed the eighth hour of the morning, the King of the Realm, Warager Ase Torgaard, appeared and opened the sixth session of the King's Conference.

Mr Herbing Ase Köpping was immediately given the floor to speak, and the gentlemen leaned back comfortably in their armchairs, for it was now several hours, if not the whole day, before the speech began. The burgrave spoke freely, only glancing at his leather belt now and then and drinking from a glass of water at long intervals. Mr Köpping didn't like it, but other refreshments were not his favourite.

Drinks were not permitted in the Posidensaal, and at a gathering of Northmen it is not necessary to state the reasons.

During the lecture, the king leant towards his son, Acora, who obediently turned his ear to his stern father.

"Has Wieborg put together what Köpping is talking about," said Mr Warager quietly. "Recommend Wieborg to you when I'm dead."

"He is somewhat ruthless against the Porte and the kings of states," the duke replied. "I fear there is unrest in the high assembly today."

"Don't give a damn about unrest," growled the old man. "Heroic measures are no joking matter, but bitter seriousness."

After this brief, hushed conversation between father and son, all that could be heard for another half hour was the slowly hoarse voice of old Burgrave Köpping.

"Take good care, Acora," said the king of the realm quietly.

"Here it comes. Your friend Amenor Lochi will be surprised."

The Papas of Urd sat on the other side of the king of the realm and strained in vain to hear the words that the lord whispered into the ear of the heir to the throne.

The Venerable Father was not the only one to prick up his ears. The other gentlemen also pricked up their ears as Her- bing Ase Köpping continued:

"In addition to the vessels of the Home War Fleet and those of the civilian shipping companies (the names of the vessels and skippers follow), the High Sun Gate for the departure of the population of the flat islands of Gaatland, Schoongard, Harvesum, Suderpoor and Paardegatt is also made available to the War Office free of charge:

1. Six hundred large galleys, of which at least three hundred are to be drawn from the coastal waters of Tiahusinyu and Zimbabuye.

2. The associated crew of at least eight thousand seafaring men and the skippers, helmsmen and pursers. - Does the King command that the names of the ships and captains be read out now?" asked Mr Köpping.

"Thank you. Not necessary. A copy of the order to the gate is sufficient," replied Mr Warager comfortably, casting a questioning glance at his neighbour to the left. Amenor Lochi, however, kept his crowned head bowed and only wrote down a few words.

The unrest in the hall grew. Had they understood correctly? A copy of the order? And something like that from the Sun Gate, which was always requested? There was a nice breeze whistling from the Imperial Office. And then: six hundred grand galleys! And this number was accepted by the Venerable Father and his councillors in silence, without an indignant interjection! Signs and wonders really were happening.

"Free of charge", the Burgrave had said. It was actually a matter of course that the gate would make its resources available free of charge when the empire was in need. But who had ever received anything free of charge from the business-minded temple administration? How was it possible to know the resources of the High Sun Gate so precisely that the head of the Imperial War Office agreed to read out the names of galleys and shipmasters? This knowledge bordered on magic.

Everywhere in the hall, one could observe what one had previously only seen between the imperial king and the heir to the throne, namely the inclination of the upper body towards the neighbour and a quiet murmur, as if the Posidensaal was buzzing with immen, who mistook the flaming precious stones for flowers. One name could be clearly heard in the humming: Baldur Wieborg!

Warager Torgaard tapped softly but insistently on the golden tabletop with the diamond pommel of the sword of arms in front of him. The humming subsided and the old burgrave was able to continue his speech. After the priests of the High Sun Gate seemed to have accepted the empire's demand for the surrender of six hundred high seas galleys without objection, the further regulations, which included the confiscation of the extended accommodation rooms in the hermitages and places of pilgrimage on the mountain heights of the Atlantean mountains, caused a stir.

Islands broke out, there was no longer such great astonishment among the gentlemen present. The Imperial War Office had obviously contacted the High Sun Gate beforehand, and difficulties were therefore hardly to be expected in the ensuing debate. As there was a lunch break before the debate, the gentlemen were able to hold small meetings, as there was still time for this after the communal lunch in the living quarters of the Allvaterlehens.

The Posidensaal was now completely silent again, and only the hoarse voice of Burgrave Köpping sounded monotonously through the golden splendour of the room. A short snore from the area around the pillared hall suddenly died away under a dull thud. Those in the know smiled, the imperial king craned his neck and grinned, a few lords raised their heads in astonishment, thinking to themselves and wishing for a place behind a pillar.

A low bell finally signalled the start of the lunch break. The high sun was already burning down on the participants in the open Posidenhalle.

However, the imperial king only cancelled the meeting when Köpping had finished his speech.

The governor of the Drudian Border Mark woke up and wanted to pay, but soon realised that he was in the Posidene Hall in Asgard. He had well

and looked forward to the exquisite cuisine of the royal house; the kings of the realm lifted their pressed diadems, and the ecclesiastical counsellors put away their leathers with impenetrable faces.

"Good work Wieborg has done," the King of the Realm smiled kindly at the Papas of Urd.

Amenor Lochi confirmed this view in a tone of firm conviction and only said that the young gentleman ran the risk of forfeiting all friendships if he continued, as before, to upset the unrecognised citizens of the kingdom with his unheard-of innovations. The Duke in particular, whose rigid standpoint on the racial question was well known, would take little pleasure in the young captain. And this was a reason to doubt Baldur Wieborg's intelligence.

"I will assign the Wieborg to my son," said Mr Warager Torgaard with a lurking sideways glance at the spiritual ruler of the realm.

"I cannot see any advantage in such an allocation, Lord King of the Realm," Amenor Lochi replied grumpily. He knew the old man. All you had to do was contradict him and you could be sure that he would get his way.

"I'll think about it," replied the king calmly.

"The Spiritual Councillor and Chamberlain of the High Sun Gate, Mr Odil Ase Gadirns, intends today to

afternoon to object to the Captain's latest remarks at the College of General Humanities. Perhaps it would be appropriate to postpone the assignment to the Duke's court," suggested Papas von Urd.

"The duke will shut him up," the imperial king declared clearly.

"I would be in favour of transferring the young man to a frontier march," continued the Reverend Father with great tenacity, but with cautious emphasis. "I admit that Wieborg is an important man, but it seems to me that it would be better for him to clarify his thoughts abroad. That has never done anyone any harm. He might avoid serious trouble for himself that way."

"I can imagine that you don't like the chap," the old man replied roughly. "You're free to go to the highest Imperial lawyer. Chamberlain Gadirus can shorten the matter with ease."

"Wouldn't that be the task of the kingdom?" asked the clergyman, playing the offended party. "In any case, the maintenance of civil criminal law is not the responsibility of the High Sun Gate."

The imperial king smiled broadly and maliciously.

"I don't fancy it, Lochi," he said briefly. "I know exactly what would happen if I prosecuted Wieborg for the deeds. We'll all have to cower before the young lad. Why? Not for my sake. I have

the tunic clean. The gate too? The duke too? - Don't know; don't want to know either. - Let's go to lunch."

The Papas of Urd bowed slightly and could not hide a small smile behind the old man's back. Things seemed to be going well. He would have exchanged his priestly crown for an old sailor's cap if Wieborg had not been sitting with the duke on Asgard in a few days.

When the king of the realm left the Posidenfaal, he summoned the Asgardasen Adelger Ase Gaatland, who had marched out in Baldur's place, and instructed him to order the captain Wieborg into the Allfather's fiefdom immediately.

"Let him get dressed," said the old man. "I want him with me for lunch."

Well over five hundred people attended the luncheon in the Allvaterlehen, as the members of the princely families were also entitled to such hospitality. Although the imperial king had no need to be frugal, he was not fond of splendour at meals, but attached all the more importance to a sumptuous table. The large banqueting hall in the residential wing of the Allvaterlehens was not quite big enough to seat so many guests, so the double doors to the knights' hall of the Acora flat had been lifted out so that the difficult question of communal feeding could be solved.

The invitation of the auxiliary worker in the war office to

Baldur Wieborg only arrived when the banqueting table was already in its second course and the initial solemn silence had given way to lively laughter and a babble of voices. Baldur appeared in a simple tunic with a bronze helmet under his arm and strode purposefully towards the king of the realm, who, to the silent horror of the much more educated kings, had tucked his mouthcloth into the neckline of his pearl-embroidered blue festive dress and was happily dismantling an antelope loin. Baldur could hardly conceal a laugh, for the hall was very quiet when he appeared. People were obviously wondering how it was possible for a simple captain to clatter so unerringly through the banqueting hall of the kings, not with a reverent but almost laughing face. The wives and maidens of the kings of the states turned their more or less beautiful and young heads towards the well-known university professor with obvious pleasure, and the king's child Armane almost shouted "Bal- dur!" with delight. Amenor Lochi, who was sitting opposite the daughter of the heir to the throne next to Mr Warager Torgaard, lowered his eyes with a satisfied smile. He had seen the flash of joy in Armane's eyes. If the king of the realm gave Wieborg to the lord of the Allfather's fiefdom, the greatest danger to the gate would be averted, according to human foresight.

Mr Warager was surprised at the sudden lull in the general conversation and turned round questioningly. Now it became so quiet that one could hear the Captain's steady footsteps and the soft clanking of his armour. The young assistant from the Imperial War Office now felt uneasy for a moment, but this weakness, which easily sets in under the eyes of many illustrious personalities when passing through a hall, immediately disappeared again under the compelling will of the man of war.

"Come here, Baldur!" called the king of the realm and prepared his knife and chopstick. Then he wiped his mouth on the hanging sheet and moved the armchair back.

The dinner party was once again astonished. The master simply called the captain Baldur, as his closest confidants used to call him.

"Captain Wieborg to the King of the Realm," Baldur Wieborg announced in a clear, bright voice that rang through the hall like a blaring trumpet. One of the spiritual counsellors of the High Sun Gate, whose nerves had suffered somewhat over the years, put both hands to his ears and grimaced painfully.

"Pleased to meet you," said the king of the realm, extending his soft, wrinkled hand to the captain. "Are you hungry, Baldur?"

"No, Lord King of the Realm," replied Baldur Wieborg, looking at his royal master seriously and calmly.

"Why not?" asked Mr Warager, surprised.

"Because I've just eaten," Baldur explained quickly.

"Often get it wrong with you," the old man laughed broadly.

"Should have invited earlier."

"I like to eat again," explained the captain.

"There were white beans in the communal kitchen at the Asgardasen."

"They're as dangerous as liquid explosive fire," grinned the old prince. "Sit down there by the exit, Baldur. You're just a poor captain. Don't need to check your rank. I want to speak to you alone in the blue quay later."

The blue quay was the king's own realm, the only place where he could rule as he pleased, because he couldn't quite do that in Atlantis. After the death of the Queen of the Realm, the Blue Quay was in a terrible state. Mr Warager Torgaard was allowed to deny order and punctuality there, he used to take his midday rest on an old cot, and nobody had any business in the quay except himself and an old servant, who was only allowed to fix the worst messes. To be received in the blue quay was

almost a special honour, and Amenor Lochi took this into account and, despite his inner satisfaction, contorted his face into an angry laugh, with the intended result that the old gentleman was pleased.

"What has Baldur done, Mr Grandfather?" asked Armane Acora quietly, leaning over the table towards the king.

"Felon," replied Mr Warager, not allowing himself to be dissuaded from the antelope loin. "Will be hanged."

The duchess put her white hand on her daughter's arm, and Armane ducked her head and kept silent. She was clever enough not to believe in the hanging, but since the whole town was talking about her Baldur, she feared for him.

The duke smiled to himself. The high lord father did not know what was going on in Aargund, did not know that his son had made peace with Baldur Wieborg. Mr Warager thought he was annoying the heir to the throne with his obvious favouritism towards the young captain, but this time Amenor Lochi was also firing his gentle arrows in the wrong direction. Although the Acora did not know his father's intentions, he could have sworn that Baldur Wieborg's appointment as field colonel and chamberlain in the service of the heir to the throne would take place later in the blue quay. The fact that the imperial king did not ask his son beforehand was in keeping with his unpredictable

character of the old man exactly. The chamberlain Wieborg was simply to be forced upon the unpopular son.

The Papas of Urd had done his job well, even if his intentions were different from those of Acora. After all, the weeks in Aargund had brought Baldur the most important successes he had achieved in his career of a few happy years, namely the heart and mind of the heir to the throne of the realm of Atlantis. The scorched primordial lore that had contained the rash treaty with the High Sungate had been erased, leaving the duke's back clear once more. Well-intentioned folly had lost its sting; the noose around his neck had been torn without Amenor Lochi realising it. Whatever other weapons the Porte had in its hands against the Acora were no heavier than those the Honourable Father could use against many other high imperial officials. Now the Papas of Urd was under the pressure that he had been allowed to exert for so many years in all friendliness, and he was still of the opinion that the treaty was a dangerous weapon in the hands of Captain Wieborg. That this was not the case, the honourable man would only learn when the time came.

In the meantime, the dinner party had forgiven young Wieborg again and were laughing and chatting like

before. In this respect, the imperial king had one good quality. He loved the shameless merriment at his table and could get very annoyed if his guests barely touched their plates for fear of being accosted by him. The priests of the higher temple service were probably the only ones who did not want to taste good at the king's table, as they ran the risk of being confronted at any time with questions that were unacceptable to answer in front of a large company. The imperial king's questions sometimes bordered on blasphemy, and one of the most difficult tasks of the Venerable Father was to turn the answers into jokes.

Baldur Wieborg sat downstairs at the exit and wondered what the old man might want from him again. In some respects he had a bad feeling, for it was clear to him that Mr Warager Tor- gaard would one day cause trouble because of the lectures on the ethnic community of the Asians. In matters of race, the king of the realm was certainly just as unteachable as the majority of his royal peers and the other blood-pure Aesir. The king was of course well aware that the High Sun Gate drew its power precisely from the existence of millions of unrecognised citizens of mixed Asean blood, but he could always refer to the previous successes of the rigid racial principle and could not ignore the disadvantages that would arise from it over time.

were insignificant and unavoidable in a realm of millions. Whether the king would realise that it was high time to bring about change here and to remedy and prevent a further decline in the Rassian heritage through generous reorganisation was unlikely, given the stubborn nature of the old gentleman. Baldur Wieborg, however, continued to believe in his good star and was even determined to take Mr Warager Torgaard between his mental pincers when the opportunity arose. Hadn't it seemed that it would never be possible to win the Acora? And yet a few weeks in Aargund had been enough to perform this miracle.

Baldur Wieborg had little opportunity to dwell on such thoughts for long, as he was sitting downstairs at the table among the underage children of the royal families. The youngest Asen were very quiet at first and looked at the new dinner guest covertly and suspiciously from the side, but then they became more trusting. Finally, amused laughter broke out from time to time during Captain Wieborg's amusing stories, which were told in a hushed voice, so that the king of the realm peered with a good-natured grin towards the end of the table, where things were obviously more entertaining than in his neighbourhood.

"If you're a child's head up here like Wieborg, you can sit downstairs," he said cosily.

"I, Mr Grandfather," said Armane Torgaard immediately. Mr Amenor Lochi smiled benevolently, the heir to the throne less so, and the duchess said reproachfully:

"But Mr Father!"

Armane received a look so full of reproach and deep indignation that the young girl quickly recanted: "I'd rather stay here."

"Poor child," said the imperial king quietly, lowering his eagle nose reverently into the large goblet of golden yellow Atlantean wine.

The following three hours of rest were dedicated to the midday rest of the high guests, of course only for those who wanted to use them for this purpose. Those who were young went to the Asgard park with the royal maidens and the daughters of the high dignitaries and amused themselves with childish games.

Baldnr Wieborg, however, followed a servant into the living quarters of the Allfather's manor, which, despite his service as Asgardase, were not all familiar to him, for even the castle guards could not enter the inner rooms of the king's wing. The path led through long, winding corridors until the servant, head bowed in awe, knocked on a precious wooden door, behind which lay the famous blue quay. Quays were actually only called the living quarters on ships, perhaps because of their small size, but the term for the favourite room of the imperial king was

well chosen. The room was nothing more than a small quay.

After the harsh "Come in!" Baldur stood staring in amazement, so disorganised that the official message stuck in his throat.

"You're surprised," said the imperial king with satisfaction.

"I can understand that. I know exactly what you're thinking now, Baldur."

The captain was silent. Warager Torgaard was lolling around like a huge old bear, content with himself and the world, on a heap of blankets and pillows, with which the cot made of ordinary bronze rods was laden.

"I'll say what you think," the king continued.

"Think like this. The old warager is a messy, sloppy guy, a real ragamuffin, like the ones from the harbour pubs. - Is that right?"

"No, Mr Reichskönig," Wieborg replied.

"How?" the old man asked suspiciously.

"I think a little more politely, Mr Reichskönig," Baldur Wieborg replied amiably.

"Well, that's basically how it is. - I'm very pleased that you're not lying. Anyway, you're a skilful liar. - Aren't you?"

"I never lie, Mr Reichskönig," Wieborg said calmly.

"So? - And how do you do that?"

"I have not needed to lie so far, but I want to

I can't say that I can do without them in the future," explained the captain. "I don't know the future. In any case, as young as I am, I have discovered a secret, namely that of fencing with the truth. Surprisingly, I've had some pretty good results."

"Even more arrogant than two years ago?" asked Mr Warager.

"No, I've always been like that."

"How do you fight the gate? Even without lying?" enquired the old gentleman, looking at the guest with great attention.

"The High Sun Gate is my mortal enemy," Baldur Wieborg replied harshly. "I will use all the means I know against them, violence, betrayal, cunning, deceit and even lies if I can use them."

"I see," the king grumbled and put his head back in the pillows. Baldur was careful not to break the silence that now came. The king of the realm wanted something special, and he should say so of his own accord.

"You should try harder to win Acora's favour, Baldur," Mr Warager began after a while.

"Told you once before. - But sit down somewhere, Captain. Throw the leather volumes with young Grammer's ballads off the chair, on the floor if you like. - I'm actually tired; I want to sleep. King's meeting at my age is exhausting. - Do you know how old I am?"

"Three hundred and eighty solar years, Lord King of the Realm," replied Baldur.

"Are you also counting the years until I'm dead?" asked Mr Warager Torgaard maliciously.

"No, I can't do that," smiled the captain, knowing that the imperial king could not see this smile because his eyes were fixed on the wood-panelled ceiling.

"But are you counting on it like the others?"

"Yes, Mr Reichskönig," Wieborg replied briefly.

Warager Torgaard straightened up and fixed his grey, old lights on the outspoken young man, who openly admitted that he expected his king to die.

"There's a special kind of flattery that delights in rudeness," he growled at the visitor. "You think I'd like that, Baldur? - I don't like it at all. Don't know your heart, Baldur. It is possible that you are a man of honour, the opposite is also possible, even probable. - Do you know people, do you think so?"

"No, Mr Reichskönig," replied Mr Wieborg, as he had been asked.

"Why?" hissed the old man, who had not expected this.

"Because you doubt my honourable heart, Lord King of the Realm," the captain explained with an icy calm, which he involuntarily directed at anyone who snarled at him in any way.

"I see, you're angry with old Warager," sighed the gentleman, sinking back into the crates. "You're sensitive. You're supposed to be a man of honour, that's my opinion too. - Don't worry, Baldur, the old man was just teasing. I've had a lot to do with pigs and dogs all my life. You can hardly imagine. My own son and heir to the throne, good-for-nothing ..."

"I request my release," Baldur said calmly and stood up.

"I didn't ask you, captain," the king said.

"Sit down. Listen. - Can only talk to you about such things; you're wearing a clean jacket. Know you lads well enough now. Know no fear. Breaking into Lochi's vault was a game of life and death. Have taken note with respect. Lochi trembles before the little captain! You won, Baldur; no doubt about that. Attack on Pforte was a skilful performance, has my approval. The idea of a national community may be stupid, but it's worth thinking about. Work with heroic measures satisfactory. Can judge that. Will work better than if old Köpping had worked alone. - Do you want to be ordered?"

"No, Mr Reichskönig," Baldur replied evenly.

"Reason?"

"A promotion would possibly jeopardise my

I will take a teaching position at the College of General Humanities," the captain replied clearly and confidently. "I'm only interested in high state positions if I can help rebuild the empire there."

The king straightened up again and looked at his young guest with open scorn.

"Megalomaniac, Baldur?" he asked with a grin.

"To save the empire: - Yes, Mr Reichskönig," replied Mr Wieborg very kindly and looked at his grinning master with an impenetrable expression.

"But you started it very stupidly," laughed the old man. "Scharwenzelst for old Warager Torgaard. Acora will be terribly pleased. You'll be surprised how you'll be put out cold in a border march when I'm dead, unless a small poisoned arrow splashes into your back first. You'll have to fuss over the duke, my lord. Duke has the future, not me. There's no more state to be made with the old warager."

Baldur Wieborg remained silent and looked in front of him. Now he was faced with an important decision. Should he tell the king of the realm how things stood with him and Acora? Should he report that the duke intended to take him with him on his tour of the Border Marches and that the way had been discussed in Aargund to persuade the imperial king to make the allocation? Baldur Wieborg sensed how close

he was at this destination. Mr Warager Torgaard himself had the wish that he should do more for the Acora. Whether this wish came from a sincere heart was uncertain. If he was now open and sincere without consideration, the unpredictable old man could change his intentions just to annoy his son. The imperial king had often shown such all-too-human traits.

