



Kai Meyer: Die Seiten der Welt

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Even as she dashed down the steps to the library, Furia could smell the stories – the best smell in the world. New books smelled of printer’s ink, of glue and expectations. Old books reeked of adventures, their own and those of their characters. And good books emitted a fragrance that contained all that, topped off with an extra dash of magic. There were a lot of good books in the Faerfaxes’ library and even more old ones. Some of them were so crumbly that the edges of their pages collapsed like dead leaves the moment anyone touched them. Most of

them had been read by someone or other, but there were some that no one had ever cast a glance inside because they were hidden away in the side aisles and leaving the main aisle was forbidden. “Never stray from the path” was the place’s unwritten law.

The library was down in the house’s ancient catacombs. The vaults and tunnels dated back to the days when the Romans had conquered Britain. They had built dozens of magnificent villas in the green valleys of the Cotswolds. And it was on the ruins of one of these houses that the Faerfaxes had their country home.

Wackford the caretaker was just polishing the library’s iron door when Furia came dashing down the stairs into the vestibule. The metal shimmered silvery like a mirror; her reflection was contorted. That was because the iron was slightly convex – as if someone had tried to break down the door from inside with a bulldozer. Except that a bulldozer wouldn’t fit between the shelves on the other side.

She slid to a halt in front of Wackford. ‘Was he here?’ she burst out. ‘Has my father been here today?’

Samuel Wackford was in his early sixties and didn’t look a day younger. But still his blue work-suit was bulging with muscles. He had lived in the house since long before Furia was born and knew every bent nail and every crack in the timbers. Above all, though, he knew about the library’s secrets. His father before him had worked for the Faerfaxes, and even his grandfather.

Wackford had short grey hair and skin like crumpled paper. He had a scar across his left cheek and a flashlight dangling like a baton from his belt – both of them since that day thirty-six years previously when the door had also been damaged.

‘Your father was here,’ he said sedately as Furia chewed her lower lip. ‘About an hour ago.’ Wackford did very few things quickly, and talking wasn’t one of them. He was hard-working, determined and as strong as a young dock worker, but speed was a word as foreign to him as *frontispiece* and *facsimile*.

‘And?’

‘And what?’ he asked.

‘Did he find it? The book?’

‘He had a few books with him – four, if I saw rightly.’

‘Siebenstern’s books?’

‘Could be.’

□ ‘Damn!’ She tugged at her messy blonde hair.

‘Pip told me Dad came up the stairs. From down here.’

‘Where else would he come from, young lady?’

‘Did he have *the book* with him?’

‘I didn’t ask the titles.’

She felt a flash of suspicion. ‘You didn’t tell him, did you? Where I hid the book?’

‘If I told him I’d caught you straying from the path he’d ask me how it was possible for a fifteen-year-old girl to go prowling around the library on her own. And then I’d have to tell him how often you come down here alone.’ His face turned accusatory. ‘Let me go with you. Someone ought to look after you in there.’

‘I can look after myself.’

‘If anything happened to you, I’d...’

□ She stood on tiptoe and breathed a kiss onto his cheek, as light as a feather. ‘Nothing will happen to me. I promise.’ She took a step back. ‘What are you doing down here anyway? I thought you were helping Sunderland with the furniture.’

Wackford pulled a disparaging face. ‘If furniture from the house is to be sold, I’ll have no part of it. I like it here just the way it is, with every chair and every vase.’

‘Dad says we need the money. Badly.’ His actual words had been: *We’ll have to let Wackford, Pauline and Sunderland go if we don’t get some capital coming in quick-smart.*

Wackford scratched the back of his head. ‘But just putting things out in the drive, sticking prices on them and watching total strangers take them away with them, it’s... not nice.’ There was a long white hair growing out of his ear. He tweaked at it. ‘It’s not nice at all.’

‘No.’ Furia had no time for this kind of thing. Not when the book was at stake. ‘Are you going to let me in then?’

He pointed at his scar. ‘I didn’t get this from mowing the lawn.’

‘I’ll be careful, really I will.’

His nodding was hesitant and mechanical. But he stepped up close to the door, put his hand on the metal for thirty seconds and closed his eyes in silence. Then he nodded again, this time more certain.

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘Seems to be quiet. Off you go.’ It was almost like a sloth saying, go on, get a move on!

