

Rebekka Frank

The Echo of the Tides

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The wild beauty of the North Sea coast, a mysterious shipwreck, and two women, connected by the sea



St Peter's by the North Sea coast, 1955: Tilla's world is the sea. She doesn't want to get married, she wants to dive. Not to be tied down, but to feel the freedom of the waves. In the depths of the North Sea, she discovers an old shipwreck – a subject of fishermen's folklore for generations. An insatiable curiosity to unveil its secrets grows within Tilla.

Upon a North Sea island, 1633: Nes and her mother, fleeing from their past, seek refuge in the tranquillity of a Beguine convent. But soon the islanders turn against the women, and dangerous accusations begin to fly. At the same time, a mysterious ship appears on the horizon that could be a potential path to salvation or the harbinger of disaster.

"This book captivates you like the pull of the sea." – Miriam Georg

To **Rebekka Frank**, the sea is full of stories. When she's not diving into its depths herself, she writes about them. She studied theatre studies and German literature and lives with her husband and dog in the countryside in northern Hesse. She can be found on Instagram and TikTok under @rebekka.mit.k.

Long Summary

The Echo of the Tides is a gripping historical novel on two timelines that sheds light on the fate of two young women. Centuries separate them, but the sea connects them.

Prologue:

A young woman stands on a dyke, clutching her bundle tightly to her chest. She looks at the ship on the horizon. She could still run away. But she is determined to board the ship. For her child.

St. Peter (now St. Peter-Ording), 1955:

Tilla Puls loves the sea. The young woman is fascinated by the rare shells and historical artefacts that repeatedly wash up on the coast. Her greatest dream is to dive and uncover the secrets of the sea. She is particularly fond of an old shipwreck that fishermen have been telling stories about for generations. When her father is finally persuaded to teach her to dive, a whole new and fascinating world opens up to her. And Tilla does indeed find the legendary wreck. But she becomes careless during the dive and puts her life in danger, whereupon her father forbids her to dive. So Tilla decides to study archaeology in Hamburg in the hope of one day returning to the wreck as a scientist. For years (during which she also witnesses the devastating Hamburg flood) she pursues this wish and earns a place in the research group led by PhD student Jonni. Her best friend Curd, with whom she is secretly in love, is also part of the group. Together they are actually able to decipher the moving story of the wreck. But the discovery is attributed solely to Jonni and Curd; Tilla, as the only woman in the group, is completely ignored and wrongly referred to as "the fiancée". When Curd actually proposes to her, she refuses. She wants to remain independent and make her own name as a

researcher. She manages to make Curd understand this desire for freedom and her love for him at the same time, and the relationship ultimately lasts even without marriage.

The story of the young Nes Dorn in the seventeenth century is told in chapters alternating with Tilla's story:

Nes and her mother seek refuge from their past on the island of Strand (today: Nordstrand). They find it in an old Beguine convent. The Beguines, an all-female Christian lay order led by Nes' grandmother, take them into their midst and soon Nes feels like part of a family for the first time in her life. Although the best days of the Beguines are over, their patron Hark Jannen provides them with a good livelihood. The Beguine Perke in particular fascinates Nes with her presence and the two quickly become friends. But Nes' family has a dark history on Strand: Nes' great-aunt was accused of witchcraft and child abduction decades ago and drowned herself in the sea. Now that Nes and her mother are back on the island, children are disappearing again, and the Beguines are under suspicion. In order to restore her family's reputation, Nes, together with the attractive amber seeker Pay, tries to find out the truth.

Their enquiries take them to the Medusa, an old two-master anchored off the coast. When the mood on the island turns threatening, Nes' mother wants to flee with Nes. But Nes wants to stay. To force them to flee, Nes' mother reveals her terrible secret to the Beguines: She and Nes were abused by Nes' father (an alchemist) and Nes' husband for years until they finally killed them with black powder to protect themselves and others from the two men. The Beguines are horrified and Nes flees to Pay because she wants to stay on the island at all costs. They spend passionate days together until Nes returns to the convent. Calamity



awaits them: The islanders have killed the Beguines and set fire to the convent. Nes' mother and grandmother are among the dead. And Nes realises that Pay must have told the islanders about the Beguines' valuables, because the well-kept treasures are gone – Pay was the only outsider who knew about them. Nes curses the now fearful islanders and wishes that the sea would swallow them up one day. Like her great-aunt, she goes into the sea to drown. But shortly before she does, she is rescued by the only other survivor – the Beguine Perke.

In their distress, Nes and Perke move closer together and realise that they have found soul mates in each other. They go into hiding and pretend that the convent is haunted by ghosts so that nobody comes near their burnt-down home. Months pass until Nes realises that she is pregnant from her night with Pay. Perke encourages her to have the child. And they realise that the child abductions have stopped after the death of the Beguines. Until one day the heavily pregnant Nes sees Pay with a little girl on the way to a house she doesn't recognise. She follows them and her terrible suspicions are confirmed: it is Hark Jannen, the patron of the Beguine convent, who is behind the child abductions and the destruction of the convent. His piety was only a façade for his cruel impulses. And Pay is his henchman. Before he can harm Nes, a storm blows up and the dykes break. Most of the Island is swept away in the great Burchardi flood. Only two stretches of land (one of them bearing the burnt-down convent) remain.