"What do you think?" asked Mr Warager Torgaard suspiciously.

"I wonder whether it is now good for the welfare of the kingdom to tell the Lord King the truth," replied Mr Wieborg straightforwardly.

"It's news to me that a minor captain from one of my offices can make a decision about the welfare of the realm," laughed the old man with a tidy smile. "I always thought that was a matter for the Warager Tor- gaard."

"By risking my honour and life, I have earned the right to make decisions for myself that affect the empire," the captain declared confidently.

"Does the decision also affect the Acora?"

"Yes, Lord King of the Realm," replied Baldur.

"What was in Aargund? - Not pure joy, eh?"

"On the contrary," smiled Baldur Wieborg. "The despatch to Aargund was in accordance with your will, Lord King of the Realm. I obeyed, travelled there and wooed the duke."

"Hard to imagine," said the old man. "The Acora wants to be treated differently to the Warager. - Success?"

"The Duke trusts me," said Baldur.

"And you?"

"I trust him too, Mr Reichskönig," said the captain with conviction.

"I'm glad to see you falling in too, my son," grinned the lord with a contemptuous sideways glance at the guest. "Can only warn you, Baldur, warn you about your own flesh and blood, sad as it is. Sneaky man, the Acora, is dirty; I'm sorry to have to say it. Change of life unpleasant. You can feel sorry for the duchess and the king's child. Joins in the dirty secret cults."

"Perhaps he was forced to do so," Baldur interjected cautiously, at the risk of being excoriated for saying something without being asked. But the king suddenly seemed to take it for granted that Mr Wieborg was sharing his opinion without being asked, for he answered very animatedly:

"That's the bad thing. Forced. Only a good-for-nothing who doesn't have a clean doublet can be forced. I'm very worried, Baldur. You can hardly imagine. People say I don't want to please the duke. That's nonsense, of course. But I can't treat him well when he betrays me at every turn, and with

the gate and the associated clique are doing dangerous things behind my back."

If only you knew what the ambassador's contract with the High Sun Gate was, thought Baldur Wieborg. The Empire can thank its good star that the little captain from the Imperial War Office actually belongs in the ker- ker for burglary.

"Look to the future with concern, Baldur," continued Mr Warager Torgaard. "Empire stands on the hollow. One day the Acora will be allowed to live as king of the realm by the grace of Papa. Pforte has the masses, has the people. Lives on stupidity, and lives well. Small matter to chase us aces away, if one day it suits the gate. Wears the crown like a born prince, the Lochi, the poisoner. - I locked you up the other day, Baldur. Why? To protect you from public accusation. Prevented others with the house arrest. They won't open their mouths against me. Wait until the old badger is dead."

"I'm still hoping for the public prosecution," said Baldur.

"Crazy!" laughed the king of the realm. "Will wring your neck with their legal quibbles."

"The Imperial Lawyer will beware," smiled the captain, confident of victory. "The plaque of honour of the all-knowing mountain mother's association has become gossipy. Even the supreme judge knows that by now.

Advocate of the realm. - It's good to prepare for such dances; then a public lawsuit is a pleasure."

"I don't understand," said the king breathlessly, as if he suspected what was about to happen. Baldur Wieborg also continued:

"Odil Ase Gadirus, Chamberlain of the Venerable Father in Urd and Spiritual Counsellor of the High Sun Gate, Master of the League of Noble and Free Spirits, Master of the Secret Union of the Omniscient Mountain Mother, member of the Free Bank of All-encompassing Love of the Silent Stars ..."

"Odil, the lurker of Agni?" the Lord asked quickly.

"It's my most trusted friend," the captain replied calmly. "It's not always necessary to break into vaults to obtain documents. Sometimes friendships are enough."

"So?"

"Gadirus will attack me today in the King's Council for blasphemy," added Baldur Wieborg.

"This will not be done if it has become known in the meantime that the Lord King of the Realm has placed me in a chess position at the request of the Honourable Father of Urd, which young people are not up to, namely - in the vicinity of the king's child Armane Torgaard; either by transfer or in some other way."

"What is it between you and my granddaughter?" enquired the king.

"I beg leave to refuse to answer that," said Baldnr Wieborg without outward movement.

The master sank into silence for a while, which was interrupted by a knock on the door. The servant wanted to draw the king's attention to the fact that in a short time the bell would ring for the start of the afternoon session.

Warager Torgaard stood up, and the captain stood up as well. Then the king of the realm did the same as the Acora had done at Aargund Castle; he placed both hands on Baldnr's shoulders and looked into the grey, clear lights for a long time. Only this time there was no heart to disturb the movement.

"The matter with Armane must be carried," the King of the Realm said slowly. "Love is not so important. Loyalty a hundred times more important. Perhaps you'll go down in loyalty, Baldur. Know yourself now. Seems to me that's not too important either. Rich a thousand times more important. I'll be leaving you soon. - Leave good chap behind for my Nordic people. Guy's name is Baldur. Do you want to go to Acora, Baldur?"

"No, Mr Reichskönig," replied the captain.

"Then I'll force you," replied Mr Warager Torgaard harshly. "You no longer belong to yourself, Baldur. Belong to the people of Atlantis. Appoint yourself field commander in my army. An external matter; will you

be indifferent. Assign yourself to Acora. - It is necessary, Baldur. Not as chamberlain, as first intended. It's too personal; makes you unfree. - What do you want to be?"

"If that's what it takes. Clerk to the ducal administration," replied the captain.

"Scribe?" smiled the king. "Very, very modest, Baldur."

"The low position makes my work easier, Mr Reichskönig," said Mr Wieborg, explaining his request.

"Griffelfuchser," said the old man thoughtfully.

"But you may be right, Baldur. - I'll send you the documents. - Clerk. For my sake. Has a Norse Ase ever pushed for such a title? - I have your field cords hanging here. Put them on. If you walk past the Allfather's fief with them, the whole royal assembly will know what the bell has struck. - This afternoon, the heads of the kingdom's observatories will be attending the meeting. I'm curious to see if the attack by Odil Gadirus will fail to materialise."

"The Spiritual Council will remain silent," assured Bal- dur Wieborg.

THE NEW LORD

Flashing wedges of light shot across the evening sky from news centre to news centre, tirelessly darting across the globe, and where they crossed the night border, the flashes of liquid fire sparkled from polished mirrors and carried the mourning news through kingdom and border markers that King Warager Ase Torgaard had died.

On the bridge of the war galley "Hammersar", the blinker stood with his scribe and had the rune signs of the sudden flashes written down, which shot up over the western edge of the Atlantic Ocean and came from the customs galley "Spurläufer". This received its messages through a large number of lightships from the African mainland from the blinking point of Tableland at the southern tip of the Zimbabuye border mark.

"Final signal," said the skipper. "Flash on to the Acora fleet."

"The Imperial King Wittmund Ase Torgaard," the blink attendant corrected with a reminiscent glance at his superior.

"Write down the flashing spell in legible letters," replied the skipper. "I will then carry it down to the king of the realm."

"We also want to set the flags at half-staff," reminded the flashing keeper, writing his name in the words he had picked up and moving the flashing device half a turn to the stern in order to use the last rays of the evening sun to convey the mourning message to the slower-moving fleet of the now imperial king Wittmund.

Slowly, the imperial flag of blue cloth with the sun emblem sank to half-mast, the Acora's banner on the stem of the stern disappeared and made way for the house flag of the Torgaard family flying at half-staff, and the off-duty crew gathered on the forecastle to discuss the death of the aged ruler of Atlantis in low voices. With slow steps, the skipper left the bridge, took a look at the bulging sails of the two slender masts, which leaned slightly aft, and walked wide-legged towards the companionway of the ship's quay, disappearing into its white-rubbed wooden superstructure.

Under the bright awning on the aft deck there were two people who had noticed the flashing of the flashing signals, but didn't care, partly because this message transmission on a warship of the Reichsflotte was not a problem.

was something commonplace and could not be deciphered without a key, but then because they had better things to do than read the flashing signs. The king's child Armane Torgaard was sitting in a woven cane armchair by the railing, against which field colonel Baldur Wieborg was leaning. The chamberlain Gunnar Ase Gepide had made himself comfortable on the windward side. He had been suffering badly from seasickness over the last few days and had now fallen asleep because the war galley was rocking less today. The old knight's snores sounded like the sighs of a redeemed scapegoat, who had been relieved of the overall agony of seasickness suffered by all the members of the crew of the "Hammersar" and now wanted to sin for once, namely by not looking after Mrs Armane. The snoring did not sound very nice, but it seemed to Baldur and the king's maid that Mr Gepide was snoring quite well; at any rate they were both satisfied with it, and were careful not to go over from their leeward side to windward and shake the sleeping master.

They didn't talk much, the two young people who knew very well that they belonged together and yet were certain that this should never be the case. They had sometimes talked about how nice it would be if Armane were a peasant girl who could choose freely, like the other happier sisters in Atlantis who were not under a diadem.

had been born. But the rare hours they were alone, the restraint Baldur Wieborg had to exercise precisely because of Mrs Armane, had lent them both their protection, so that the love of their youth had become a tender memory made with melancholy. They had travelled together on a ship on Acora's sightseeing tour, had ridden together through the southern states of Zimbabwe in the entourage of the heir to the throne, had both attended the festivities and receptions of the governors and district bailiffs and had also been guests of black and brown African princes at hunts and conferences, but at least the knight Gunnar Gepide had always been nearby. The Acora knew what was being played and wanted to protect both his daughter and Field Colonel Wieborg from serious disappointment.

At the sources of the Nile, near the huge chain of lakes from which the river flowed, the first flashes had reported a serious illness of the old imperial king Warager Torgaard. The Acora had immediately cancelled his journey to Egypt and ridden straight to the east coast of Africa, where the fleet, which had been quickly notified, was waiting for the travelling party. The duke and his immediate entourage transferred from the heavy fighting galley "Mammut" to the fast-moving "Hammer- sar" and hurried ahead of the fleet in order to possibly catch up with them.

to be in Atlantis before the demise of the Imperial King Warager.

At the promontory of Tafelland, the southern tip of the large border mark of Zimbabuye, the ship encountered a heavy south-westerly gale, which could be fully utilised for the journey northwards. The solid construction of the "Hammersar" allowed the masts to be rigged without any problems, newly rigged dirks and guys braced the masts against the storm roaring in from astern, so that the voyage to the height of the Atlantic island of Suderpoor proceeded at lightning speed. However, for those who were not seaworthy, such as Mr Gunnar Gepide, the twenty-eight days and nights that the "Hammersar" ploughed northwards through the green waves of the storm were a terrible experience. For twenty-eight days and nights, the unholy swells of the South Atlantic had rolled under the "Hammersar" so that the crests of the waves had torn themselves away from the sharp, curved bow with a piercing roar, and had rushed forward as if the galley's speed were nothing but a boring creep. Now it had become quieter as the ship approached the equator and with it the happy islands of the kingdom of Atlantis. Although the stiff south was still pushing the vessel at great speed through the flattening dunes, the deck had dried out again and the sun was shining warmly from the apex of the

sky, and the movements of the galley became smoother. It was once again a pleasure to stand at the rail and watch the sharks, which sometimes dived under the keel with bluish bodies without changing their destination, as if the "Hammersar" wasn't even there.

The sun was sinking towards sea level in the west. Aft, on the quarter, the tiny sail of one of the fast liaison ships of the ducal fleet was glowing in competition with the flashing call-signs; and while the young people gazed silently at the beautiful play of light, Baldur's eye happened to fall on the Torgaard house-flag fluttering on the stem of the stern. It stood halfway up, had been placed in place of the duke's standard without his realising it, and heralded a profound and serious change in the life of Colonel Wieborg.

King Warager Torgaard, the old, stubborn Nordland knight, had closed his grey, suspicious eyes forever.

A shudder ran through Baldur Wieborg's otherwise fearless heart. He looked at the fluttering cloth with stubborn eyes.

"Armane!" he said hoarsely and grabbed the king's child's hand with his right hand, seeking help. For the first time in a long time he said Armane, forgetting the separating word woman, which had hitherto been a wall.

between the lovers.

"Baldur, what has happened?" asked King Wittmund Torgaard's daughter. An icy terror ran through her when she saw the favourite of happiness, as the people called Baldur Wieborg, in a state of despair that broke out suddenly and seemingly without reason. "Baldur!"

Then a deep sigh of relief went through the chest of the tall knight, his proud head slowly turned towards his beloved and a smile, distant and lost, revealed that his thoughts had travelled a long way.

"King Warager is dead," Baldur Wieborg said quietly to the startled royal child. "Sit tight for a while longer, Armane. I need you. We men are a strange people. All self-confidence, all arrogance, all knowledge gives us endless years of support and purpose, and then it can happen to us, as it did to me just now, that we grasp at a weak girl's hand like little lost boys, as if she could untie the tangled knots of fate with her love and tenderness. As of today, your father is the king of the happy islands of Atlantis. I have reckoned with this day, as must a man whose responsibility has grown from year to year, who has been driven into the grinding game of high statecraft with fateful speed. Your grandfather possessed a wisdom that nobody

knew in the empire. He was thought to be an ill-tempered old gentleman without inner vigour, even malicious. He was not, Armane. He was so clever that he foresaw what I had just realised with horror when I saw the Torgaard house flag at half-staff. He knew that my task would break me."

"Does a poor royal child have to tell you that you're wrong?" Armane smiled bravely.

"I didn't mean it like that, my love," Baldur Wieborg replied, having regained his confident demeanour. "I will hopefully still achieve my goal of remoulding the kingdom. Your father, King Wittmund, gives me the guarantee that he will complete the casting even if I should die. - No, another thing will break the rift through my life, that which we Asen consider the highest thing next to honour: loyalty. And faithfulness will destroy my heart, whether my body lives or not. For whatever happens, they say you can go on living without love. Most people do and are quite content. Perhaps your grandfather was right when he told me: Love is not important. The kingdom is a thousand times more important. You know, Armane, how strangely torn and jerky the old man spoke. There was something incredibly forceful about the way he spoke. I haven't forgotten anything he said to me."

"I don't want to ask if it hurts you..." the royal child said quietly.

Baldur Wieborg took the slender hand of his beloved king's daughter between his own and stroked the delicate fingers with lost tenderness, which he would have liked to kiss just now, when his heart was heavy.

"I'll tell you without being asked, Armane," he replied in a hushed voice. "I dread the loyalty that I owe, that I owe a thousand and one times over. I dread the paralysed woman who lost her health and youth in the service of the people of Atlantis, who, at the sacrifice of honour and life, gave me the opportunity to open the door to happiness, the happiness of a great people. Such deeds demand loyalty from Wieborg. And I will have to bear that loyalty, no matter how much it weighs on me. People say of me that I can do anything, and I can do it with a smile on my face and a gleam in my eyes. They say that Baldur Wieborg is spring incarnate, and that whatever his hand touches blossoms. - There is one thing I can no longer make blossom, Armane; one to whom I owe the success and fame of my life."

"Warga Gadirus," the king's child replied quietly.

"Yes, the gardener of the Sun Gardens in Urd," the field colonel nodded sadly. "Can you play love like a good actor? If you're called Wieborg, you have to be able to, it's required of me. And I

must play it, play it so masterfully that Mrs Warga is deceived. You see, Armane, loyalty can also be used to deceive. - And that's where I break down. - It is not possible to remain a man of honour."

"Yes, that will kill you, Baldur," said the king's child firmly.

"Do you know any better, Armane?" the colonel asked bitterly.

"No," replied Wittmund's daughter.

"I will love you for this no as long as I breathe!" Baldur Wieborg burst out passionately. But then he pulled himself together and continued: "Stop, Wieborg! - Do you know, child king, what I was about to do? I wanted to throw myself on my knees before you and lay my poor head on your lap. But who has ever seen the happy cryer of Acora do such folly? I have a strange longing, Armane, a longing that only very old people are supposed to have; a longing for peace. - The old gentleman once told me to be careful lest a poisoned arrow should unexpectedly pierce my back. Perhaps the merciful arrow will come, and when I feel its sting between my shoulders, I will think of Armane Torgaard and spread out my arms."

"And then I want to come into your arms, Baldur, no matter how far I am from you," replied the

King's child, and his eyes had become moist. The ship's bell greeted him with four slow, solemn

The sunset came with a loud beat. Twilight quickly fell over the ship, followed by the darkness of night, and a luminous, misty disc glowed in the sky, shining with a white light, brighter than all the other lights in the sky: the chic, changing star Heldung.

Mr Gunnar Gepide felt the cool draught of the eighth wind, now that the sun was gone, and appeared somewhat sleepily on the leeward side to check on his royal maiden. But when he saw the duke's clerk next to Armane, he wanted to retreat again, but Baldur Wieborg beckoned the chamberlain to come closer.

At the same time, the king of the realm, Wittmund, stepped out of the companionway onto the deck and slowly made his way to the sheltered place under the sun sail. Baldur took a few steps towards his new king.

"Field Colonel Wieborg pays homage to the Imperial King Wittmund Ase Torgaard," he said calmly and seriously. The eyes of the two men, who had become friends when many people in Atlantis thought they must be bitter enemies, rested on each other with trusting love. The new king's ageing mouth twisted into a good smile.

"And King Wittmund thanks his Imperial Count

Wieborg," he replied with significant emphasis.

Baldur winced. He knew the meaning of this official title that Mr Wittmund had pronounced. It had hardly been awarded once in centuries. Saviours of the realm received it, no one else. And the counts of the realm were equal to the kings of states. Baldur knew what the king intended with this appointment. Rank designations were as unimportant to him as they were to his friend, even if it was the highest rank an imperial king could bestow. No, this appointment was made for Armane's sake. The father wanted to bring the lovers together without having to violate the rigid rules of the royal house.

"I request that I be allowed to decline the appointment for the time being," Baldur Wieborg asked in a low voice. The king looked round. No one seemed to have understood his words.

"You're right, Baldur," he said with a sigh of relief. "I was a little premature with my love. We still have what I anticipated ahead of us: the success against the Porte and the Race Office, the fight for the laws we drafted together, getting the new tax legislation through. - All right, Baldur, let's wait."

"And we don't know what the star Heroung will bring us," said the colonel with a cautious warning.

The king made a gesture with his hand as if he no longer feared the danger from this direction so much. The measures Mr Wieborg had worked out for the rescue ran like the gears of an artful clock. The disaster itself had to be awaited in the mountains, but by the fleet on the high seas. Wittmund Torgaard had not yet decided whether he would sail north with the home fleet or accompany the royal family to the mountain castle of Torgaard to wait for the floodwaters to recede.

"My trust in your order of action, which has reached the individual offices in the countries and the empire, almost allows me to forgive the danger that threatens us in the realm of All-Father," said the prince.

"If you look dwars to the east, you can see how the leadership of the war office of old Köpping is taking action. I can see at least forty positional lights of galleys coming from Suderpoor on the shore, bringing the inhabitants of our South Island to Atlantis. They are probably even the galleys of Mr Lochi. A few years ago, he put several hundred brand new ships into service, each of which can carry over a thousand people. He had slaves transported on them along the coasts of Zimbabuye, so of course the galleys couldn't be big enough. Now he has done us a great favour with his giant boxes. Old Köpping wrote

At least I was delighted to hear that the Venerable Father of Urd was a pearl."

Baldur Wieborg smiled. He thought that under a certain salutary pressure of the evil conscience some good-for-nothings would become useful, apart from the fact that in the hermitages there were indeed values for the purposes of heroism because of the accommodation possibilities.

"Our accommodation buildings in the mountains will hopefully be ready in time," said the colonel.

"My father took care of them himself," replied King Wittmund, "so I assume that the question of accommodation for the population will also be resolved when we return to Atlantis."

Wittmund Torgaard did not talk about the death of the old king of the realm. Baldur did not dislike this move by his new master. Why should he feign a pain in the presence of his friend that he did not feel? There had been too much mistrust and resentment between the old master and the Acora, the eternally recurring tragedy had erected its bulwark, which did not allow father and son to find each other. Baldur's cautious prudence had managed to channel the growing hatred between father and son into bearable channels, but there remained a residue of unforgiven bitterness that only death could erase.

One by one, the royal family gathered on deck with the small court that had moved to the "Hammersar". Wittmund Ase Torgaard accepted the condolences with the same somewhat disdainful calmness with which he had accepted the homage as King of the Realm with amiable equanimity. He declined the swearing-in of the ship's crew and helmsmen offered by the skipper. It would only take place in Atlantis once the entire fleet had arrived. A secure imperial leadership that rested on such broad foundations as that of Atlantis had no need for a hasty swearing-in ceremony.

Baldur Wieborg spoke to the queen of the realm, who had earlier believed for a while that s h e could force her heart to resist her daughter's playmate, and now the king almost had to smile when he saw the warmth with which the queen returned Field Colonel Wieborg's congratulatory words with her beautiful blue eyes, in which the dull light of the wind lanterns swaying under the sail shone. Wittmund Torgaard slowly approached.