He pulled his key ring out of his pocket and inserted the longest and oldest key into the lock. The mechanism inside the iron whirred and buzzed like a wasps’ nest, then there was a click, and the door swung open.

The scent of books that came flooding out was overwhelming. Furia was instantly hungry – craving new stories. But that wasn’t why she was here. All she cared about was one single story, and that was almost two hundred years old. On top of that, she knew it almost off by heart. Wackford stepped through the doorway and looked into the cramped aisle behind it. It was as silent as outer space, and perhaps this library was exactly that: an entire universe of worlds still waiting to be discovered.

The corridor was almost four yards high but much, much narrower. Thousands of books covered every inch of the walls. The aisles stretched back miles into the rock, branching off never-endingly. In the nineteenth century, one of Furia’s forefathers had taken it into his head to draw up a map of the subterranean complex, but he might just as well have tried to count the hairs on an enraged gorilla. The labyrinth had as many twists and turns as a tree’s roots and seemed to find constant new paths into smaller and smaller gaps and layers of earth. Wackford claimed his grandfather had followed many of them to their ends and had still found books upon books, even there. The art of bibliomancy had come into its own in this place, there was no doubt about that. And that was one of the reasons why Furia came here so often. She couldn’t wait to be a full-blown bibliomancer herself, to possess a soul book and to split the page heart.

Wackford pointed at the bare light-bulbs dangling on short cables from the rocky ceiling. Electric lights had been installed down here in the 1940s, but they only lit up the main path and a couple of the first few branches. ‘The power seems to be fairly stable at the moment. Perhaps the odd flicker, but no cuts to speak of. But still,’ he held his flashlight out to Furia, ‘you’d better take this.’

She had one of her own in the back pocket of her jeans, but that was just a tiny spark next to this monster of a torch. After a moment’s hesitation, she reached for the flashlight.

‘I’ve got another one,’ said Wackford. ‘No need to worry.’ She swung the heavy shaft over her shoulder like a lumberjack’s axe and entered the library. A few steps in, she heard Wackford calling, not holding out much hope that she’d take his advice, ‘And don’t stray from the path!’ Millions of pages dampened his words to a whisper. The door fell closed behind Furia.

Now she was the only person in amongst the books and she loved it, even loved the shadows and the silence and the certainty that there were only a handful of places in the world like this one. And possibly only a single one.

Once again, she took a deep breath, drawing the scent of books into her lungs and even deeper into her heart. Then she dived down into the depths of the library, ready to face anything and everything that might live there.

Furia followed the main path, hardly hearing her own footsteps on the stone floor. The books swallowed up most sounds. Her heart beat faster. She was excited – she always was when she entered the library. And yet she refused to be scared. She usually managed it. Something darted across a shelf next to her but when she looked over it was gone.

She went on, turned left on the main path and saw another canyon of books ahead. Despite all the twists and corners, it wasn't difficult to stick to Wackford's beloved path – all she had to do was follow the chain of yellow light-bulbs that illuminated the darkness of the aisles and chambers every few yards.

Invisible behind the shelves lay the old grave niches, from which all the remains had allegedly been removed. But what had the dead thought of the desecration of their graves when the first Faerfaxes built their library here? And who knew how it looked in the unlit side aisles, behind all the books, books and more books?

As a child, Furia had once followed her father deep between the stacks, through dusky vaults of paper and grottoes made of book spines, until she lost sight of him around a corner. By the time she'd finally caught up with him and he turned around, he was no longer her father – but a nightmare of her father. She had only found the real one an hour later. The apparition might still be wandering between the shelves to that day.

The corridors were so narrow that Furia often had to walk sideways even on the main path, to avoid getting her shoulders stuck between densely laden shelves. The scent of books saturated the dry air and when an unexpected gust of wind blew along the aisles, it bore on it only the smells of folios and sometimes faraway voices that existed, perhaps, only in her imagination.

Even more corners and crossroads with the occasional vaulted cavern. Everywhere there were shelves, everywhere there was paper, most of it bound in leather and linen. Billions and billions of words from all over the world.

