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**Chorus of the Erinyes**

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### **The Talent of Ravens**

*My mother is afraid of her abilities because they allow her to see the dead. It's milder for me; it's the living that appear. They flicker briefly, and I know everything about them, if only for the moment that we are connected. It often happens while I'm sleeping, when a dream is drawing to a close, revealing something truer than what has come before, the clarity of which leaves me agitated. Suddenly alone again, and yet not. What remains is the feeling of closeness, of a secret presence. Most of the time it's friends who haunt me, those I haven't seen in years who never get in touch, but who at night make themselves known, impose themselves. What am I to do with them? In everyday life they are busy, barely reachable, and certainly not by me.*

Mathilda lowered the pen and contemplated her flowing handwriting. The arcades and festoons appeared wide and a little ponderous, almost baroque in their expansive exuberance, while the ups and downs were jagged and concentrated with the regularity of hammer blows, as if they were nailing a series of air bubbles to the floor.

She hadn't kept a diary since she was a child. She had no need for introspection. She still remembered the moment when she decided to stop chasing her whims, and to devote her energies to intellectual work and living a normal, useful life. It was the afternoon her school

friend Birte had stood her up for the first time. She had opened her jotter and entered the date, then sat frozen for hours in front of the lined paper before finally closing it. Until today.

In this notebook, black with red corners, a number of pages were left blank, most of them in fact. Maybe this was the only reason she had kept it over the years, even retained it within reach in her desk drawer, because she couldn't throw away a book that had hardly been broken in. Rather, she thought she could use it again for some trivial matter, such as entries pertaining to the household budget. Petrol receipts, mileage allowance.

Now she was lost in the squiggles and clouds of her sentences. The black lines of ink slid over each other, bunched together to form a mass in which she could make out her mother's dark curls for a moment, her permed hair which she still dyed regularly. Twisted threads that became more and more tangled into whorls and knots, into an impenetrable darkness. Then the tangle shifted and became a weight in her stomach, which she had last felt as a child when something unpleasant was about to happen.

That morning, she had her class take a test and afterwards she rehearsed with the working group chambre orchestra. She walked home, as she always did.

The first leaves were covering the pavement and emanating their autumnal scent. Mathilda's leather soles were slippery, she stepped carefully on the leaves. The extra weight of the tests in her bag was insistent. She switched the strap to the other shoulder. Bad for one's back in the long run, but a modicum of elegance had to be maintained. The young violinists and the cellist, the violist and even the bassist placed so much importance on their artistic habitus at the weekly rehearsal that they did not want an overly derisive appearance, possibly caused by a hiking backpack, to destroy their illusions. Her charges wore long robes and tossed their hair passionately, while she herself tried to teach them that a great performance came down to a musical penetration of the piece; to precise phrasing, breath control, and that, when playing as a group, the first thing to accomplish was to become in tune with the other musicians.

Her house was not too far from the stately pre-war grammar school, in a neighboring area with houses from the turn of the century and a mature stock of trees. In this context, her flat-roofed house was conspicuous, angular and cool, in a garden of sparse, low-growing plants, perennials, ground covers, pampas grass. Nevertheless, the property was mostly in the shade, the gnarled branches of the neighboring trees jutted in from all sides, and she liked knowing

that she was flanked by these mighty beeches and linden trees without being responsible for their maintenance. In the front yard she rummaged for the key, the white fruits of the snowberry gleamed from the bush by the fence, her tiny ginkgo in the middle of the lawn was already showing a hint of yellow, and when she looked up, she saw Birte standing on the steps in front of the door, fragile-looking, motionless. She was standing there with her arms hanging down, oddly translucent, gaunt. Birte had always been slim, lithe, and graceful, now she seemed emaciated, even skeletal. Mathilda went to meet her, and the closer she got, the more Birte lost her focus. As she reached the entrance, Birte disappeared.

She went into the house and locked it from the inside. For once, she left the key in the lock, though it was only the afternoon. She took off her shoes and coat and took the post with her into the study: a statement from the health insurance company, a letter from the city administration, an invitation to a concert. She made essential phone calls. The Math Olympiad. The new state program: ‘An instrument for every child’. The School Inspectorate. Then she smacked the pile of tests down onto her desk and corrected stochastics problems until it got dark.