Nes and the rescued little girl are able to flee back to Perke in the convent, where Nes gives birth to her own child. Now that his crimes have been exposed, the patron of the Beguines wants to flee on the ship off the coast. Pay, who had thought Nes was dead until that evening and has now been proven wrong, blackmails her into taking their child and coming with him. What Pay (and the readers) don't know: Nes secretly leaves her child with Perke and boards the ship

as the young woman of the prologue with a completely different bundle in her arms. She has wrapped all the black powder she was able to make in the previous months in her child's blanket. Once on the ship, she blows it up and jumps into the sea. As she sinks, she does not feel alone, as if there is an echo of another woman in the sea.

North Sea coast, 1966:

Tilla made it: She has just been awarded her doctorate and her relationship with Curd is going well. She dives to the wreck one last time to say goodbye. So many years have passed since her first dive. But down here, in the eternal sea, Tilla has the feeling that only the blink of an eye separates her and the young woman whose story she uncovered with the wreck. That the story resonates in her like an echo.

Sample Translation

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Prologue

A young mother stood high up on the dyke, clutching her bundle tightly to her chest. The wind tore at her earth-coloured skirt and her gaze was fixed on the sailing ship below. The sea behind the small harbour was still dark, almost black. But dawn was already heralding itself in the clouds that chased brightly across the sky.

Nobody had noticed her yet. People were dragging crates across the jetty. A rowing boat cast off and headed towards the huge two-master off the coast. She could turn round and leave.

But she would not run away again. No, this morning she would get on that boat – for her child. It was the only solution.

She looked intently at the high masts and all the ropes that hung between them like cobwebs. Sometimes they formed such tight nets that brave sailors could climb up them. High up, the sails were tightly tied. They would soon be pulled down so that they could set this huge ship in motion with the help of the wind and propel it across the sea. An insane endeavour.

The young mother did not pray – she had not trusted the Holy Spirit for a long time. Instead, she whispered to the Queen of Water. *Forgive me, Nimueh. And don't let me out of your sight.* She looked at the waves, how they lured the ship out to sea. Foaming softly, they finally broke on its bow and licked the wood of the figurehead. From the dyke, the young woman could not recognise its carved face, but she knew for certain that the gorgon, made of maritime pine, had its mouth wide open and that its hair was writhing snakes.

She thought of the spirits that lived invisibly in the waves. They wished her well, she tried to reassure herself. They had always done that.

She touched her pink shell necklace with her free hand, once, twice, three times, before descending the dyke with her bundle.

Chapter 1

September 1960

Tilla Puls dug her toes into the hot sand and looked out to sea. The moment she had been working towards for years had finally arrived. The ocean lay calm and dark blue in front of her, and its gentle lapping lulled her to safety. She knew she couldn't always trust its voice – she had learnt that the hard way. And she could still turn round and walk away. But, if she was honest, that was not an option for her, never had been. Today she would entrust herself to the sea, come what may. She would coax its ancient secrets out of it.

She held her diving goggles in one hand. Her breathing apparatus in the other. The wind tore at her hair. If the girl Tilla had been five years ago could see her like this now – what would she think? Would she be proud? Would she be afraid? Probably not fear, she thought. The fear had only come to her recently. Perhaps it was part of being an adult. Perhaps it was seeping into her along with the knowledge she had learnt at university. And maybe Tilla could get rid of it again – at least for a moment – when she finally broke free, finally sank, finally floated. Just like before, when she didn't know the price of adventure.

And what power the sea has.

Five years earlier ...

September 1955

Tilla Puls shifted her weight onto one leg and tilted her head, just like Lotte Hass had done in the photos for the newspapers. Ever since Tilla had read the articles, the diver had been her biggest idol. Many people said that Tilla looked like Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*, but Tilla thought they were wrong. People only looked at her dark hair with short fringes. As soon as she was allowed to dye her hair blonde, people would no longer be able to overlook her resemblance to Lotte.

Tilla breathed in the scent of the sea as her friends' gasps grew louder at her back.

"Blimey, Tilla!" Hilde shouted.

"You're much too fast." Hannelore groaned too, but there was a little admiration in her high-pitched voice.

Tilla was reminded of her grandmother's words: "They're not friends," she had said, "they're admirers."

"Nonsense, grandma. And besides, it's called fans."

"Come again?"

"These days, they call them fans."

Her grandmother had grinned. "So, the young lady has faaaans."

Tilla had shaken her head with a sigh, but she knew that she would never be able to dissuade old Frieda Puls from this conviction anyway.