The book that had led Furia into the library had a long title, not unusual

for the year 1820 when it had once been published: *Fantastico Fantasticelli, the Lord of the Autumnal Twilight*. The author was known under the name of Siebenstern, the pseudonym of one of her German ancestors. He had written several dozen books, mainly the bandit novels very popular at the time, and later all sorts of other things. *Fantastico* had been his first. The book might be forgotten today, but in its day readers had devoured the adventures of the Italian bandit chief with the colourful name with great fervour.

The novel had been her mother's favourite book. She had often read it aloud when Furia was small. Cassandra Faerfax had died giving birth to Pip. Furia fought day after day not to forget her smiling face. Whenever she read *Fantastico* she saw her mother before her, with long blonde hair like her own, a thin nose and a high forehead, with the same green eyes and long fingers, which gracefully turned the pages of the book. Furia saw her sitting by a little girl's bed, whisking the child away to the canyons of the Italian Maritime Alps with her calm voice, taking her along into the world of *Fantasticelli* the bandit and his band of merry good-for-nothings.

For a while Furia had looked for similar books, old and new, but none of them matched up to *Fantastico*. Siebenstern's other novels were often only a rehash of the same story. If it was a good book it was colourful and adventurous and took her away to past times; if it was a bad one it had a melancholy, hopeless taint to it. And the only really good one had been *Fantastico*, Furia was convinced.

She had rescued the book from her father, who had burned many things that reminded him of his dead wife in a fit of angry grief. Probably because his head was full of memories that granted him no peace, by day or by night. Over the years he had grown obsessed with finding *Fantastico*. He guessed that Furia had spirited the book away. And she knew that he was still secretly looking for it – as though it were the last step before he could finally let his wife go.

Furia refused to let him destroy the book like he had destroyed her mother's clothes and all the other things once dear to her. Furia had been angry with him for a long time but now she understood him better. Even ten years after Cassandra's death, Tiberius Faerfax still hadn't learned how to deal with the tragedy. He was not a man who showed his emotions and he almost never mentioned his wife. The only thing

he was more secretive about was his experiences during the war in the night refuges.

Something else moved on one of the shelves, this time to her left. Furia stopped and turned her head slowly.

Two tiny origami birds were perching on top of the books, both rather yellowed with age. They were artfully folded miracles made of paper. One of them was pecking the dust from a volume of poetry, while the other seemed to return Furia's gaze. Like all origamis, though, it had no eyes, not even a face apart from its long beak.

'Hey, you two,' said Furia.

The one bird went on with its meal of dust. The other took a stiff step to the edge of the book spine, gave a flap of its wings and tilted its head. It seemed to be sizing Furia up, as if it could really see her, but it was more likely it had picked up her scent.

'Don't let me bother you,' said Furia and went on her way.

Soon after that she came across a whole flock, at least twenty of them, pecking the grey dust balls off the books with their paper beaks. They were parasites that proliferated unchecked. Furia's ancestors had bred them to stop the books getting too dusty, a task they dealt with in an exemplary manner. They hopped and crawled between the shelves like bizarre insects, and she rarely saw more than a handful of them at once. That was why the flock currently feasting on the dust covering the complete works of a Portuguese novelist was an unusual sight. Furia shrugged and went on. As long as the origamis didn't develop a taste for paper they were doing no harm. And luckily cannibalism wasn't in their nature.

She saw several more, unusual numbers of them, before she finally got to the crossroads where she had to turn off to the left. To be precise: where she had to *stray from the path*. She had hidden *Fantastico* in one of the dark side aisles, beyond the reach of the electric cables, next to a Swedish book about the manufacture of early industrial cogs. She assumed her father wouldn't develop an interest in mechanical engineering in the harbours of the Gulf of Bothnia any time in the near future.

A few steps on, she switched on Wackford's flashlight. Several origamis rustled through the beam of light. Furia shone it after them with a frown, wondering whether there was a plague of the little

creatures somewhere in the depths of the library, the offshoots of which were even visible in the front sections.

She had to turn off twice before she finally reached the right shelf for *Fantastico*. Relieved, she saw the book was still in its place. She put the flashlight down on the shelf, still switched on, and pulled out the novel. The firm cover had gone brown at the edges and the binding was loose. There was no picture on the outside, only the title in faded letters. Beneath it the words: *The Adventures of the Valoroso Capitano Fantasticelli from the Annals of the Ligurian Historia*. The instant Furia read that line she heard her mother's voice in her mind, and a warm shudder ran down her spine.