She hadn’t heard from Birte for several years. The last time a letter had arrived from her, she recognised the flourishes Birte used to decorate the envelopes to make them appear personal and not businesslike (although her letters were really business letters) the moment she opened the postbox. She acknowledged the stained, wrinkled envelope that had been lying around somewhere carelessly for too long and which Birte had proceeded to cover with cut-out flowers, which Mathilda felt was not age-appropriate; flowers for friendship scrapbooks that appealed to a mutual childhood that had passed decades ago.

It had been a letter full of subtle accusations and demands, and Mathilda had not replied. The slight nausea in the region of her stomach had returned with this letter, but she had no desire to resolve a nebulous situation that the other side did not want to resolve. Birte indicated that Mathilda’s way of life seemed too well adjusted, without risk, without existential seriousness. A nice husband, a house that’s almost paid off, an interesting job, a car she and her husband could share because they could both walk to work, plus kids galore at school – she had achieved all that was traditionally considered fulfilment without any special effort. From

this Birte deduced that Mathilda owed her something, but Mathilda did not see what this could have been.

She was now moving the pen nervously. She wasn't writing anymore – she was scribbling. She crossed something out, hatched the sheet of paper, obliterated until all the lines covered one another.

She had perceived Birte's form clearly and distinctly, at first, that is, then as strangely watery, transparent. In broad daylight and on her own property! At first, she had experienced a jolt of joy, a flickering, flaring delight, and she couldn't help walking faster towards Birte, like an unsuspecting dog running at everyone it's ever known, violently wagging its tail. Then the impulse changed, the memory returned, and she wondered suspiciously what Birte was doing there at her door. What she wanted from her. It was only on the third step that she realised that the figure wasn't solid enough to behave in any meaningful way towards her, but then she had already begun to evaporate.

If only it had been a Marian apparition! A proven vision for which there were formulas, empty sayings, tried and tested over centuries.

She turned the page and added strange little spirals and spikes to the next sheet of the notebook. They meant nothing.

Still, during all these years, she had been afraid to look inside it. She was afraid of her own handwriting. She was one of the first to switch to computers. In her fields of music and mathematics, she didn't have to write very much. Corrections required numbers and symbols rather than words and sentences, and there were right and wrong solutions; no half-measures, no ambivalence. It gave her security, she relaxed around facts and figures, and it was a pity that her students didn't feel the same way, that they didn't unanimously declare maths their favorite subject. It's a support for pubescent minds, a rock in the surf of wishy-washy subjects, in which it was rarely about content, but rather more – as she observed every day – about telling their teachers what they wanted to hear and reassuring them about their respective political attitudes and their pedagogical ambitions. Her colleagues sought validation from the students. She considered this wrong. Her ideal was impersonal instruction, professional distance. One revealed themselves with their handwriting.

She kept scribbling mechanically, scrawling all over the paper, meticulously trying to shade over every white spot. Oddly enough, the white gaps multiplied the more determinedly she sought to overwrite them. For every opening that she filled, three new slivers were created; an endless undertaking. Even so, the page came alive, breathing and arching towards her. Of course, the dark cloud didn't mean anything, it also wasn't a cloud; a fragment of indeterminacy at most. But the paper was no longer neutral. It was completely filled, it exuded an atmosphere that she could only attribute to herself.

Well, she had seen Birte. Outside her own front door. She would have preferred to have seen where a certain other person was lingering. Her wedded husband, with whom she lived in peaceful, unobtrusive harmony and with whom, as far as she knew, there had been not the slightest disagreement, had left the house in the blink of an eye and had never come back. Willingly or forgetfully, she had spent the last three days as if everything was as it should be. She didn't let it show, she behaved as usual at school, and she hadn't spoken to anyone about it. It was as if the situation, if she didn't in any way talk about it, might turn out to be a delusion overnight, but could conversely harden if others, with their superficial opinions, began to declare an uncertain situation a fact, cementing something for which there was no justification and no reason. Suddenly a cloud castle made of pipe dreams landed out of the blue and became massively, immovably real.