Hilde and Hannelore now caught up with her. They were both wearing the same dress as Tilla. It was tied at the waist with a

belt and the hem of the skirt fluttered in the breeze. Hilde leant her heated forehead against Hannelore's shoulder. Some of her light-coloured hair had come loose from the clips and was swirling in her face. Despite the exertion, Hannelore was as pale as ever. Up here on the dyke, she looked even smaller and thinner than usual. Tilla would have liked to hold on to her so that the wind wouldn't carry her away.

"Look how beautiful it is here today!" Tilla pointed into the distance, to the tidal inlet, which bubbled up to the dyke, and the wooden pier that led across the marshland far out to the huge sandbank. Modern lamps arched over it, and the occasional tourist strolled up and down the path. There wasn't a single cloud in the deep blue sky. You would have thought it was summer. But if you looked closely, you could see the signs of early autumn. The high seas in the distance were dark. And then there was the breeze. It tugged and pulled at the girls as if it wanted to hold them back.

"Let's go on to the bridge," said Hannelore. Tilla replied with a nod and ran ahead. She slipped under the railing, stepped onto the wooden planks and braced herself against the wind.

"There's hardly a soul here, Tilla!" Hilde shouted. "Didn't you say this place was full of blokes by now?" She said it in an emphatically casual way as she unlocked the door, and Tilla felt a warm tingling in her stomach. Bloke – her teachers disapproved of this new-fangled word. None of them dared to use it at school. But out here they could say it out loud.

"There must be some on the beach. We just have to go a little further." But Tilla didn't look at her friends. It was possible that



she had exaggerated a little and really only wanted to come here for one reason – she just liked being by the sea. Blokes or no blokes.

To change the subject, she lifted her skirt as she walked and looked at her new stockings. "They really do make a nice leg." She bent backwards briefly to inspect the dark seam at the centre of her calf.

Hannelore also looked down. "You have beautiful legs anyway. The stockings don't need to do much." She sighed. "My mum says I urgently need to eat more if I ever want to get a man."

Tilla waved her hand. "I wouldn't worry about that at all if I were you."

"No?" Hilde raised her eyebrows. "They keep writing in the papers about the surplus of women. Four of my aunts are old maids! Four!"

Tilla shrugged her shoulders. "Why should every woman have a husband? After all, there really are more important things in life."

Hilde and Hannelore turned their heads, completely dumbfounded. "Like what?"

Tilla avoided their gaze and looked towards the horizon again. *The sea, for example*, she would have liked to say. She thought of the North Sea legend that her grandmother Frieda had told her again and again from an early age. About the stories the ocean hid. And of all the treasures that her grandma had already found. On Mondays, when the Puls family's sea-side restaurant was closed, she liked to walk along the beach and

look for flotsam. Even as a child, Tilla had loved to accompany her on her treasure hunts. Sometimes they found ancient pieces of pottery, glass bottles, even the occasional silver ring or brooch. Her grandma could tell the most exciting story about any object, no matter how small. And back in the restaurant, she arranged her finds on the windowsills and on the counter as lovingly as if the building on the high stilts were a magical museum and not a restaurant.

When Tilla visualised her future, she always had to do with Grandma's treasures from the sea. With the mysteries hidden beneath the surface of the water. And with the exciting tingling sensation that the old secrets sent over her skin. But the idea of telling her friends about these vague dreams made her blush. Because her mother had told her more than once that treasure hunting was not a profession, but a folly. She was almost an adult and should stop acting like a child. To distract her, Tilla replied, her eyes still fixed on the horizon: "Do you remember Egon Rank?"

"You mean your regular guest from Hesse?"

"He's a photographer. And he thinks I have what it takes to be a model."

"He said that?" Hilde looked at her with wide eyes.

Tilla shrugged her shoulders. She didn't really want to believe his words either. "If all else fails, I'll just marry an American. There's always someone in the paper looking for a German wife."

Hilde grinned now. "Yes, because they think German women are good housewives. Tilla, you can do a lot of things, but a good housewife you're really not."

"But maybe I can become one!" Tilla reached into her bag and dug out a small bottle. It was labelled *Frauengold* in large letters.

"Does the tonicum help?" asked Hannelore.

"My mum swears by it, anyway." Tilla was the first to take a sip. It tasted spicy and sweet at the same time, with a strong hint of alcohol. And even as she passed the bottle to Hannelore, a pleasant feeling rose up inside her, soft and warm. She spread her arms out, swivelled her hips and felt the gentle dizziness of this miracle product. This is exactly how a lady should feel.

Gradually, they approached the sandbank, which was the same bright yellow colour as Tilla's skirt. The sea glistened behind it. On any given day, at any given hour, the North Sea could be different. Sometimes foamy, churning and close. Then again very quiet, whispering and far in the distance. On warm sunny days, the waves sparkled as if they had dressed up. On rainy days – and there were many of them at this time of year – they seemed dull and gloomy. Today it was as if the sea couldn't quite make up its mind.