Both her forenames were taken from this book. Furia was a cunning lady thief, who stole Fantasticelli's booty on more than one occasion, and Salamandra was a gifted forest witch with warts on her face. Her brother Pip was named after a literary character as well, the hero of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Dickens was her father's favourite writer and she could imagine quite vividly how Tiberius had once insisted in passionate discussions on at least naming his son and heir after a Dickensian hero, seeing as his daughter bore the name of a warty old hag.

Furia opened the book and read the beginning, and it was love at first sight all over again. It began with a stormy night, a campfire, a story within the story. Before Furia even noticed, she was caught up in her reading, turning to the second and the third page –

And hearing a crackling sound.

She lowered the book in shock, tried to grab the flashlight and accidentally knocked it off the shelf. As the light hit the ground, hundreds of black specks sprayed apart there, seething and swarming like fleas.

Letters.

As quick as a flash, they formed a long ribbon reaching from one shelf to the next and continuing in either direction until it was lost in the shadows. Vowels and consonants, between them accents and umlauts with dots wagging like telescopic eyes on hair-thin feelers.

Furia took a deep breath, put the book on the shelf and picked up the flashlight. 'You lot again.' With a sigh, she let the ray of light play across the army of creeping, crawling letters.

There was another crackle, and suddenly the tiny letters came flooding from all directions to a single point directly in front of Furia. There, they pushed and shoved and piled themselves up, instantly hardly distinguishable from a very large anthill.

The tip of the hill moved gradually upwards, like a tree growing in fast motion. It swayed slightly as it reached Furia's eye level and leaned sideways to the shelf holding *Fantastico*. Several dozen letters hopped across, some of them speedily forming three words:

GoOd DaY FuRiA □

The letters – all scattered out of mouldered books – had no punctuation in their swarm intelligence. Furia had once asked why that was, and promptly caused a flurry of indignation. Commas, full stops and especially semicolons were pointless nonsense, she was told. There was no place for them in the swarm.

'Hello, Whyzed,' said Furia as the letters rearranged themselves on the shelf. A few years ago she'd decided the swarm needed a name, and Whyzed was the first thing that occurred to her. 'You almost shocked me to death.'

YoU hAvE To GeT oUT oF HeRE, wrote the letters. Some of the extra ones jumped about excitedly on the shelf, as if to emphasize the urgency of the warning.

Furia's mouth went dry. 'What's the matter?'

The hustle and bustle began again, before a single word appeared:

MouLdRaY

She cursed. 'Nearby?'

On ItS WaY heRe •

She whirled around with the light and shone it along the aisle in either direction. There was nothing to see on one side, and on the other the pile of letters cast a wobbly shadow. Behind that was only emptiness.

'How far away?'

When she shone the light on the shelf again she saw the words: **A fEW**

CORneRs

For over a hundred and fifty years, the Faerfax bibliomancers had been making sure no moisture ever got into the catacombs. Yet even their power occasionally reached its limits. And then it came to pass that damp gathered behind a shelf in one of the outer sections and a

mouldray grew, its soul filled with the same life as Whyzed or the origamis.

The timing might be a coincidence, but Furia was painfully reminded that her father had been very busy and distracted recently.

GeT oUt oF HeRe, Whyzed warned her.

‘Where’s it coming from?’ □

RiGht

She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘Does it know I’m here?’

YoUrE toO noIsY □

And then: □

A rEal kLUtZ □

Furia flicked the Z against the book spines. It bounced off and turned a somersault but hurried right back to its place. Other letters joined it, and as quick as a flash they spelled out the words:

kLUtzKluTzKLutzklutZ

Whyzed was right. She had ignored Wackford’s warning and felt far too safe. If the mouldray got her, Whyzed would creep through cracks in the earth to her gravestone and spell out three words on the granite.

Furia Faerfax 1999-2014

1999 – 2014

Her **OWn** fAu**Lt**

Turning right would take her back to the main path but if she wanted to dodge the ray she’d have to take the other direction, in the hope of doubling back later.

RUn, wrote Whyzed. **NoW**

She had pushed *Fantastico* halfway back onto the shelf when she thought better of it. Who knew when she’d get an opportunity to come back here – if that even mattered in a few minutes’ time. She stuffed the book down the back of her jeans waistband, pulled her T-shirt over it and ran. The flashlight beam zigzagged across books and floor ahead of her. The crackle of the swarm was by her side. Whyzed had shrunk back down and was now crawling hurriedly along the foot of the shelves on either side of her, like two columns of ants.