What was certain was that three days ago her husband had become short-tempered over some incomprehensible trifle, he had thrown a tantrum, and then left the house in a sulk. She had tried to recapitulate the scene several times, but the incident remained inscrutable and unsatisfactory. Perhaps he was attending a conference and had neglected to inform her; he had considered the trip to be so self-evident during its preparatory phase – which was always carried out a bit overzealously – that he supposed that she must have been aware of it. Maybe he'd gone to see his mother and assumed she could figure this out by herself. She'd even had him on the phone twice, but the connection had been so bad she could barely hear him. His monologuing had sounded confused, and she didn't want to set herself up as a supervisory authority on his behalf. He had lately, in any case, accused her of domineering behaviour; she had resolved not to interfere in his affairs and to give him total freedom, within reasonable limits of course. He would have his reasons. He had to have reasons, even if she couldn't work them out. Still, she felt he was overdoing it.

[...]

## **Flaming Vision**

Mathilda waited on the wide forest path, she heard Olivia's laboured breathing and her footsteps a little deeper within the forest.

Up to now, she had been disappointed with the hike. No night frost and no morning mist, no wistful sinking into the emptiness of the landscape; it didn't feel autumnal at all. Others hiked the Großer Ahornboden in the Karwendel mountains to admire the gnarled 500-year-old trees and their twilight-amber foliage, this shocking hue, pure gold against a backdrop of blue mountains. They, on the other hand, were surrounded by coniferous forest, by pointy cones with stiff brown twigs, by post-45 spruce used to plug voids left by the catastrophic impact of logging as war reparations.

Olivia broke out of the undergrowth and dropped onto a tree stump.

Fantastic weather, she gushed, wiping sweat from her brow. She was glad that they had got together again for this endeavour. The forest at its most beautiful, clear views, an Indian summer. From here, however, the view was miserable; three brown spruces that had not survived the bark beetle infestation. Mathilda didn't like the ever-dusty needles, nor their aggressively triangular silhouette. She shifted about restlessly. Birte had gone on far ahead in the meantime, shouldn't they set off to catch her up?

In a minute, Olivia said, leaning against the back of the trunk, arching her chest, and pushing her face into a sunspot.

We won't be rushed, she decided. It's impossible to follow Birte anyway, Birte knows where she's going, she just goes straight ahead.

Someone had smashed a bottle near the stump. The shards lay scattered among the dry needles; and they weren't in the shade. Wasn't this the kind of scenario they were always being warned about? A shard for a magnifying glass, and a single ray of sunshine would be all it took. In an ideal case, the shards had to be layered for an effect to occur. Even better, she warned her students on each hike, an intact bottle of water could do the trick.

She fixed her eyes on the largest of the shards, she tried to elicit a sparkle from it by concentrating, and the shard did indeed light up; the sunbeam, which had just shone on Olivia's face, hit it, eliciting a flash from the realm of shadows, a piercing glare.

Why are we being so soft with Birte? Olivia asked when they finally started walking again. How did she even know we were meeting?

And Mathilda briefly told her how Birte had come to her earlier that morning and how she couldn't get rid of her. Birte's motivation for joining her had remained a mystery even to her.

Her own daughter had turned on her with a knife, Olivia reported. Birte had only just about been able to avoid the matricide by gently cajoling her and by cautiously retreating, strictly speaking she was on the run. She doesn't dare go back home, she has to prevent her daughter from throwing herself into trouble, but she also can't put her in her place, let alone involve outsiders, she wants to spare her all that distress.

That's ridiculous, said Mathilda, that's grotesque. That's unbelievable. That can't be true.

Maybe she's exaggerating, said Olivia flippantly. And besides, she must have given her daughter a reason to behave like that.

Mathilda involuntarily walked faster. She saw Birte's bony figure in every withered grove, in the long-fingered twigs of the bushes, in the trunks that were rigidly striving upwards and yet seemed stooped, she saw her rough, often scabbed knees, she expected they would come across Birte at any moment, cloaked in bark, with an aptly halting, more timid gait.

How far is it to the inn? she asked anxiously.

But Olivia couldn't say.

The path ended in a grassy hollow and they walked across a meadow. Olivia headed for a concrete den on the edge of it, overgrown with bushes.

It's open! beamed Olivia. The cave's open!

The barricaded entrance had been broken into, the iron door was ajar. On the paved ground in front of it was the usual glass shards of a broken bottle.

What an opportunity, Olivia declared. You can't usually get in. I'll lead the way!

With surprising dexterity, she slipped through the gap and disappeared down the passageway. Shortly afterwards, Mathilda saw it light up inside. Olivia had switched on the torch on her mobile phone. Mathilda pushed the door open a little more and followed the shimmering glow. The passage was narrow. Mathilda didn't touch the walls, but Olivia could just about fit through. Mathilda took a deep breath, she felt uncomfortable underground, her chest tightened, and she could hardly see anything, only the faint reflection on the gloomy rock. She turned a corner, the passage widened, but she had to bend down due to the stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Olivia was already standing in what Mathilda understood to be the actual cave, she stood in the damp glow of the stalactites, slowly rotating and allowing the torch to wander over the columns, cones, peaks, calcareous formations that now elusively promised a mysterious underworld, but which out in the air, in daylight, would immediately become unsightly – clichés of themselves. The entrance disappeared in the darkness, it was as if they were enclosed in a glass ball, a snow globe in which it was not snowing, but rather raining glittering particles, flakes of gold, it seemed to be endlessly trickling down from above, every now and then a drop could be heard, Mathilda herself at the center of this sparkling and flickering. Then a dull bundle appeared under Olivia's light, it didn't shine, it swallowed any and all shimmer deep inside itself. Ragged. Hairy. A whole group of bats, huddled together, hung up behind a ledge, Mathilda cautiously approached it.

Stay here with the light, she said softly. The bats hung level with her face, she had never been able to look at these animals at such close proximity, at least not in peace.

Their long ears bent down, mouths slightly open so that their front row of teeth were on show, their bellies lighter than the wing skin that shielded their small bodies on both sides, all in all, the frightening contrast of fluffy fur and unwieldy, barely covered bones. These bones, the extended fingers of the arm, were found inside the flesh of all other mammals, and it was only when this flesh fell off, rotted away, that they emerged. Here, they could be seen in a living animal, which in its rigid sleep itself seemed dead, an ambivalent creature from an intermediate realm, no wonder it was considered uncanny.



The first bats began to stir, they awoke from their petrified state, let's go, said Mathilda, but she didn't move, she studied one of the heads with its soft fur, a velvety nose, matte lids. Olivia obediently held the torch. Then the bat opened a beady eye, pit-black.

The bunch of skin and fur grew restless, one animal opened its mouth wide, bared its gullet, let's go, Mathilda said again, we're disturbing them. She backed away cautiously, but Olivia was eager, she wanted to proceed, a tunnel system, she claimed, closed to the public, it's now or never.

I'll wait outside the entrance, said Mathilda, feeling her way sightlessly down the narrow passage while the light from Olivia's torch had already disappeared. It suddenly seemed to not go any further, she became frantic, the cold stone under her palms, then a turn, a hole, the exit further back, they hadn't penetrated particularly deep into the cave, but her pulse was pounding as she forced her way through the gap in the door back outside, kicked the broken glass aside with her foot, crouched there and pulled the notebook out of her backpack, then found a place on the meadow from where she could keep the cave opening in her sights.

Where the heck have you been? What on earth's taking you so long? Birte came from behind and looked over her shoulder, Mathilda hastily closed the notebook.

I've already been to the inn, I was waiting forever, I was worried! Where's Olivia?

She's checking out the cave. Mathilda pointed to the entrance with her chin.

Birte sat down on the grass next to her. I read your diary. Last night. As the sun was coming up. It was pressing under my head, I couldn't sleep anymore.

She can't be talking about my diary, thought Mathilda. Two pages of illegible scrawl, indigestible spitballs vomited up by unknown beings, hair and feathers, little bones, insect shells, snail shells.

You read it, she said slowly, and it wasn't until she finished speaking that she realised that her tone was neither friendly nor neutral, that an ominous nuance had crept in, a strident rebuff, that something inside her was churning and growing, not balanced, caring and cotton wool-like as she usually felt when she came face to face with Birte, an anger she could almost physically feel shoot up and spill out of her eyes; the piercing gaze – here it was.

Birte was looking off to the side, she didn't seem to notice this gaze. She combed through the blades of grass with her fingers, picking out the head of a daisy, putting the flower in her mouth, chewed.

What kind of conference is your husband at, she wanted to know, the innocent lamb. He's always so busy with such quirky subjects.

Mathilda flicked the tip of a stalk that bent and snapped back, flicked the next one, she proceeded systematically, row by row.

Don't you feel lonely when your husband's travelling all the time? Aren't you afraid?

Afraid? Mathilda didn't understand what she meant. She didn't want to talk about the conference, or the diary.

Afraid that he'll look elsewhere at these conferences. Birte twisted a daisy on its stem and made it twirl. All that was missing was her rolling it over her lips.

Why would he? said Mathilda coolly. What was this, an interrogation? Of course it worried her that her husband had left more or less without saying a word, something was rumbling beneath the surface, something had gone into disarray, but she wasn't about to talk to Birte of all people about that. She didn't want to talk about it at all, didn't want to yammer on about the inconsistencies, didn't want to make a big deal out of the problems, best to leave the matter in the subliminal realm, keep it down. Something was going on, she didn't know what, she didn't need to know for the moment. But as for the so-called fear that Birte was trying to put to her – no, she really wasn't afraid. Whatever was on her husband's mind, no matter how absurd his behaviour, she trusted him completely.

Birte ate another daisy. Mathilda looked for a more comfortable position on the knobbly grass, which was suddenly an unrelentingly stubborn indolence. She wouldn't justify herself, wouldn't let herself be cornered, she was just a bulky form taking up space, outside.

Everything okay at home? she tried to pick up the conversational tone. What's your daughter up to?

Birte remained impassive. Her daughter had invited over two classmates. They were spending the night with her, she was happy. Her father's on the road, performing with his group. He's a musician.

Sometimes Birte spoke to her as if they didn't know each other at all. As if she were practicing a script to present her achievements to a stranger, a personnel manager, a new psychoanalyst.

Mathilda was well aware that Birte's partner was working as a guitarist in a folk band. He had turned a flight of fancy into a career and attended medieval markets and festivals, where young people strolled around in flowing robes, stockings, bonnets, hoods and aprons, and after years of performing they had produced two CDs' worth of recordings, their greatest hits, boring songs, accompanied by a recorder, rattles, and bells. Nonetheless, Birte spoke of this group as if they were the soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic, while at the same time seemingly forgetting that she, Mathilda, had completed a regular music degree and felt quite capable of assessing the quality of an artistic performance.

Birte fiddled with the buckles of her sandals, undid the straps, took off her socks and rolled them into a ball, which she tossed into the air a couple of times before dropping it into her pocket. She lifted the soles of her bare feet just above the grass, stirring the tips of the blades.

Mathilda looked away. She had been looking forward to physical exertion. Steep climbs, clear air, muscles and tendons, wide views over the autumnally tinted landscape, where in the evening you could feel what you had done, aware of every bone, yet feel light and free, detached from everyday life. She should have known better. A slog was impossible in this formation.

Birte had already braided a second wreath of flowers when Olivia wriggled out of the cave entrance with a broken stalactite, beaming, holding the trophy in her arms, dropping down next to Birte, breathing heavily, showing her stone baby, who looked gray and grubby, like a wax icicle.

Olivia was sweating profusely. She had got lost in the passageways, her torch had gone out, she had made out eerie noises that she could not assign. A huge animal or some creature had scurried over her feet, she had to feel her way back arduously, taking small steps, always along the wall, the stalactite had come loose in her hands, because walls in the narrowest sense didn't exist in there, just bulging spatial formations that she couldn't reach in the dark.

Mathilda had been standing there for a long time, shouldering her rucksack, but Birte was spellbound while listening to this heroic story, nodding affirmingly, even dropping in

something akin to “I never would have dared do that,” and Mathilda gave up exerting pressure and allowed herself to flop down once again in the inevitable meadow, setting down her bag, and silently declaring the day a failure.