"Do you know what my plan is?" asked Hilde. "I'm going to be a secretary and marry the boss. There's a step-by-step guide I read. And then ..."

"Oh no..." Tilla interrupted her. Because no more than a hundred paces away, she saw two familiar figures walking across the sandbank.

"Aren't they...?" Hannelore had apparently followed her gaze.

"... My brother and my gran." Tilla closed her eyes. "Damn." The two of them must have wanted to go out to sea. Frieda was too

old to steer the fishing boat on her own and Nepomuk was too young to help properly. Tilla would have preferred to stay with her friends. But that was no longer possible. It was her job to look after Nepomuk and Grandmother. What if something happened to them? The thought that her two favourite people in the world could be in danger was unbearable. Tilla slipped off her shoes. She held the left one out to Hannelore and the right one to Hilde.

"But Tilla! You can't ..." said Hannelore.

But Tilla was already running. The sand crunched under her feet.

"Your stockings!" Hilde called after her.

"Where are you going?" asked Tilla breathlessly.

"What do you think?" Grandma put on a wry grin and pointed at Nepomuk with her chin.

"The weather is so good today, maybe we can see it from above!" he said in his little piping voice.

A smile immediately appeared on Tilla's face. That always happened when she looked at her little brother. He was only eight years old, slender, yet cuter than any puppy. Why could the mere sight of a cute creature make you feel so gentle, Tilla wondered. She tried to breathe against it. Nepomuk would be all over her if he realised.

"We've talked about this again and again, Nepomuk."

"But Grandma said the weather is *particularly* good today."

Tilla rolled her eyes so that water, boat and sky became one in an instant. A blue-grey infinity that could only exist by the sea.

"But you're not supposed to go out to sea alone any more!"

"You're welcome to come with us." Frieda turned to the boat that was rocking on the waves behind them. Tilla loved the wooden boat. Decades ago, her grandfather had painted the planks white and blue. The paint had peeled off in many places and the wood had warped, but that was exactly what made this boat with its crooked wheelhouse so picturesque. At low tide, it lay in the middle of the mudflats. But when the tide came in, it was easy to get in – you only got wet up to your calves.

"What do you say, Tilla Puls? You can either go back to your friends and we'll go alone. Or you can come with us," said Frieda as she climbed up a narrow ladder with astonishing agility. Nepomuk followed her and gave Tilla a happy gap-toothed smile when she followed.

The sun was now high in the sky and beating down on Tilla's forehead. After just a few minutes in the wind, her hair was ruined. She looked down at her feet and realised that her new nylon stockings were not only dirty and wet, but also torn. So what, Tilla thought. On land she might have had to behave like a lady, but here, on the waves, that wasn't the case. And when she suddenly realised this, something inside her loosened like a tightly tied rope. She sucked in the breeze deeply, savouring the cold splashes of water on her skin and the idea of the depth of the sea beneath her.

When they were so far away from the beach that they could no longer see it with the naked eye, Grandma switched off the engine. "We're here."

Tilla jumped up to lower the anchor into the water. Nepomuk bent low over the railing and stared into the sea. Very slowly, he walked round and round the boat.

"I told you," said Tilla, but she couldn't stop herself from looking at the surface of the water. It was rough and reflected the deep blue sky. Every now and then, a small school of fish darted underneath.

"You can't see a thing, Grandma!" said Nepomuk.

"It's probably too deep after all." Frieda grimaced apologetically. Then she stretched out an arm. "The island Pellworm is in this direction. And there is Nordstrand."

Slowly, she sat down on the bench at the edge of the boat.

"You used to go out here on your own, didn't you?" Nepomuk pointed to the water.

"Not always." Grandma looked past him with her bright eyes. "Sometimes my father was with me. Or my sister. But that was all so long ago ..."

Tilla scrutinised her grandmother. Frieda rarely adopted this wistful tone. The little woman always seemed tough and weatherproof, even though she was already over seventy. Her bun sat firmly at the back of her head, only a few white strands had come loose and swirled around her cheerful face. She had thousands and thousands of little wrinkles. Tilla imagined that each of her fits of laughter had left behind one of these wrinkles. And Grandma had fits of laughter every day. She loved jokes, liked to pat herself on her slim thighs and joked all day long with everyone she met. But at that moment, she was strangely serious.

"That was before I married your grandfather ... After that, I only rarely went out fishing."

Tilla felt a tightening in her chest. What kind of woman would her grandmother have been without the marriage? Water splashed over the railing and into Tilla's face. It was freezing cold. Of course, it was September. Up in the air, summer was giving one last encore, but down in the sea, winter was already rumbling and threatening.

Nepomuk whirled around. "I want to swim! Can we jump in, Grandma? Just for a moment?"

"Absolutely not," said Tilla with all the authority she could muster before Frieda could give one of her unreasonable grandma answers. Basically, it was a mystery to Tilla how her father Hansjörg had survived his childhood. Frieda not only said yes to everything, she wasn't afraid of anything and hardly ever worried.