Behind her came a snarl. She looked over her shoulder as she ran but

there was nothing but a wall of darkness. She'd have had to stop to shine her light at it.

The snarl became a hiss, and a second smell settled over the scent of books: the stench of damp cellars.

She reached a crossroads and turned left. Ahead of her was an aisle through which she only fitted sideways because the bookshelves were so close together.

Before she forced her way in she swung the light very quickly in the direction from which she'd come. She knew that was a mistake even as she moved her arm back. For the length of a breath, the sight she saw paralyzed her.

The ray was much larger than the last one she'd come across. She'd been nine at the time, down here with her father. Now, six years later, there was no one for her to hide behind.

The creature was a furry layer of mould spores, bigger than a pillow and shimmering like a layer of oil on water. It was floating horizontally along the path towards her. Its edges fluttered like the leaves of underwater plants in a current. At the front edge there was a gaping cleft, getting wider and wider until it looked like the ray was about to split into two. The wind it whipped up billowed its mouth even further, and it sailed towards Furia like an open sack that would at any moment plunge itself over her body and devour her alive.

With a cry of anger, she spun around and forced herself into the narrow aisle. At least she wouldn't be the only one who had problems with the space here, unless –

The ray twisted in mid-flight to vertical and followed her, as flat as a pancake, between the shelves. Furia was still five yards ahead of it, but the distance between them was rapidly shrinking. When the mouldy reek grew overwhelming she stopped, whirled around and as she did so wrenched a book off the next best shelf. Several origamis poured out of the gap. Rustling, they jumped on their folded paper legs across Furia's arms and shoulders, hopped onto the opposite shelf and crawled out of the torchlight into the dark.

Furia flung the book directly into the ray's huge mouth. The cleft closed as the creature paused; perhaps it was considering whether it had already swallowed a piece of its prey. Furia pushed her way onwards in the meantime, saw hundreds of origamis fleeing in the same direction

and finally realized why there were so many of them: they had been trying to escape the mouldray, had fled from the deeper levels and by doing so, had enticed the beast after them to this very place.

Dozens of alarm bells rang in her head. Perhaps she could distract it by throwing more things but she doubted that would work. At that moment something hit her shoulder hard, and an instant later she expected the mouldy jaws of the ray to close around her skull. But it was only the book, which the creature had ejected with astounding force.

Even in a situation like this, it pained Furia to leave the broken book behind on the floor. Bibliomancers who didn't treat books with respect lost their abilities. If their love of literature waned, their powers vanished along with it. Furia was by no means a full-blooded bibliomancer yet. The tiny bit of energy she could draw from books was hardly worth mentioning.

By stopping the ray for a while she had made up a few paces' distance, but now it continued its pursuit, not distracted by the panicked origamis whirling around the shelves and the books. It wanted Furia now.

The shelves were affixed firmly to the walls and far too heavy to use as a barricade. All she could do was try to run faster, dash even more swiftly through the gaps between the books, and at the same time think about which of her modest talents to employ. But to do that she'd need to concentrate, and that was absolutely impossible right now.

The path widened ahead of her, with three steps leading downwards. Furia noticed too late. Cursing, she missed the top step, suddenly had no ground beneath her feet and toppled into emptiness. She crashed instantly onto one knee, screamed and rolled to one side. The flashlight slipped out of her hand and rolled around, casting an oval of light onto a bookshelf and only vaguely illuminating the swathe from which she'd come.

The mouldray glided out of it into the wider aisle, slid back to horizontal and dragged a torrent of horrific stench behind it. Furia saw it floating above her. It must have lost her scent for a few seconds. Origamis darted about in their dozens, their shadows like angular black cats leaping from shelf to shelf.

A torrent of letters poured out of the aisle after the ray, flowed down the steps and drew itself together protectively between Furia and the beast. The seething pile became a tower, which bashed into the

underside of the fluttering ray and threw it off course. That only held it back briefly though, and then the attack drew its attention to what was underneath it on the ground. It registered Whyzed and Furia in the same second, billowed up and turned in their direction with its mouth agape.

Intrigued? For more information and reading copies please contact:

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