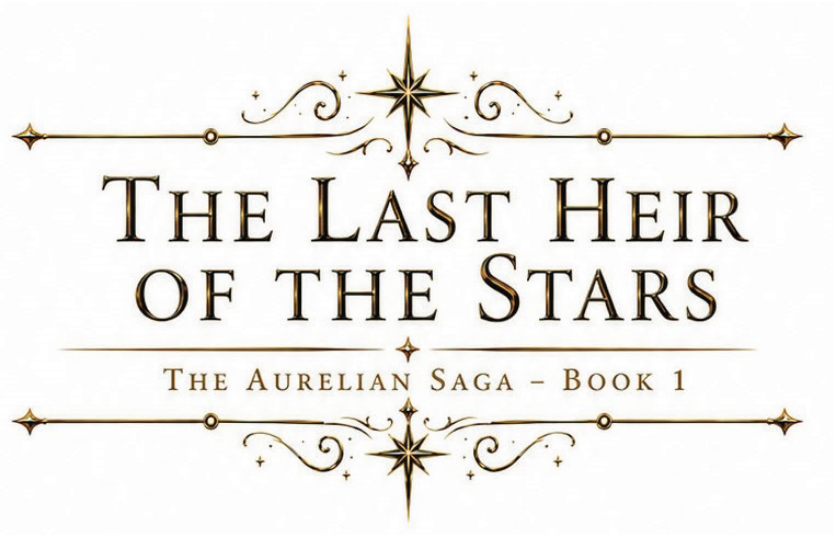


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The Aurelian Saga – Book 1

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Hello!

My name is Jan, and I live on a small, fairly insignificant planet. More precisely: somewhere in Germany. Which, if we are honest, does not sound particularly impressive as the beginning of a galactic story.

I was no hero, no soldier, no explorer and certainly no adventurer. If anything, I was more of a sofa person. Wherever there was a comfortable seat, there was a fairly good chance I had already tested it. Not out of laziness, you understand. More out of scientific curiosity.

My life consisted of family, children, work, bills, worries and the daily question of why there was always so much month left at the end of the money. I was content, really. Most of the time, at least. I had my wife, my children, a home, far too little peace and usually more problems than any normal person would willingly order. But it was my life. Not perfect, not especially grand, but real.

And yet there was something I could never truly explain. Sometimes I sat outside in the evening and looked up at the stars. Not because I wanted to go there. Not because I dreamt of great adventures or imagined a better life waiting for me somewhere among alien suns. Quite the opposite. All I really wanted was some peace. And still, my gaze kept being drawn upwards, as though something were waiting for me there. As though I had forgotten something I had never known.

That feeling had followed me all my life. Quietly. Unobtrusively. Like a distant call one cannot quite hear, yet never entirely forgets. What I did not know then was that a secret lay dormant deep within my heart. A secret older than memory, older than any known history of Earth and older than anything I could have imagined.

It had waited for more than a thousand years. For the right moment. The right sign. For me.

And one day, that secret decided to awaken.

From that moment onwards, everything became complicated. Very complicated. Because the universe apparently had a plan, and I was probably the last person to hear about it.

Welcome to

The Last Heir of the Stars

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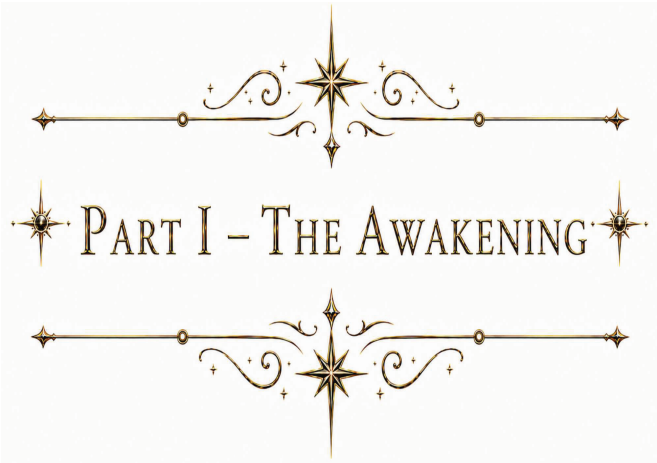
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Chapter 1 – The Sign

The alarm went off at exactly six o'clock. I did not merely hate that sound. Hatred would have been far too kind. The beeping was shrill, far too loud, and tore me from the little sleep I had finally managed to find. Had I known then what the coming weeks and months held in store, I would probably have thrown the alarm out of the window, gone back to bed and then closed the window so no one could find me. Not especially heroic, I know. But honest. Instead, I did what I did every morning: I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. It was still dark outside. Rain tapped against the window—not dramatically, the way it does in films, but simply cold, wet and far too early. Somewhere in the house, an old water pipe cracked as if to remind me that I was not the only thing making unhealthy noises in the morning. For a few seconds, I simply lay there and enjoyed something that was almost a luxury in our house: peace. No children. No questions. No missing shoes. No bills. No voice shouting "Dad!" from the corridor as though an international emergency had broken out in a bedroom. Only me, the ceiling and the very brief dream that perhaps I could simply stay where I was.