Nepomuk now turned to her with a mischievous smile. "Grandma, may I?"

"Your sister's right, it's too dangerous here."

Tilla turned to her in surprise. She had placed one hand on the iron railing, looking past her grandchildren and out to sea.

"I thought it was just a legend." Tilla felt her heart beat faster.

Grandma swayed her head. "Never underestimate a legend, Tilla Puls." A peculiar smile played around her lips. "Legends have power. Just like the North Sea. Both are unpredictable."

"Will you tell it to us again?" Tilla felt the familiar tingling under her skin. Her mother was far away, she couldn't tell her to stop being a child. So Tilla would listen to her once more with relish.

Grandmother smiled first at her, then at her brother. "It's right here, deep below us. An almost forgotten, ancient wreck."

Nepomuk bent over the water and stared intently into the unfathomable dark blue.

"How did you know it was here?" asked Tilla.

"Once a fisherwoman, always a fisherwoman. We know all the shipwrecks on the North Frisian coast. Ships lie where the crab nets come up in tatters. This one is said to be from another time. Even my grandparents and their grandparents knew that it was here. They say it was here before the mudflats existed and the old island had not yet sunk. Hundreds of years ago, when people spoke a different language, a language that the waves also understood, men stole a sacred church bell. But the sea saw it. It sees everything and forgives nothing. One gloomy October, it sent a tidal wave so powerful that it tore the old island in two. The thieves fled with the bell onto a ship to hide from their fate in another, new world. But as soon as they were at sea, the sea swallowed up the ship and its men. They were never heard from again. Only the bell can still be heard today. Every year in October, it rings in the depths. And sometimes, when the wind is right, the waves carry its sound all the way to the coast ..."

Tilla and Nepomuk looked at each other, smiled and listened, as they had always done, listening to the restless whispering, the eternal murmur and roar of the waves. When Tilla had been a small child, this story, which her grandmother recited in an eerie tone, had frightened her. But the older Tilla got, the more exciting she found it. What did it look like down there, at the bottom of

the sea? What happened to a ship that was not on the waves,
but under them?

How well the murky waters of the North Sea hid its secrets.
Tilla had often asked her father about it. He was a diver, just like
Lotte Hass. Except that he had learnt to dive for the war, not for
underwater filming.

"Have you ever been to the North Sea?" she had asked him. He
had shaken his head briefly. She shouldn't ask any more
questions, she had sensed that.

"Can I learn to dive too?" She just couldn't resist. But he just
raised his hand and left her standing there.

How she would love to dive down to this wreck with her father.
Surely she could find treasures there that told even more stories
than Grandma's flotsam. How she would love to find out what
truths lay behind the old legend.

One day ..., Tilla thought to herself, savouring this promising
thought. One day she would unlock the secrets of the sea.

Chapter 2

October 1633

Nes Dorn ran and could smell smoke and fire with every step.

The stench of her decision had become entangled in her hair.

"Come on, Nes!" shouted Belanca.

Nes should have been the faster one. She was the younger one, the daughter. But Belanca was not a traditional mother. Nes had stopped arguing about it years ago. Now she hurried after her. Behind this body that was bigger and more massive than her own. Belanca's earth-coloured skirt fluttered. She held the torch they would need at nightfall, Nes carried the bag. In it was all they had left of their old lives. It wasn't much, and that was a good thing.

Behind her, she heard panting and amused grunting. It sounded as if they were being chased by a horde of wild boars. And Nes wished they really were.

"Where are you going?" one of the men shouted mockingly.

"Do you think it's better somewhere else than here?"

Naturally, Nes wanted to believe that things would be better elsewhere. This hope had driven the two women ever since they had left their village. It had lured them, tempted them.

"We'd best split up!" Belanca said these words not in the language of her people, but in her own, in the language that only she and Nes understood. Her father's angry face flashed before Nes' inner eye. He had hated it when Belanca spoke in



this secret language. He had often beaten her black and blue for it. But he would never again hear it. Never. He was gone.

"You to the left, me to the right. There's a crooked aspen tree not far from here. That's where we'll meet."

"Understood!" Nes' lungs were burning, but her legs were strong. They would walk as long as necessary.

Nes took a turn to the left. The grass was higher here, the earth softer. She sank a little with every step, but so did her pursuers. But while they ran for their pleasure, Nes ran for her life.

"Stop right there!"

She glanced back briefly. Two of the three men were apparently following Belanca, because only one was now chasing her. He was young, certainly a year or two younger than her. And at least ten years younger than the man she had married. Back then, when she had still had a home.

Greed and pleasure distorted his bright face.

"Leave me alone!" she screamed at him.

The young chap laughed. "When does such a beautiful woman ever come to our farm? And then all alone. You shouldn't be surprised."