"I just want to interrupt for a moment," he said kindly. "I'll ask Baldur to come to the Führer's quay after dinner. We want to finalise the message to the people of Atlantis that we prepared in Africa during the night. If the wind doesn't drop, we'll arrive in Atlantis in the evening within five days,

and then it's good, we have the decree ready to be signed."

After so many cloudy nights, the southern starry sky shone down on the king's ship with magical clarity. The shimmering disc of the wandering star Heldung, which after many millennia people would one day call their earth moon, stood with a washed-out silver halo in the plane of the eclipses, where the wandering stars of the solar realm run their fixed orbits.

Whenever night fell at sea, this uncanny great star was the target of the gaze of thousands and thousands of sailors on all the seas of the earth, for they all knew the warnings of the imperial observatories that four and twenty days after the equinox of the northern spring the celestial body would be close to the earth. There were also predictions about the probable appearance of the star, based on ancient records from thousands of years ago. In the days of danger, the star was supposed to take on a very nebulous appearance and possibly even have a tail pointing away from the sun in the manner of the hair stars. Those of the galley crew who were not on duty or who belonged to King Wit-mund's court leaned comfortably against the starboard railing and watched the celestial miracle with mixed feelings. Jokers among the sailors wanted to see the

tail, but even they were not comfortable with the thought that the effects of the Earth's proximity would be several times stronger this time than fifty years ago.

That things were getting serious this time was shown by the many wavering positional fires, which, with barely noticeable movement, betrayed the merchant ships sailing in the distance that had been captured by the empire. They were sailing roughly the same course as the "Hammersar" and would be reinforced by the galley fleets coming from the island of Paardegatt with human cargo when dawn broke. From there, by the way, not only with human cargo, but also with valuable breeding horses that should not be left to misfortune. Their destination, like that of the humans, was the harbour of Atlantis, which, with its huge ramps and piers, its lifting equipment and runways, was suitable for providing safe landing facilities for hundreds and hundreds of large seagoing vessels. The entire war and merchant fleet of the empire could have been twice as strong if the harbour facilities in the ring and branch canals had been utilised.

For the onward transport of people and animals, necessary household goods and foodstuffs, the vast training grounds of the Imperial Army on the Idafelde were available, where endless columns of wagons were waiting to take the involuntary mountain hikers into the mountains.

the highlands. There, the royal house had prepared the estates and castles of the Allfather fiefdoms to receive the hundreds of thousands, had commissioned whole armies of carpenters from all ten kingdoms for a whole year to erect entire barrack towns, and the pilgrims' houses of the gabled hermitages had stood empty for weeks, waiting for the guests from Suderpoor, Gaatland, Paardegatt and Schoongard. The High Sun Gate, too, realising that it could not be left behind in mastering the huge rescue task, had had a large part of its beautiful woodlands cut down in order to obtain timber for new accommodation.

It was not so bad that the occupancy of the huts with people would nevertheless take place in cramped conditions, as it was hoped that the days would be bearable during the danger period, so that only the nights would be considered for a full occupancy of the hut towns. It was not appropriate for the involuntary guests to remain in the open air during the night because of the cold in the highlands. Even if the accommodation was set up below the snow line, the nights were bound to be very cold.

The question of food proved to be very difficult. The war office's calculation of requirements came up with such enormous figures that the population to be deported was obliged to pay for at least four

weeks to bring their own food for their families. With the main voyage lasting five to six days and the guests expected to stay for at least eight weeks, the task of procuring food was difficult enough for the management of the relief operation. Hard bread was made to last twice as long, and even the bakeries of the frontier brands worked for this purpose, loading whole shiploads of their rusks onto Atlantis. How the many people would be brought back was not yet clear in the lower rooms of the Asgard. It was impossible to know how the cargo fleets would survive the high tide, whether they would be able to reach Atlantis in time after the danger had passed and, above all, in what condition. After weeks of consultations with the heads of the Imperial Naval Maintenance Centres, the Fleet Office had decided to place the ships in the middle of the sea during the time of danger with the order to avoid the coastal area there at all costs. Martial law had been proclaimed for the implementation of all these measures, and everyone knew what this meant: obey or die.

For the first time in a long, long time, the people of Atlantis realised that they had a strong core government whose tenacious will burst like lightning from the Asgard where resistance arose.

Baldur Wieborg leaned against the railing between Armane Torgaard and the Queen of the Realm and gazed at the flaming star that would one day, after many new passes by the Earth, have to give up its independent position as a wandering star to orbit the home of mankind as a moon. The possibility of such an event was quite clear to the astrologers of Atlantis; in any case, the scholars on the solar observatories looked at the ominous celestial body with greater concern than the ships' crews from the rails of their galleys.

The science of the stars was so highly developed in the kingdom of Atlantis, the observation of the movements of all celestial bodies that could be seen with the naked eye had been increased through thousands of years of examination and repeated re-examination to an accuracy of results that could hardly be equalled, so that it was known exactly that in the case of Heldung it was a wandering star whose orbit coincided almost exactly with that of the earth. Although no proof of the nature of the stars could be given, the opinion of the astronomers was unanimously agreed that the wandering stars must be cosmic bodies that were similar in shape and structure to the Earth, even if they differed from it in mass and size. The effect of gravity that such celestial bodies exerted on each other was also known, without

the nature of this force was clear. For the observation of the facts, however, it was sufficient to know that the effect was present. Since the observations of the star Heldung had been carried out with the greatest accuracy for many millennia, it was also known that the orbital period of the small star around the sun had shortened, that the star obviously needed a few hours less time to orbit the sun from millennium to millennium. From this it was rightly concluded that the star Heldung was getting closer to the sun and thus inevitably also to the earth. Consequently, the astrologers of the solar observatories surmised that the time could not be far off, as a collision or union of the two wandering stars Heldung and Earth would have to take place in some form. What form this would take could only be guessed at with a shudder. The close positions of the two celestial bodies in the last decades had from time to time given a foretaste of what would have to happen when the small Heldung would no longer be able to escape the gravitational effect of the much larger Earth, as it had always been able to do after a few days of hardship and horror. One remark shows that even Plato, the author of the Atlantis story, was aware of the causes of temporary floods and volcanic disasters on Earth,

which blames the altered movement of celestial bodies.

The possibility of the unification of the two stars, the most serious concern of the Sternweisen, was kept secret in agreement with the governments of the empire and the individual states, in the full, clear awareness that, in the worst case, any human attempt to save them would be in vain. The measures, which the empire called "Heldung" for short, intervened almost disastrously in the structure of the giant empire, bringing trade and shipping, administration and education to a virtual standstill for a period of over a year. Although the fabulous wealth of the confederation, combined with the resources of the High Sun Gate, made it possible to carry out this kind of cures on the body of the people, it was clear to the higher government authorities that once the danger had passed, a heap of ruins would have to be cleared up that the calculating mind could hardly imagine.

Dangerous uprisings were also to be expected in the border marches, as the subjugated foreign princes were just waiting to strike as soon as the empire got into trouble. So if the governors of the Marches had left the royal assembly with the certainty that in a few months' time their warlords would receive a substantial reinforcement

If individual governors had returned to their marches with orders to arrest unsafe foreign allies without giving reasons, or, if this was not possible, to start the war with foresight, the heavy pressure of uncertainty weighed on them as to how the motherland Atlantis would survive the disaster. They knew that at home a people that had come of age was grumbling and knocking demandingly at the gates of the Asean administration. There were only a few trained army detachments in Atlantis. The empire had dutifully deployed all available combat units to the borderlands. Many a state king, many a governor and bailiff asked themselves the anxious question of what would happen if the "heroic measures" failed, if it became apparent that the ancient, strong imperial administration was not up to the task? -

After dinner with the royal family, at which Baldur Wieborg was present as usual, Wittmund Ase Torgaard and his clerk Baldur retired to his tiny working berth, which had been ceded by the skipper. The "Hammersar" was a war galley and had no special rooms for royal guests.

"Take a seat, Baldur," said the king of the realm. "We have many things to discuss before we land in Atlantis. - When you presented me with the draft of the king's message in our camp at the sources of the Nile,

I was in doubt as to whether I should not delete from the decree the announcement that you recommended the inclusion of twenty million citizens in the circle of recognised Asians. Now that I see the effects of the "Heldung" measures with my own eyes, now that I have realised that without the active cooperation of the Atlantic states, municipalities and large cities, success would have been impossible, I know that we must voluntarily give what might otherwise be snatched from us."

"It is our good fortune that we have recognised the time," replied the field colonel. "The active co-operation of the population proves how firmly the Confederation will stand if it is rebuilt in time. The reconstruction began when Mr Reichskönig Warager gave me permission to present such unheard-of things for public discussion in a Reichshochschule. As my teaching licence was not withdrawn, it was correctly assumed that the ideas I presented would meet with the approval of the imperial king. So hopes were raised that we must not disappoint. The people are uncertain, very uncertain, in their judgement of your personality, Mr Reichskönig. Your close connection with the High Sun Gate is well known, even the Honourable Father does not yet seem to suspect the changes that have taken place in the meantime. Amenor Lochi is still of the opinion that I have a weapon in my fist to strangle you."

"And you did not strangle my neck, but my heart," smiled the king. "And the strangling was so gentle and gentle that I am now in your hands, even if you no longer have any weapons to force me."

"The new way of fighting has borne fruit, Lord King of the Realm," Baldur Wieborg laughed happily. "Who has fought with the weapons of truth and honour in Atlantis since time immemorial? I now almost feel like an insidious evil dwarf who uses quite improper and ugly means to achieve his goals. The High Sun Gate obviously considers such a way of fighting to be so impossible that it does not even think that a man with only halfway common sense could deprive himself of any protection in his dealings with you, could try honesty and honour, these two outdated concepts that have so far only had some value among the lower people and perhaps among some stubborn Aesir, who could therefore only be laughed at. Your royal message will make the temple administration sit up and take notice."

"I'm afraid so too," replied Mr Wittmund.

"Even if the announcements concerning the High Sun Gate itself are still missing in the message, we will have to reckon with the fact that the Venerable Father will prick up his ears. We are robbing him at a stroke of the immovable source from which he draws his strength: the

Masses of the citizens of all the islands in the Mother Kingdom. I fear that he will sense the extension of the Azeri land rights to his properties in Atlantis and then also to the secured border markers. For the Gates, this means the loss of their earthly power."

"We can wear it if it's only a matter of light hearing at first," smiled Mr Wieborg.

"It will be more dangerous for you yourself, Lord Realm King. The inevitable disorder during the passing of the star Heldung will give the High Sun Gate a welcome opportunity to use its tried and tested means of timely death against the Imperial King."

"Not against you too?" asked the prince.

Baldur Wieborg smiled at his royal friend with sparkling grey eyes.

"I've been counting on this since I broke the Venerable Father's vault," he explained, as if it were a very amusing matter. "The protection I have had in the documents up to now will lose its effect in the open battle between the empire and the gate, but I will defend myself as best I can. And if the Papas of Urd were to seize me with poison or dagger, it wouldn't do him much good. He'll be that clever. The draft laws are ready and waiting for your signature. You have decided to tax the High Sungate.

The prohibition of secret societies or the disclosure of their statutes as well. The official clarification of the falsification of our Azeri solar service has been prepared; it can be carried out by the chairs of the universities in a similar way to what I have attempted. We have jointly worked through the extension of Azeri land law to the properties of the High Porte in a draft law. If we consult some legal scholars in Atlantis, nothing will stand in the way of publication. The star Heldung has become very dear to me, Mr Reichskönig. He has given us access to almost all the hermitages of the High Sun Gate, and I don't think the War Office will be loosening its heavy paw any time soon. After all, Mr Köpping was the first to love me, and in the end he hated me with love because he had to work and think. Not as I should, but as he had to as an honourable Ase, out of inner compulsion, because he recognised the truth."

"Didn't you force us all a little, Bal- dur?" the king of the realm asked kindly.

"Never," said the field colonel with conviction. "My compulsion was spirit, honour, love, persuasion, all concepts that have nothing to do with the compulsion of force or threat. You know very well that there was another way for me, Mr Reichskönig."

"The one you tore up and burnt," nodded Mr Wittmund thoughtfully. "When I think about it, I have to agree with you. Everyone went with you voluntarily. Warga Gadirus, Odil, the teachers and listeners of the colleges, the army, the workers who heard you in Atlantis, then old Köpping, my father, finally me and last but not least the Queen."

"And the very first was Mrs Armane," said Baldur Wieborg with a quiet smile.

"How are things between you?"

"The high lady knows that I will ask Mrs Warga Gadirus to be my wife," replied the field colonel calmly.

"Mrs Warga is a recognised ase. It will be taken as a seal of honesty if the pure-blooded northerner Wieborg marries a recognised citizen of Atlantis. I have a bond with Mrs Warga that cannot be severed. Loyalty for loyalty, Lord King of the Realm. She lies on the same path I have travelled so far; you know it was a good one."

"Mrs Warga is paralysed," said Mr Wittmund Torgaard, hiding a shudder.

"People say that what Baldur touches blossoms," the friend smiled forcedly. "So shall it be with Mrs Warga. She will get well."

"And the hatred of the Venerable of Urd?"

"I can only protect Mrs Warga from this hatred,

when I stand in front of them myself," replied Baldur.

"Even before your first message is issued, Warga Gadirus must be removed from the vengeful grasp of the High Sun Gate. The same applies to my friend Odil, the Chamberlain of Urd, who had to be clothed with all the honours the Reverend Father has to bestow for my sake. I marvel that he is not broken by it. But your message will lift him up, if he was ever bowed down. It also fulfils his longing, which is the thought of millions, to create a block of national granite as the foundation of the Reich, no longer a block of pure race, which the guilt of the fathers has prevented, but a block of most valuable national property with the riches of the Nordic soul as an important inheritance. - May those who come after us prevent the decline from continuing. We have done our part."

"Perhaps Baldur Wieborg will then be spoken of as the hero who brought a new spring to Atlantis," said Mr Wittmund seriously.

"What will they say of me, Mr Reichskönig?" asked Baldur slowly and thoughtfully. "I hope they won't say too much. It will be enough for them to know that a man once fought against the darkness with the weapon of light and even won victories with it."

"We haven't reached our destination yet, Baldur."

"I always believe in victory. That has been the secret of my successes and should remain so," laughed the colonel.

"And you took me with you," said the king, extending his hand to his friend across the swaying, narrow table. It was quiet for a while in the working quay of the "Hammersar". You could hear the waves crashing and gurgling against the planks of the galley.

"May I now read out the wording of the message again?" asked the field colonel matter-of-factly.

"Please," replied the king of the realm.

HELDING

"I ask for the last flashing messages for the Lord King of the Realm," said Baldur Wieborg to the old burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping, who had moved into the mountain castle of Torgaard, the royal family's highest fiefdom, along with the other imperial offices.

"The last ones?" asked the old knight with a sceptical smile. "The last ones are from yesterday, from Suderpoor. The lighthouse keeper flashed us a garbled message, which had to go through all sorts of detours because of the cloud cover, that the island had disappeared in the rising sea. The tower had suffered from earthquakes and was about to collapse. Presumably the good officer was taken on board the 'Falkenklaue' in time. At least I hope so."

"So nothing else?" Wieborg asked seriously.

"Nothing," replied the burgrave.

"No wonder," said the field colonel calmly. "When there's a storm and cloud cover, the indicators also fail. We have to accept this and use the

wait for the difficult days. We knew that they would not be pure joy."

A crash of earth rolled under the feet of the men who sat in the granite halls of the ancient royal castle of the highlands of Atlantis and had to light their work plans with candles despite the summer day on the towering mountain heights. The storm clouds chasing past the windows obscured the sun, and a twilight hung over the otherwise so radiant forests and meadows that even the birds were mistaken and sought their nooks, believing it was night.

The hall was full of people; the offices of the Reich had been strengthened by the appointment of new officials, but had all the less space for the individual. Even Mr Köpping could not claim a workspace for himself.

The huge walls of the castle crackled unsecretly. The forces of the deep paid little heed to whether the walls were five or ten feet thick; they shook them as if they were walls made of thin writing paper.

"Then at least give me the one report so that I don't come to the imperial king empty-handed," Wieborg asked calmly, but also cast a scrutinising glance at the cracking beamed ceiling. "Then I would also like the water level reports from Atlantis."

An unskilled labourer rummaged under a pile of thin

leather and handed one to the burgrave.

"Here," said the old man. "Also from yesterday, from the evening. Today's report is still pending. The water is three hundred feet above Asgard. A nice amount of water. Three hundred feet. And the water is still rising after it receded a little yesterday afternoon. There's so much surf on the coast that no ship can dare approach. - If it goes on like this, we'll drown here in the mountains."

"Of course there are no reports from the Imperial Fleet?" Baldur enquired matter-of-factly.

"Nothing," replied the burgrave, resting his old head in his cupped hand. "It's a terrible feeling when the administrative facilities fail. You feel like a prehistoric man who only thinks from one day to the next."

"The main thing is that he thinks," laughed the colonel.

"When this mess is over and we've all got our skins on, I'll put you forward for the head of my lovely office," growled Mr Köpping.

"I'm tired of picking apart this pile of rubble from the empire. When I think of what it will look like in our states when the waters have the goodness to recede, my white hair could turn blonde again, because it can't get any whiter. - You could have helped me during this cursed time

could have helped, Wieborg. But when it came to the energetic work, my old labourer was no longer there. I had to go to Zimbabuye with the Acora - with the Lord King of the Realm - while the work was on my hands."

"If you can do the work on your own, you don't need any help," said Colonel Wieborg good-naturedly. "Besides, you didn't even want me any more, Mr Burg- graf. - And your imperial office? I do not believe that the Lord Imperial King will take away the most important office in Atlantis from the successful master of the 'Herald' measure, even if you should ask for it. It is not credible whether the implementation of the guidelines decided by the King's Assembly shows signs of ageing. So far, one sees the opposite."

"I'll probably have to ask you," said the white head with a hint of bitterness. "Baldur Wieborg is the name of the new star that outshines even the Heldung."

"New stars go out quickly, both in the sky and among people," smiled the field colonel.

"I know that," replied the Burgrave. "That's why I put the pack of my best security officers on your trail the day the 'Hammersar' moored at the Asgard."

"So there's still some affection left for the former labourer after all?" asked Baldur Wieborg with

He laughed softly and bent down to his old superior. Mr Köpping shrugged his broad shoulders in annoyance.

"No illusions, Baldur," he grumbled angrily. "I ensure the safety of all those I believe to be under threat. That has nothing to do with affection."

"Certainly not," Baldur said quietly. "Mr Burgrave is always on duty. With the best will in the world, you can't recognise anything of his heart."

"I'm busy now, Baldur," replied Mr Köpping. "If you want any more official information, just say so."

"It was everything, Mr Burgrave," replied the colonel, bowed reverently to the old man of war and left.

The corridors of Torgaard Royal Castle were full of people waiting to be admitted to the Imperial War Office. Town leaders from Gaatland and Schoongard, horse breeders from Paardegatt and the lowlands of Antianyu wanted to complain about inadequate accommodation or ask for oats, wealthy shipowners demanded to speak to the Burgrave in order to obtain official information about the fate of their galleys; weeping mothers wanted to know which camp their men or children might have ended up in. They were still together at the time of disembarkation, but then the ship's bailiffs and captains of the wagon convoys separated the groups.

who were to be taken into the mountains; and then they got lost.

And everyone, everyone wanted to speak to Mr Köpping himself.

"Poor Burgrave!" thought Baldur Wieborg as he pushed his way through the crowds. Most of the people who came from the flat, temporarily abandoned islands didn't know Field Colonel Wieborg, but some of them, namely the city leaders and officials who had occasionally heard him in the halls of the College of General Humanities when they were in Atlantis on business, recognised him and doffed their caps. And when Mr Wieborg had worked his way through to the two warriors standing in front of the royal family's living quarters, it became known who the great field colonel was: Mr Baldur Wieborg, who had called for the equality of the Atlantean citizens with the Aesir and who was now the first advisor to the imperial king.

Mr Wieborg heard the muffled cries of women's voices behind him. Another tremor ran through the solid granite structure of Torgaard Castle. The predictions of the observatories arrived on time. They had been communicated to the population through public notices and verbal announcements over the course of the previous year and had been repeated in smaller intervals. In addition to the flooding of the flat islands and the lower parts of the mountainous states, there would be severe earthquakes and

eruptions of old and new volcanoes occur. But the knowledge was not enough to banish the fear of the present. The horror sat oppressively in the homes of the involuntary emigrants. In the mountains the thunderstorms raged with a violence that seemed unnatural, and the storm snorted around the old walls of Torgaard so that the slate shingles of the roofs rattled and the trees of the park bent low to the earth with rustling crowns.

The spacious castle courtyard was swarming with armed men and saddled horses. Traffic flowed incessantly through the yawning circle of the gate, whose portcullis and bronze doors were open. A small troop of soldiers pushed their way into the courtyard, a carrying chair was brought in and set down in the midst of the crowd. With the help of a warrior, a captive man with his hands tied got off the horse.

Baldur Wieborg smiled. There were his friends! Safe and sound, they had been brought in by Urd and Agni. Baldur leant out of the window and tried to call the leader of the detachment. He was unsuccessful, so the colonel decided to run down the steep stairs and fight his way through to the troop of riders that had arrived.

"The clerical councillor Odil Ase Gadirus and his sister, Mrs Warga, as prisoners to Torgaard," the leader reported when he recognised the Imperial King's scribe.

"Did the prisoners resist?" Baldur asked harshly and deliberately loudly.

"No, Herr Feldoberst," replied the man-of-war.

"Some priests of the Venerable Father made a claim. They were with the Lord Chamberlain in Agni to see the rising of the waters in Atlantis. I pointed out the written order of the Lord Imperial King, which I presented. That was enough to leave with the prisoners without difficulty."

"Take the prisoners under close guard to Mr Reichskönig," Mr Wieborg ordered briefly. "Mrs Warga Gadirus must be carried up by two skilful men. I ask that this be done with the utmost care. - How high is the water in Atlantis?"

A large circle of people crowded around the group. The question about the water level in the Idafeld plain was probably asked a hundred times a day without receiving an answer.

"The water had receded this morning, and not insignificantly," the guide replied.

"But in the morning hours it started to rise again, higher than before. When I left, it was a little more than four hundred feet above Asgard. I got the figures from the observation centre set up by the Imperial War Office. You can read the water level exactly, because the officials have been

beforehand on the steep cliffs of Urd, and the numbers on the markings are so large that you can see them from the army road. I read the number four hundred and twenty as I entered the mountains with the prisoners. The sun was shining over Atlantis, if only for a very short time, and it was an eerie sight. Where the city and the Asgard stood, there is now the sea. You can't believe it. It all looks as if it couldn't be any other way. - By the way, a merchantman was cruising out at sea. His guide must have been asleep when the warnings went out. I don't know what became of him, because low clouds moved in front of him."

"He'll be sensible enough to return to the high seas," replied Baldur Wieborg. "If he's lucky, the crew will come away with a few weeks of severe seasickness."

In the meantime, the prisoners had disappeared into the castle. The colonel made his way to the stables, where the king's horses and those of the third Asgard troop were stabled. Captain Adelger Ase Gaatland squatted on a heap of straw and ate a piece of bread decorated with slices of sausage.

"Stay seated, Gaatland," asked Mr Wieborg. "I just want to make sure that the horses are saddled for the king and his entourage."

"That's all right, Colonel," replied the

Swordsman, but quickly put the eagle helmet on his blond head.

"Thank you!" The colonel was gone, and the helmet flew back into the straw. Lashing, cold rain hit Baldur in the face as he stepped outside again. The men of war crowded under the gate and in the open, covered walkways of the enclosing walls; only the poor nags stood in the courtyard with their heads bowed, resigned to their fate, letting the unpleasant water rush over their backs and leathers.

"A real man of war would call this a mess," thought Baldur Wieborg as he returned to the castle and brushed the raindrops off his leather tunic. "Most people had probably thought that the Heldung Passage would take place in the most beautiful sunshine. But perhaps it's a good thing that we can't see the burning mountains of fire. The unrest would only increase."

The guards lay on straw in the corridors of the royal chambers. It smelled of sweat and wet leather. The long spears leaned against the walls, their bronze tips resting on the wooden floor, which was already roughened in small splinters in these places.

Where warriors come, the most beautiful floor looks terrible in a short time. Baldur took a guard who was sitting on a pile of rocking bronze shields, one on top of the other, holding a

Hemd mended that it was a miracle how he pushed the needle into the right place on his arm and told him to report him to the king of the realm.

"I'm just going to buckle up, Mr Feldoberst," said the young lad. The man's discipline was tight.

A short time later, Baldur Wieborg stood before the King of the Realm, Wittmund Ase Torgaard.

The colonel handed in the reports from the Imperial War Office and reported that the prisoners had been brought in without incident.

"I want to speak to them this evening when we have returned from our ride to the barrack camps," said the king. "Perhaps you will take on the task of greeting them on my behalf afterwards. Then I would like to ride away with you."

"I will be finished in a short time, Mr Reichskönig," Wieborg replied. "But I would like permission to submit the draft bill for the new tax code to the Imperial Office for Public Law. I must say a few explanatory words to the gentlemen, as the draft is only written in keywords. I was a little uncertain, as I have paid little attention to these matters up to now."

"Ready already?" laughed the king.

"I used the night," replied the field colonel. "The slaughter oxen in the pen outside my window roared from evening to morning. Sleep was out of the question."

"So pick me up when you're done, Baldur," said Mr Wittmund. "We've had it so good for so long that it's not so uneven, you realise for once how things can be different. I would never have dreamed in Asgard that as King of Atlantis you would stumble over freshly greased warrior boots when you step out of your room."

"I stepped into a pot of hot soup this morning as I was walking through the corridor of snoring people in the dark," Baldur laughed brightly. "The head constable of the Third Asgard Hundred had got hungry during the night and had the soup taken from the war kitchen. I hope he didn't notice. There's still some left in the pot."

"Baldur, Baldur!" sighed the king of the realm. "My lord father was right when he called you a child's head."

"You can also do statecraft with a child's head," replied the field colonel. "The bitter bits taste better if you can laugh at them."

A sharp, jerky impact shook the castle. The walls seemed to make a lopsided movement and spring back again. In the corridors there was a clanging and clattering of fallen spears, and the bronze shields fell over with the man mending his shirt. In any case, the rumbling and a

A fierce curse suggested this. Mr Wittmund Torgaard turned pale, and Baldur Wieborg involuntarily slumped his shoulders. That was the seventh earth tremor that day. If it went on like this, they would have to expect at least serious damage to the castle.

The carpenters are building a wooden hut for the royal family on the park meadow," said Baldur Wieborg. "But I suggest that the household moves into the wooden barns of the Torgaard estate before evening. The new barracks can't be ready until tomorrow evening."

"And the imperial offices?" asked the prince anxiously.

"For the time being, they can stay in the vaults of the ground floor," said the field colonel. "But if things get worse, they'll have to move into the cow and horse stables. It's not nice, but it's better than being under a blanket ready to fall."

Baldur's encounter with Warga and Odil Gadirus was very brief. The prisoners had been lodged with Armane Torgaard. Warga was to stay there, while the head of the observatory, Agni, was to move into Baldur's room. For a while, the friend of the king of the realm sat with the allies of his fight against the High Sun Gate. The siblings knew why the king had ordered their arrest on Baldur's advice. The Honourable Father would perhaps allow himself to be deceived once more before he realised what bitter enemies

he had owned in his immediate neighbourhood.

"You'll be moving into a barn later," Wie- borg said quickly. "The risk of earthquakes is too great in the stone walls of the castle. I must now run to the Law Office and then fetch the Imperial King to visit a series of barrack camps. Hopefully I'll see you in the evening. That is not certain, because we cannot know what new work the next hour will bring us."

Then he kissed the women's hands, took Odil Gadirus by the arm and pulled him with him to show him his room, which he was to share with the colonel for the time being.

The beautiful gardener from Urd sat with a narrow, pale face in the cushions that Armane Torgaard had placed under her back and arms. Her proud blue eyes looked into the distance, as if the clouds did not block their vision. Her paralysed limbs were still failing. For five full years, the young girl had suffered from the terrible effects of the poison that the treasurer and deputy of the Honourable Father had taught her in order to protect the Papas of Urd from folly.

When the eerie trembling and crackling of earth tremors ran under the castle, Warga Gadirus flinched. When you're paralysed and feel you can't get to safety, you suffer from the constant threat of an earthquake.

Wall more than other people who can rely on their quick feet.

Armane Torgaard sat on a stool in front of her friend and stroked her beautiful hands, which were no longer rough and processed as they used to be. The royal child felt as if she must have a guilty conscience towards the gardener of Urd. So she laid her cheek softly and tenderly on the sick woman's hand so that she would not have to see the bleak, large eyes that looked so fixedly into the distance as if they could see through the stone and heart walls.

Warga bowed her head over the blond crown of the king's child's head and kissed Wittmund's daughter. All the jealousy, all the hatred that had sometimes flared up in her in lonely hours when she thought of Baldur and Armane, was now silent. A young, innocent girl had robbed her of everything she had longed for with her childish laughter.

"Now you will soon be well, Warga," she heard the soft, sobbing voice of the king's girl. "Now you're finally with your friends."

"Do you think so?" asked the gardener. "I hope so too, but I believe there is only one health for me that no doctor can give me, that no healing spring can provide. And this health will come much sooner than we realise, Armane."

"You mean the downfall of us all through the

Stern Heldung?" asked the royal girl, raising her blonde head.

"No, we'll survive the holding days," Warga replied. "In that respect, I share Baldur's confidence that the rescue operations will be successful. - I meant it differently, but it wasn't nice of me to say it."

"You want to die," said Armane reproachfully. "Now that you mention it, child king - yes," the gardener confirmed calmly.

"What will Baldur say if you ..."

"Baldur?" smiled Warga Gadirus. "Baldur? I'm sure he'll be very sad to hear that his faithful ally Warga is no longer alive. But he will forget it, Armane, will perhaps still think of me from time to time, will visit my grave later and decorate it. But he will exhale when I am gone, believe me, child king. He feels weighed down by the debt of gratitude he thinks he owes me, and it's better to thank a dead person than a living one. He would rather have me when I am dead than when I live as a constant reproach. Paralysed, used up, destroyed."

"Warga!" pleaded Armane Torgaard desperately.

The gardener tried to put her clumsy arms around her friend's shoulders. "It's nothing unusual for a natural, like Baldur Wieborg, to forgive," the paralysed girl continued. "Yes, he must

if his work is to prosper. Such a man always remains a boy, even if he is five-and-thirty years old, which he is now. There is an eternal spring in his soul, an indomitable thirst for action, a sharp mind, ruthless wisdom. He captures hearts because he can't help it, like an innocent predator ..."

"How badly you know Baldur," said Armane, offended.

"And only say what you know yourself, King's Child," replied Warga Gadirus. "I didn't mean to hurt you. If the bitterness in my words resounds, not that of a life gone wrong, but that of a woman full of life, from whom the poison from Urd took away all the hopes that a healthy young girl can have, then you should not forget that I did not have it easy."

"I know it so well, Warga!" said Armane ruefully.

"You gave everything for Baldur; I certainly can't judge what it was, because it wasn't just your health that you lost in his service."

"In Baldur's service?" smiled the gardener from Urd.

"You see, Armane, what you say is not quite right. For me, Baldur Wieborg was more than the victorious springtime man who pulls hearts towards him, whether they want to or whether they resist. For me, Baldur was the embodiment of a new era, of a ravishing

thought. For me, he was the liberator from unworthy chains of the spirit, the man who was able to open the gates of a new springtime of nations, the seer who carried the divine within him, perhaps without realising it himself. His love of truth, his purity of will and deed, his irrepressible hatred of everything unclear and blurred, of idolatry and priestly arrogance, his dreamlike certainty with which he chose the means that led to the goal, all this gave me the strength to remain faithful to him. - Armane, it wasn't easy."

"You don't know Baldur's loyalty," Armane sobbed.

"Dearest royal child," said the gardener of Urd softly. "I know his loyalty as well as only a woman can know it who respects him as highly as I do. It is his loyalty that I fear as if it were my enemy."

"Baldur loves you," the royal child lied bravely and bowed her blonde head in deep shame at the sick woman's knees. Something like a sore smile flitted across the gardener's delicate, intelligent features.

"I know that, Armane, that he loves me," she replied with forced calm. "But I also know that he is faithful to me, as only a man who is honourable and good, like Baldur Wieborg, can be. - And now let us talk openly about what moves us both so deeply. I can tell you, because you

will have known it for a long time, and many friends will have guessed it: I love Baldur Wieborg, not as an ally and fighter for his goals, which are also mine, but as a girl from whom the poison has not been able to rob the youth of feeling."

The king's child pressed her face deeper into her friend's lap, and her beautiful shoulders twitched and shook in deep pain. The gardener stroked the king's daughter's round head softly, as if she could banish the heartache that had been an unfriendly guest in both girls for years.

"And now, dear child king, I want to ask you a question," Warga Gadirus continued. "You do not have to answer this question, and you can remain silent; I will then glean the correct answer from this silence. - Can you imagine a Baldur Wieborg at the side of a paralysed woman, a woman whose healthy blood has been poisoned to the core? Do you think love can endure when a thriving, healthy person is bound for life to another whose life force has been nipped at the root? - Don't tell me the doctors still have hope that I will recover. I mean, they themselves no longer believe in their confidence. And even if their art should succeed in restoring me to the point where I can walk without crutches, I can no longer be a companion for a long life.

be. And you know that we people of Nordic blood still take the covenant that is made for life seriously; even we who are only recognised Aesir, who are no longer pure-blooded like the true Nords. Even in us recognised ones lives the Aesian spirit, which is prouder and firmer than the blood."

The gardener was silent, as if she wanted to hear whether Armane Torgaard would say a word in reply. Warga nodded slightly when all she heard was a stunned sob.

"King's child!" she continued almost tenderly. "My question was certainly not a nice one, and I would have liked to have avoided asking it. But you see, Armane, we must have clarity, we cannot always live side by side as distrustful enemies. Of course, we both love each other and certainly out of an honest heart, but if you want to be completely honest, then you have to admit that sometimes there was something like hatred in your heart when you thought of the gardener from Urd. I, too, will be honest. I have often thought of you with bitterness and hatred. It hurts a great deal, child-king, to see another, healthy, beautiful girl dash all the hopes of her less favoured sister without wanting to, and at the same time - if I may repeat a word that offended you earlier in connection with Mr Wieborg - innocent as a beast of prey."

"I didn't take anything from you, Warga!" Armane Torgaard rebelled. "Yes, I took Baldur Wieborg

dear. I can't help it. But he can't and won't marry me, if only because he's a farmer's son from Thule and I'm a Torgaard from Atlantis."

"Isn't it said that the Lord King of the Realm will make Baldur Count of the Realm?" Warga asked quietly. "And shouldn't you know that?"

"Mr Gunnar Gepide heard," Armane confessed ashamedly. "My father offered Baldur the title of Imperial Count on the 'Hammersar', but Baldur refused. - I know why."

"Yes, old chamberlains are garrulous," Warga smiled. "But I know the appointment will come, whether Baldur wants it or not. Perhaps she wants a royal girl? - Don't be angry, Armane, we want to speak openly with each other. I know how poison hurts. And I want to remove all poison from our hearts, at least as far as possible with us unpredictable people. Don't you think the path of the farmer's son from Thule to the king's child of Torgaard will then be clear?"

"Even then it's blocked," said Armane, raising her narrow head to look her friend full and clear in the eye.

"Out of loyalty?" Warga asked, and now her shoulders wanted to shrug, her eyes wanted to grow misty with tears.

"Yes, out of loyalty, Warga," the king's girl confirmed.

"So it will turn out as I thought," the gardener from Urd said more to herself than to her friend. "The paralysed girl stands between Baldur and your happiness."

Armane did not answer. With desolate eyes, she looked into the drifting clouds of the mountainous country.

"There seems to be no solution," Warga continued quietly. "There is a rift in our lives, which were really worth living, even if they were poisoned."

"I don't know what to say any more," Armane sobbed in despair.

"Perhaps I know a last resort," smiled the gardener. Terrified, the royal child grabbed her sick friend's white hands.

"You mustn't do that!" she shouted in horror.

Warga Gadirns shook her head.

"I'm not going to do what you mean now," she explained calmly. "I'm not going to take the easy way out of life. You only do that if you were not up to a great task, if you failed at it, for example, only if Baldur's and my labour had been in vain. We cannot say that this is the case. Our own little fate is not worthy of the consecration of self-chosen death. Such ways are contemptible and not compatible with our pride as northern aces. One bears one's own fate, Armane; it is not so important. - I have it good against you, King-

child. My flame of life will soon extinguish itself, even if it may take a few more years. I can't explain it to you, but you can feel it. And time will make up for a lot. Time will also mature for Baldur and you. - I could show you a leather, Armane. I don't have it with me; I think it's there in my little travelling trunk. But you will believe me when I tell you. - Have you ever heard of our race office?"

The king's maid looked at her friend questioningly.

"You've certainly heard of him," Warga continued.

"I had dealings with him from time to time, first when my father applied for his children Odil and Warga to be accepted into the circle of pure-blooded Asen. Then I had to deal with the office a second time. I left it with a heavier heart than when I entered it, and it was not long ago that I left it. You know that the Race Office only allows healthy brides and grooms to marry, and that it's not so easy to get the certificates from the medical officers. The laws in Atlantis are very harsh in this respect, and many a loving couple has had to give up because the king of the state in question and even the king of the realm refused to grant an exemption. - I was forbidden to marry by the Race Office."

"Yes, if you come in with this in mind, without a medical report, without an examination, with the

If you wish to obtain the ban, I believe they will do you the favour and forbid the marriage," replied Armane Torgaard, and she could not conceal a joyful gleam in her honest childish eyes. "When the officials of the Race Office see a young girl walking on sticks or even on crutches, and then say that she was poisoned five years ago, it is no wonder that the desired leather is issued without further ado that a marriage is inadmissible."

"So you are of the opinion that the Lord King will grant the special licence in my case?" asked the gardener.

"If Baldur asks for it, yes," Armane replied firmly.

"And will he ask for it?"

"Knowing him, definitely," the royal child declared with conviction.

Then the beautiful, pale gardener bent over her friend and kissed her on the lips.

"Baldur knows only one way", affirmed the child king emphasised his words.

"The path of honour and loyalty."

"And what does Armane Torgaard think of the honour of Warga Gadirus?" the sick woman asked with a wry smile.

"No less high than Baldur's honour," said Armane.

"And who can hope?" asked the gardener with a heart-winning expression around her fine, languid lips.

mouth. Armane Torgaard wrapped his arms around Warga's neck and answered quietly.

"None of us. We must carry our broken love as honourable Northland girls must. With pride and weaving courage. I've learnt a lot from you, Warga, and I want to learn the last thing too. To stop thinking about Baldur Wieborg."

"Can you do that?" asked the gardener. "I will try," promised the royal child, now uncertain again, and averted her beautiful, transparent eyes.

"Keep some hope for yourself, Armane," advised Warga Gadirus kindly. "And hope for the time. You are still very young, and one day Warga Gadirus will no longer stand between you lovers, when she has faded away, when the rosebush on her memorial hill bears many red roses because it has grown tall and strong from the power of love that flowed into it from the earth. And only the thorns will remind us of her suffering, but we will break them off carefully because we know that there may still be some poison in them that could break Warga Gadiru's body but not harm her soul. After all, she lived with Baldur's soul, not her own. Her soul was a single spring, and there are few women on earth who can say that about themselves with an honest heart."

In the courtyard, the guns of the riflemen clanked

kicking Asgardasen. Horses stamped restlessly on the cobbled courtyard, shouts of command echoed sharply and harshly against the walls of the castle and the defences.

"The Lord King of the Realm gets into the saddle," said Warga.

"And here comes Baldur," added Armane, his eyes shining brightly. "He's riding the white horse from his father's stud in Paardegatt. Baldur didn't want to accept it because it was white and because Mr Grandfather had last ridden this white horse."

"And?" asked the gardener. "He's riding it now, isn't he?"

"Father said that the spring of Atlantis must ride through the land on a white horse," smiled the royal child. "And mum said so too. That's when Baldur gave in."

"Spring doesn't know autumn," said Warga Gadirus thoughtfully. "He should therefore ride the white horse. The Lord King of the Realm was right to give it to him. Who can imagine Baldur in any other way than with shining eyes of victory on a white horse? Not me."

"Me neither," said Armane wholeheartedly.

SPRING

Baldur Wieborg's skilful move to proclaim the recognition of the citizens of the Atlantic islands by a law that was under martial law had worked. As it was a law of the homeland, which had to be approved by all the kings of the states, its acceptance would have been very unlikely in peaceful times. Now rejection was no longer possible. The cheering of the population knew no bounds when Baldur Wieborg or the imperial king appeared in public. As heavy as the emotional pressure was under which the barrack dwellers of the temporarily abandoned islands suffered during the Hero's Day, the general recognition announced a few weeks earlier in the message of the new King of the Realm, Wittmund Ase Torgaard, was not granted. It was trusted that the imperial government would overcome the difficulties that the borderline cases of recognition would still present with the same vigour as it had so far managed, through Wieborg's ruthless will, to implement the fundamental law under the protection of the

to proclaim the exceptional right of the Heldung measures. The imperial king had expressly emphasised the participation of the Atlantic population and expressed this in his message.

As the tidal wave of the sea slowly but steadily receded and hope flared up in the hearts of the frightened people, like a spark that lies half-smothered under smouldering ashes and awakens to new life with a breath of fresh air, Asgard riders nailed in all the barrack camps in the high mountains, in the confiscated dungeons of the High Sun Gate, in all villages and country towns, on the estates and castles that were the royal fiefdoms of high imperial officials or the all-father fiefdoms of the royal house, small red leather strips were nailed to walls and doors. These strips bore the signature and wax seal of the imperial king Wittmund Ase Torgaard and were - and this was new in the history of the realm - countersigned by the imperial count Bal- dur Wieborg, also on behalf of all the imperial offices of Atlantis. The king had thus placed the entirety of all offices housed in Asgard, which had previously been directly responsible to the king of the realm, under the authority of his scribe Wieborg. The law was promulgated provisionally pending the approval of the kings of the states and contained the King's Message as its legal basis when Mr Wittmund took office.

That the consent of the kings of the states could only be a formality under these circumstances was clear without further ado. It was simply not possible to revoke this law against the will of the entire people. The goal towards which the development of the giant empire had been pressing for many centuries had come to fruition and been achieved in difficult, fateful times. Just a few days after the proclamation of the provisional law, there was talk of a new spring in Atlantis, and the name of the farmer's son from Thnle became the symbol of spring in those days. The uplifted mood was expressed in jubilant greetings when the imperial king rode through the wide valleys of the mainland island with his imperial count, and the joyful mood was necessary to bear what was soon to come, namely the return to the old homeland. Burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping had been right when he feared that the realm would be a heap of ruins when the tide had gone out; and Mr Wittmund wanted to use the iron will of Count Wieborg to rebuild what had been destroyed. His ability to work tirelessly and sensibly, his popularity, which bordered on idolatry, the unlimited trust placed in him as the creator of the new Recognition Act by the citizenry and the workers, determined him in advance to solve the enormous task that the former

Head of the War Office Burgrave Köpping could no longer afford and no longer wanted to.

The Venerable Father of Urd, Lord Amenor Lochi, found himself forced into defence during this time, which seemed to have gone off the rails; Indeed, he did not even have the opportunity to make this defence in any way effective, since behind the proclamation of martial law lurked the indomitable will of that young soldier of fortune, Baldur Wieborg, who had begun his fight against the High Sun Gate five years ago with his outrageously brazen break-in into the treasury vault of the high priestly palace and had continued it successfully according to plan ever since. Amenor Lochi had remained in Urd and with him the priesthood of non-Asian blood and a few Nordic tribes who remained loyal to him. There were more traitors among the priests of the High Sun Gate than he had thought possible. Among the clerical councillors and chamberlains, there were only a few in whom he could place his trust.

Who could he trust when even his chamberlain Odil Gadirus had gone over to Baldur Wieborg? The observatory directors also sensed the new era. The teachers of the priest schools in the temple city, otherwise his most loyal supporters, saw the foundations of their existence shaking. Hadn't the young Wieborg in the halls of the College of General Studies

my humanities that the schools should be under the sole supervision of the states and the empire and that the schools for priests should be subject to the same conditions under which the state educational establishments operate?

There was a crash in the structure of the ornate building of the High Sun Gate even before Baldur Wieborg struck it with the heavy hammer of the law.

Amenor Lochi paced up and down under the rose arches of his palace garden. For long, anxious weeks the sun had been shining cautiously through cracks in the clouds on the temple city again, as if it did not believe that the star Heldung had once more broken free from the earth's gravitational spell and was continuing its altered orbit around the day's star. What did Papas care that his high-priestly castle lay partly in ruins, toppled by earthquakes the likes of which the empire had not seen in living memory? In the middle of the service to the gods, in which he personally pleaded with the Earth Mother to spare the people and the empire, the ungracious woman shook herself and hurled her own statue from the altar, causing it to shatter on the lava slabs of the sanctuary before the eyes of the people. It had been impossible to calm the frantic crowd. The worshippers had fled into the gardens and onto the lawns of the temple city, under the narrow entrance to the Sun Gate

The trampled people piled up, especially children and women, who were killed or seriously injured by the outbreak of horror. Falling stone beams from the covered walkways of the shrine had buried people under them. And then came the worst thing that could have happened to the Venerable Father:

The king of the realm, whom he believed to be firmly in his hands, had sent a short but very clear decree to the High Sun Gate, signed by Baldur Wieborg. The divine services and devotions in the temples of Urd, including the usual sun services, were to be suspended until further notice because of the danger to the congregation; a very reasonable decree, against which, in view of the heavy sacrifice of human lives that the last petition service to the holy Earth Mother had demanded, appeals were useless and downright foolish.

Amenor Lochi had aged. He had also neglected to dye his hair in the difficult days of heroic closeness, which now stood out in yellowish grey under his soft priest's hat.

The Venerable Father stepped up to the parapet wall that closed off his garden from the steeply sloping cliffs of the Ida Plain and took a look at the giant city that had reappeared at his feet. An indescribable throng crawled through the streets and crawled across the squares. Whole

Thousands of labourers cleaned the pavement of Atlantis of sand, shells and seaweed, of living sea creatures that had failed to regain contact with their element of life with the receding tide of the Atlantic sea. Barges that had sunk during the flood and were now raised again filled with mud and debris and moved slowly through the channels towards the sea, driven ponderously by oars, to be scooped out to sea. The citizens of Atlantis did not have the patience to wait for the arrival of the fleets from the middle of the sea, which were reported to be approaching from the empire's flashing centres, some of which were working again. The most peculiar vehicles were moored on the landing steps of their own houses, small galleys carefully stored in cellars emerged and floated low on the ring canals, laden with sand and mud from kitchens and living quarters. A fervour had broken out in Atlantis, as if everyone had to be the first to have their home clean and repaired. Roofers climbed over half-collapsed roofs, carpenters appeared and disappeared with beams that had been left floating in the streets and which bore no name as to which large warehouse at the harbour sheds they might have come from, and took advantage of the favourable opportunity to build the necessary roofs with very cheap wood.

to carry out repair work for their old customers. Such minor offences were deliberately overlooked by the officers of the city security guard, who had enough to do to prevent major thefts and bring the culprits to justice. As an exception, Count Wieborg had provided several thousand men-of-war who, although they did not feel very comfortable in their new capacity as thief guards, carried out their duties with exemplary vigour, for which they were not actually there.

On the military road from Urd, countless wagonloads of food rolled down from the mountain warehouses to the Idafelde. The Imperial War Office had ruthlessly plundered the supplies that had been piled up for a year, as the King of Acora, Brammerloh and Aargund, Lord Hagenot Skullörn, had sent a fast galley announcing the imminent arrival of a cargo fleet with food for Atlantis. The northernmost islands of the realm had suffered little from the flood. With the consent of old Lord Köpping, King Hagenot had pulled a loaded fleet into an inland sea and taken responsibility for it in case it was lost. It had not been lost, had only suffered minor damage due to a few ships getting stuck, and sailed immediately to the reappeared Steerkopp harbour.

as the fast galley had reported, and should arrive in Atlantis in a few days.

But the fast galley was already chasing out to sea again, and Amenor Lochi did not know that Baldur Wieborg was diverting part of the welcome lifeboat fleet to Lipore, Harvesum and Murnaas, where the tide might have reached and spoilt some lifeboat camps. Even the leaders of the solar observatories had not expected the water to rise five hundred feet, and the imperial government was worried about the fate of the three mountain islands.

With eyes filled with hatred, Amenor Lochi looked at the old castle of Asgard, whose huge stepped circular structure lay in the centre of the city as if no force of earth or sky could harm it. Hundreds of Asgardasen were at work there, reinforced by warriors from the armouries of the old city and by skilled craftsmen and builders from the royal building lodge. The entire armoury of the second floor had been brought back from the highlands and was still stored outside for the time being. A myriad of small figures swarmed on all the platforms, tiny figures hung from ropes on the outer walls and freed the shiny metal covering of the stone circle from seaweed and shellwork. It was as if a mania for cleanliness had broken out down there, an obsession with keeping the damage under control.

that the malicious enemy out in space had caused in Atlantis.

Amenor Lochi admitted to himself that he had made an irreparable mistake in his treatment of Count Wieborg. There was no doubt what was meant by the word "treatment" in the circles of the High Sun Gate. It meant rendering the opponent harmless in some way, by entanglement in emotional guilt, by borrowed money, by gifts, by marriages, love affairs and similar more harmless means that poisoned the soul and not the body. The Papas of Urd knew very well that these harmless means were far more dangerous than poison and daggers, which were only used in extreme cases. The promotion of the secret societies with their soul-killing, unclean cults, with the binding of oaths to some superior, to whom the secrets of every human delight and every animal lust were known and who was destined to make them increasingly accessible to the members of the societies under new oaths, was one of the weapons with which the priesthood of Urd ruled the Atlantean world, or at least had ruled it up to that time.

The betrayal of the ecclesiastical councillor and chamberlain Odil Gadirus, whose compliance with the wishes of the Venerable was exemplary.

had been valid, this weapon also seemed to be broken. If the ecclesiastical councillor Gadirus had exercised his secret offices in collusion with this Wieborg, if the duke and current king of the realm had excused his participation in the festivals of the secret societies by claiming that he had only done so in order to expose the culprits, then the successes of many hundreds of years had been destroyed. The High Sun Gate with its army of priests, ecclesiastical councillors, chamberlains, affiliated boards of countless co-operative societies, whose members were assured of economic support in all areas, had thus suffered a decisive defeat, and the blue flag of the empire with the old, pure sun symbol flew over the ruins of the proud, ingenious edifice for the domination of the souls and passions of an army of millions of open and hidden followers. In invisible writing, however, was the victory rune of Baldur of Thule on the pommel of the flagpole.

Amenor Lochi did not know whether the document that was so heavily incriminating for King Wittmund Ase Torgaard was still in the hands of the robber Wieborg. It did not matter how and by what means the young man controlled the king. But in the days of the heroic misfortune, it dawned on the honourable man of Urd that

Baldur Wieborg had not worked with the tried and usual means of statecraft, that his ambition had not been to dominate the king; it now became more than likely that Baldur had chosen ruthless openness and truth as his weapon with dreamlike certainty: destruction of the enemy by all means, conquest of the friend through the spirit of truth and honour, that had been Wieborg's unusual way of fighting. And this man had already won before the annihilating decrees from Asgard came crashing down on the High Sun Gate like lightning bolts. The Venerable Father was not unaware for a moment that these decrees would come. After all, his councillors had listened to all the speeches of the young captain at the time and had written some of them down verbatim. And what the captain had demanded as a young man without influence or dignity, he would carry out with unyielding rigour as Count of the Empire.

With a grim laugh, the high priest counted the laws on his fingers, which he knew almost in advance.

Introduction and extension of Asian land rights to the properties of the High Sun Gate in the ten kingdoms of the homeland.

Introduction of equal land rights in the border marks.

Taxation of income and wealth, of trade by sea and land, of priests' salaries and of the Papa of Urd himself according to the same assessment that the bourgeois world had to put up with.

Disclosure of the statutes of secret societies.
Disclosure of assets and borrowed funds abroad.

Strict supervision of the priestly schools by the Imperial Office for the Education of the People, takeover by the Empire of the schools influenced by the High Sun Gate, proof of fair pay for workers in the orphanages and sewing schools, in the workshops and homes for the homeless, in the farms and market gardens of the authorised hermitages in the Empire and the Marches. Amenor Lochi could almost have offered himself to Count Wieborg as a clerk, so well did he know what was to come.

It could not be prevented.

There was no longer any point in subjecting Baldur Wieborg to priestly treatment aimed at his timely demise. The only thing left to do now was to negotiate with Mr Wittmund and make understanding concessions to avert the worst effects of the coming laws. Suggestions from the councillors loyal to him to remove Mr Wieborg from the battle between

Amenor Lochi, with the statesmanlike look that could not be denied him, had recognised and rejected the idea of eliminating the Empire and the Porte as wrong. Not that he had suddenly grown fond of the Imperial Count! As was well known, the opposite was the case, but the Honourable of Urd knew all too well that Baldur's sudden death would be written on the debtor's table of the High Sun Gate. The papas then ran the risk of losing most of his influence as well as his position and life. On the contrary, he had expressly forbidden his supporters to take such desperate measures against the Imperial Count and had left no doubt that he himself would hand over the guilty party to the Imperial Lawyer for prosecution if Mr Wieborg was harmed in any way.

However, this ban did not mean that revenge against the man from Thule had been cancelled. Amenor Lochi was used to thinking and working in the long term. In the nets of all human laws there was usually a hole that men like the Honourable Father of Urd would know how to find. Time could turn many things in his favour. If the people of Atlantis were visibly enthusiastic about the new laws, Amenor Lochi relied on the poor judgement of ordinary men and their susceptibility to superstition, which even Baldur Wieborg could not eradicate.

As he had done his whole life and as the tradition of the idolatrous priesthood taught him, the chief priest of the High Sun Gate trusted in the stupidity of his fellow human beings. And this thrice-blessed stupidity would, he confidently hoped, one day also pave the way for the High Sun Gate to develop new power. Everything depended on exploiting the weak point of the Recognition Act in the future, namely to overturn the law and make it easier for the foreign-raced sections of the population to gain recognition. The Asian spirit was the born enemy of priestly rule and the gagging of the spirit, of superstition and impure idolatrous cults. Bending the Nordic spirit was the goal that he and his predecessors had always had in mind. It had to remain the only goal worth striving for in the future.

If the blood and spirit of deep-rooted human races could be made at home in Atlantis, then Baldur Wieborg's spring was only a passing phenomenon.

"As it is every spring," thought Amenor Lochi with a confident smile.

Soft footsteps crunched on the sand of the path. The Papas of Urd turned and recognised one of his Abyssian blacks, carrying a leather in his giant fist. The human dropped down in front of the

The man knelt down to his spiritual master and handed him the letter, only to rise immediately and quickly disappear in the direction of the palace of Urd.

The Venerable Father sat down on a semicircular white marble bench and untied the thread. The joyful gleam in his black eyes gave way to a sad, almost despairing expression. He read:

"Warga Gadirus to the Honourable Father of Urd, Lord Amenor Lochi. I am unable to accept your kind invitation to resume my position as gardener of your parks in Urd due to my unfavourable state of health. I will receive medical care at my father's farm, as I have confidence in the healer who has cared for me so far.

Warga."

The Venerable Father crushed the leather in his hand. The girl, to whom his heart clung with all his fingers despite or perhaps because of his suffering, also left him. He had blindly trusted the beautiful gardener, and even now he could not bring himself to believe that she would betray the cause of the High Sun Gate.

So his warga Gadirus also sensed the morning air and avoided following the sinking star Amenor Lochis. Another star had risen for Atlantis:

Baldur Wieborg.

However, it was also conceivable that the brother's betrayal had caused the gardener to sever her ties with the gate. Perhaps people in Atlantis would also be surprised if Odil's sister returned to the services of the Honoured One, even if these services were not used because the girl was no longer capable of working in the gardens.

"I will ask the king of the realm, and if necessary, I will understand myself to present my request to Count Wieborg, so that he will let me have the girl. The cold-hearted soldier of fortune will have no interest in a paralysed gardener. Perhaps he will ask her to move back to Urd out of statesmanlike prudence, when he sees that I care about her. It is not insignificant whether the laws are carried out against my will or with my tacit acquiescence. The Imperial Count must also realise this. I have proved a hundred times over in recent years by my actions that I want the girl well. I will therefore write to the king."

Amenor Lochi smoothed out the crumpled leather and reread the letter from his beloved gardener. There didn't seem to him to be much warmth in Warga's words, but neither was there any harshness that destroyed all hope. And since the Reverend Father himself wanted to hope, he did not realise how hopeless his hope was.

"I will write the letter to the imperial king immediately," he said half aloud and rose to return to his palace, in which several rooms, including his rest room with the entrance to the treasury cellar, had remained intact.

But as he emerged from the rose walkways and overlooked the path to the palace, he was met by his deputy, the clerical councillor Atahualka Chun, the Mejican, who, as the successor to the Egyptian Phe ras, renounced independent thought for his own good, and informed his master of the visit of the Imperial Count Baldur Wieborg.

"Did he come alone?" asked Amenor Lochi, unable to conceal the fact that he was paling.

"The Lord Imperial Count is unaccompanied. He has given his white horse to one of the masons and is waiting in the front portico," replied the clerical counsellor.

"Alone!" muttered Papas von Urd. An unearthly bitterness rose up in him. This Wieborg knew that he was coming to his mortal enemy and disdained to bring even a single riding servant to protect him. Did the Earl not know that there were wafer-thin thorns of steel-hard brass in Urd, which willing hands could sink into the reins of the waiting horse, thorns that penetrated the riding glove with his tear, that

not a drop of blood showed the injury? Did he not fear that these thorns of his might be impregnated with the equally subtle means of priestly statesmanship? Did Mr Wieborg not know what delicate, safe-working poisons the Garden of Urd harboured, poisons that worked slowly and insidiously and those that struck the ground in a flash?

Yes, this person knew all that, and yet he was as sure as if he were about to visit a good friend, to whom one comes alone and without argument.

Now Papas smiled again, somewhat flattered even. Baldur Wieborg correctly assessed the wisdom of the High Sun Gate. He knew that it was too late for poison and dagger for the time being, that the Honourable Father had become tame because the moment demanded it. The Earl of the Realm reckoned correctly. He was as safe in Urd as he had been in the Imperial King's house on Asgard.

"Where will you receive the Lord Imperial Count?" asked Atahualka with the reverence befitting a high priest.

"I'll ask Mr Wieborg to come into the garden because the rooms in the palace are uninhabitable," replied Amenor Lochi with dignity. "Bring the count here."

"Wouldn't it be good if some councillors took part in the discussion?" Atahualka Chun dared to remark.

"Thank you," replied Papas briefly. "The Imperial Count obviously wants to speak to me without

witnesses. - Keep yourself within calling distance, Mr Spiritual Counsellor. You can also place two absentees inconspicuously nearby. But they must not be seen under any circumstances."

The deputy bowed low and left. The Reverend Father, however, remained standing in the middle of the wide gravel path, so that he could be recognised immediately when Baldur Wieborg stepped out of the palace, and waited with mixed feelings for the unwelcome guest.

He was not long in coming. With the quick, sweeping strides that made it possible to recognise the king's friend at a great distance, long before his features were clearly visible, the Count of Atlantis stepped out of the palace of Urd, rushed swift-footed across the lava slabs of the broad forecourt and descended the steps to the garden. As usual, he wore his leather tunic without insignia, a half-length sword on his armour and bronze mountains on his shins. As he was the highest spiritual dignitary in the realm, Baldur Wieborg had put on a brass helmet bearing the diadem of an Imperial Count of Atlantis in the form of a golden hoop with blue gemstones. He held the leather riding gloves in his right hand, a clear sign that he had no intention of greeting his adversary in confidence.

Mr Wieborg stood with broad shoulders in front of Urd's much smaller dad and lowered his grey ones,

ice-cold lights freezing into the black eyes of the opponent.

"Good evening, Honoured One," he said in a hard, clear voice. "I come at the express request of the Lord Imperial King Wittmund Ase Tor- gaard to speak a few words with you, which are perhaps of importance for the future. I therefore ask you to grant me a short period of time to discuss with you what the Imperial Government deems necessary."

"I am pleased that you have found your way to me, Lord Count Wieborg," replied the Papa of Urd, full of the majesty he knew how to display at all receptions. "If it's all right with you, let's walk among the roses and take a seat on the bench by the Rock of Urd. It's my favourite spot in the garden. From there I can look down on the proud Atlantis that has always stood at the foot of the sanctuaries of the High Sun Gate."

Baldur Wieborg hid a smile and silently followed the high gentleman to the designated place where the venerable man had been sitting a short time ago, lost in deep thought and looking down on the city.

The small semicircle of the marble bench allowed the enemies to sit opposite each other and watch each other in comfort.

"You know, Honourable Father, I come to you as an irreconcilable opponent," Baldur Wieborg began clearly.

"That's not unknown to me," Amenor Lochi replied with a friendly, mocking gesture.

"In order to eliminate any ambiguity from the outset, I would like to mention a matter of course," continued the Imperial Count of Atlantis. "My enmity is not directed against your person as such. There are even reasons that could speak in favour of the opposite, namely your never-tiring care for the sister of my friend, the Star Wise and Spiritual Council of Agni: Mrs Warga Gadirus."

The Papas of Urd nodded to show that he understood. At the same time, the hope he had been harbouring in his mind and which he had wanted to express in a letter to the King of the Realm, Wittmund, flashed through his mind: the recovery of his beautiful gardener, Warga.

"I therefore ask you not to regard all my words as those of a hateful personal opponent, but as those of the real enemy who fights world views and not individual people," explained Mr Wie-org with a friendly firmness that did not fail to have its effect. "There are laws in preparation that directly affect the High Sun Gate. The close connection between the Reich government and

You, the supreme leader of the spiritual power in Atlantis, shall be respected under all circumstances. This is not only the will of the Lord Imperial King, but also my wish. It is not our intention to inflict any injustice on the High Sun Gate, as you may be inclined to fear. Nevertheless, I am aware, and so is the Lord Imperial King, that the laws in preparation will be perceived as unjust by you and the priesthood of the various divine services. Even the proclaimed law on the recognition of further parts of the people as equal Aesir has caused a profound uproar within the priesthood, even though this decree can only indirectly damage the High Sun Gate."

"I've come to terms with the fact," Amenor Lochi said coolly. "There is no evidence of damage, although there is no doubt that it will occur in the long term."

"From the point of view of the priesthood, the following laws will also reduce the influence of the Porte," Mr Wieborg continued. "These laws will not contain any injustices. Neither you nor the Porte will be deprived of or given anything that is not available to every citizen of Atlantis and the royal states in the empire, and later, incidentally, in the Border Marches as well."

with assured sovereignty, is entitled to or will be withdrawn. The influence of the High Sun Gate in matters of sovereignty, the economy and maritime trade will undergo certain changes. Ownership of assets will not be affected, ownership of land and real estate only to the extent that current and future law requires it of the ownership of imperial land. Here too, equal treatment is to be applied in all federal states. - The Lord Imperial King is now of the opinion that these changes will be so far-reaching for the current power of the highest priest in the realm that voluntary co-operation cannot be demanded. The Lord King of the Realm therefore has me propose that you resign from your office as Papa of Urd and give the place to a successor whose past is unencumbered."

"My office is for life and has been bestowed upon me by the gods," Amenor Lochi replied haughtily. "I will therefore not resign because I am not allowed to."

"I would be grateful if you could show me the document according to which one of the gods you mentioned has transferred your office to you for life," Baldur Wieborg asked with lashing harshness, although he avoided showing open derision, "I have no sympathy for such unclear claims. We Asen know only one divine effect; we call it All-

father, because as humans we are forced to somehow designate the divine with human words. Therefore, when the fortunate islands of the kingdom of Atlantis fell to our ancestors after a difficult struggle, they could say with a certain right that it had been bestowed on them by the All-Father. The deity gives good fortune to the strong and capable; and we had both strength and good fortune. Allfather's fief is the grateful expression of simple-minded Nordic people, and we have no reason to change its meaning and form. We brought the service of the sun with us from the cool north of the globe, a service, simple, symbolising the divine circle of the year, the circle of constant becoming and passing away. We greeted the rising sun with the jubilant joy of childlike people as a divine blessing, we mourned the setting of the warm star, but we knew of its eternal return. This is what we can recognise and sense about the divine even today, no more and no less. And in the constant return of life and death, of the rise and fall of life, we see the law that we call the All-Father. Try it another way and you will come up with what your art was: superstition. If you want to recreate the Nordic sun service in its original purity, then I welcome you as one who has his office from All-Father, for you do not contradict him. But only then."

"Fulfilling this demand in its entirety is forbidden to me by tradition, which recognises not only the sun as a divine symbol, but also true deities of a personal nature who have a relationship with the rejected evil of mankind," Amenor Lochi replied cautiously.

"I suggest that you ease your resignation," said the Imperial Count, who was convinced that it would be pointless to continue the conversation about the conception of the divine. "It would be conceivable, for example, that you would fall ill. You are not unfamiliar with such illusory illnesses. They have been used often and successfully in both priestly and civil administration. I therefore advise you to take them in order to avoid hardships which the imperial government might also be forced to use against you."

The Imperial Count's words left nothing to be desired in terms of clarity. The Honourable Father therefore remained silent and bowed his head thoughtfully. He did not want to give a promise under any circumstances, but he could ask what the king had in mind for the former papa's accommodation.

"And if I were to leave?" Amenor Lochi asked at length. "What would Mr Wittmund offer me in the way of fortune and refuge?"

"What you have in assets will not be taken from you," Baldur Wieborg quickly replied.

"That this fortune would be subject to general taxation, to which even the poor harbour worker must submit, is a matter of course, even if it is new to you. However, the Lord King of the Realm would not be averse to giving you a castle of your own choice as a royal fiefdom and also granting you an annual pension corresponding to your years of service in Urd. To my knowledge, it cannot be small."

"These suggestions are certainly worth considering," said the Reverend Father seriously. "Of course, I can't agree to them yet. I could only do so when the wording of the draft laws was made known to me. It is quite conceivable that I could comply with the wishes of the King of the Realm. I cannot say anything before then, neither in favour nor against."

"There are no objections to your request," explained the Imperial Count without a second thought. "The laws contain no secrets. They are the result of mature deliberation and the realisation of the basic principles of a world view that I cannot assume you understand. I will therefore send you the copies without delay."

Again, the Reverend Father remained silent for a long time. Baldur Wieborg waited patiently until his opponent had decided on an answer.

"There would be a way to make my decision

make it easier to feign the official illness you mentioned," said Amenor Lochi after a long pause. "It is a harmless request that is very easy for the king to grant."

"If it is as you say, Honourable Father, then there will probably be nothing to prevent the request from being fulfilled," replied the Imperial Count with great attention, but already a little suspiciously.

"Here's the thing," continued Papas. "You know I had a young girl as a gardener in Urd, beautiful and clever, and she was a master in the care of my favourites, the roses. She fell ill in my service. Although I did everything I could to remove the terrible paralysis, the young girl is still suffering today. I know that I can no longer use her for active labour in my gardens - or in those of the royal fiefdom of which you spoke, Lord Imperial Count. But I have a debt to the poor child. I want to provide him with the best care, the most experienced doctors ... in short, I ask the Lord Imperial King to arrange for Mrs Warga Gadirus to move back to Urd."

Baldur Wieborg's features had stiffened during his opponent's words. Unyielding hardness broke with cold fire from the grey eagle eyes, and a movement of the hand seemed to prepare the thousandfold no that was now to come.

But first he asked one more question:

"What do you want from the girl, Venerable Father?"

"Nothing, what should I want?" Lochi replied quietly. "You don't understand, Mr Reichsgraf - I've got used to the girl."

"You don't need to ask the Lord King of the Realm," Baldur Wieborg explained. "Warga Gadirus will not join you in Urd, nor in any royal fiefdom that should be given to you. Your request, small as it seems, will not be granted. Any other. - Not this one."

"Well, perhaps the king thinks differently," Amenor Lochi interjected, but his black eyes sparkled with hidden anger.

"I don't know what the Lord King thinks," said the count coldly. "In this case, it is also unimportant, because the Lord King cannot dispose of the will of a young girl."

"Certainly not," Papas insisted. "But the king's intercession with Mrs Warga could result in her consent."

"No," said Wieborg.

"And why not, Mr Reichsgraf?" came lurking from lips pale with rage. A terrible mistrust flickered in the eyes of the Honourable Father of Urd.

"Because the wife of Earl Baldur Wieborg will not be moving to Urd, but to Asgard in Atlantis," Baldur replied.

"She is your wife!" cried the priest, so that Baldur looked at his counterpart in astonishment. The venerable man's eyes glowed with burning hatred.

"She's not yet," the imperial count clarified.

"But I hope she will be soon. At first, the Race Office made difficulties because of her suffering. But now I have the King's approval, so the Race Office also gave in. Unfortunately, Mrs Wurga has fallen ill again; she couldn't cope with the exertion of the mountain journey. But as soon as she is reasonably well... But that is not part of our discussion, honourable sir. What belongs to it is my unconditional cancellation. - I am sorry."

The last words came from Baldur Wieborg's heart. The Papa of Urd had turned ashen grey, was slumped over and breathing heavily. The otherwise so composed priest had lost all composure.

Baldur Wieborg stood up.

"I am sorry to see that you are unwell, Venerable Father," he said, and there was an honest pity in his voice. He suddenly felt sorry for having broken too hard with the old man. But who could have believed that this ruthless ruler of Urd would fold so quickly?

Papas did not answer, nor did he raise his eyes to look at the Count. It must have been

a sudden, serious case of illness.

Baldur Wieborg hurried through the rose corridors into the open. Atahualka Chun, the spiritual counsellor, stood there listening with his head bent forward, as he had heard the outcry of his master.

"The Venerable Father is ill," Baldur Wieborg said quickly. "See that the personal physician is summoned at once, Mr Ecclesiastical Councillor. - I will wait until then."

"Thank you, Lord Imperial Count," Atahualka replied coolly.

"You don't need to go to all that trouble." Then he waved to the black guards, who were hidden behind bushes, and said a few words to them in a foreign language. The Abyssians then disappeared into the palace of Urd at a run.

"I'll send for the doctor, Mr Reichsgraf," the alderman explained with polite coldness. "So please excuse me, as I would like to attend to the Reverend Father myself."

"I will enquire about the venerable man's condition during the night," Baldur Wieborg assured him. "First of all, please convey my wishes for a speedy recovery."

Then followed a short, very cool bow, and the consultation with the Papas of Urd was over.

The Imperial Count walked thoughtfully around the palace to his white horse, mounted the saddle and rode slowly out to the portal. A cold breeze came from the

mountains. Baldur Wieborg was freezing. In the shade of the Urd mountains, it quickly became chilly in the evening.

In the meantime, Deputy Atahualka Chun had reached his master, who stood crouched in front of the marble bench like a cat ready to pounce. There was no sign of any discomfort. But it was with difficulty that he caught himself when he recognised his treasurer.

"You are ill, Venerable Father!" cried Atahual-ka anxiously. "I have..."

"Don't talk nonsense," the dad told his subordinate. "If you've called for the doctor, call him off as soon as possible."

The spiritual counsellor ran so fast that his long silk skirt blew through the rose bushes, for the eyes of the landowner betrayed nothing good.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Amenor Lochi stepped up to the parapet wall. Down in Atlantis, the street lights flickered on. Evening was falling in the giant city, while up here in Urd the last rays of sunlight were still shining on the roses.

"Warga - Baldur ..." murmured the papas of Urd.

Then he fell silent with his lips pressed together. He stood like that for a long time, staring into the valley with eyes glittering with hatred.

The deputy came back and asked for further orders.

The Venerable Father turned round and saw

the Spiritual Counsellor penetratingly.

"On Asgard Street, not far from the King's Bridge, there's a house that belongs to one of my councillors," he said slowly.

"Yes, it is the property of the High Chamberlain Holmer Wode, a recognised Asen," confirmed the treasurer. "However, the lord has not yet returned to Atlan- tis; he is said to be ill and lying in the shrine to the sacred fire in the mountains of Garmalen."

"Get me the keys to the house of Holmer Wode," Amenor Lochi ordered. "Then send a messenger to the hermitage by the sacred fire and tell the old man to stay in the mountain until called, not to return to Atlantis. - Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Honourable Father," assured the assistant.

"When I have the house keys, you'll forget everything we've just said, Atahualka," demanded Papas.

"Everything, Venerable Father," the subject assured him.

"Then you can go."

———— **BALDUR'S DEATH**

The constitutional law teacher Weeling Ase Gadirus had resumed his lectures at the university together with other scholars from his specialist group, to which, as usual, a large number of students of administrative science listened. At the request of the imperial government, which in this case had also taken Baldur Wieborg's intentions into account, a generous campaign for enlightenment had been included in the curriculum, which opposed the arrogance of power of the idolatrous priesthood in recent centuries and demonstrated the need to restore the free spirit of research of Nordic mankind to the place it had to claim over the rampant superstition taught and favoured by the High Sun Gate. These lectures were actually an extension and continuation of the courses that the young Captain Wieborg had introduced years ago. It was a rewarding but immensely arduous task for the Imperial Government to combat the ingrained and in some places cherished superstitions with the sharpness of intellectual weapons. The Imperial Count

For this purpose, Wieborg recruited a large number of scholars who honestly shared his convictions, had them read not only in Atlantis about the reasons for the reorganisation of the empire, but also from the islands of the kings of the states, who sometimes caused difficulties in the old camp due to personal ties. As far as his work in Asgard as the overall head of all imperial offices allowed, the Imperial Count resumed his lectures himself, and he was forced to use the largest halls and lawns of the agricultural college for these courses, which were just sufficient for the purpose.

Soon Wieborg was seized by a veritable frenzy of work that had never been known on the happy islands of the kingdom of Atlantis because it was never required. But the Imperial Count acted as if time had suddenly become something essential, as if he had only been granted a short period of time to complete his work.

The king's family rarely saw him either. Baldur deliberately avoided seeing and speaking to his royal child, and when the light of the candle fell on the high forehead of the saviour of Atlantis in the evening, when the officials and employees of the entire office had gone home, one could have seen how Baldur Wieborg leaned his mighty head on his narrow hand and at times looked forlornly into the small flame of his candle. It would also have been possible to recognise that the Count's features no longer had that radiant

The youthfulness that Baldur had so easily given people's hearts.

A quiet, weary sadness then wanted to flit around the fine, curved mouth, like the expression of a wafting foreboding.

Warga Gadirus!

Loyalty was to be his downfall! He often wondered whether his life would be straightforward to the last, whether his loyalty to the beautiful gardener of Urd was not madness. Baldur had become so accustomed to subordinating all his thoughts to the one question of what advantage the realm could gain from his actions that every time he doubted, he had to think of the profound effect his marriage to his faithful ally Warga Gadirus must have on the people. If he, the pure-blooded Ase, whose childhood even fell in the unfriendly regions of the Nordic Thule, married a woman of mixed blood who was only recognised as such, this act would be seen symbolically for what it was: an open commitment to his own law, which had given the citizens of Atlantis the community of the people. No one would be allowed to say that the Imperial Count preached good teachings to other people, but he himself was careful not to descend into the lowlands; he was, after all, a haughty, racially proud Northman.

In the last six months after the passing of the

Baldur Wieborg had once again enquired of the constitutional law professor Weeling Gadirus whether Warga would be able to receive his visit. He had also written to Gadirus to ask whether he was sure of his consent if he asked for Warga's hand in marriage.

So far, however, the scholar had waved goodbye, hiding behind the opinion of the family doctor, who considered a discussion of this question and even a visit to be inadvisable at the moment.

The beautiful gardener from Urd could no longer leave her bed; at most she would sit for a few hours a day in her armchair in the lawn garden behind her father's house by the canal, watching the fish or reading Baldur Wieborg's lectures, which her father had faithfully brought her from college.

The Imperial Count knew all this. The news from the House of Gadirus had been sparse ever since. The star-wise Odil had married and was once again living with his young wife in Agni, the sun-warden, had refused all the honours and distinctions that the imperial king had offered him and sometimes said to his friend Baldur: "I have received so many honours and offices from Papa in Urd that I no longer like them. Besides, you know as well as I do that they can give me nothing that I do not already possess."

Count Wieborg had become a lonely man. He shared the fate of all those who had lost fortune and

ability to the cold heights of success, and Baldur suffered from this cold loneliness as only a blood-warm person can suffer, whose heart cries out for love and to whom the small word loyalty comes back as an echo.

Slowly, the blonde head of the envious man sank onto his folded arms, his mighty shoulders twitched and the candle fell from the brass candlestick, rolled across the table and went out.

Here, in the sober solitude of his empty nocturnal office, Baldur Wieborg wept like a dead boy for lost happiness. No human eye saw the most powerful man in the realm of Atlantis as he writhed under the endless agony of his pressing grief; no one sat quietly beside him and waited with patience and deep understanding until the storm had subsided. The silence dripped oppressively through the cool pillared halls of the imperial offices, like a changeable, inaudible clock, and only through the open windows did the gurgling and trickling of the canal water penetrate the mighty walls. From far away, perhaps from a garden on the other side of the Ring Canal or even from the park of the Allfather's Fiefdom, the nightingale's voice sang with a wistful echo. Atlantean spring was calling for the lonely man outside.

Slow, hard footsteps sounded from afar; the heavy bronze doors banged so loudly that they sounded like deep bells. The imperial count straightened up, reached for the

lighter and relit the extinguished candle. The night watch went round the offices to see if the lights had gone out everywhere. The man was used to Baldur Wieborg still working late at night, so he passed by with a clear "Good evening, Mr Reichsgraf" and disappeared between the deep shadows of the pillared halls. Metal doors slammed shut again and the footsteps fell silent.

The lone man pushed back the armchair and stood up.

A small galley glided along under the window, you could hear it in the strokes of the oars and the soft singing of the occupants. Lovers were travelling through the spring night of Atlantis. Baldur Wieborg snuggled into the deep, cold fabric of the window and listened to the fading song. He knew it. When had it been that he had sung it too? That was a long time ago. - Up in Thule, the peasant boys sang it in the half-timbered courtyards, and he had sung it there without knowing what it meant, because he had still been a child.

How happy were the people who were not counts of the realm . With a sigh, he turned away from the window and walked with hesitant steps towards his workstation. There lay the draft law for the border markers. There were few difficulties here, as the Marches were undisputed imperial lands.

The kings of the states therefore did not need to be heard.

Why was he so indifferent to the law today? Had it not been the result of long, faithful labour? Hadn't the first legal scholars of the empire had it in their hands? So why was it boring?

Baldur Wieborg smiled. He knew it well. The night had done it to him, the spring that beckoned outside, the crying bird and the singing people in the small galley.

Had it really only been six years since he had climbed through Heunig Schuld's trapdoor to the king's child in the garden of the Allfather's fiefdom as Asgardase? Now nobody was waiting behind the bushes for the big playmates. Fate had decided otherwise.

Tomorrow morning he wanted to go on foot to Warga Gadirus. Loyalty was waiting!

Baldur Wieborg approached the door with hesitant steps. Then he unlatched it and glanced into the empty, curved corridor, which was lit from section to section by matt oil lanterns. The Imperial Count of Atlantis looked ahead of him impassively, and once again a smile flitted across his large, lively features. At last he made up his mind, extinguished the candlelight at his desk and left the office.

The Asgard guard in the gleaming silver vestibule clanked together as the tall figure of the mighty

man stepped out of the bronze door with the signet rune of the Norwegian people. With a friendly nod, Baldur Wiborg walked past, climbed the steep steps of the staircase to the first floor with quick steps, as if he did not know the difficulty, crossed the flower-scented terrace on which his small house stood, where he still lived, and walked towards the metal gate of the armouries. The Asgard guard silently unlocked it and allowed the Imperial Count to enter. The gate slammed shut with a thud.

Baldur Wieborg stood in the night-dark armoury of Asgard. For a moment he listened into the darkness, but then he called out with his resounding voice, which ran around the huge round building like a bright trumpet sound and came back from two sides like evil cackling:

"Heunig Schulde, the key!"

The effect of the call was magnificent. Not far from Baldur Wieborg, a man fell out of bed, got up with a terrible curse and rummaged around rustling. A single glowworm suddenly lit up, a bunch of keys rattled, and fumbling footsteps approached. Once the firefly disappeared behind pillars and piles of tunics and linen, and once it reappeared brighter than before. At last Heunig Schulde stood in front of the Imperial Count and shone a small lamp in his face.

"Allfather's lightning! The Wieborg!" the old man exclaimed, but he immediately improved and said. "Mr Reichsgraf."

"Good evening, Mr Schulde," said Baldur amiably. "Have you got the key to the trapdoor?"

"No, but I'll get it right away. I've only got the other keys," replied the armourer eagerly and ran through his familiar realm with somnambulistic certainty, only to be back in front of Baldur Wieborg in no time.

"Wait, Mr Reichsgraf, I'll go first," said Mr Schulde. "I've covered the stairs with old helmets. The staircase hasn't been used since you stopped being Asgardase."

The metal hats rolled off the steps with a clatter and bounced around on the stone floor with a bright clang. It was actually unheard of how Mr Schulde handled the property of the empire that night, which he usually only took into his hands with tender care.

"So, the staircase is free, Mr Reichsgraf," Mr Schulde announced with a sigh of relief. "Here is the key. I've always oiled the lock. It will open all right." Baldur Wieborg climbed the wooden steps with a pounding heart. He smiled at himself that a sensible man, who was also the highest official in the kingdom after the king, had committed such foolishness and was hiding behind the bushes of the Allfather's Garden from old

times, of old times and of lost happiness.

The key turned quietly, the trapdoor opened under the pressure of his strong arm, and then Baldur Wieborg stood breathing a sigh of relief under the starry dome of the Atlantic sky.

The bushes and trees around the circle were black and silent, with only the nightingales singing in the distance. It had probably been a little singer from the Allfather's Garden that the imperial count had heard down in his cold office.

How often had the king's child waited for him here! Armane had always sat close to the trapdoor and waited for her playmate, and her cry of joy.

"Heunig Schulde, the key!", which had sounded like an echo of his own call into the depths, echoed distantly and forlornly in his ears, even though it was as quiet as it must be deep in the seabed.

Baldur Wieborg stood tall and silent under the stars. Far away from the Allfather's fiefdom, the soft music of many harps could be heard. King Wittmund Ase Torgaard had his harpists play, the best there were in the realm. Like longing and lamentation, the unison sounds of the music ran through the quiet garden of the Allfather's Fiefdom, and the lonely man behind the resting bushes drank in the sounds with open lips.

And as he stood listening, his head back and his bright eyes turned towards the stars, the following happened

something that was like unreal magic. Two slender, soft hands grasped Baldur's cheeks from behind and pulled his head back even further until it was resting on one shoulder. For a heartbeat his breath caught, but then the man threw himself round, his arms embraced a slender figure, soft lips lay on his, and instead of the thousand stars of the night sky, two dear eyes that he knew too well looked at him very closely. Even if only an almost lost gleam of the distant suns in space was reflected in these eyes, it was enough to tell Baldur that they were the eyes of his royal child Armane.

Had he not hoped in a hidden corner of his heart that things would turn out as they did now? Had he not called out with all the strength of his lonely heart?

Not having to think for once! For once not to be an imperial count whose will and vigour guided a great empire. For once just drink oblivion, oblivion of thoughts of honour and loyalty.

Loyalty was a curse, honour a stumbling block. He only wanted to throw it all away for an hour, to be dishonest for an hour, even if it broke him inside.

And his young, strong arms wrapped themselves like inescapable bonds around the lover he had always and forever loved, whom he could never forgive in labour and danger. Wordlessly, in wild, foolish tenderness, the two people, who had always loved each other, kissed each other.

The two of them had belonged to each other ever since they had known each other, flattering, searching fingers pushed through blond hair and caressed neck and chin, and under the silent stars, in quiet bushes, the lovers savoured the first caresses of a thirsting love.

At dawn, Amenor Loch. sat behind the stone parapet of the townhouse of the old clergyman Holmer Wode in Asgardstrasse and waited. He waited with the patience of a man whose purpose in life has become hatred.

As the sun rose, when the first people in Atlantis opened the doors of their homes, the Honourable Father would leave the house through a side entrance and step out into the still half-dark alley to return to Urd by ever different routes as an ordinary citizen. Sometimes the papas lurked for several days in a row, his black eyes constantly fixed on the tunnel gate of Asgard.

Baldur Wieborg had often ridden past with his panelling around his broad chest and his helmet on his proud head. When the Earl of the Realm rode past alone or with a retinue, the Honourable Father lowered the drawn bow. There was no chance of the arrow hitting one of the three brass rings.

So keep waiting! Waiting incessantly! The hour of the High Sun Gate arrived.

Today too, Amenor Lochi wanted to leave the

left the house. The imperial count apparently did not ride out again.

The honourable man had already risen from his position behind the parapet of the roof and was about to carry the bow with the two arrows down into the empty house when he saw the Asgard guards at the king's bridge stepping quickly towards the gate pillars. The bronze rounds of their shields clinked against the defences, and the eagle helmets flashed from their raised skulls. Count Wieborg was leaving Asgard on foot!

Amenor Lochi slumped silently, crouched behind the parapet, his smouldering black eyes fixed on the bridge with burning hatred. The Imperial Count had thanked him with his hand for the greeting and now stepped out from under the canal bridge's canopy between the two short towers with his head bowed. What could be bothering this man that he did not walk in with his head held high as usual?

The Venerable Father noticed this attitude, however busy he was with other thoughts. A great joy flashed through the priest. Wieborg was unarmed. No protective ring encircled his broad chest over his tunic, no helmet covered his neck. The lurking man stared at the approaching hated man with terrible tension. Step by step, slowly and thoughtfully, Baldur walked

Wieborg runs across the pavement in the centre of the road, as if he wanted to take some time out to relax today.

The venerable father's ageing heart beat wildly against its walls, so that for a short time he had to press both hands against his chest to force it to rest. Baldnr's footsteps were already sounding steady and firm beneath the walls of the Holmer Wode house. The priest pulled himself together.

If it didn't happen now, it never happened!

The bow rose above the height of the parapet. The arrow pointed calmly at the back of the slowly receding Imperial Count. The bow sank.

In a fraction of a heartbeat, however, he rose again, this time firmly and securely, directed by hatred.

Baldur Wieborg heard the twang of the bowstring and was about to turn round, but then it struck him in the back like a twitching bolt of lightning. The blackness of the night struck his mind so quickly that he could no longer form the thought of where the unfriendly messenger might have come from, piercing his Nordic heart with a poisonous sting.

The Imperial Count sank to his knees, very slowly and as a matter of course; then he fell forward, supported himself once more with his hand and lay still on the face that had been a happy symbol of spring to many in Atlantis.

"Spring has its time," said on the roof of the

House Holmer Wode of the Papas of Urd, took one look at the motionless figure of his mortal enemy and left the cellar. Then he stepped out onto the landing, carefully locked the house and walked with long steps to the side canal where his small galley lay. The arrow stuck out of Baldur's back, and when the morning breeze glided over it, the feathers at its end quivered like funny little flags.

A door was pushed open.

A woman's voice called out from the depths of a kitchen. Then a baker's boy stepped out onto the street, still a little sleepy, and organised the small loaves of bread in his basket before hanging it on his arm with a flourish and turning off into the city.

He was met by the old burgrave Herbing Ase Köpping, who had asked for and received his resignation from the imperial king at the turn of the year, but until then had appeared at the Imperial War Office every morning in his customary devotion to duty to provide his signatures. Both the old man of war and the baker's boy met at the spot where a quiet man lay sleeping on the pavement.

And as the baker's boy approached in silent horror, he suddenly heard the old gentleman roar like a wounded beast of prey, and saw him prostrate himself on his knees beside the silent man. The old burgrave's cap rolled over the pavement so that

The snow-white hair blew around the fresh, red cheeks. He took the dead man's head with both hands and turned it halfway round. "Baldur, my boy, my dear boy!"

Baldur Wieborg had never realised in his life how much the old man was attached to him. If you are a man of war, and the other man is too, you must not show it. Rather, for educational reasons, you have to act as if ...

And now Mr Köpping howled on the hard stones of Asgard Street, so that people tore open the windows and looked down, so that doors opened everywhere and distraught people stepped outside.

In a short time the street was black with citizens and labourers, sailors and warriors, craftsmen and builders, and although the crowd pressed towards the one spot where Baldur Wieborg lay murdered on the cold stones, there was a deep, unsecret silence over the city. It passed quietly from mouth to mouth, trickled through the cracks of still-closed doors, flitted across the still waters of the canals and across the spacious squares of the markets and parks, that Baldur Wieborg, the favourite of Atlantis, the spring of the new empire, had been cowardly murdered.

The flags on a thousand galleys and boats were lowered to half-mast, black cloths rolled out of open windows and clung to stone walls and

Towers, and when at last the huge imperial flag with the radiant sun sign slowly descended high on the All-Father's Fiefdom and stopped halfway up, a single wailing cry went through the whole city. Baldur, the spring of Atlantis, was no more. From the blinks of Agni and Urd, the sun's gathered rays flashed with talking flashes over countless lightships and war galleys to the newposts in Lipore, Antianyu and Paardegatt, to Harvesum and Acora, Schoongard and Aargund, shot across to the borderlands of the border marks and startled the governors, where evening was about to fall or whose territory was still shrouded in deep night. The wind whistled the message of mourning across seas and lands, and the waves of the Atlantic Sea sighed as they embraced the bitter words of Baldur's death.

And whenever Nordic people cross the sea when they are travelling, they hear the old song that will not die, hear it like a distant legend, like a terrible suffering that comes upon bright, good people, and recount what they have heard on the forecastle of the ship, by the hearth, by the flickering fire of the camp, tell it when another great, good person falls victim to the murderous steel:

The legend of Baldur, whom Loki slew.

— INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE

follows the Atlantis account by the great Greek philosopher Plato, which he set down in his dialogues "Timaeus" and "Critias" in 365 BC. Using the translation by Otto Alpert, volume 179 of the Philosophische Bibliothek Leipzig 1922, published by Felix Meiner.

I want to tell this old story, which I heard from an old man. Critias was then, according to his own account, nearly ninety years old, I was about ten; it was the boys' day of the Apaturia festival and was celebrated in the usual way, with the fathers of the boys offering prizes for the best recitation of poems. In addition to many other poems, many of us boys recited poems by Solon, which were still something new at the time. One of our phratry - whether he really thought so, or whether he wanted to say something nice to Critias - remarked that Solon seemed to him to have the greatest wisdom, but also the highest nobility of all poets. The old man - I can still see him in front of me - was very pleased and

replied with a smile: "Yes, my dear Amyndros, he would certainly have become at least as famous as Homer, Hesiod or any other poet if only he had not just practised the art of poetry on the side but, like others, had been able to devote all his diligence to it. And if only he had completed the story he brought here from Egypt! But he had to leave it behind because of the internal unrest and all the other damage he found on his return. What kind of story was that? he asked. The story of the greatest and rightly most famous deed of all that our city has accomplished; but because of the long time and the death of its perpetrators, its tradition has not survived to us. Tell me from the beginning, replied the other, what and how and from whom Solon heard and reported authenticated things about it.

There is in Egypt, began Kritias, in the Delta, at The Nile splits around the head of this region; it is called the Saitic region, and the largest city in this region is Sais, the birthplace of King Amasis. The inhabitants of the city consider a deity to be their founder, who in Egyptian is called Neith, in Greek, as they say, Athena; they are therefore great friends of the Athenians and to a certain extent related to them. Solon was therefore showered with honours when he came to them, and when he made enquiries about the ancients from the priests who were particularly experienced in this field

he found that no one in Hellas had the slightest idea about these things. Once he wanted to get them to tell him about primeval times and began to tell them the oldest stories from Hellas, about Phoroneus, who was supposedly the first man, about Niobe and how Deucalion and Pyrrah remained after the Flood; he enumerated the genealogy of their descendants and made an attempt to calculate the times by means of the years that were added to each one he mentioned. Then one of the priests, a very lively man, cried out: "Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are and will always be children, and there is no such thing as an old Hellene! Why, how do you understand that?" asked Solon. You are all young in spirit, replied the priest, because in your minds there is no knowledge from ancient tradition and no knowledge that has greyed with time. This is due to the following. Often and in many ways men have perished and will perish, most often through fire and water, but also through thousands of other causes. For what you also hear about Phaeton, the son of Helios, how he once mounted his father's chariot and, because he did not know how to keep to his father's path, burnt up everything on earth and was himself killed by lightning - that sounds like a fable, but the true core of it is the changing movement of the celestial bodies orbiting the earth and the periodic destruction of everything earthly by a great fire. Under it then

the inhabitants of the mountains and high, water-poor regions suffer more than the inhabitants of the rivers and seas; but the Nile, our saviour from every trouble, saves us from this embarrassment. But if the gods flood the earth with water to cleanse it, then the mountain dwellers, the herdsmen and shepherds remain alive, but those who live in your cities are swept into the sea by the rivers, whereas in our country the water does not flow down from the sky onto the land then or at any other time; rather, it is arranged so that everything rises above it from below. For these reasons, everything is preserved here and is considered the oldest. In truth, in all regions where excessive cold or heat does not prevent it, there is always a human race that is either more or less numerous. What happens with you or with us or elsewhere, as far as we have knowledge of it, if it is excellent, great or significant in any way, is recorded in our temples from the oldest times and remains so. With you and the other states, however, the Scriptures and the whole life of the state have only just reached a certain stage of development when, after the expiry of the period, the flood of rain from heaven breaks over you like a new disease and leaves only those who are ignorant and uneducated in the Scriptures alive; then you always become young again, as it were, and know nothing of our or your ancient history.

Your genealogies, dear Solon, as you have just recited them, hardly differ from children's tales. You know only of one flood, when so many have gone before; and you do not know that the most glorious and best race of men lived in your country, from whom you and all the citizens of your present state are descended, leaving a small tribe of them; all this remained foreign to you, for your ancestors lived through many generations without the language of writing. Once, before the greatest destruction by water, the state now called Athenian was the most warlike and possessed an excellent constitution in every respect; to it are attributed the most marvellous deeds and the best state institutions of all known to us under the sun. Solon expressed his astonishment at this and urgently asked the priests to tell him the entire prehistory of his state in exact order. The priest began: 'Let nothing be withheld from you, Solon, and I will tell you everything, for your sake, for the sake of your state, but above all for the sake of the goddess, who received, raised and formed your state and ours as her own, yours a thousand years earlier from the seed she had received from the earth goddess Ge and the fire god Hephaestus, and later also our state. According to our holy books, our state was established eight thousand years ago. So your fellow citizens came into being nine thousand years ago, and I just want to give you a brief

of their constitution and their marvellous deeds. We will discuss all this in more detail at another time, at our leisure, on the basis of the writings. You can get an idea of their constitution from this one. For you can find many samples of your former institutions in our present ones; a priestly caste separate from all others, then the caste of craftsmen, whose individual classes, however, worked for themselves and not with the others, and the herdsmen, hunters and farmers; finally, it will not have escaped your notice that the warrior caste in this country is separate from all others, and that according to the law its only activity consists in the care of warfare. Their weapons were the spear and the shield, which we first introduced from the peoples of Asia, as the goddess had taught us, as she first taught you in your country. You can also see how much care our legislation has already taken in its foundations to educate the mind; from all the sciences that have to do with the cosmos to mantics and health, the divine arts, it has selected what is suitable for the use of mankind and appropriated these sciences and all those connected with them. The goddess first founded your state according to this whole arrangement and organisation by choosing the place of your birth with a view to the fact that the happy mixture of seasons prevailing there was best suited to it,

The goddess loves war and wisdom at the same time, so she chose the place that would probably produce the men most like her and colonised it first. So you lived there under such a state constitution and many other good institutions, ahead of all other men in every virtue, as is to be expected of descendants and disciples of the gods. But among all the great deeds of your state, which we read admiringly in our writings, one stands out for its greatness and valour; our writings tell of the mighty war power that once came to an end at the hands of your state when, full of arrogance, it marched against the whole of Europe and Asia from the Atlantic sea. For at that time it was still possible to navigate the sea there, for there was an island off the estuary, which you call the "Pillars of Heracles", larger than Asia and Libya together, and from it it was still possible to cross over to the other islands and from the islands to the entire mainland opposite, which surrounds the sea that is in truth so called. Everything that lies within the aforementioned estuary appears to be merely a bay with a narrow entrance; but that ocean is rightly called so, and the land on its shores is called mainland by the same right. On this island of Atlantis there was a great and admirable royal power, which ruled the whole island as well as many other islands and parts of the mainland.

Moreover, their power extended over Libya as far as Egypt and in Europe as far as Thyrrenia. This empire once attempted, with a united army, to subjugate our country and yours, in fact the whole area within the estuary, in one fell swoop. Then the power of your state showed itself in all its splendour and strength before all men; superior to all others in valour and cunning, it first led the Hellenes, but later found itself compelled by the apostasy of the others to build on its own strength, and despite the extreme danger it finally overcame the advancing enemy and erected signs of victory; thus it prevented the subjugation of those not yet subjugated and became the noble liberator to us within the gates of Heracles. Later on, mighty earthquakes and floods arose, and in the course of one bad day and one bad night your entire belligerent race sank beneath the earth in droves, and likewise the island of Atlantis disappeared into the sea. That is why the sea there can no longer be navigated or explored, because the heaped-up masses of mud created by the sinking of the island make it impossible. Above all, let us first recall that a total of nine thousand years have passed since, as has been said, the war between the people outside the Pillars of Heracles and all those who lived inside them was fought.

which I will now report on in detail. Our state is said to have ruled over one of them and brought the whole war to an end, while the kings of Atlantis ruled over the other. This island, as I have mentioned, was larger than Asia and Libya put together, but it sank due to earthquakes, leaving behind an impenetrable, muddy shoal that prevents anyone who wants to travel to the sea beyond from making any further progress.

Since many mighty floods have taken place in the nine thousand years that have elapsed since that time until now, the earth that was washed down from the heights during this time and during such events did not, as in other areas, accumulate high, but was washed away all around and disappeared into the depths. Thus, as happens with small islands, compared with the land of that time, only the bones of the diseased body remained, as it were, since the fat and loose soil was washed away, leaving behind only the meagre skeleton of the land. In those ancient times, when the land was still intact, its mountains were high and covered with earth, and its plains, which are now called stony ground, were full of rich soil. On the mountains stood dense forests, of which there are still clear traces. For now some of the mountains only provide food for bees, but it was not so long ago that

The roofs, made from the trees that were felled there as beams for the largest buildings, were well preserved. The soil also bore many tall fruit trees and provided the herds with inexhaustible, rich pasture; in particular, the rain brought it abundant prosperity over the course of the year, for the water was not lost as it is now, as it flows into the sea in the barren soil, but the rich soil absorbed the rain and retained the water in its clayey soil and then allowed it to flow from the heights into the valleys, thus providing rich springs and rivers everywhere; There are still sacred signs of them at their ancient origins, which prove the truth of what is now said about them. Such was the nature of that once so fertile land, and it was cultivated by true farmers, who in truth deserved the name, who were exclusively occupied with agriculture, who pursued the right and were well-talented, as they also enjoyed the best soil, the most abundant irrigation and, as far as the climate was concerned, the most suitable change of seasons.

But we now also want to describe the conditions I hope that my memory will not fail me in what I heard as a boy, so that I can tell you, my friends, exactly what I heard. I hope that my memory will not fail me in what I have already heard as a boy, so that I can also tell you, my friends, everything exactly. There is only one small thing I must add to my report, because

so that you may not be surprised that non-Hellenic men have Hellenic names; you shall know the reason. For Solon, wishing to utilise this narrative for his poetry, made careful inquiries into the meaning of the proper names, and found that those ancient Egyptians who first wrote them down had translated them into their own language; so he took for himself the meaning of each proper name and wrote it down as it reads in our language. My grandfather kept the records and they are still with me, and I have been scrutinising them since I was a boy. So don't be surprised if you hear proper names there as you do here; you now know why. But now to our long story, which began as follows. We have already related that the gods divided the whole earth among themselves partly into larger and partly into smaller lots, and founded their own sanctuaries and places of sacrifice; thus the island of Atlantis fell to Poseidon, and he settled his descendants, whom he begot with a mortal woman, in a place on the island with the following characteristics.

On the coast of the sea towards the centre of the whole Island was a plain that is said to have been the most beautiful and fertile of all; at the edge of this plain, about 30,000 feet from the sea, was a low mountain (a)* on all sides. On it dwelt

* The letters (a) (b), etc., refer to the name at the end of the

Euenor, one of the men who sprouted from the earth at the beginning, with his wife Leukippe; they had an only daughter, Kleito. When the girl had grown up, her father and mother died, but Poseidon fell in love with her and joined himself to her; he fortified the hill on which she lived with a strong protective structure around it; he made several smaller and larger rings, two of earth and three of water, around the hill, each equally distant from the others in all directions, so that the hill became inaccessible to humans, since ships and navigation did not yet exist at that time. He furnished this hill, which had thus become an island, in the best possible way, which caused him no difficulty as a god; he caused two springs, one warm, the other cold, to rise from the earth and abundant fruit of all kinds to spring from it. As for male offspring, he produced five pairs of twins, had them brought up, then divided the whole island of Atlantis into ten parts and gave the first-born of the eldest pair his mother's residence and the surrounding territory as the best and largest part, and made him king over the others; but he made them rulers too, and each was given dominion over many people and a large territory. He also gave them all names, calling the eldest, the first king who reigned at that time, Atlas,

city map included in the book.

from whom the whole island and the sea took their name; to his second-born twin brother, who received the outermost part of the island, from the Pillars of Heracles to the area of today's Gadeira, he gave the name Gadeiros in the local language, Eu-melos in Greek, a name that was to lead to the naming of the country. Of the second pair he named one Ampheres, the other Euaimon, of the third the first-born Mnaseas, the younger Autochthon, of the fourth the eldest Elasippos, the younger Mestor, and finally of the fifth the eldest was named Azaes, the younger Diaprepes. All of these, as well as their descendants, lived on the island of Atlantis for many ages and also ruled many other islands of the Atlantean Sea; however, they also extended their dominion to Egypt and Thyrrenia. From Atlas descended a numerous family, which was not only generally highly respected, but also maintained the kingship for many ages, in that the eldest always passed it on to his first-born, whereby this family preserved such an abundance of wealth as neither existed before in any kingdom, nor will so easily exist again in the future; they were also provided with everything that is needed in a city and in a country. Foreign countries supplied these rulers with many things, but the island itself supplied most of the necessities of life. So too

The island was the first to produce all the solid or smeltable ores available from mining, especially a kind of brass, now known only by name, but then more than that, which was mined in many places on the island and which the people of the time valued next to gold. The island also produced everything in abundance that the forest had to offer for the work of the builders, and fed wild and tame animals in large numbers. Thus there were numerous elephants, for not only was there plenty of food for all animals in the swamps, ponds and rivers, on the mountains and in the plains, but also for this naturally largest and most voracious animal species. Furthermore, all the odours that the earth now produces in roots, grasses, types of wood, swelling juices, flowers and fruits, the island also carried and nurtured in large quantities, as did the "lovely fruit" and the fruit of the field that leads us to the food, and all that we otherwise use as food and call by the common name of vegetables, furthermore a tree-like growing plant that provided drink, food and anointing oil at the same time, and finally the rapidly perishing fruit of the fruit tree, destined for our pleasure and delight, and everything that we carry as dessert, desirable stimulants of the overfilled stomach for the satiated; all this was produced by the island, then still accessible to the sun's rays, wonderful and beautiful and in unlimited abundance. Their

Since the earth offered them all this, the inhabitants built temples (b), royal palaces (b), harbours (c) and shipyards (d), but also furnished the whole country and proceeded according to the following order. First, they built bridges (e) over the canals that surrounded their old headquarters, thus creating a connection with the old royal castle. They built this royal castle right from the start on the very residence of the god and their ancestors; one inherited it from the other, and each sought to expand its furnishings to the best of his ability and to surpass his predecessor, until finally their residence was an astonishing sight due to its size and beauty. First, they built a canal three hundred feet wide, one hundred feet deep and thirty thousand feet long from the sea to the outermost ring, making it possible to enter it from the sea like a harbour and making it wide enough for even the largest ships to enter. But they also broke through the earth walls between the ring-shaped canals below the bridges and thus created a passage (f) wide enough for a single trireme between the various canals; they then bridged this passage again so that ships could pass underneath, because the edges of the earth walls were high enough to protrude above the sea. The widest of the ring-shaped canals was eighteen hundred feet wide (g); the following one had the same width

Earth belt (h). The next ring-shaped canal was twelve hundred feet wide (i), and of the same width was the adjacent belt of earth (k); the innermost canal, which surrounded the island itself, was six hundred feet wide (l), and the island on which the royal castle stood was three thousand feet in diameter (a). They surrounded this island, as well as the belt of earth and the hundred-foot-wide bridge, with a stone wall (m) and erected towers and gates on the bridges against the passage from the sea; the stones for these, white, black and red, were quarried on the slopes of the island in the centre and below on the earth walls on their inner and outer sides; this gave them cavities on both sides of the earth walls for ship arsenals, which were covered by the rock itself. For their constructions they used stones of the same colour, and sometimes, for the pleasure of the eye, they put together stones of different colours, giving them full natural charm. They coated the wall around the outermost rampart with a layer of ore, the innermost wall with tin and the castle itself with brass, which shone like fire.

The royal residence within the castle was as follows was furnished to a large extent. In the centre stood a temple dedicated to Kleito and Poseidon; only priests were allowed to enter it and it was enclosed by a golden wall; the family of the

ten princes were created and born. Every year, the firstlings from all ten regions were sent there as sacrifices for each of them. There was also a temple to Poseidon, six hundred feet long, three hundred feet wide and correspondingly high, built in a somewhat foreign style. The whole outside of the temple was covered with silver, the battlements with gold. Inside, the ceiling was made of ivory, decorated with gold and brass, and the rest of the walls, columns and floors were clad in brass. They erected golden pillars inside. The god himself, standing on his chariot and steering six winged steeds, so tall that he touched the ceiling with his head, surrounded by a hundred Nereids on dolphins; for that was how many were believed to exist at the time. There were also many other statues dedicated by private individuals in the temple. On the outside, all around it were the golden pillars of the ten kings themselves, their wives and all those who came from them, as well as many other consecrated gifts from the kings and private individuals from the city itself and from the foreign territories they ruled. The size and design of the altar also corresponded to this splendour, and the royal palace was also commensurate with the size of the empire and the splendour of the sanctuaries. They also used the two springs, the hot and the cold, which flowed in abundance and produced a delicious and marvellous water for every use.

They built buildings and suitable tree plantations around them and set up bathing rooms, some in the open air, some for the winter as warm baths under roofed rooms, the royal ones separate from those of the people and special ones for the women and pools for the horses and other draught animals, and furnished all these rooms appropriately. They channelled the run-off water partly into the grove of Poseidon, in which trees of all kinds grew of particular height and beauty due to the goodness of the soil, and partly they let it flow away through canals over the bridges into the outer ring canals. There were sanctuaries of many gods (n), many gardens (o) and training grounds (p) were laid out, separate for the men and for the chariot teams from the islands formed by the earth walls, but a special racecourse (q) was located in the centre of the larger island, six hundred feet wide and set up for chariot races along its entire perimeter. Around this racecourse were the dwellings of most of the members of the bodyguard. The more reliable of them were posted from the smaller earthen rampart closer to the castle, but those who were particularly loyal lived in the castle itself in the immediate vicinity of the palace.

The ship arsenals were full of triremes and all the materials needed to equip such ships, which were kept in good condition.

This was the layout of the royal residence. But once you had passed the three harbours outside it, you came to a wall* that started from the sea and ran in a circle, thirty thousand feet from the largest ring and harbour everywhere; it ended at the same point on the sea, at the mouth of the canal. The whole space was occupied by many densely-packed dwellings; the exit and the largest harbour were full of ships and merchants from all sorts of places, and there was loud shouting, noise and all kinds of commotion by day and by night.

That pretty much covers everything I was told at the time about the city and the former home of the kings. I must now also endeavour to report on the natural features and administration of the rest of the land. First of all, as it is said, the whole island rose very high from the sea, only the area near the city was a plain throughout, enclosed all around by mountains that ran down to the sea; it was completely smooth and even, more long than wide, three thousand stadia long on one side and two thousand wide in the centre from the sea outwards**. This whole part of the island lay on the south side, facing north towards the north wind.

* This wall is no longer marked on the city map.

** Cf. the map of the Idafeld, which is also included at the end of the book.

protects. The mountains rising up all around are said to have surpassed all those now existing in quantity, beauty and size; they comprised a number of richly inhabited villages, rivers, lakes and meadows with sufficient fodder for all kinds of tame and wild animals and finally also large forests which, in the colourful diversity of their trees, provided wood for all kinds of work. This was the natural state of the plain, which many kings had worked to develop further. For the most part it formed a complete rectangle; but what was lacking was made up by a canal running round it; what is said of its depth, breadth and length sounds almost incredible for a work made by man, besides all the other works; for this ditch was a hundred feet deep, six hundred feet wide all round, and in its entirety had a length of ten thousand stadia. It took in the rivers flowing down from the mountains, touched the city on both sides and flowed into the sea*. From its upper part, channels about a hundred feet wide were led from it in a straight line into the plain, which in turn rejoined the channel drawn from the sea and were a hundred stadia apart; in this way the wood was brought from the mountains into the city, but also all other products of the land through channels that ran the length of the canal.

* See the map of the Idafeld.

canals were connected to each other and also to the city.

The soil yielded them two harvests a year; in winter due to the fertilising rain, in summer due to the irrigation from the canals. With regard to the number of inhabitants, it was stipulated that in the plain itself each plot of land had to have a warlike leader; each plot, however, had a size of one hundred square stadia, and the number of all plots was sixty thousand. On the mountains and in other parts of the country the number of inhabitants was given as immeasurable, but all were assigned to one of these plots and leaders according to their localities. Six of the leaders each had to drive a war chariot, so that in total there were ten thousand such war chariots for the war; in addition, each had two horses and riders and a two-horse team without a seat, which carried a warrior armed with a small shield and the charioteer, as well as two heavy-armed men, two archers and two slingers, three stone and three spear throwers and finally four sailors to man 1,200 ships. That was the order of warfare in the royal state; the other nine states had different regulations, the discussion of which would take us too far afield.

The relations of the government and state dignitaries were organised in the following way from the beginning. Each of the ten kings ruled in the area assigned to him.

He ruled over the inhabitants from his city and was above most laws, so that he could punish and execute whomever he wished. The rule over them and their mutual intercourse was determined by the commandment of Poseidon, as handed down to them in a law engraved by their ancestors on a pillar of brass in the centre of the island, in the temple of Poseidon. There they met alternately every five and every six years, in order to give equal justice to the even and the uneven number, and in these assemblies they deliberated on common matters, but also examined whether none of them had transgressed a law and passed judgement on it. When they were about to pass judgement, they would first give each other a pledge of loyalty:

They organised among the bulls, which ran free in the Holy.

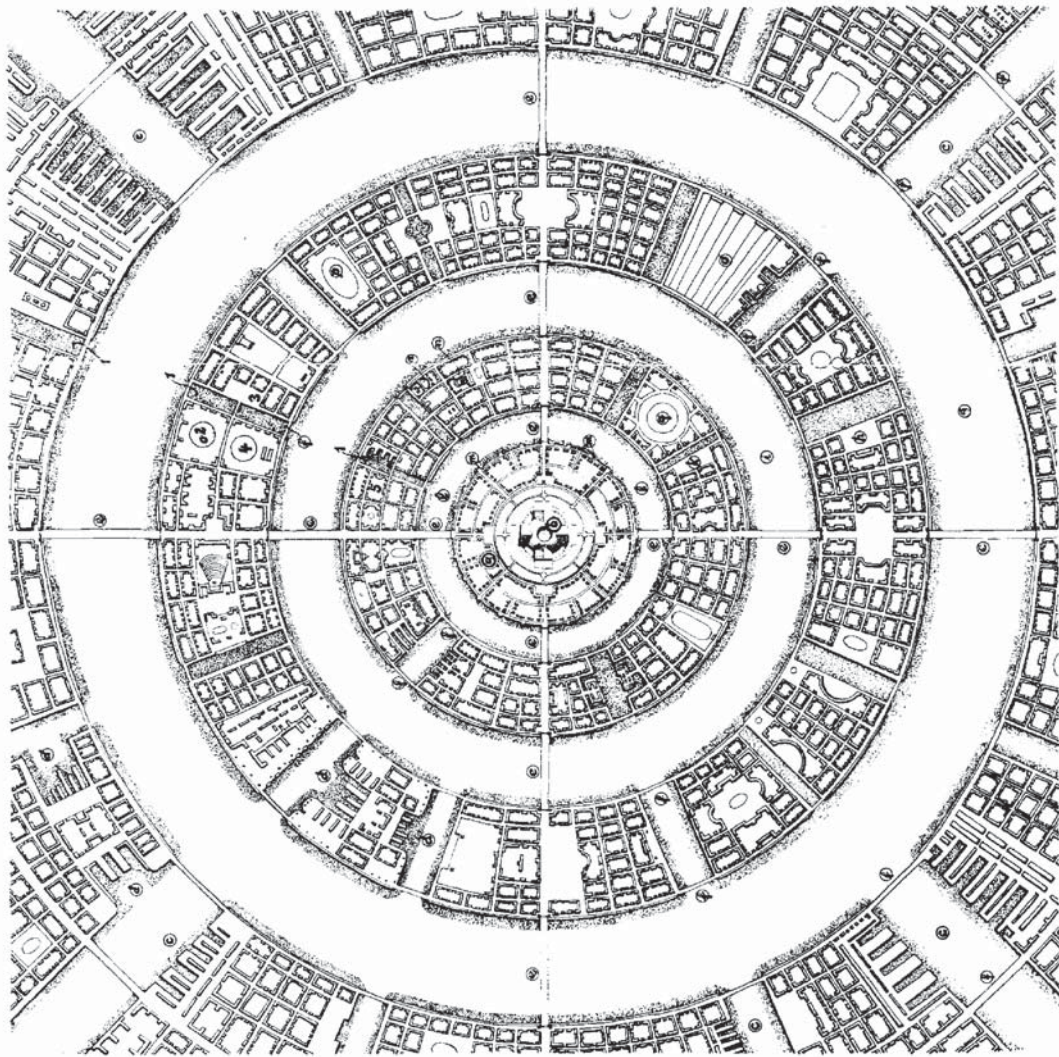
They hunted without weapons, only with shackles and snares, and begged the god that they might succeed in capturing the sacrificial animal that was pleasing to him; they then brought the captured bull to the pillar and sacrificed it there on the pommel of the pillar, directly above the inscription. On the pillar, in addition to the laws, there was an oath that pronounced powerful curses on anyone who disobeyed them. When they had consecrated all of the bull's limbs to the god during the sacrifice according to their customs, they filled a mixing jug and poured into it for

They took a drop of blood from each person, but threw everything else into the fire and cleansed the pillar all round. Then they drew from the mixing jug with golden drinking bowls, poured their offerings into the fire and swore to judge faithfully according to the laws on the pillar and to punish anyone who had committed an offence, not to deliberately violate any of those rules in future and not to rule or obey any ruler other than the one who ruled according to the laws of the father. When each of them had vowed this for himself and for his family, he drank and then consecrated the bowl as a gift for the temple of the god; then he took care of his meal and the needs of his body. As soon as it became dark and the sacrificial fires had died down, they all immediately dressed themselves in a dark blue robe of the highest beauty, sat down by the embers of the oath sacrifice, then extinguished all the fires in the sanctuary and received and pronounced judgement in the night, as often as one of them accused the other of breaking the law. As soon as it was daylight, they wrote the judgements on a golden tablet and consecrated it together with the robes as a memorial. There were many other laws concerning the rights of kings in particular, the most important of which was that no one should ever take up arms against another, but that they should all help each other in the event that one of them should attempt to take up arms in any city.

to overthrow the royal family; after joint consultation, as their ancestors had done, they were to decide on war and all other matters, but the Atlas family was to preside and give supreme command. An individual king would only have the right to execute one of his relatives if the majority of the ten had authorised it.

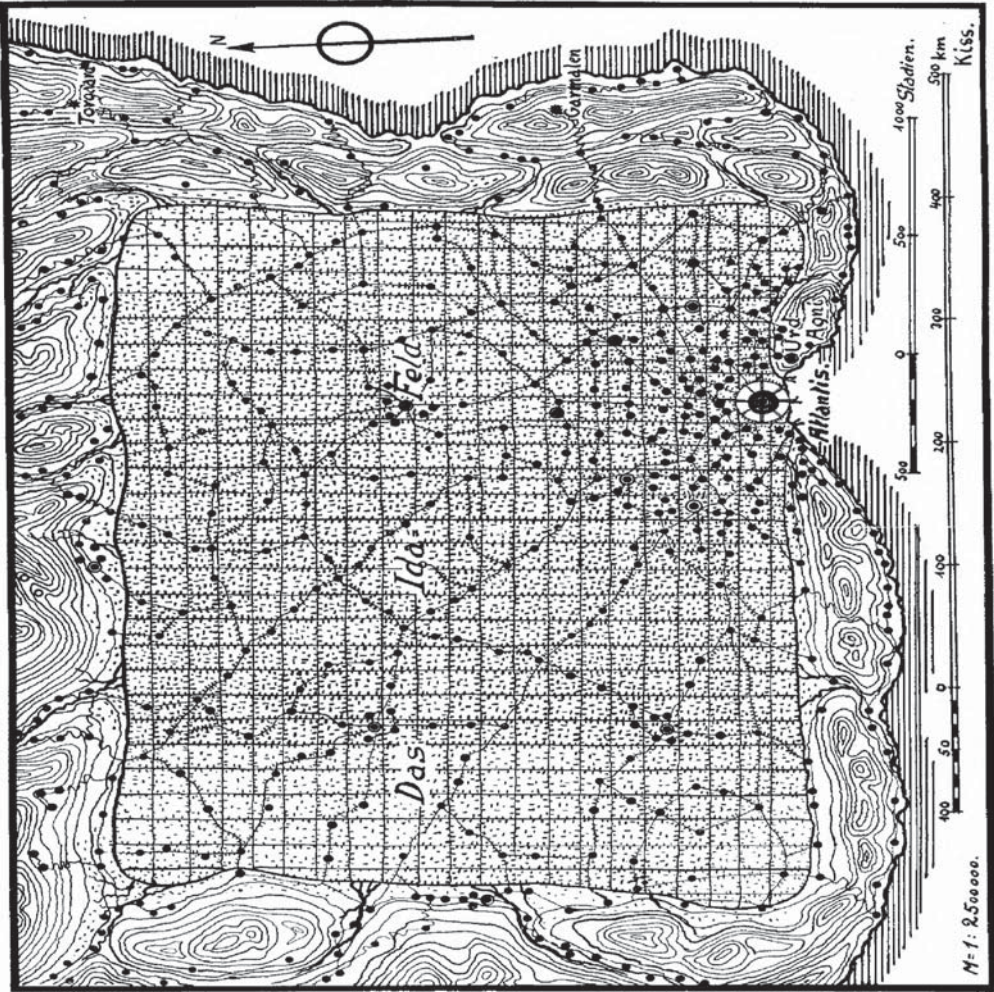
This power, which then existed in those lands in such a way and to such an extent, was brought against our country by the god, according to legend, due to the following circumstances. For many generations, as long as their divine descent was still active in them, they had obeyed the laws and were kindly disposed towards the divine, with whom they were related; their minds were sincere and thoroughly generous; they showed gentleness and wisdom towards all vicissitudes of fate and in their dealings with one another; They regarded every good except virtue as worthless and regarded the abundance of their gold and other possessions indifferently and more like a burden; their wealth did not intoxicate them and was not able to take away their self-control, nor to bring them to ruin; with sober perspicacity they rather recognised that all these goods thrive only through mutual love, united with virtue, but perish through the zealous pursuit of them and with them virtue. With such principles and the continued

The permanent activity of the divine nature in them meant that everything I described earlier flourished to the best. But when the part of their nature that came from God began to atrophy through the multiple and frequent mingling with the mortal, and the human character began to predominate, they were no longer able to endure their happiness, but degenerated; Anyone who was able to see through this realised how shamefully they had changed, by destroying the most beautiful of all that was valuable; but anyone who was not able to see through what kind of life truly leads to bliss, thought they were particularly noble and blissful at that time, since they were in full possession of unjust gain and unjustly acquired power. But Zeus, the god of the gods, who ruled according to eternal laws and was well able to see through this, decided, seeing a capable race degenerate so sadly, to make them pay for it so that, brought to their senses, they would return to their old ways. He therefore gathered all the gods together in their most venerable abode, which lies in the centre of the universe and provides an overview of everything that ever came into being, and said ...

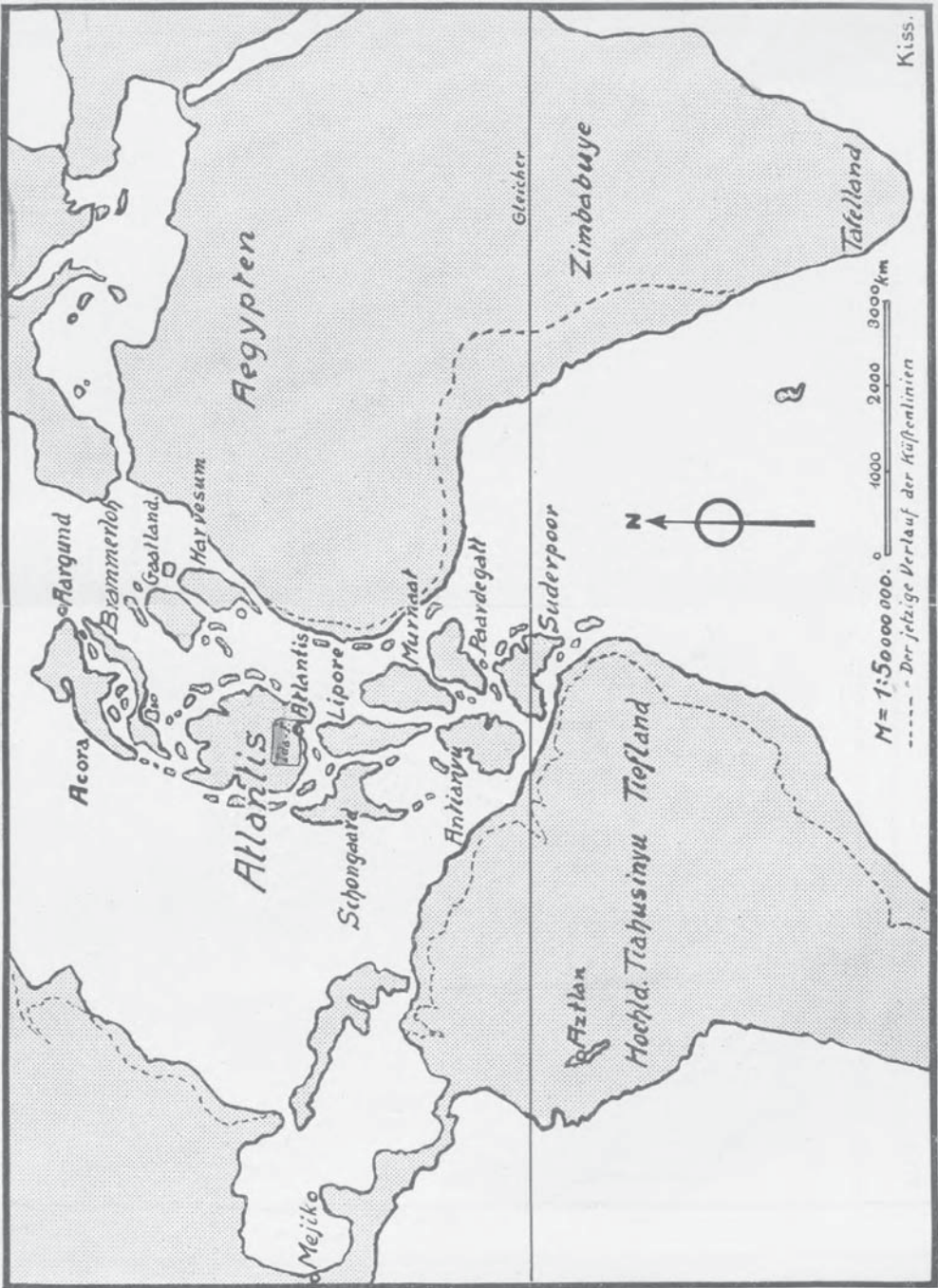


Map of the city of Atlantis

- a) The mountain that forms the innermost interior, the royal seat
- b) Temples and royal palaces
- c) Harbours
- d) Shipyards
- e) Bridges
- f) The passages between the ring canals
- g) The outer ring canal
- h) The outer earth belt
- i) The centre ring belt
- k) The inner earth belt
- l) The inner ring canal
- m) The wall around the royal castle
- n) Sanctuaries of the gods
- o) Gardens
- p) Training grounds
- q) Racecourse
- 1) Branch canal north-east, called "The lime tree"
- 2) The horticultural school
- 3) Commercial building
- 4) Public parks with playgrounds and racecourse
- 5) Hermit's house to the "Good Earth Mother"



Map of the Ida Field with the capital Atlantis



Map of the kingdom of Atlantis and its colonies

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