Then my heart made itself known. One beat. Another. Then a third that did not quite fit. It felt as though my heart had briefly forgotten which

rhythm it was meant to follow. I lay perfectly still, held my breath and waited. By now, I knew that stumble. Doctors had words for it. Cardiac arrhythmia, exertion, monitoring, treatment. When one had been ill long enough, one eventually collected medical terms the way other people collected supermarket loyalty points. They were not much help at six in the morning. After a few seconds, it settled again. It often went like that: a few irregular beats, a fright, then peace again. "Brilliant," I muttered. "You again." At forty-two, I was already having regular conversations with my own heart. I had never won one. Lydiana lay beside me. She was asleep—or rather, she was trying to be. In our life, that was about as easy as taking a peaceful bath while five children argued outside the door over who would die first if no one fixed the Wi-Fi immediately. Papers, a pen, a half-closed folder and some list that was probably more important than my entire schedule lay on her bedside table. My wife could write lists even when she was tired, annoyed or already half asleep. I sometimes wrote "milk" on a note, then forgot why I had gone to the shop at all.

I watched her for a moment. After many years of marriage, one looks at a person differently. Not as at the beginning, when everything is new and one is trying not to look too foolish. Eventually, one knows the other person tired, dishevelled, irritable, worried, ill and overwhelmed—and still strong. Lydiana was such a person. She often carried more than she said: children, housework, appointments, paperwork, worries and me. Especially me. I think sometimes I was the heaviest part of it, and not only because of my weight. I pushed back the duvet as quietly as I could. My knee cracked. Naturally. I sat there for a moment and rubbed my knee. The bloody pain reached up into my thigh. "Ow, shit," I whispered. "Old, fat, short-sighted and broken. What a package." Lydiana moved slightly, murmured something unintelligible and pulled the duvet higher. I froze. Anyone who wakes a sleep-deprived woman is either brave or stupid. I was many things, but I was not suicidal. So I stood carefully, slipped on my slippers and went to the door.

The corridor was cool. The house smelled of night, rain and faintly of the laundry basket someone had definitely meant to put away yesterday.

Probably me. I decided not to remember. In the morning, one had to set priorities, and mine was clearly coffee. In the kitchen, the first enemy of the day was already waiting: a stack of letters. It lay on the kitchen table, right beside the coffee machine. Exactly where it was impossible to ignore. Probably bills. Perhaps a reminder as well, so I could dislike the same bill twice. I would rather not look before my first coffee. I decided to make coffee first. Coffee did not make the world good, but at least it made it a little more bearable. While the machine hummed, I braced both hands on the worktop and slowly breathed out. My heart was calmer again, but I still felt utterly exhausted, although I had only just got up.

The rain grew heavier outside. Droplets ran down the kitchen window, distorting the streetlights. I looked out and disappeared into my own thoughts for a few seconds. I was good at that: simply standing somewhere, staring at something and vanishing inside my head. Lydiana sometimes said someone could dismantle a wardrobe next to me and I would only notice when I tried to lean against it. Perhaps she was right. My mind was rarely truly quiet. Money. Children. Appointments. Heart. Work. Doctor. Bills. What had to be done today? What had we forgotten? Why had something broken again? And sometimes there was something else. A strange pull upwards, towards the stars, although I was standing in a kitchen in Germany at six in the morning and really only wanted coffee. I shook my head. “Not now.” I did not know whether I was speaking to my heart, my thoughts or something out there. At the time, I thought it did not matter. Later, I would understand that some things are listening long before one even knows one has called.

The coffee machine gurgled one last time. By then, I had rubbed my eyes three times and was still barely awake. I picked up the cup, smelled it and decided the coffee was strong enough either to wake a human being or repel small animals. I was fine with both. The first sip was hot, bitter and exactly what I needed. I heard footsteps behind me. Not the children’s pounding, but the tired, cautious steps of my wife trying to wake up without killing anyone. I turned. Lydiana stood in the kitchen doorway, hair dishevelled, eyes weary, wearing an old shirt—and still with that look that grasped the situation in a second: me, coffee, letters

and a bad decision within reach. “Don’t touch them,” she said. I immediately raised both hands, although I was still holding the cup. “I haven’t done anything.” She looked at the stack, then at me. “Not yet.” I sighed. “You really have very little faith in me.” She came into the kitchen, sat at the table and pulled the top letter towards her as though defusing a bomb. “I know you.” Unfortunately, that was a rather good argument.

I put coffee in front of her. It was one of my most important contributions to family life: bringing coffee and trying not to do anything wrong in the process. One had to know one’s strengths. “You should have stayed asleep,” I said. She gave me a look somewhere between love, exhaustion and mild homicidal intent. “So should you.” “I got up because the alarm went off.” She did not even look up. “And because your heart was playing up again.” I stopped. “You noticed?” “I notice more than you think.” She really did. Sometimes it was lovely. Sometimes terrifying. Lydiana had this particular ability to know things before I said them. If I stood in the corridor wondering whether I could secretly take something sweet from the cupboard, she would call from another room, “Leave it.” To this day, I do not know how she did it. Perhaps she was the true alien life-form in our house. “It was only brief,” I said. She set down the letter and looked at me properly. “With you, everything is always only brief. Your heart was only brief. The pain was only brief. The exhaustion is only brief. And at some point, you’re lying there again saying you’re fine.”

I wanted to object. Truly. I had already drawn breath and arranged my face to suggest I had a sensible reply. None came. That was annoying, because I hated it when she was right. More annoying still was the fact that she usually was. So I did what men often do in such situations. I looked into my cup. “I don’t want to worry all of you even more,” I said at last. Lydiana softened, but did not grow any less serious. “You worry us more when you pretend nothing is wrong.” I nodded slowly. A car passed outside, its tyres hissing on the wet road. It was no grand dramatic moment. No music, no ray of light, no revelation that changed everything. Just my wife, me, coffee, bills and a heart that did not

reliably do what it was meant to. Sometimes those small moments were harder than the great ones. “I’ll ring the doctor later,” I said. She raised an eyebrow, and I immediately realised she was assessing whether I meant it. “Really,” I added. “Without you having to remind me three times.” She smiled for the first time that morning. Only briefly, but it was enough. “Progress.”

I was about to say something clever, perhaps even romantic, when a door slammed upstairs so loudly I almost spilt my coffee. Then came one voice shouting something that sounded like “That’s mine!”, followed by a second voice insisting on the opposite with absolute conviction. Lydiana closed her eyes. I looked at the ceiling. “And here comes the peace.” “The peace is in a bad mood today,” she said. “The peace is probably looking for socks.” As it turned out, she was not even wrong. Five minutes later, our kitchen had once more become what it usually was on school days: breakfast room, lost-property office, courtroom and disaster zone all in one. One child was looking for a notebook that had, of course, been exactly where it no longer was yesterday. Another claimed the wrong pair of trousers had been washed, which was apparently a grave crime against humanity. Someone wanted to know whether they had PE today, and someone else suddenly developed a stomach ache of the very suspicious kind that always appeared precisely when school was involved. And I stood in the middle of it all with my coffee, trying to look as though I had some control over the situation. I did not. But looking the part was something, at least.

Our youngest sat at the table, stared at her bread and announced with the gravity of a little queen that unfortunately she could not go to kindergarten today. When I asked why, she thought for a moment and said, “Because I can’t today.” I nodded slowly, as though she had made a very strong case, while Lydiana gave me a look that clearly said, Do not make this worse. So I made it only a little worse and asked whether she was ill. The little one visibly considered the possibility, settled on a cautious “Maybe”, and was exposed by her mother at once. At that, she sighed and declared that she was tired, then. “Welcome to the club,” I muttered. When she cried “Dad!” in outrage, I merely raised my hands.

“What? That was sympathy.” Lydiana rubbed her forehead, but I could see her suppressing a smile. Mornings like this were exhausting. Loud, chaotic, sometimes enough to make one run away. And yet there was something in all of it that I loved. Not necessarily at the very moment someone spilt milk, or remembered five minutes before we had to leave that some form was due today. But somewhere deep inside, I knew this jumble was my life. My real life. Not perfect, not peaceful, not tidy, but mine.

My son came into the kitchen half dressed, his hair looking as though he had fought a fan in his sleep. He took a slice of bread and meant to disappear again, but Lydiana stopped him with a single word. “Rubbish.” He looked at me, hoping I was the softer authority. That was a mistake. I might have been more softly built, but I was not always soft in the head. I pointed at his socks, one blue and the other grey. Perhaps it was fashion. Perhaps despair. In our house, the line was often thin. “You’re not even dressed yet,” I said. He looked down at himself, then nodded as though I had helped him. “Exactly. That’s why I haven’t got time.” The logic was so brazen it almost deserved respect. “Nice try,” I said, “but the rubbish is still going out with you.” He sighed as though I had ordered him to move a moon by himself and muttered something about it always being him. “It’s called training for life,” I explained. “Taking out rubbish is training?” I raised my cup. “Sometimes responsibility is rubbish.” Lydiana looked at me. “Please don’t turn that into a philosophy of life.” I shrugged. “Too late.”

For a few seconds, we laughed. Not long, not loudly, but enough to make the morning a little easier. Then everything continued: lunchboxes, jackets, shoes, wrong hats, arguments about weather, school, kindergarten and the great question of why everything had to be so stressful today when today was, in essence, like every other day. I helped where I could—or where I thought I was helping. Those were not always the same thing. I handed over a jacket no one was looking for, put a lunchbox in the wrong place and had to listen to complaints that I had not been paying proper attention again. That was unfair, because I had been listening. Just not to the right child. In the middle of it all, I

suddenly stopped. A brief pressure in my chest. Nothing bad. Nothing strong. Merely a tug, as though someone inside me had pulled an invisible thread. I laid a hand on the worktop and slowly breathed in. Around me, the chaos went on. Voices, footsteps, rustling jackets, clattering cups. No one noticed at once. Except Lydiana, of course. She looked at me, and I gave the smallest shake of my head. Not now. Not in front of the children. Her gaze hardened—not with anger, but with worry and a little fury because she knew exactly what I was doing. Playing it down. Again. But she said nothing. Not at that moment. I loved her all the more for it, although I knew I would pay later. With a conversation. That conversation in which, as a man, one is better off not trying to be funny, because it only digs the hole deeper.

After a few seconds, the pressure faded. I straightened, pretended I had only been looking for something and reached for my cup. Unfortunately, it was empty. That fitted the day. When the children had finally left the house, it did not immediately become quiet. There were those after-noises every family home knows: a door that had not been closed properly, a forgotten spoon on the table, crumbs everywhere and a shoe in the middle of the corridor as though someone had lost it in battle. Lydiana and I stood in the kitchen surveying the battlefield. I picked up my empty cup and said we had at least survived the first attack. She looked at the clock. “It’s half past seven.” “Then it was the first battle of the day.” “Please don’t turn it into a heroic epic.” “Too late. I can already hear dramatic music in my head.” She gave a quiet snort, but I saw her suppressing a smile. That was often how it was with us. We were tired, stressed, sometimes with our nerves lost somewhere between the coffee machine and the laundry basket, but there was nearly always room for one small joke. Perhaps it was how we survived. Some people meditated. I made stupid remarks and hoped no one noticed how tired I truly was.

Lydiana took a cup from the table and put it in the sink. “You’re ringing the doctor today.” There it was, the sentence I had been expecting. I nodded at once. “Yes. I will.” She merely looked at me. Not loudly, not angrily—simply with that gaze which said, Do not try to wriggle out of it now, my friend. If looks could kill, I would have been gone long ago.

They would probably have found me somewhere between the coffee machine and the kitchen table, officially dead of unexplained causes. “For real this time,” I said. “No escape attempt, no excuse, no sudden and critically important engagement with the coffee filter.” Her “Good” was only one word, but individual words from Lydiana could sometimes carry more weight than entire letters from government offices. I nodded, set down my cup and tried to look like a man who handled his health problems responsibly. I probably looked more like someone wondering whether one could arrange a doctor’s appointment by staring at a phone for long enough.

She came closer, and her expression softened. Then she placed her hand on my chest, exactly where my heart had staged its little private rebellion earlier. It was no grand gesture, nothing dramatic. But I sensed at once that there was more behind it than concern. There was fear. One of those quiet fears one does not voice because saying it aloud makes it more real. “You have to stop playing everything down,” she said softly. I wanted to make another joke. Something like, I don’t make everything small, only myself. But the words caught in my throat. Sometimes even a man like me can tell when humour will not help. Not often, but it happens. “I know,” I said. She looked at me, and this time there was no deadly glare, but the other one, far more dangerous: the worried one. I had even fewer defences against that. “I don’t want to lose you.” There it was, the sentence that did not tap one on the shoulder but went straight through the ribs. I swallowed and laid my hand over hers. Beneath her fingers, my heart was beating normally again. Or at least pretending to. Lately, I had learnt that normal for me was often only a pause between two problems. “I’m still here,” I said. “That isn’t the same as looking after yourself.” Again, she was right. This was becoming deeply inconvenient.

I pulled her briefly into my arms. Not for long, only as long as the morning allowed. In our life, hugs were sometimes like rest stops on a motorway that went on far too long. One did not stay forever, but one needed them in order to keep going. She rested her head against my shoulder for a moment, and I smelled her shampoo, coffee and the ordinary, familiar scent of home that one only misses when far away. I

did not yet know how much I would miss it. “I’ll ring,” I said quietly. “I promise.” She drew back, studied me once more and nodded. She did not look entirely convinced. Understandably. If I had received a euro every time I promised something and later forgot because of some child, some bill, something broken or my own stupidity, perhaps we would have had fewer money worries. Lydiana had to get ready, but reminded me once more not to touch the letters. I promised not to touch anything at all, which she naturally questioned at once. So I revised it to almost nothing. She had reached the door when she turned once more. “Doctor,” she said. Nothing else was necessary. I raised a hand as though in court. “Today. Really today. No escape attempt.” Only then did she go upstairs, although her expression made it clear that she was already compiling a list of all my possible excuses.

I remained alone in the kitchen. At last it was quiet. Truly quiet this time. No alarm. No children. No arguments. Only rain, the refrigerator and my breathing. Crumbs still lay on the table, together with a half-open folder, the suspicious stack of letters and a single felt-tip pen that would be guaranteed to belong to no one when someone asked about it later. I moved a few things aside, but not too many. One had to be careful. If I tidied too much, no one could find anything afterwards, and it was my fault. If I tidied nothing, it was my fault as well. Marriage and family were sometimes more complicated than tax forms. I picked up my phone, opened my contacts and found the surgery’s number. My thumb hovered above the screen. All I had to do was press it. One tap, wait, make an appointment, done. It was not difficult. In theory. But people are strange. Sometimes one can pay bills, take children to school, repair broken things and juggle five tasks at once, yet sit before a simple phone call to the doctor as though about to testify in court.

I breathed out. “Don’t be ridiculous.” At that exact moment, the phone vibrated. I flinched as though someone had caught me, although I had done nothing. No number appeared on the screen. No name. No message from the surgery, from work or from Lydiana. Only a symbol. At first, I thought there was something wrong with the display. Perhaps spam, an advert, some rubbish that had opened by itself. But the sign remained. It

lay against the dark background as though drawn in fine light. A circle. Several lines. Rays that met and parted again. Like a star, but not the way a human being would draw one. It was too precise. Too old. Too alien. And still, I knew it. Not in my mind. My mind was utterly overwhelmed and would rather have had more coffee. But somewhere deeper, in the place without words, I recognised the sign at once. My heart struck hard. Then again. Then it stumbled—and this time it was not like that morning in bed. This time it felt as though someone had pulled an invisible thread from within me. I almost dropped the phone and seized the worktop with my other hand. “Ow, shit,” I forced out.

The kitchen remained the same. The table, the letters, the coffee machine, the crumbs, the shoe in the corridor. Everything was normal. Far too normal. That made it worse. Had the walls suddenly shaken or light poured from the ceiling, at least my brain could have said, Good, something is now officially broken. But nothing of the sort happened. There was only that sign glowing on my phone, and my heart answering as though it had waited years for this. I stared at the screen. The symbol did not truly move. Not in a way one could prove. Yet the lines seemed to breathe. Very slowly. As though it were not an image but something alive pretending to be flat. “No,” I said softly. That was my first great response to the impossible. Not courage. Not curiosity. Not some heroic pronouncement. Simply: No. I pressed the power button. The screen went black. For one second, I stood there almost relieved. Then the display flickered back to life. The sign was still there. “Naturally,” I muttered. “Why should anything ever simply work?”