Nes tried to run even faster. Anger drove her on. Belanca and she had only wanted to ask for bread and cheese, they had money and were extremely hungry. But they were met with hostility everywhere they went. Women were not allowed to travel, especially not without a male companion. As soon as a woman belonged to no one, she belonged to everyone. Nes and Belanca knew this, but the farm had seemed friendly. An open barn door, the smell of hay, cheerful laughter. They shouldn't

have trusted appearances, they should have stayed hidden and stolen what they needed.

"At least let me look at you. How old are you? Twenty? I've never seen a whore up close before!" the young guy called after her.

Nes should have ignored it and carried on running, he would certainly have given up soon, but she couldn't do that.

"I'm not a whore!"

Nes was distracted for a moment and stumbled over a stone hidden among the grasses. She stumbled, jerked her arms – and felt his hands on her body. He yanked her back, the pungent smell of sweat filling her nose. Without hesitation, Nes rammed the small, sharp knife she had hidden in her sleeve into his thigh. He screamed, let go of her and held his leg. Stunned, he stared at the wound.

Nes stood still for a moment and watched the blood soaking through the fabric of his trousers. He'd had it coming, she thought. And yet she was sorry. Because she had sworn never to harm anyone again. Never again. The wind came up, pulling at her hair, and once more she could smell the stench that had got caught in it.

As if ...

"You're really not a whore." The young man forced the words out between clenched teeth. "You're a witch."

Nes swallowed, avoided his gaze and rubbed the bloodstained knife clean on her skirt. Slowly, she slipped it back into her sleeve. "Treat the wound with ribwort plantain." Her voice

was dark and gentle, sounding as if nothing had happened. As if everything was the same as before.

The stranger cursed. "Witch!"

Nes turned round without a word and walked on in search of a crooked aspen.

She recognised it from afar. It was a tall, narrow tree with only a few yellow leaves hanging from its already bare branches. Her mother was leaning against its slender trunk. Although Belanca Dorn was twenty years older than her daughter, they looked almost like sisters. They both had fine, clear features and striking light green eyes. And they both had long curly hair, which differed in colour. Belancas was dark blonde, almost brunette, with individual silvery strands running through it. Nes' hair, on the other hand, was a light blonde colour that shimmered red in the light.

"At least we have this," said her mum as soon as Nes was close enough. She had taken a piece of bread out of her pocket, broken it in two and held one half out to Nes. Nes could only briefly see the dark red scabs on Belanca's palms.

"How did you do that?"

She reached for the bread and bit into it immediately. It was old and stale. Nes chewed quickly, gulped it down and immediately tore off the next piece with her teeth.

Belanca did not answer. Her gaze slowly wandered to the stain on Nes' skirt.

"Blood?"

"Not mine."

Belanca nodded. And then they continued on their way without a word.

They were silent for hours, but they held each other by the hands whenever they could walk side by side, or by the skirt or shoulder as soon as the path became narrower and they had to walk behind each other. Whoever walked in front held the torch and lit the way. Right now it was Belanca. Nes followed her, looking up at the sky. The moon was shining brightly, but the stars that Belanca and Nes used as a guide were barely visible. Dawn was gradually breaking. Nes' legs were getting heavier and heavier, she was so tired she was swaying. She was freezing. Belanca, on the other hand, showed no sign of exhaustion. She too must be dead tired. The last rest the two women had had was a day and a night ago. They had been on their feet and travelling ever since.

"We should get some sleep," Nes said into the silence. "At least a few hours."

Belanca didn't respond, just kept walking. "Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

"Can you hear it?"

Nes listened. She had noticed that the ground beneath their feet had become flatter and flatter. Since they had left the farm behind them, they had not passed a single house. They had walked across wide meadows, past fields and small pine forests. Nes could hear the wind, which tore at her clothes and rustled in her ears. She couldn't smell anything, but she understood ... She squeezed her mother's hand once more.

"Are we there yet?"

The two women did not pause until they reached the foot of a broad hill. Nes gave Belanca a questioning look. How was she supposed to force her aching body up there? But Belanca paid her no heed. Instead, she began the ascent.

Nes sighed and trudged after her. It took her a few steps to notice the chattering, chirping and screeching.

"What are those birds?" she shouted against the wind.

"Oystercatchers. Snipes. And gulls."

And then they were already at the top, surrounded by a thousand fluttering birds in the whipping wind. Nes gasped in surprise, tried to find a foothold with her feet and spread her arms. The wind tugged at her, making her hair swirl wildly.

There it was. The sea. Belanca had told her so many stories about it. She knew numerous sea monsters, water spirits and drowned rulers. She had imagined the sea to be dark, dangerous and huge. But what she saw now surpassed her imagination. For before her lay infinity.

They found an old rowing boat among the driftwood and grass on the shore.

"I knew it would still be here," said Belanca. "It's a good thing fishermen never change their habits."

Together they pulled it down to the water. They took off their shoes, threw them into the boat and pushed it into the waves. The cold bit into their toes.

Belanca laughed when she saw Nes's face.

"Well, jump in already!"

Nes quickly climbed into the rocking boat, held on to the side wall and sat down on the bench. Tensely, she looked at the bottom of the boat; no water seemed to be leaking in. Apparently it really was still watertight. Belanca calmly pushed the boat further out to sea and was soon up to her waist in water.

"Come in at last, Belanca!"

Although the air still smelled of autumn, the sea was already wintery cold.

Finally, her mum climbed into the boat. She didn't even tremble as she reached for the oars. Her skirt was heavy and wet against her legs.

Nes let her gaze wander. The waves surged and foamed beneath them, carrying them far away from the white beach. Soon it was just a line on the horizon. How deep was the sea beneath them? And what was hidden beneath its surface?

"Don't be afraid." Belanca looked at Nes seriously.

"How do you know where to row to?" asked Nes anxiously.

Belanca shrugged her shoulders. "Once a fisherwoman, always a fisherwoman."

Nes nodded. And gradually she became calmer. She breathed more slowly and deeply, tasted the salt on her tongue, heard the strange sea birds cry out, felt the wind in her hair. It had always been said that the sea brought death, that it was best to stay away from it. But now that she was so close to it, she couldn't resist its fascination.

The wind blew Nes's hair into her face. Smoke. Fire. Still. How she hated that smell. It persisted.



She was silent for a long time, then Nes finally asked: "Do you think they're dead?"

Belanca sighed. But she didn't answer.

Nes leant over the side of the boat and held her fingertips carefully in the water. "Do you think I can wash my hair in the sea?"

Belanca looked at the waves, then nodded.

Nes knelt against the side of the boat, bent over it and dipped her mop of hair into the sea. She felt the cold on her scalp and the force with which the water pulled at her hair.

Nes straightened up again, bent her head forward and squeezed the water out of her hair with her hands. When she lifted her head, the strands stuck to the back of her neck, freezing cold. Her hair was happy to absorb anything, but reluctant to give it back – even if the stench had not been completely washed out, it would now smell not only of the past, but also of the future – of the sea, salt, algae and infinity.

"That's where it is," said Belanca, pointing into the distance.
"We're almost there."

Chapter 3

Winter 1955/1956

One of the biggest changes in Tilla's life began with Toast Hawaii. She had just turned sixteen and still wore her fringes Hepburn-short, and her skirts still long. Toast Hawaii was Nepomuk's favourite food, and her mother liked it too. However, this was not because her mother adored tinned pineapple and ham as much as her son, but rather because Tilla couldn't burn anything or let the sauce splatter all the way to the ceiling with this dish. Even if Tilla didn't do that at all. But every move she made differently to her mum was too much and had a huge impact on the mood at the meal afterwards. That didn't happen with Toast Hawaii.

The family of five was now sitting at the table in a normal, subdued mood, chewing and keeping quiet in a peaceful manner. Only Grandma said something from time to time, such as "Crispy ham" or "A really juicy pineapple, Tilla" and "This modern food makes you thirsty, doesn't it?"

She received stern looks from her daughter-in-law Meta, who was of the opinion that there should be no talking or drinking at mealtimes, only eating. There was always time later for everything else. But there was never really time for anything: Nepomuk had to go to bed, the women had to tidy up and do the dishes and Tilla's father had to look out of the window smoking his pipe. Father rarely did anything else. Whether in the small house in St Peter or in Tilla's family's restaurant above the sandbank, he usually gazed silently into the distance. He always

positioned himself so awkwardly that he was in the way of Tilla serving, mum mopping or grandma cooking.

Hansjörg hadn't always been like this, Frieda emphasised again and again. The war had changed him. Sometimes Tilla asked him what he was actually looking for out there, but had never yet received an answer.

But today was different. Her father had stopped eating, remained seated, had taken out his pipe and as he began to fill it, he said, "I have an important announcement to make." And then he looked at Tilla. Really. He didn't look through her or just past her – his eyes fixed her. She suddenly felt cold. Had she made such a big mistake that this time it would be her father, not her mother, who would take care of the punishment?

Her father's gaze wandered over to Nepomuk, who turned pale and rigid. "An announcement concerning the two of you. But first, what do you know about Elba?"

Tilla was confused, but answered as if shot from a pistol: "Napoleon was banished to the Italian island in 1814."

"What else?"

"It's in the Mediterranean and its capital ..." She interrupted herself as her father furrowed his brow.

"You're not crying, are you, Nepomuk?" he asked.

Tilla turned her head. Her brother's eyes were wet and dilated with fear.

"Do you want to send us away?"

Her grandmother laughed out loud at the words. "I didn't realise you were a little French dictator, Nepomuk!" She tousled his hair and he blushed.

"Of course I won't send you away." Her father replied in such a serious tone that Grandma stopped laughing again. "We'll go to Elba together. The three of us."

"Are we going there ... On holiday?" asked Tilla. She didn't dare hope. Like all her friends, she dreamed of travelling to Italy one day. But until now, it had been unthinkable for the Puls family to go on a summer holiday, as they not only hosted holiday guests in their house during the warmer months, they also had their hands full with the restaurant.