My heart beat faster. I did not merely hear it; I felt it in my throat, my ears, my fingertips. Part of me wanted to call for Lydiana. Another part wanted to throw the phone into the sink. A third, extremely sensible part reminded me that we could not afford a new one and I should therefore please not throw it into the sink. So I did what I was apparently best at in such situations. I stood and stared. Perhaps for ten seconds. Perhaps a minute. I no longer know. Time became strange in that moment. The rain at the window grew quieter, or perhaps I simply stopped hearing it. The refrigerator continued to hum. Somewhere upstairs, Lydiana moved

about the room. Normal life was still there, but suddenly seemed to lie behind a thin pane of glass. Then the symbol vanished. Just like that. The screen returned to normal. Contacts. The surgery's number. Everything as before. I blinked. "Right," I said slowly. "That was not normal."

My thumb was still hovering above the surgery's number. I looked at it, then at the place where the sign had been, then back at the number. For a moment, I genuinely considered ringing the doctor and saying: Good morning, my heart is playing up and my phone is showing me luminous star symbols that probably came through some form of galactic spirit post. Do you have an appointment today? I decided that might not be the best opening. Instead, I opened my messages. Nothing. No history. No sender. No image. No indication that anything had happened at all. My heart slowly settled, but the feeling remained. That pull. That certainty something had only just begun, although I had no idea what it was. I heard footsteps on the stairs. "Have you rung?" Lydiana called. I looked at the phone, then at the stairs. "In a moment!" It was not a lie. Unfortunately, it was not the whole truth either.

I stood there for another moment, phone in hand, staring at the contacts list. Everything looked normal. Not the slightest sign of what had just happened. "Stress," I muttered. "That was stress." It sounded reasonable. Adults said things like that. Stress explained a great deal. So did exhaustion. Heart rhythm problems certainly did. Perhaps I was simply overtired and had imagined it. Other people saw marks on a wall and thought of faces. I saw a star symbol on my phone. Almost the same thing. Only considerably more idiotic. At last, I pressed the surgery's number. It rang. And rang. Naturally. When one finally worked up the courage to ring the doctor, the line was engaged, it was lunchtime, they were on holiday, or one ended up on hold while some friendly voice explained how important the call was. Extremely important, apparently. So important that, at first, no one answered.

When someone finally did, I explained that my heart had begun stumbling again, that I had pressure in my chest and that it had been happening more often lately. I left out the luminous star symbol. There was no need to sound, over the phone, as though I belonged in a different

department. The woman at the other end was friendly but busy. She asked a few questions, typed something and eventually gave me an appointment that afternoon. I thanked her, hung up and stood still for a moment. This afternoon. Good. Done. I had called. I had been a responsible adult. At least for about five minutes, until Lydiana noticed I still had not touched the letters. I put the phone on the table, but not too far away. Just in case. Then I opened the top letter and understood after two lines why people in the past might indeed have been happier when messages were delivered by riders. If the rider annoyed you, at least you could refuse to open the door. Letters simply lay there and waited until you weakened. After the third, I gave up. “I need more coffee.” It was not a solution, but it was a beginning.

Lydiana came downstairs a little later, dressed, her hair more or less tamed and with an expression which said that her day was already too full before it had properly begun. When she asked whether I had called, I was finally able to nod with pride. “Yes. Appointment this afternoon.” She actually asked once more whether I had genuinely rung the surgery. I raised my eyebrows. “No, the pizza place. I wanted to find out whether they deliver cardiac arrhythmias.” She rolled her eyes, but her shoulders relaxed a little. On an ordinary morning, that was about as much victory as one could expect. Then she asked whether anything else had happened. I froze for only the tiniest moment. Unfortunately, she knew me well enough to notice even tiny moments. I picked up my coffee cup to have something in my hands and shrugged. “The phone played up for a moment.” Naturally, she wanted to know how. I looked at the device. The screen was black. “No idea. A strange image for a moment. Then it disappeared.” “What sort of image?” That was where things became difficult. If I said, a star symbol that looked as though my heart recognised it, she would either escort me to the doctor herself or call an ambulance at once. Neither would have been entirely unreasonable, but I was not ready for it. “Some sort of sign,” I said. “Maybe an advert. Spam. I don’t know.”

She continued to look at me. I hated it when she looked at me like that. It made one feel like a cheap second-hand car undergoing its

roadworthiness test. Finally, she demanded to see it. I opened messages, photographs, notifications. Nothing. Naturally, nothing. If the universe was going to start sending me strange signs, it could at least have had the courtesy to leave a record. “There’s nothing there now,” I said. “And your heart?” I was about to say “Fine” automatically, but her expression stopped me just short of stupidity. Progress. Perhaps I was becoming capable of learning after all. “It reacted,” I admitted. “Briefly. Then it was all right again.” Lydiana slowly exhaled. Not with relief. More as though she were counting to ten so she would not beat me with the nearest folder. “You tell the doctor everything about your heart,” she said. “And if another sign like that appears, you tell me.” I wanted to ask whether we had now officially reached the point of discussing signs on phones, but I left it. One had to ration one’s jokes. “All right,” I said. “If my phone makes contact with alien powers again, you’ll be the first to know.” Her eyes narrowed. I immediately raised my hand. “Seriously. I’ll tell you.” She did not look convinced. Understandably. I probably seemed about as credible as someone trying to pass off a burnt pizza as a culinary experiment.

The morning continued as mornings do when one has no time for mysterious symbols. I tidied a little, answered messages, looked for a document, found three things that had been missing for weeks instead and almost forgot why I had started searching in the first place. Eventually, I was sitting at the kitchen table again when I realised I had been staring at the same paragraph of a letter for ten minutes. My mind was not on the letter. It was on the sign. I kept seeing it: the circle, the lines, that glow which should not have been able to glow. And every time I tried to dismiss it as stress, the other feeling returned. Not strongly. More like an echo. As though my heart were saying somewhere deep within me: You know this. But I did not. Or did I?

Eventually, I did what every sensible modern person does when they do not understand something: I searched for it online. Naturally, I did not type “my phone is showing an ancient star symbol and my heart is playing drums to it”. I was not quite that honest. I searched for “circle star symbol”, “ancient sign circle lines”, “gold star symbol”, deleted one

search at once because even I thought it looked ridiculous, and within minutes found myself on esoteric websites, pages of old coats of arms, tattoo designs and a forum where someone claimed his toaster was receiving messages from Atlantis. I closed the browser. “Wonderful,” I muttered. “So this is where I belong now.”

Towards midday, the rain eased. I sat down in the living room just to put my feet up for five minutes. Truly, only five minutes. That was what I told myself, at least. My body acknowledged the information and apparently decided that five minutes was a very elastic term. I leaned back, closed my eyes and was gone at once. Not properly asleep. More that brief plunge one sometimes takes when the body says, We are stopping now whether you like it or not. I could still hear the heating ticking and a car somewhere outside; then everything softened and went dark. And then I saw stars. Not as they looked in the night sky. Closer. Clearer. As though I were not looking upwards, but drifting among them. A golden shimmer ran through the darkness, fine lines like those on my phone, only larger, more alive. Once again, they formed the circle, the sign, and this time it was not on a screen. It was everywhere. Before me. Around me. Inside me. My heart beat. Once. The stars answered.

My eyes flew open, and I gasped for breath. For a moment, I did not know where I was. Living room. Sofa. Old T-shirt. No ocean of stars. No sign. Only me, breathing far too fast, my mouth dry and my heart once again behaving as though it had just run up the stairs. “Bloody hell,” I whispered. From the kitchen, Lydiana called to ask whether everything was all right. I sat up, rubbed my face and tried to make my voice sound normal. That was difficult when one felt as though the universe had just personally knocked on one’s ribcage. “Yes,” I called back. “Just nodded off for a moment.” It was even true. Unfortunately, it was once again not the whole truth.

The afternoon arrived sooner than I would have liked. It was always like that with medical appointments. When one waited for something pleasant, time crawled like an old man with a bad knee. But when one had an appointment at which someone would ask serious questions about one’s heart, the day suddenly took off as though it had a bus to catch. I

sat in the waiting room and tried not to look nervous. That worked about as well as my attempts to take only a small portion at mealtimes. A poster about healthy eating hung on the wall. On it, a family holding fruit smiled as happily as if none of them had ever secretly eaten crisps at half past ten at night. I resolved not to feel personally attacked and failed after roughly three seconds. My heart was beating calmly. Almost too calmly. Now, of all times. Earlier, at home, I had struggled for breath, and here there might once again be nothing to record. I briefly laid a hand on my chest. “I hope they can at least see what’s happening today,” I muttered. An older woman opposite looked up from her magazine. I pretended I had said nothing.

The smell of coffee suddenly drifted through the open door. I looked up. I knew the smell from the surgery’s machine: bitter, thin and usually a little burnt. This coffee smelled freshly roasted, with a note of dark chocolate and something warm and nutty beneath it. A woman walked past the waiting room, holding a cup. I caught only a glimpse of her profile before she had gone. Where had she got that? I seriously considered getting up to ask. With all my visits to the doctor, at least the information would have paid off in the long run.

When my name was finally called, I tried not to groan as I stood. I half succeeded. I could not get up without swearing at all. I hoped it had been quiet enough. The medical assistant led me into an examination room, attached electrodes to my chest and asked me to lie still. I could do that. It was one of my few talents. The ECG machine began to run. Paper emerged with little spikes and lines, and I could not tell which of them were still normal. I stared at the ceiling and thought about my promise to tell Lydiana everything. Everything was a difficult word. Everything also meant the sign. The phone. The brief dream. That feeling that my heart had not merely stumbled, but answered. I said nothing. Not yet.

The doctor joined me a few minutes later. Friendly, calm, but wearing that professional expression with which one could never be certain whether he meant to reassure you or was already planning three more examinations. He looked at the ECG, then at me, then back at the ECG. I did not like that. If a doctor looks at a piece of paper too often, it is rarely

a sign that a compliment is coming. He asked whether it had been worse that morning, and I explained that my heart had briefly stumbled, with pressure in my chest, then improved. When he asked about stress, exertion or climbing stairs, I thought for a moment of the symbol on my phone and the stars in my head. Then I imagined how idiotic that would sound aloud. “Mornings with five children,” I said instead. “Does that count as exertion?” The doctor gave a faint smile. “Certainly.” At least it was medically recognised. He continued with his questions. Sleep, shortness of breath, dizziness, medication, diet, weight. He remained professional when we reached diet, which I appreciated. Some doctors could deliver an entire lecture with one look at a person’s stomach and never say a word. This one was better. Even so, I knew where it was leading. Less stress, more exercise, lose weight, regular check-ups. The classics. That day, I would have counted even ten peaceful minutes without pressure in my chest as a success.

Then the doctor paused over the printout again. “This is unusual,” he said. There it was. That word. Unusual. Not serious enough to cause immediate panic, yet not harmless enough to ignore. “Unusually good?” I asked. He merely looked at me. “Worth a try,” I muttered. He explained that there were irregularities. Nothing he wished to interpret definitively from this brief ECG, but in conjunction with my symptoms, further tests were advisable. A long-term ECG, blood tests, perhaps another cardiology appointment. And if the pressure grew worse or failed to subside, I was to go straight to A&E. I nodded. The way one nods when one has understood, but still hopes inside that it might all be a misunderstanding. My gaze fell upon the ECG printout on his desk. The lines ran restlessly across the paper—spikes, pauses, little deflections. For a moment, the pattern blurred before my eyes. Not badly. Only briefly. But within those lines, I saw something that did not belong there. A circle. Rays. The sign. I blinked. It was gone. Only ECG lines. Paper. Ink. Nothing more. “Are you all right?” the doctor asked. I realised I had been staring at the printout too long. “Yes,” I said quickly. “It just… looks like art.” The doctor observed drily that heart rhythm was rarely art. “Mine is making an effort,” I said. He did not quite smile, but almost. Then he gave me referrals, instructions and the sort of look that meant:

Please take this seriously, even if you are plainly a man who likes to bludgeon serious matters with stupid jokes.

I took the papers and went outside. The rain had stopped. The air smelled wet and cold; the grey sky was reflected in little puddles across the car park. I stopped beside the car, drew a deep breath and felt how tired I was. Not merely physically. That other kind of exhaustion, somewhere between fear and 'I cannot do this right now'. I should have called Lydiana at once. Instead, I stood holding the papers and looking up at the sky, although no stars could be seen that afternoon. "What do you want from me?" I whispered. Naturally, no one answered. That would have been the last thing I needed. Then I got into the car.

* * *

The woman was now sitting by the surgery window. Her cup stood before her, one hand still resting on its handle. Outside in the car park, Jan placed the papers on the passenger seat. She watched him until he started the engine.

"So that is the heir," she said softly.

Jan drove away. The woman took a sip of coffee.

* * *

On the drive home, the phone lay beside the papers. Silent. Black. Harmless. At every red light, I glanced across at it. Nothing happened. No symbol. No light. No galactic text message with an explanation. Just an ordinary phone. And I was slowly beginning to wonder in earnest whether I was losing my mind.

The house was alive again when I returned. Voices, footsteps, doors; someone was laughing somewhere, someone complaining elsewhere, and the kitchen smelled of food. Other people might have called it chaos. To me, it was home. Lydiana looked at me the moment I came in. Not at my jacket. Not at my shoes. Straight into my face. That woman could probably have spotted from fifty metres away in thick fog whether I was hiding something. I had no chance. I never really did. "Well?" she asked.

I took off my jacket and tried to look normal. “I’m still alive.” When she said my name in that particular tone, I immediately raised the papers. “All right, all right. He wants more tests. Long-term ECG, blood tests, perhaps cardiology.” She took the documents, skimmed them and fell silent. That was worse than being scolded. Lydiana could be loud, certainly. But her silence had weight. “He said you have to take this seriously,” she said. “Does it say that?” “I can see it in your face.” I took off my shoes and put them aside. “Nothing was conclusive.” She simply looked at me, and I knew what was coming before she said it. “But it wasn’t nothing either.” She had me. Again. I nodded slowly. “No. Not nothing.” She handed the papers back, but kept her gaze on me. Fear, worry, anger, love. The whole package, heavier than any official letter. “You are not playing this down any more,” she said. I automatically wanted to make a joke—something about playing things down being my sport—but stopped myself. Sometimes one has to grant a person one loves at least the dignity of worrying. “I’ll try,” I said. “Don’t try. Do it.” I nodded. Nothing more was needed in that moment.

Then the children interrupted, as children do when conversations become too serious. One wanted something signed, one was hungry although dinner was nearly ready, another could not find a jacket that was naturally lying in the middle of the corridor. The little one informed me with great importance that someone at kindergarten had cried because a tower of building blocks had fallen over. I listened, nodded, asked questions and tried to find solid ground again in this ordinary jumble. It helped. A little. Dinner was loud. There was talk of school, homework, an allegedly unfair teacher and whether vegetables were truly necessary or merely an invention by adults to annoy children. I sat at the table, ate, half listened and eventually noticed Lydiana watching me. I was holding my cutlery, but had stopped eating. “What is it?” she asked softly. I looked at my plate. “Nothing.” She said nothing. She did not have to. I took a bite, chewed and realised I could barely taste the food. That was rare for me. Eating was normally one of the few areas in which my mind worked with perfect reliability. If I became distracted while eating, it was not a good sign.

One of the children asked whether I was listening at all. Suddenly, everyone was looking at me. I nodded immediately. “Of course.” When the test question came—what had just been said—the only thing left in my head was a tiny monkey banging two metal cymbals together. Nothing else. “You said… something very important,” I ventured. The table erupted in laughter. “You weren’t listening!” I raised my fork. “I was listening internally.” Apparently, that did not count. “Many things count for adults that don’t count for children,” I explained. When someone said that was unfair, I merely nodded. “Welcome to life.” Lydiana shook her head, but she smiled. And it was for precisely such brief moments that I loved this table. This chaos. These voices. This jumble of complaints, jokes, crumbs, worries and warmth. I did not know that I would soon miss it from a distance no longer measured simply in kilometres.

Later, as the children slowly settled and the house passed from loud chaos into weary chaos, I took a cup of tea onto the terrace. The air was cool, but not unpleasant. The rain had stopped, and dark gaps appeared between the clouds. Beyond them, very faintly, the first stars. I stopped. There it was again. That pull. Not strong. Not painful. More like a memory of something that could never have happened. The terrace door opened behind me. Lydiana stepped outside, drew her cardigan more tightly around her shoulders and stood beside me. For a while, she said nothing. She was good at that. Being silent beside me without making the silence empty. “You’re looking like that again,” she said at last. I continued gazing upwards. “Like what?” “As though you’re searching for something.” Naturally, I wanted to deny it. But the stars above flickered between the clouds, and my heart was beating a fraction too hard. “Perhaps I’m only looking for some peace,” I said. She leaned lightly against me, just enough for me to feel her warmth. “And do you find it up there?” I shrugged. “Sometimes.” She too looked at the stars. “Then keep looking.”

And I did. For a moment, a wider gap opened in the clouds above us. More stars became visible. Not many, but enough. I did not know the constellations. Not truly. If someone showed me one, I generally nodded

as though I had recognised it while thinking, They look like dots to me. But that evening, there was something else. A handful of stars stood in a shape that seemed familiar. A circle. Lines. Rays. I blinked. The clouds moved on, the pattern broke apart, and suddenly they were only stars again. Ordinary stars. Points in the sky. Nothing more. Without thinking, my hand went to my chest. Lydiana noticed at once. “Jan?” I slowly breathed in. “Everything’s fine.” She said nothing. “Right,” I murmured. “That was a lie.” This time, she did not scold me. Perhaps because she realised I did not understand what was happening either. Or perhaps because the evening was too quiet for an argument. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked softly. I searched for an answer that did not sound entirely mad. That was difficult, since my life had apparently decided that very morning to head in precisely that direction. “I don’t know,” I said at last. “I feel as though something is coming.” “Because of the doctor?” “That too.” She looked at me. “But not only that.” I nodded. “Not only that.”

In the faint light from inside, her face looked tired, worried and beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with perfection. It had more to do with years. With days endured together. With a love that does not always look romantic, but sometimes simply means someone standing beside you while you have no idea what is happening to you. She took my hand. Her fingers were cold. So were mine. “Then we’ll face it together when it comes,” she said. I had to look at her for a moment. “That sounds very brave.” “No,” she said. “It sounds like marriage.” I laughed softly. Not because it was especially funny, but because otherwise I might have said nothing at all. “You do know that when I encounter something unfamiliar, I usually stare stupidly at it first and look for coffee?” She nodded. “Yes.” “And even so?” She squeezed my hand. “Even so.”



We remained there for a while. Behind us, the house slowly went to sleep. Before us lay the night. Above us, the stars. At some point, Lydiana said that as soon as the medical appointments and all the stress allowed it, we should finally go to the sea. Not merely talk about it, not merely look at pictures. Actually stand there, together with the children, for a few days without bills and appointments on our minds. “Someday,” I said. She looked at me. “Not someday. We’re doing it.” I had to smile, and I promised her. For a moment, that little dream of the sea felt closer than anything in the darkness above us. Then I felt it. A single heartbeat, heavier than the others. Above us, a star flickered. Only briefly. Perhaps it was a cloud. Perhaps my circulation. Perhaps stress, exhaustion, fear, too much coffee, too little sleep and a heart in urgent need of a rest. Or perhaps it was an answer.

Later, I lay in bed while Lydiana slept beside me. I listened to the house, the rain beginning once more to tap softly against the window, and my own heart. Somewhere deep within me, for the first time, I had the feeling it no longer beat for me alone. I do not know when I finally fell

asleep. At some point, the morning was gone, the terrace was gone, Lydiana's hand in mine was gone, and I stood beneath a sky I did not know. It did not feel like an ordinary dream in which everything makes perfect sense and none at all at the same time. This dream was clear. Too clear. So clear that eventually my mind could no longer decide whether I was sleeping or remembering a place I had never visited.

I stood upon black ground. Not earth. Not tarmac. Not stone as I knew it. Beneath my feet lay a smooth, dark surface threaded with fine golden lines. They did not lead anywhere at random, but formed patterns. Circles, arcs, rays. It took a moment for me to understand that I was seeing the sign again. Only this time, it was not on a phone, not in the stars, not in a brief flicker. It was immense. It lay beneath me like the ground plan of something far too ancient and too vast to fit inside my head. I wanted to move, but my legs felt heavy. My heart beat slowly. Not irregularly. Not stumbling. More as though it were waiting for something.

Something rose from the darkness before me. At first, I thought it was a wall. Then a tower. Then I realised I could not judge its size at all. Silver light slid over smooth surfaces, high arches and black columns veined with gold. Somewhere above me, stars were moving although there was no sky. Or perhaps the sky was there, but too close. "Hello?" I called. My voice sounded wrong. Too quiet. As though the darkness swallowed it at once. No answer. Naturally. Even in my dreams, the service was poor. I took one step forwards. The golden lines beneath my feet glowed more brightly. I stopped at once. I was no expert in ancient luminous floor patterns, but from my limited experience of life I could say this much: if something beneath one's feet suddenly begins to glow, carrying on dancing is not necessarily advisable. "Stay calm," I muttered. "Perhaps it's only stress. Or too little sleep. Or that sauce at dinner." Part of me knew it was nonsense. I clung to it all the same. One takes what one can get.

Then I heard a tone. Not a sound in the usual sense. More a deep hum that came not from the air, but from the ground, the columns, the golden lines and perhaps even my own chest. My heart answered with a single