"No." Father lit a match, held it to the tobacco and drew on the pipe. "This won't be a holiday. On the contrary. The company Barrakuda from Hamburg is going to open the first German diving school on Elba. The owner is a good friend of mine ... From before. I'm supposed to give the first diving courses this summer. He has offered an excellent salary. In the meantime, Uncle Jakob will help your mum here. And you're coming with me. I want you to learn to dive."

Tilla held on to the tabletop with both hands to stop herself from jumping up in excitement. She couldn't believe what she had just heard. Was her dream suddenly going to come true?

When Tilla and Nepomuk were very young, their father had sometimes told them about giant rays, huge cod and colourful corals. Hansjörg only became a restaurant manager when Frieda felt too old for it. Until then, he had been a sports swimmer and diver. And in his heart, he would probably always be one. As soon as he talked about diving, he changed. Then his voice was friendly and his gaze clear. He described to his

children how weightless you felt underwater and how easy every movement was. "When you're diving, you forget everything else. There are no worries down there, no everyday life, nothing to weigh you down."

Ever since Tilla first saw that sparkle in her father's eyes, she wanted to be able to dive herself. Because of her father, she idolised the diver Lotte Hass, collected all the articles about her, cut out all her pictures and hung them above her bed. Because of him, she didn't dream of getting married, as Hilde and Hannelore did, but only of the sea.

At some point, she wanted to stand out there with a breathing apparatus on her back, in the distance, where the waves rolled towards the sandbank. Next to her father. Perhaps then they would be able to descend together, into that depth where Hansjörg Puls was still the old man.

In front of his half-eaten toast Hawaii, Hansjörg sucked on his pipe and let out large clouds of smoke. "The owner wants children to be taught too. He wants to prove that anyone, no matter how old, can learn to dive. Nepomuk, you'll be nine in a few weeks and a task like diving will, I'm sure, quickly turn you into a confident man. And Tilla, I know how much you've always wanted to learn to dive. I put you off for a long time, but I haven't forgotten."

Tilla felt her eyes getting moist. She tried with all her might to pull herself together. Just don't cry, she told herself sternly. Certainly not in front of her parents. They must never see her tears.

"This is the best day of my life," she said.

"Wait and see." Her grandma laughed and winked at her.

"There'll be a few more."

The very next morning, there was a loud knocking on Tilla's bedroom door. Startled, she jumped up. It was still dark outside.

"Get up, get ready. If you want to dive, you have to strengthen your body," Dad said through the door. He had never woken her up before. Tilla breathed shallowly as she followed his instructions.

A few minutes later, father and Nepomuk were standing outside the house in the icy February cold. It was the first time that Tilla had done anything alone with him and Nepomuk. With a wave of his hand, he signalled for them to follow him. Then he jogged off in the direction of the pier.

Tilla ran after him, she couldn't go fast enough and her excitement sent her flying. Nepomuk, on the other hand, started panting after just a few metres. But he didn't complain and hurried after them.

Tilla let herself fall back. "Are you alright?" she asked her little brother.

Nepomuk didn't answer, he just gasped.

"Get ready!" shouted their father, who had turned round to face them as they ran. "Whoever gets to the beach first!"

"But..." Tilla tried to recognise her father's face in the gloom. "That's not fair! Nepomuk has much shorter legs than me!"

"Unjust?" Father's voice sounded harsh. "You know nothing about injustice. One, two, three, go."

Both siblings sprinted off. Tilla was naturally faster, instantly leaving her brother behind. Her feet thudded on the wooden planks of the bridge. A kilometre was long, especially when you were running. But she focussed solely on the distant glitter of the sea. She ran under the bent lamps, past the benches and telephone booths and approached the sandbank. When she finally arrived, her lungs stung violently. She struggled to catch her breath, bent over and rested her hands on her knees.

"Stand up straight," said her father.

It was only minutes later that Nepomuk reached them. He was staggering and panting.

"Remember this day," her father said to him. "Never again will you be as slow as you were today, do you hear me? Don't measure yourself against your older sister. Always measure yourself against yourself."

Nepomuk nodded and wanted to drop into the ice-cold sand.

"No! Stand still, it's better for your circulation. And watch your sister."

As soon as Tilla had recovered a little, her father started the first exercise session. He made her sprint across the sand, do jumping jacks and press-ups. Then she had to run back and forth between two pile dwellings while her father shouted: "Knees up, heels to buttocks!"

Tilla ran, jumped, puffed and sweated. Gradually, a red-golden glow appeared on the horizon. The first rays of the rising sun poured over the sea, and Tilla was sure that she would never forget this sight. Her father was here, with her, and finally saw how hard she was trying. At the same time, she felt every

fibre of her body, the fullness in her lungs, the strength in her legs. And she heard the beckoning whisper of the waves. *Soon,* Tilla thought, looking out over the sea, *soon I'll be ready.*

This sample was generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence.