

The Gospel of Madness

Book I

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The Rats of Frankfurt

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THE GOSPEL OF MADNESS

Book I

The Rats of Frankfurt

By
Georg Bruckmann

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Foreworld I

Father Bianchi

Restlessness spread throughout the classroom as soon as Father Bianchi had left the room and closed the door behind him. Costa, the head of the small mining village hardly ever bothered to wait until the lessons were over when he wanted to discuss something. Inside, the preacher sighed. The Provost was a good guy, but here up in the mountains near Vestone it was hard to find a man of education and of a certain intelligence these days. And if one found someone worth talking to, that person was certainly an atheist. This circumstance was the only one that annoyed Father Bianchi every now and then, since he had asked for a transfer. Rome had not been good to him. Too much poverty. Too much crime. He was just too weak for that. Too soft, as his superiors had told him over and over again. But how could he not have been desperate in the face of abused and neglected children, underage whores of both sexes and the almost daily found victims of stabbings and other violent clashes? His superiors couldn't tell him either. They just had looked at his despair for five long years and then decided that his faith was too weak for the big city. They had transferred him to the country and he was okay with that. Even if he now had to deal with the simple but egotistical soul of Provost Costa.

"What is it?"

The Father tried not to let his anger at the interruption of his class shine through and fled into a calm, soothing tone of voice, which he had also become accustomed to for teaching. Only during his sermons, especially during Sunday Mass, did he allow himself a little more passion.

"Father, Father..."

The head of the Provost was fiery red.

"... little Da Silva! The brats have..."

The excited Costa didn't need to talk any further. It's happened more and more lately. Of course, he had noticed that Toni's seat had

been empty again this morning. For the fifth time in the last two weeks.

“Have they tied him to the oxen again?”

The oxen wasn't a real oxen. It was a statue and something like the landmark of the village. Signore Barbieri, a sculptor who grew up here, had donated it, probably in a seizure of age-related sentimentality. It had been placed on the “Red Stone”, a small rock plateau on the outskirts of the mining town, so that it now looked as if the oxen was watching over the small settlement.

Toni had already been found there the last time. His hands and feet tied in such a way that his head was pressed between the stone buttocks of the statue. The Father shook his head sadly.

What was it about the boy that attracted the malice of his peers over and over again?

“As bad as last time?”, he asked.

“Nah, worse. We untied him and sent him home.”

“I'll go see him tonight. Thank you for letting me know, Mr. Costa.”

A deep, disapproving humming followed as an answer. *Alright, preacher boy. If you say so.*

Then the Provost turned away and left the small schoolhouse. The man was rightly dissatisfied with the reaction of the priest, he had to admit that to himself. This whole affair wasn't something to be taken easily. Somehow it had to be possible to end Toni's ordeal. In a larger city Toni would have been able to simply avoid his tormentors, at least to a certain degree. That wouldn't work here.

Too small. Too narrow. Nearly two hundred souls. Just one single school class.

The Father wasn't ready to face his students again.

Their laughter and giggling told him that they knew exactly what had just happened outside the classroom. That he had been put in the picture. It was certainly the older boys who went after Toni. Too much energy. It saddened Bianchi that it expressed itself in meanness, not in diligence and ambition. He would have been satisfied even with sportsmanship. He'd take on the four greatest bullies after class and hope that his status as village teacher and

pastor alone would be enough to make an impression on them. Because this was all he had.

The four were sitting in front of him and the priest was mildly delighted that none of them dared to grin. Four pale and wary faces, the glances gently touching the obscene graffiti cut in and drawn on the plates of their school tables. Inside and against his will, he had to smile a little. It's always the same with the young ones. Then he recalled the seriousness of the situation. Little Da Silva. He started with the budding man on the outside left. He built himself up in front of him, placed the tips of his somewhat too slender fingers next to each other on his table top and began to perform steady, annoying tapping movements.

"I know it was the four of you. This morning. With Toni. That seems a little too much right now. Given your age I realize you can get into a fight every once in a while quite easily, but you're clearly overdoing it. Young guys like you getting into little brawls from time to time, that's all right. That's not a good thing, but quite normal, I guess. But this ongoing torturing ... is something completely different. That's ... *bad*. And I don't use the word like you use it on a toddler who refuses to empty his plate at lunch. I use the word as it is used for adults. Because that's what the four of you will be in the blink of an eye. This has to stop. Is that clear? Look at me, Luca!"

The last sentence the father spoke grumbling, threateningly whispering, and he seemed much more compelling to Luca in this way. Slowly the boy lifted his head and tried to look the priest in the eyes. Their eyes met, and Father Bianchi's gaze held that of the boy.

"Amen, I tell you: Whatever you did for one of my least brothers, you did for me. How many times have you heard that line, Luca? Do you think it's in the Bible for no reason? Or that it applies to everyone else, but not to you? You sin!"

Father Bianchi now took a step back and let Luca out of his sight.

"You sin. All of you. You're making your souls ugly. You're harming yourself with what you do. If you do not want to stop out of love for the Lord and the commandments, then it must be for your own sake

at least. Remember, once your day has come, and you stand before the gates of heaven, you will be tested. You'll have forgotten what you did to the poor boy by then. But the Lord will not. Take out your notebooks."

Silence.

No movement.

"Take out your notebooks."

Still no movement. The priest knew why they did not obey immediately. The order to take out the notebooks implied that detention would take quite some time. This meant that they could not help their families on the farms or in the household, as it was normally their duty - and they would have to explain the reason for their absence at home. At least Luca and Benno would have to take a beating for this, as he assessed their fathers. Pietro and Fillipe would probably get off a little more easily, but things back home would get very unpleasant for them too.

"Take out your notebooks. I won't say it again."

At last, the half-baked obeyed. Benno fought with tears. The others did not, but they tried hard to be inconspicuous, not to attract any more displeasure. They knew Father Bianchi had understood how serious their situation was.

"Now, write down everything you've done to Toni. Ev-ery-thing. Then write down why you did it. Then how you want to make up for it. None of you less than four pages. Begin!"

Four pages were quite a lot. It would take a while. The preacher stepped back and sat down on a free table. Fillipe was one year older than the other three, and in his gaze Bianchi could see a hint of resistance. So he mercilessly stared down the rebellious spark in the boy's face, until finally Fillipe began to write. At first the pens scratched the paper slowly and unwillingly, but after a quarter of an hour and after the four boys had glanced at each other again and again, the dam broke at some point - much to the surprise of the priest. They now wrote hurriedly, almost feverishly, and each of them ended up with considerably more than four pages.

Late that evening, Father Bianchi put the last essay aside. Already in the middle of the first one he had fetched a bottle of wine from the cellar. After having read the third report, a second bottle followed. It was much worse than he had suspected. Not only because of what the four had done to the Da Silva boy, but their reasons and justifications were even more worrying. He couldn't really believe all that he had read. It went way beyond thoughtless, stupid mocking of an outsider.

He took another big swig out of the bottle. Then he read the sections he had marked a second time. If he had not observed the faces of Luca, Pietro, Benno and Fillipe while they had written down these monstrosities, he would have thought all their claims were straight lies. Clumsy, silly lies too. But then the four boys would not only have had conspired to an agreement so that their essays could produce such an uniform picture as it now became apparent, no - they would also have had to foresee that they would even find themselves in a situation in which they would have to present these lies. The Father refused to imagine this to be a fact.

Weary and slightly drunk, much more slightly than would have been expected regarding his consumption, he leaned back in his chair and stretched.

What did he know about this Toni Da Silva? He and his mother moved here nine years ago. He was three then. A little pale, small for his age. Mrs. Da Silva was in her early thirties at the time. Widowed. They said it was an accident. She received a small pension and improved her salary as a worker at one of the larger farms in the neighboring village until her alcoholism became obvious after two years and was no longer acceptable to her employer. Since then she has only been seen in town while doing her modest shopping on the Saturday market. When Toni was still younger she had always taken him with her, but at some point that had stopped. In class, Toni was inconspicuous. Sitting in the back-left in the corner, seen from the teacher's desk. The seat next to him was free, but he didn't seem to mind that none of the other children wanted to sit next to him. He followed the lessons attentively, asked clever questions and kept quiet. During breaks and sports he stayed away

from the loud and lively crowd of his classmates. There was one like him in every class, as the priest knew from experience, and for these children things always were a little harder than for the others. The girls made jokes about his appearance, and it didn't matter whether there was really something wrong with it or not. The boys pushed him while passing, and so on, and so on. Not nice, but still normal. Normal, until one had read the reports of the greatest bullies. Father Bianchi sighed and then opened a desk drawer. He took out some sheets of paper and his own pen. A beautiful writing tool, handmade, with interchangeable steel feathers. He bought it when he started his seminary. Good old days. But he didn't want to enjoy those memories now. He wanted to try to put the reports of the four detainees in a halfway chronological order. He started with Luca's report.

Once I was at the lake with my sisters. It was August and very hot. We took our clothes off and went swimming in the water. There was no one else. We were swimming races and I always won and was the first to return to shore. I saw something in the forest. A branch has moved strangely. I wanted to see who was there, but they wanted to compete with me again, even though they knew I would be faster. I let them win the third time. I was a little tired too. When we went back to our clothes. Noemi's panties were gone. We searched everywhere, even places they couldn't actually be. We have a special hiding place for our clothes. I won't tell you, just to be clear.

At some point we gave up searching and went home. When we had almost made it back, we found the panties. They were by the wayside. Was dirt in it. Man-dirt and a little branch had been stuck through the fabric. Noemi still wanted to take it home, but I threw it away with a stick. She started crying, but she still came home with us. Dad really beat her pretty badly cause she lost her underpants.

The next day at school everyone asked what happened because of her black eye and so on. Everyone laughed except Toni. He was standing on the edge, just listening and not saying anything. I thought that that was strange. That's why I asked him if he had been at the lake when we were there. He turned around and said he was

at home. But he wasn't looking at me. Couldn't stand to, I guess. I didn't want to hurt him back then, because I didn't know if he really did the panty thing. Two weeks later another one was gone.

From the clothesline this time. My mother found it in the hen-house two days later. Dirty again and again with a small stick in it. She told me. Did not tell dad, though. He can get mean. Secretly bought a new one and made it look old, on the washboard. Seven days later the same again, only it wasn't the hen-house, but on the window sill where everyone could see it. Luckily Dad always goes to work in Vestone very early. He didn't see it. He can get very angry.

Afterwards I secretly lay in ambush at night. And then I saw him. Toni. In the meantime we always deliberately left some underwear on the leash so that whoever did this would come back. He didn't even try to hide while doing it. Did it right in our garden. Then put the panties back on the windowsill.

I wanted to follow him right away, with the knife, but mother woke up and by the time I had told her everything, he was gone again. Not with the knife she said. Luca, for God's sake not with the knife.

I took a big stick then. Waited for him after school. But he was stronger than me, even though he was smaller. Knocked loose three of my teeth and kept saying: Want to know? You really want to know?

He only stopped hitting me with my stick when Benno came around the corner. That's when he ran away. And Benno helped me, and...

The Father knew from the first reading that no more relevant facts were written down in Luca's essay, just that the matter with the dirty panties had stopped shortly after the incident.

He put Luca's notebook aside and took Benno's. As with the other essays, he still had to smile at the slightly childlike tone in which they told their stories. Big boys whose muscles grew faster than their brains. Still, they were basically good guys. Or hopefully would be one day. Benno was the only one of the four boys who had bothered to headline his essay. A headline that drove off Father Bianchi's smile.

Why I hate Toni Da Silva.

If it wasn't a sin, I'd kill Toni. You want to know why? I don't think it's any of your business, but you're the Father and our teacher. We were playing soccer. Under your supervision, by the way. You were there, but you didn't hear anything. Read something, if I remember correctly. Nobody wanted to vote Toni in, but in the end he ended up playing for the other team. In the second half, just before the end, it was a draw. Toni had the ball and headed for our goal like a lunatic. I was gonna take the ball from him. I didn't mean him to trip. I was just clumsy. But he fell and hit his knee. I wanted to apologize to him right away, but he just yelled. Foul! Foul! Red card! Red card! and pointed at me. Benno is fouling! he yelled. I really wanted to tell him I was sorry, but he just didn't hear me. You then came on the field and stopped the game because Toni's knee was bleeding so much. He didn't want to get patched up. He wanted me to get the red card and his team to win. Absolutely. He couldn't get his head around it. Foul, foul ... he was always babbling about it. You told him he was in shock about the blood and pain and stuff. I'm sure you remember it now. We all went home. Toni's injury wasn't so bad after all. The next day he was back. Hobbled a little, but he basically was okay. Quiet, his corner in the back. Nothing happened for six months. Oh wait, yes it did. He ambushed Luca after school with a stick and beat him up. I don't know why. Luca would not say. Anyway, after half a year later our Peppa foaled. I was there for the first time and I was allowed to give the foal a name. It was a mare and I called her Giada. That was great. I told everyone about it the next day. Three days later the foal was dead in its box. I discovered it. The snout had been tied together with a rope. The axe my father used to make wood with had been leaned against the door of the box. I had to put it away so I could open the door in the morning. Was blood on it. Instantly I knew something bad had happened. Giada was all chopped up. All hooves off. The neck was almost through. I saw axe strokes all over the foal. Then I saw that with all that blood something had been written on the wall of the box. Foul. That was Toni. Toni killed Giada and chopped her up. I immediately called my father and ...

Father Bianchi raised his eyes from the unhinged letters. Benno and his father had more to endure. A week later it was Peppa, the mother. With sticks in anus and vagina. Miserably bled to death. Again the word "Foul" written in blood. Then the chickens. Torn to shreds by the fox. Only that someone had let the fox in. Benno wrote that it could not possibly have been only one animal, since he and his father had immediately run out when the cackling and screaming had started. But by then it had already been too late. Eight out of eleven animals were dead and not a single fox was to be seen. The word 'Foul' was missing this time. But Bianchi had to agree with Benno. He remembered the football match and that Toni completely freaked out that day. He hadn't taken the incident seriously enough. He was particularly concerned about Benno's first line. If it wasn't a sin I'd kill Toni.

If the weight of the commandments was really the only thing that kept the boy from committing a murder, he had to increase their presence in his sermons. But that was just one of the problems he had. Benno's report also contained something else that was at least as worrying as the matter with the foal. At first Benno had kept his suspicion to himself, but after the dead chickens he had finally told his father what he thought he knew. What he in fact knew, Bianchi admitted to himself, because after all he had learned, after he was done with the reports, it just had to be like that.

Toni Da Silva was a sick boy. And a threat.

Benno and his father then had gone to the Da Silva's house. Toni's mother had opened the door, listened to what Benno and his father had to tell and closed the door without saying a word.

That wasn't the weird thing. Not the menacing. Benno had peered past her and into the house. He had seen a man he didn't know. A stranger. He stood back in the hallway listening to them. And grinned. This was a little town where everyone literally knew everyone. No one had seen a stranger come or leave. Benno had asked around in the immediate vicinity, which of course did not help Mrs. Da Silva's reputation. But that was already heavily burdened by her drunkenness anyway and he could not blame the boy for not

giving a damn. The terribly amazing thing was that actually nobody, not a single soul, knew anything about the man. That was actually impossible. Was it really only Benno who was supposed to have seen this stranger and nobody else? Father Bianchi decided to question Benno's father the next day.

He had two more reports in front of him in the second run through. Pietro and Fillipe's. Pietro's began with these words:

It was a note. I found it in my history book. Between the two world wars. There was only one name on it. Luca. I didn't think anything of it and threw away the note or took down my homework on it or something. Then another note. In my left shoe after gym class. Just the name again. Luca. Luca

and I weren't exactly friends at the time. Not like now. In any case, I didn't tell him about it at the time. I thought the first note was a coincidence or something. But the second piece of paper made me watch Luca more closely. He was in the same row as I was, two places to the right. But you know the seating arrangements. I didn't notice anything about him. He acted like always. Then, the next day

...

The priest looked at his watch. It was getting late. He was tired of the wine and the terrible things he had come to know today. He decided to continue the next day. It would probably be best to go on with the lessons as usual. But he'd keep an eye on them. On the four boys and especially on Toni Da Silva. He still couldn't quite understand it. The boy was certainly not as innocent as he initially thought. If all this was true, and Father Bianchi did not doubt it, he was really ... well ... then he was dangerous.

The four boys he at first identified as evildoers had good reasons for their behavior - understandable reasons, but of course no excuses. And as it turned out, the priest couldn't see a reason to doubt the truth of their statements. Luca and his sister's underwear. Benno and his foal.

Foul.

He had to think of Shakespeare's witches.

Pietro had been manipulated into an argument with Luca with the help of the notes and Fillipe - now that was a really ugly thing.

Father Bianchi didn't sleep well that night. The next morning, he felt whacked. Of course, it was the wine. Although, no, actually, the wine couldn't help it. *No one forced me to drink that much of it, right?*

His lessons on this day were dull and sluggish, so it seemed to him. He had his class do a lot of reading and a lot of writing, which gave him the opportunity to observe the four boys and Toni, who was back today. Toni was highly concentrated and focused, as always. His victims, or his punishers, depending on how one wanted to look at it, were less concerned. Again and again some of them turned back to Toni, who was sitting in the back row, and threw a suspicious look at him. The boy had an mean-looking black eye and two knuckles on his left hand were scraped open. He obviously fought back. During the lessons and during the break Toni did not even give any of the four a look. But after all that the priest had read in the reports, terrible fantasies of vengeance had to boil in the boy's mind. The Father knew it was his job to prevent worse.

Well. Yesterday, after class, he kept the four with him. So it seemed only fair, to do the same with Toni today. Toni had no idea Bianchi had summoned the boys who had beaten him up and tied him to the ox statue. After he was untied, he did not go to school, but went straight home.

The Father wanted to leave it like this for now. But he would ask about Toni's well-being and try to get a little closer to the adolescent, trying to establish a relationship of trust. The Father was still particularly concerned about the side note in Benno's essay, which revealed that an unknown man was with Toni and his mother. Not that he condemned such illegitimate relationships, he was not that dogmatic and unworldly. But in regard of Toni's inclinations and his mother's drunkenness, this could be an additional factor that drove Toni towards his evil games. Bianchi also suspected that the man might have something to do with the sexual component of Toni deeds. Toni was very young. Too young for things like this. But whether this was true or not, this whole matter had to be clarified and

resolved. The Father knew only too well what a spiral of violence was. Somehow he had to succeed in interrupting it.

The class was over and Toni Da Silva's face froze to ice when the priest told him that he wanted him to stay for a word. Bianchi didn't really know how to start. His fingers slipped over the attachments on the teacher's desk. When the silence became uncomfortable, Toni asked:

"Did I do something wrong?"

The Father did not know how to answer this question.

"You tell me. I noticed you were in trouble yesterday. I want to help you."

"I don't need any help. Please, I have to go back to my mother," Toni said.

"I'm afraid this is necessary. I'm very worried about you."

"But I can't stay. I don't want to."

"I'm afraid you have to. Can't let you go so easily. Tell your mother it's my fault."

Father Bianchi put one hand on Toni's shoulder and forced him to look him in the face.

"I know the others are mean to you. I really want to help you, Toni. But I need to get to know you better. Tell me about yourself. How is it at your house?"

"Good," he said quietly.

And that's all he said.

In the two hours that Father spoke to him afterwards, he did not say another word. He didn't look at Father either. While Bianchi's voice echoed in the classroom and unwound every facet and trick of the clergyman's pedagogical arts, reaching from anger to gentle forcefulness, the boy looked out of the window with an unmoved face. The Father bombarded him with questions, tried to provoke him, even threatened him with punishments and then even with eternal purgatory. But the boy just disobeyed. He didn't say a word. It was not the priest's way to impose his will with a beating, but towards the end of the two hours he was not far from doing so. Only the fact that Toni had already been roughed up real badly the day before prevented him. He almost let himself be carried away into

telling him about the essays, what he had actually wanted to avoid at that time.

Not a good idea. Good thing I didn't give in to this impulse.

Inwardly boiling with rage and struggling for self-control, Bianchi looked at the mask-like face of his prisoner. All his efforts had been unsuccessful and the means of torture did not seem appropriate to him. He'd have to let his delinquent go. But not yet. Not without a lesson. The Father decided to give Toni some penalty labor.

"Okay, Toni. This is on you and only you. Write twenty *Our Fathers* in your best handwriting. If I find a mistake once you're done, you start all over again, understand?"

Toni Da Silva still didn't say anything, just nodded and went to work. The Father went outside. He felt like having a cigarette. He rarely indulged in this vice. But today was definitely a day to smoke one of his flavored cigarillos and watch Toni from the schoolyard as he sat concentrated over his notebook. Sweet-smelling wafts of tobacco floated in the air between the father and the window through which he observed Toni.

"Well, Father? Have I caught you again?"

Father Bianchi quickly turned around. He had already recognized the voice of Provost Costa at the first word, but nevertheless was startled. He quickly pulled himself together and now held the cigarillo demonstratively in the air.

"It's just a little sin. A little Lord's Prayer is enough to make up for it."

The head of the village grinned, lit a stump of his own and for a while they smoked and joked halfheartedly with each other. Then Costas face became a little more serious again.

"We never know what goes on in our children's minds for sure. They say *yes* and *amen* and then do the opposite of what has just been agreed on. Rarely do we know what they really think. Have you made any progress with Toni?"

"No. But I am on it. A strange child."

Father Bianchi nodded backwards towards the school.

"I kept Toni here to check him out. He won't come out with nothing."

The Father was wondering if he should ask Costa about the strange man in Toni's house. Just before he could make a decision, the head of the village interrupted him.

"He just got up."

"What?"

When Father Bianchi and the Provost were back in the classroom, it was already too late. The boy had taken the notebooks from the priest's desk in a lightning-fast raid and, while the two men were storming around the building into the classroom, he had opened the window, climbed through and ran away.

Hot anger and panic ran through Father Bianchi when he noticed the loss of the reports. On the other hand, he calmed himself, there was nothing in the notebooks of the four boys that Da Silva did not already know. Perhaps, the priest thought, it would even help him to understand why they would pick on him like that if he could read it again in black on white. On the other hand, the escape through the window on the other side of the classroom of course suggested that the boy was extremely upset.

Of course he is.

Hadn't he insisted that he had to go home immediately right at the beginning of his questioning?

Was his escape merely an attempt to alleviate a punishment that might await him at home?

That was probably the case. Toni did not have had time enough to read the reports before he fled.

"Regarding him having been beaten up and tied to the oxen yesterday, he can move pretty fast today," said the village leader at the back of the priest.

Bianchi refrained from commenting. If the stupid provost hadn't distracted him, he might have been able to prevent it - or at least to observe - and would have been able to react more quickly. Father Bianchi ended the conversation abruptly and he did not care whether this did upset the Provost or not. This whole thing started to get to him more and more.

When the evening came, the preacher strolled through the small village, greeted and nodded at the few passerby, taking much time to reach the Da Silva's house. When he came close he sat down on the bench under the lime tree and folded up his newspaper. He only pretended to read and felt ridiculous. In fact, he kept a close eye on the house. So he sat for a few hours. Again and again he forgot to turn the pages of his newspaper and hastily made up for this when he noticed. His thoughts were on a journey. He was aware that he was behaving in a very unusual way and hoped that neither the Provost nor any of his flock would take notice. Getting involved in a conversation was the last thing he needed right now. Then he remembered that it was a Thursday and probably most of the inhabitants of the small village, if they weren't having dinner right now, would be at the inn to bowl or listen to the rehearsal of the choir in the back room. This assumption proved to be correct. He was not bothered by anyone on his lonely watch.

However, this watch also did not lead to results. There were no signs of life in the house. After observing it for another hour, he took a heart and went a little closer. There was no indication of the presence of a man. The pieces of laundry hung on the linen stretched in the front garden only pointed to a woman and a boy. The fact that the house, the garden and the facade seemed generally neglected also suggested that the Da Silva lacked a strong hand. The Father considered briefly whether he should perhaps search the garbage of the family, in addition to his observation and in order to find further clues. However, he immediately rejected the thought after it came to his mind.

What I'm doing right now is ridiculous enough, he said to himself.

Just when it was slowly getting darker and he had difficulties to recognize the small letters of the newspaper did Bianchi notice a first sign of life in the house. In the kitchen the light was switched on and he saw the slender silhouette of Mrs. Da Silva. Judging by the movements, she was preparing dinner. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell whether she was doing it for two or three people. He thought for a moment. She attended his sermons quite regularly. Maybe a little less lately, when he thought about it. Would she be open to a serious

conversation about her son? He would wait until he would see him through the illuminated kitchen window, too. Then he would knock.

When Toni's figure finally appeared as a silhouette in the window and father Bianchi had walked over to the door to make his plan come true, he discovered something else. Next to his right foot was a cellar window slightly below knee height.

Just a moment ago it had been dark. Now light was flickering down there too. No light, as it came from an electric lamp, but light, as it was created when something was burning. It wasn't much, it wasn't very bright, maybe like a candle or maybe two. A faint smell drew up to him. There was a little wood in it, a little smell of burnt alcohol and a little bit of burnt leaves, and there was yet another component.

Paper.

For a second, Father Bianchi had to think of the essays that Toni had stolen. But then something completely different burned through his mind. Benno must have been right. Since Toni and his mother were busy in the kitchen, a third person had to be responsible for the sudden light. For a short moment, the preacher wondered how strange it might have seemed if he had been observed kneeling in front of the Da Silva's cellar window to peep through it - and then he did it anyway.

Due to the steep angle, he could only partially scan the cellar room with his gaze and had to realize that this one second of hesitation, of vanity, had been one second too much. He couldn't see anyone. Only a tiny little wood stove from which the smoke and the diminishing light were emitted. In his mind he cursed in a most unchristian way. Even though he had not seen the man, he took this event as a confirmation of Benno's testimonies. The man existed. He rose again and knocked dust and little stones off his pants. Only then did he look around for a moment. There had been no one around who could have observed his indiscreet kneeling, he noted with relief.

For a moment he stood idle, then he went to the door and knocked three times loudly and audibly. Noises came out of the kitchen window. Surprised murmuring, the clattering of crockery. A chair was

pushed back, then steps. Five seconds later, the door was opened a crack wide. However, the thick steel chain that connected the door to the frame was not removed. The priest took a step back so as not to be too offensive and folded his hands in front of his belly. He could see half of Mrs. Da Silva's face. A single eye crowned by wrinkles and crow's feet, a coarsely porous red bridge of the nose and the mouth of an old woman.

Strange. She's not that old, Father Bianchi thought.

Then he improved in silence. Mrs. Da Silva had always looked older than she actually was. Her early widowhood and the subsequent drunkenness probably took their toll. And Toni, as he had recently got to know him, certainly did the rest to deepen the wrinkles in his mother's face.

"Father Bianchi! What brings you here?"

She didn't sound surprised.

"Good evening, Mrs. Da Silva. Toni didn't tell you? You must have heard what happened yesterday. I just ..."

"Yes, yes. Of course. But... Father, I'm sorry, I don't have time for you right now."

"I beg you, Mrs. Da Silva. What happened to your son can't happen again. And there are other things I want to talk to you about. You should really take the time."

"Father, please go. I'll get in touch with you. I promise."

"But Mrs. Da Silva, it won't get better just because you act like there's no problem. Toni is in trouble in more ways than one. It is not just about the boys, I'm worried about his soul too. I..."

The expression on Mrs. Da Silva's face darkened. While it had just reflected a mixture of concern and embarrassment, Bianchi could now see signs of anger.

"Father! My son's soul is none of your business. Do you understand that? Not of your business! Go away."

With these words, Mrs. Da Silva slammed the door right before the preacher's nose.

This kind of treatment he was used to from the dregs of society in the Eternal City, but here in this peaceful little village it hit him so unexpectedly and brutally in its cold hostility that he just stood with

open mouth in disbelief. The fire in the oven in the small basement room had faded completely when he could move again. The light that had come out of the kitchen window into the street was also gone almost completely. Mrs. Da Silva had drawn the curtains.

Back in the little house he lived in, he resisted the impulse to get a bottle of wine from the cellar, just like the day before. He had to keep a clear head. The way she had said that her son's immortal soul wasn't his business. He had never noticed that she was anticlerical. On the contrary, she attended most of his services. Even if she wasn't singing along with the greatest enthusiasm and never sat in the front row, as many others did with eager pretense, he still had the impression that she had always listened benevolently to his words. So if one wanted to assume that her negative attitude did not come from an aversion against God or the Church, one had to assume that she had sent him away out of fear.

I am right with that? Am I?

Another explanation did not come to Father's mind. So what was to be done? He now knew for sure about the presence of a third person in the Da Silva's house. The fact that Benno was the only one who had seen the man meant two things: first, that the man never left the house, or if he did, then only under the cover of the night, and second, that he had to visit Benno again if he wanted to get a more detailed description of that person. Deep down inside, the priest was sure that it was this man who had made Mrs. Da Silva's reaction so hostile. *I wonder if it was he who was responsible for the malice the boy had shown for about a year?*

The priest tried to remember, but he was unable to find anything bad about the boy as he had known him before the reports. But was that a miracle? He himself hadn't even noticed that young Toni was suffering.

This had required an attention-grabbing punitive measure on the part of the other boys. Only then he noticed. The world of children and adolescents was more mysterious than he had thought. And much darker. Once again, it was the sexual components in particular

that worried him. Luca's sister's dirty panties. The mare's anus and vagina mutilations. Maybe something like this had already been pre-programmed in some of the children and had only now come to light. Maybe the stranger caused it, too.

When Father Bianchi lay down in his bed that night, he could not sleep for hours and when he finally dawned, he had nightmares from which he woke up with a damp spot in his pyjama pants. That was completely normal for a priest too, he knew, but this morning he felt particularly stained.

He took a cold shower and had a hearty breakfast, even if he didn't have a real appetite. In this way he tried to fight fatigue with sufficient calories. He thought that was necessary and justified. No rosary for gluttony. Not today.

He left the dishes as they were, got ready and went to school. He was astonished to discover Toni Da Silva sitting in his seat leafing through a book of Italian grammar. The Father had expected the boy to stay away from him and the class for at least another two weeks, either on his own initiative or at the behest of his mother. But there he was. Father Bianchi was wrong.

Good, he thought, if you want to pretend that everything is normal - then I'll play along.

In math class, the priest made three mistakes. One nobody noticed, the other two times he was corrected by his students, which was very embarrassing for him. Today Bianchi had no particular desire for the history lessons, which he usually enjoyed very much. Instead, he had a German vocabulary test written. The students grumbled and tried to dissuade him, but he was used to it and he beat down the weak revolt. He had his reasons for this test, and they had nothing to do with any difficult-to-learn language.

"Don't act like that. It's just a little test. It won't take a quarter of an hour. I will even mark it today. And don't worry, the grades will not be counted. They will only show you where you stand and where you still need to improve."

A murmur of relief went through the class. Leaves were eagerly taken out and pencils pulled out as the preacher wrote the questions on the blackboard, with the chalk squeaking brightly. While the

students worked on their tasks, Father Bianchi's gaze rested alternately on Toni Da Silva and Benno. Then he took the time to examine each of his students in detail and he tried to recall what he knew about each one.

His conclusion was sobering. Far too little. But at least in one particular case, that would soon change.

When the time for the test was up, he told Benno to collect the sheets. He watched very closely as the boy stepped to Toni's table when it was his turn and stretched out his hand to his test.

Nothing.

No movement in Toni Da Silva's face. No hostility, no dislike, but also no shame and no fear, as one might have expected after what Benno and his three friends had done to Toni. He simply gave him the paper without comment and then put his nose back into his Italian grammar book. When Benno came to the teacher's desk and put down the collected sheets, the priest gave him a note. It was folded and on the outside it said: 'Please read this letter later when you are alone.'

Benno's eyes widened and he was about to take a breath to say something, probably to ask what that was all about - but the preacher threateningly raised his index finger and winked the boy away.

He was aware that this procedure, writing secret notes to one of his pupils, could easily be understood as inappropriate, especially since in Germany an abuse scandal made the headlines and of course also reached the Italian papers. But his reputation in the village was impeccable, so he didn't worry much.

Toni Da Silva had inevitably noticed that he, Bianchi, wanted to make inquiries about him anyway, but he should not see that he had not yet given up, even if his advance yesterday had come out with nothing. It would be best if the boy believed that the events and the reports would have no consequences.

The Father was not hundred percent sure that what he had planned was right. But in the end Luca, Benno and their friends also had sinned when they had taken their revenge on Toni. Why shouldn't they do something to work off their guilt? In the end, they

would probably enjoy it even. An adventure for them and if all would go well a great help for Toni Da Silva and his immortal soul.

MADWORLD

The degenerates stood in a respectful distance in a semicircle around their offering. There had to be about fifteen of the tattered figures and further back, behind the spearmen and archers, even more people were sitting on the cold ground.

Prisoners.

The dirty blonde hair of the girl hid most of her face and the head hung low. She had given up defending herself. Under the rhythmic chant of the others two of the degenerates had dragged her to the motorbike and tied her there. She had fought back then. Even after she was tied, she had screamed and tugged at the ropes for a while, but now she seemed to have given up and instead let the teary red eyes wander fearfully back and forth.

She waited.

They were all waiting.

They were waiting for dusk.

For the twilight with which the dogs would come.

I looked up at the sky. The sun had been in retreat for a while now and would soon have set completely.

I checked my equipment. For the crossbow I only had four bolts, and then there was the machete, which I had taken from a hardware store two days ago. On my belt I still had one of those cheap survival knives with compass and fishing gear in the hollow plastic handle, but this thing could hardly be labeled a weapon. Resigned, I exhaled. No, there's nothing I could do for the girl. Even if I managed to free the girl - what would I do with the child?

I couldn't take her with me and alone she would sooner or later peg out anyway. I made my decision, let myself sink behind the burnt-out car wreck whose hood I had peered over and cocked the crossbow.

While I was inserting the bolt, I was thinking. I had to wait until the dogs really came out of the cellars and urban canyons to get to the girl and attract the attention of the slavers. If the degenerates noticed my shot, it was more than likely that they would hunt me down.

I took aim on the poor, trembling thing for a test, checked the wind direction and watched as the light of the sun slowly departed. They were still in the shadows of the ruins, crept suspiciously around the group, but soon they would have explored the situation sufficiently and then the scent of the girl's fear would make them attack. The pseudo-sacred chant of the degs gradually became louder and more menacing and soon I saw movement in the shadows of the buildings lining the square.

The dogs were here.

Through the scope of the crossbow I watched the child, who in the meantime had also discovered the dogs and tried whimpering and panicking to keep an eye on all of the beasts at the same time.

The loose circle that the beasts now formed became tighter and tighter, and for my shot I wanted to hit the exact moment when the first animal went on the attack. I imagined I could hear the vicious, hungry growling of animals. But I most likely heard nothing except the distant chant of the wretched creatures who wanted to buy themselves safety from the beasts by sacrificing the girl.

This time it would probably even work, because I wasn't able to distinguish more than eight of the shadowy creatures - and there was enough meat on that kid for all of them.

Then it happened.

The first animal, the largest, the alpha, left its orbit, the girl screamed and tore herself bloody at the ropes, the dogs howled, barked and growled, then the alpha jumped and bit into the girl's ankle. The scream was unbearable when the tender skin burst and the bones were crushed. Then the others followed.

That's enough distraction. I pulled the trigger.

At dusk I could not follow the trajectory of the bolt with my eyes, but half a second after I pulled the trigger, a terrible noise came to my ear. Quiet and barely perceptible under the screaming, barking and growling - the noise that occurs when metal meets metal.

I missed the girl and hit the motorcycle wreckage.

All of the sudden, the screams of the girl seemed twice as loud, and I hit my hands over my ears as I sank to the ground behind the

hood, my back to the rusty wheel well and paralyzed by my own failure. I wouldn't dare to fire another shot.

It seemed to me like an eternity while I waited behind the destroyed car and had to listen to the terribly wet and raging noises.

When I was able to get up again and leave this miserable place, I didn't look back. The songs of the degenerates had stopped, and all that got to my ears was the sound of the wind. I crept away.

Loser.

That happened a week ago. I still woke up night after night bathed in sweat and had then relived the events of that evening. The dream had taken me out of my sleep again today and I sat down in my sleeping bag. Disoriented for a moment, I looked around.

No dogs.

No degenerates.

Instead a pale, early morning sun lit the bedroom of the abandoned house in which I had settled for the moment. My backpack leaned against the wall together with the crossbow and the machete lay on the unused half of the wide double bed I had chosen to sleep on.

I was barefoot, wearing only my dirty jeans, and the rest of my clothes formed a sluggish clew at the foot of the bed. After my recent experiences with the degenerates who offered their sacrifice to the wild dogs, I had become tired of roaming and wandering for the time being.

In a suburb of Frankfurt, at the lower end of a dead-end street, I found a house surrounded by a high fence. The entrance door was turned towards the turning hammer and an overgrown park full of tall trees adjoined at the back. From the bedroom in the first floor I could overlook the street, which gave me a vague feeling of security. I had closed the gate, which interrupted the fence a little over the height of a man, with a chain and a padlock and therefore allowed me to relax a little in the deceptive safety.

I still had canned food for three days and I had managed to shoot a rabbit who must have made it out of the park onto the fenced

property somehow.

Sleepy I looked down the street. In front a weathered sign had proclaimed the name of the road. "Mittlerer Hasenpfad". The asphalt had cracked and ferns, grass and here and there even a young tree sprouted. The front gardens of the other houses also were overgrown, and, as everywhere else, nature pushed with irresistible force into the remains of our so-called civilization.

With a disposable lighter, a handful of which I always had with me, I lit a gas burner and heated some water in a tin cup to stir an instant coffee. I would never have drunk a brew like that before it all changed, but right now it seemed like the greatest luxury to me. As I sipped on the blackish liquid, I gazed across the cloudy sky.

Autumn had come.

Later that day I would check the attic and the cellar for useful things. But for the moment I simply sat on the bed and drank my coffee. I still had to think about the dogs. About them and about the degenerates. To the same extent that the flora pushed forward and occupied the space that man had so suddenly and so terribly released, much so did the fauna.

But that wasn't the real problem. The problem was that in the few years after the Great War and without human influence the animals had very quickly found their way back to their archaic behavior. Dogs now lived in packs again and they had remembered how to hunt. In addition, the simplest of all mechanisms had been applied. In our brave new world the weak and the little ones were eaten or starved to death. Not only were there significantly more dangerous animals in relation to humans than before, but those who made it were really big beasts with sharp teeth who were prepared to kill for their food.

And so it was not only with the dogs.

A very similar development had taken place with the humans. Where there were remnants of civilized behavior, the survivors had formed tribal social structures. Each of these structures had developed its own rules, often based on the right of the strongest, and when you met such a group as a stranger, you had to be extremely careful. Even the smallest argument could quickly end in a

deadly fight. It was better to avoid people. People are trouble. Even if they were still trying to maintain a minimum level of civilization.

But there were others. The degenerates were among them. Degenerate - that's what I called those people who had discarded almost any behavior that had been labeled human before the war. Whether this development was caused by our collective trauma, or whether these people had always been closer to the border of animalism, and now - in the absence of law and order - could live out their disposition without inhibition, I did not know that and in the end it did not matter much to me.

They were nothing more than predators, roaming in groups, stealing, plundering, murdering and raping wherever they could. Mostly these groups consisted of men, but now and then women were also present, and when they were, they usually appeared to try to be more cruel than the men. The dangerous and disgusting thing about them all was their intelligence and their will for unnecessary sadism.

The hurters were another group. They were found where uranium ammunition stuck in the walls and biological warfare agents had been used, or where tactical nukes had turned the large industrial facilities of the world into contaminated debris fields. Many of them had almost nothing human in their appearance. Molten flesh, cancerous, mutilated, without teeth and affected by scabies, they had also come together in small groups. Often they lived isolated from the healthy, who wanted to have nothing more to do with them. Whether out of the fear of an infection or simply out of innate, instinctive disgust. Some of them had gone insane because of their suffering, but I had already been able to barter with others on several occasions. But even I had been anxious to avoid any physical contact back then. Self-protection. Once a hurter woman offered herself to me in search of protection and some company. I could do with her whatever I wanted, she had said, just leave her behind – that I should not do.

I left her behind and wandered on.

I can't say exactly why I roamed this gigantic battlefield alone. There was no place I wanted to go, no person I cared about and no big goal I was pursuing. Basically, I could have killed myself just as

well as so many before me had done. Especially in the first years after the war. I decided not to think about it any further.

I took off my jeans and underpants and began to clean myself with a bar of soap and the rest of the water from the plastic bottle. Every other day I sprayed myself generously with disinfectant, from which I had taken three small bottles from a half-collapsed drugstore. Since there was no more basic medical care by doctors and hospitals, it was more than advisable to pay attention to hygiene. A blister on the foot could be fatal on the run, just like fungal infestation in the crotch. An inflamed ear could be the reason why you couldn't hear when someone or something sneaked up on you.

You just had to take care of yourself.

When I was done, I got dressed. After the jeans came socks, leather boots and a holey gray T-shirt. I took my machete with me and left the rest of my belongings in the bedroom, because I basically didn't expect any trouble.

When I had reached the house, exhausted and depressed, the first thing I'd done was to take a quick look in each room to see that no one was here. The door to the cellar had been locked, so I hadn't dealt with it any further. At the end of my search I had arrived in the bedroom, had blocked the door with a chair and had quickly fallen into an exhausted sleep.

Now I took a little more time. When I arrived I hadn't noticed the name tag on the door, but everything here looked as if this family had been quite wealthy before the war. You could tell by the furnishings and the contents of the wardrobes. Kitchen and living room were open and generously laid out and separated from each other only by a counter. Modern back then. In a pantry bordering the entrance area, I found some food cans with an acceptable expiry date, which I stacked next to the entrance door. Then there was a small toilet and a larger bathroom on the ground floor. There, in the mirror cabinet above the washbasin, I found a toothbrush still sealed in, a booklet with plasters and a few rolls of gauze. I stuffed my prey into the pockets of the jeans and turned to the cellar door. It was still locked. I felt around a little, and in fact - there was a key on top of the door frame. I used the key and opened the door, the machete on my right. Listening, I stared into the darkness.

Shit.

Darkness.

I closed the door behind me again and began to rummage through drawers and cupboards until I found a small flashlight that, to my great joy, had a battery that still was functional. Other electricity no longer existed in the most parts of the world, the war had made sure of that. For a brief moment I had to think of all those nuclear power stations that now stood unattended, gloomy and threatening and represented a silent, intangible threat to everything that was left of the world. I couldn't change it, so I pushed the thought away. With the flashlight in my hand I felt much safer when I descended into the cellar. Arrived downstairs, I was immediately pleased. In the room to my right was a well-equipped workshop. Worktop, various orphaned, meanwhile useless power tools. The wall hung full of hammers, files and saws and there were thousands of nails, screws and nuts in the drawers. Everything was a little messy. Here the master of the house must have had retired for relaxing handicrafts. This assumption was confirmed by a half-full box of beer standing in a corner on the floor. Beck's. I let the beam of the flashlight wander further. Behind the door were some pieces of wood, among them a few round bars from which I immediately planed to make some bolts for the crossbow. There was another room which, apart from clotheslines, washing machine and dryer, was empty and the boiler room, which also no longer contained anything useful. I took a bottle of beer from the crate and left the cellar again.

When I reached the top, I opened the bottle at the edge of the counter between living room and kitchen and took a deep sip. At that moment I nearly felt happy. Then I almost dropped the bottle in shock.

Someone sneaked down the fence. At first just a shadow on the edge of my field of vision, then I realized it was a degenerate.

I froze, didn't want him to look through the windows.

I wouldn't let him see me.

I wouldn't give him a reason to enter the house.

I needed the security and protection it offered for a little while longer.

Please, just a few more days without tension and without always having to look over my shoulder.

My hands trembled as I watched him move out my field of vision. Ragged clothes, more holes than fabric, a spear made of a long iron pipe and a kitchen knife in a dirty scabby hand and bloodshot eyes in a suspiciously looking face.

I couldn't tell if the guy was one of those degenerates who had been giving me nightmares for a week, but as soon as I thought about that night, a cold rage started boiling inside me. I could no longer see him and quickly moved from the counter to the kitchen window facing the street.

There he was again.

A little perplexed he looked at the chain with the padlock that I had used to lock the gate wings when I arrived outside. Then his eyes searched the windows, and as his gaze glided over me, I shivered.

He hadn't seen me. He paused for a moment, then turned around and left.

Was he really alone, or was he just a scout to lead his pack to fresh prey?

As quietly as possible, I hurried upstairs into the bedroom. The outlook from this elevated position confirmed my fears. I watched him move away from the gate and stop. He made a brief gesture, and shortly afterwards they stepped out of the overgrown front garden of one of the neighboring houses on the right side of the dead end.

Two more degenerates. One of them also carried an improvised spear, the other figure was a woman holding a baseball bat lined with nails in her hand.

They exchanged a few words, then they went down the alley together. One of the men looked around again and I felt as if our eyes had met. I stopped at the window until after about sixty meters they turned right into a street and I could no longer see them. I noticed that I still was holding the beer bottle spasmodically in my hand, forced me to loosen my grip a little and took another novice sip.

One more, then. And another.

The last time I had drunk alcohol was a while ago and so a warm, cozy, light feeling soon set in in my body, which seemed somehow inappropriate to me. I sat down on the edge of the bed and allowed myself for a moment to enjoy this paradoxical feeling regardless of all danger. With one last, big sip I emptied the bottle and thought about what I should do. I could not say for sure if the degs had noticed me, but when the last drop of beer was finally drunk, something dawned on me.

I had made a mistake. The padlock on the gate. It hung inside. Not on the outside.

If the scout had been alert enough, he would have noticed that someone had locked himself in here. And where someone lived, there was food and there you could plunder and murder. On the other hand, he couldn't have known that I was alone. Maybe this uncertainty would keep them from taking the risk? So I could not say for sure if they would try to enter here, but I cursed myself for my mistake and decided not to stay longer than necessary.

I gathered my belongings together. The backpack, the crossbow and the olive-green Bundeswehr parka, which was still on the bedroom floor and in whose side pocket were the remaining three bolts for the crossbow. In the drawer where I had found the flashlight, there was another pack of suitable batteries. I took those too, then I went back to the cellar and locked the door behind me. First thing I did was cocking the crossbow and put in a bolt. To have it handy, I placed it on the left edge of the worktop. Then I took another bolt and started working.

I messed up two workpieces, but for eight others I managed to make improvised missiles out of the round bars and long nails from a drawer with the help of wood glue, a small drill and hemp string. Since they had no feathers like the aluminum bolts from the sports store, they would never fly as far and straight as these, but at short range you could certainly cause enough damage with them to dissuade one or the other of the Degs from possible attack intentions. I kept going. With a whetstone I sharpened the machete and the cheap survival knife. Then I left the basement again. I just

wanted to put the cans I had stacked at the front door in my backpack and leave the house, when I saw them.

In a small caravan they came along the dead end street. Five or six ragged figures with spears went ahead, followed by two carts, a four-wheeled car trailer and a handcart, each pulled by naked, emaciated people who had ropes around their necks. The bodies seemed weak and scuffed. Especially the body of the woman who had to pull the larger car trailer together with an old man. On the carts were supplies, tarpaulins and tent poles and some other things that I could not recognize exactly through the thick glass next to the front door and through the struts of the fence.

Again I hurried up the stairs to the bedroom and tried to be quiet, although the procession was certainly still forty meters or more away. From here I could see a lot more, and the hair on my arms stood up. Behind the carts, also prevented from escaping by ropes, three children trotted. At this distance I estimated the age of the little ones between eight and eleven years.

It simply had to be the same degenerate group I came across a week ago. At the end of the caravan, four more degenerates walked tall, armed with knives, clubs and spears. Two of them carried additional sports bows with translation and quivers with arrows on the shoulders. But all this was not that important at the moment. More importantly, in the blink of an eye I had made a decision and the sight of the prisoners had given me certainty.

This pack of degenerate slavers wouldn't let any more kids get bitten to shreds by wild animals. Never again.

However, my new determination did not prevent me from feeling fear. Fascinated like a rabbit in the spotlight, I watched fist-balling and sweating how this platoon of wretched and wicked people set up camp right in front of my fence.

That's why the scouts were there. They were not looking for easy prey today, but for a safe place to camp - and the dead end was ideal, since the supposedly empty houses, the fences and the

overgrown gardens offered protection on three sides. As I watched the degenerates and their prisoners setting up camp outside my house, I tried to analyze the situation as objectively as possible. On the first floor of the house I was safe from discovery for the time being. No one bothered looking up. Soon I got aware of a simple hierarchy within the group. One guy was a little older than the rest, about fifty maybe. He was of wiry stature, the only one not dressed in rags and relatively tall. He stood, flanked by two strong looking men, in the midst of the activity and seemed to consult with them. The rest of the troop was busy unloading the wagons pulled by the naked prisoners, or carrying flammable material, furniture and a lot of books, out of neighboring houses and piling it up in the middle of the improvised camp. The prisoners were still tied to the two carts, but had in the meantime sat on the ground and tried with a lowered gaze not to attract the displeasure of the bustling degenerates. Every now and then, however, one of them was beaten or kicked in passing and their fearful and damped noises of pain made the Degs laugh mockingly. Once one of them pointed towards my house. Another time someone even shook the chain with which I had closed the gate, and I got sick with fear.

Don't.

Not now.

I'm not ready yet.

The leader finally called the man to order. *There is enough wood for a decent fire. The gate would be taken care of tomorrow.* At least that's how I interpreted the leader's gestures.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Yeah, you creeps, take care of that damn gate tomorrow. Don't you pay any attention to me.

I watched them for a while until I was really sure they wouldn't change their minds. The carts had been arranged across the road so that they formed a barrier that shielded the camp from the open road. This way they were protected from attacks by other gangs and wild animals from all sides by my fence, the two neighboring houses and their carts. They had unloaded the tents, but had not set them up yet. The Degs had put down the tarpaulins and tent poles at the

eastern edge of the camp. Food and water containers had been brought to the center of the camp, where a small fire of looted furniture and books had already been lit. The leader, protected by his two henchmen, took his seat with his back to me and his eyes turned to the road. Most of the other degenerates also sat in loose circles around the fireplace, except for one who was preparing the food and, for this purpose, pulled something that looked like the old carcass of some unidentified animal out of a blue garbage bag and two other men who walked down the street with shouldered spears and took a stand about thirty meters away from the camp.

Wonderful.

I actually seemed to enjoy a certain amount of fool's freedom, at least as long as I didn't make any noise and didn't show my face outside or in the windows. The leader had now taken a small, leather-clad book from one of his pockets and seemed to study it. The rest of the group talked, and now and then one of the aides seemed to give an instruction with a slightly raised voice, as I could tell from the body language. I could not understand the words, but it was also to be seen that there was no concrete reason for the apparent command tone, since nobody reacted to it with any visible action. It only seemed to be a matter of clarifying the hierarchy. I took one last look at the neglected group. Finally I leaned the tense crossbow against the wall next to the window, taking care not to hit the cold heating element under the window sill so as not to make any kind of noise and to announce my presence by mistake. I left the two aluminum bolts together with the ones I had made myself next to the weapon and went down to the ground floor with my machete in my hand and the sheathed knife on my belt. There I began to put my plan into action.

While I was searching the whole house for usable items the second time, one thing was clear to me: if I really wanted to take on such a superiority, I had to prepare myself.

I crept carefully and crouched through the whole house and collected everything I considered useful in the entrance area.

Whenever I had completely looted a room, I tried to block the door to that respective room. Sometimes I managed this by simply turning a key that was still in the door lock, but now and then I had to reach for a broom handle, a floor lamp or something similar.

In the end, there was only one way left unblocked to get into the bedroom upstairs, because I wanted to start my attack from there. But first I had to go back to the cellar. I unlocked the door as quietly as possible and descended the steps. There was another hatchet here, over there was a hammer. I found a bottle of solvent and about two liters of petrol for a chainsaw, but the tool was nowhere to be seen.

Back on the ground floor, I let my eyes wander over the rubbish I had collected here. Suddenly my plan seemed completely idiotic. I'd certainly die today.

On the other hand, what kind of life would I possibly lose today? Aimless, restless and pointless - that's all I could think of at the moment to describe my state of being, and right now I didn't really know whether that had been very different before the war.

Completely slack and lost in thought I stood around for a few more minutes, trapped in a web of conflicting thoughts and shadowy memories. Then I had to think again of the girl the degenerates had sacrificed to the wild dogs and of the three other children who were still tied to the carts outside the house. Finally I went back to work.

In a way you could say, I worked backwards from the front door up into the bedroom. All the time I was aware that none of my measures were suitable for really killing one of the degs. Rather, I tried to ensure that they could not make use of their numerical superiority and all at once attack me. If I was lucky, I'd catch two or three of them before they climbed over the fence. The others would probably try to enter the house through the entrance door or through one of the bigger windows on the ground floor. But no matter which way they would choose to get to me and kill me - in the end, every one of them would end up in the hallway and try to get to me via the stairs leading up to the bedroom.

At some point I had finished my preparations and was back in the bedroom. Not only had I added the axe and the hammer to my arsenal of weapons, but I also had three Molotov cocktails made

from empty beer bottles, chainsaw gasoline and with the help of an old cleaning cloth as wick.

I left one of them next to the crossbow, which was still leaning next to the heating element below the window. The other two I placed at the top of the stairs. While my hand was playing with the lighters in my pocket, I looked out the window.

I got nervous.

The improvised camp of the degenerates had not changed. I can't say for sure how much time my preparations had taken. Not too long I guess. The group was still sitting around the fire. The two guards at the northern border of the dead end were still at their posts and the leader was still leafing through his little leather booklet.

There was no better time than now, I reassured myself.

I picked up the crossbow and opened the window very slowly and as quietly as possible. Nobody had noticed anything down there and I set my sights on the back of the leader's head. Through the rifle scope I could see that his hair was getting gray here and there, but that shouldn't be his concern anymore - he wouldn't get much older.

I took a deep breath, held my air - then I pulled the trigger.

It took the bolt a fraction of a second to reach its target. With a wet, somehow crunching sound, the missile penetrated deeply into the leader's skull from behind and tore him forward. The book fell out of his hands into the mud and his body collapsed. I did not wait for the reaction of his comrades, but moved quickly away from the window in order not to be discovered just yet and began to make the crossbow ready again. When I had cocked the bow another time and just was inserting the bolt, I heard the first cries.

Taking advantage of the chaos below and their moment of shock, I stepped back to the window and aimed again. The two aides had leaned over the leader's body. The rest of the group had taken up arms and they looked around suspiciously. But nobody had discovered me yet and now I took my time. Through the telescopic sight, I chose the degenerate who looked the biggest and most dangerous. He was on the other side of the fire, had just picked up his spear and jumped up in shock. I aimed at his ugly face full of pustules and pulled the trigger again.

This shot didn't hit as well as the first. It missed the face and the bolt drilled into the man's chest below the left clavicle. He yelled in pain, but at the same time he raised his arm on his unharmed side and pointed at me.

I was discovered.

Now several things happened at the same time. I was again readying my crossbow, the two aides let go of their leader's body and reached for the weapons and the two archers on the other side of the fire placed arrows on the tendons. The whole camp was now in motion and turmoil and a great shouting arose, in which the prisoners also took their part.

The degenerates screamed with rage, the prisoners with fear.

By the time I had inserted the third and last of my feathered aluminum bolts, the two aides had already climbed halfway over the fence and the archers had put their weapons on me. As fast as I could, I also aimed at one of them and pulled the trigger. The bolt pierced his hand and his arrow rose high into the grey sky. I dropped my crossbow, reached for the Molotov cocktail and with the other hand for one of the lighters. I was going to throw the incendiary charge at the two henchmen as soon as they had gotten over the fence protecting me. The scrap of fabric at the top of the Molotov cocktail had just caught fire when an arrow rushed past me and hit the wall behind me. When the slower of the two aides had just put his feet on the ground, I sent the flaming projectile on its way. I was a little hasty with the throw. The bottle crashed on the ground one meter away from the guy, there was a bright jet of flames, and he was caught by a spray of burning liquid. I jumped back from the window, just in time, because a second arrow came flying in and just missed me. I was thinking about what I should do.

Should I shoot the crossbow out the window again?

Or should I prepare myself for them to storm the house soon?

No, not with the crossbow!

On the one hand, the remaining degenerate archer now had warmed up for sure and on the other hand I just had my homemade bolts at my disposal. I had already used up all the more precise aluminum bolts. So the decision was made. While I was crouching in the bedroom to avoid being hit by a third arrow, I listened eagerly.

The degenerates were still screaming with rage and those I had hurt were screaming in pain and expressing their anger. Metallic rattling, the rustling of clothes and a grinding noise told me that other Degs were about to climb over the fence. On the ground floor, loud, booming blows made the front door tremble and behind me an arrow slammed into the bedroom door and made it squeak in its hinges as it moved slightly. Time to move.

Standing on top of the stairs I readied the crossbow for the fourth time and inserted one of the self-made bolts. Through the small window next to the front door I could see how they were gathering. However, the angle was a bit awkward, so I couldn't really see how many they were. While still aiming at the door below, which vibrated from the heavy blows of the degenerates, I heard the sound of breaking glass from the ground floor somewhere.

Someone must have tried to enter the living room.

Suddenly the front door gave way with a bursting, wooden sound, jumped open and a ragged figure stormed through the door frame. I pulled the trigger and the bolt hit the degenerate's upper body. With a horrified, unbelieving expression in his eyes, he stared at the wooden shaft that stood out from him. Then he went down under the onslaught of his pressing comrades. He fell forward and the bolt disappeared completely inside his body. While I tried with sweaty fingers to light the Molotov cocktails previously deposited here, I saw three other degenerates climb over the corpse of their friend and take the entrance area.

It was the unusual sight presented itself to them that prevented the degs from immediately storming up the stairs to chop me to pieces. Cross and crosswise, in the entire entrance area I had set up a net and footrests of cords, belts, knotted power cables and shoelaces. However, my plan didn't seem to work out. I had expected them to rush at me immediately, just to get tangled up and fall and this way make easy targets for me, but I guess I was wrong.

The short moment of rigidity was over when I had finally lit the fuses of the two Molotov cocktails.

The very second I took my first throw, they hectically began to chop on the first lines and cables that were stretched between them and me and to violently pull on them. What they did not notice,

however, was that one of them was standing in a quiet large puddle of solvent.

When the first of the two remaining Molotov cocktails exploded on the floor, ignited the highly inflammable liquid and turned the deg into a living, screeching torch, the living room door on the side of the scenery suddenly burst open and the woman with the spiked baseball bat jumped right into this madness. I threw my second incendiary charge at her, but instead of smashing at her feet on the floor, the bottle simply kept rolling and just set a curtain in the back of the entrance area on fire. Smoke, greedy flames and screaming were now omnipresent. As I beheld a scornful grin on her face, I realized that the other degenerates had broken my net and were getting ready to storm the stairs. The first of them, who set foot on the stairs, slipped in a puddle of soap and salad oil and fell forward. This blocked the way for his comrades at short notice, and I had enough time to throw the axe and the hammer. The axe unfortunately only hit the degenerate woman with the handle on her upper body, but the hammer I threw right afterwards hit her right in the face, broke her nose and took some teeth with it when it fell to the ground. Her hands slapped in front of her bloody face and she started screaming loudly and gurgling wet. Up to here it had all worked out incredibly well for me, but at the latest my surprise advantage was gone now. The one of the aides I hadn't caught with the Molotov cocktail out by the fence just stepped over his fallen comrade and then jumped at me with a mean-looking knife in his hand. Down at the front door I could see the silhouettes of other degenerates preparing to enter the battlefield shining through the flames.

Too many ... way too many.

When I reluctantly woke up, all I could see at first were dark silhouettes. Strange, naked and bizarre figures and shadows seemed to hurry around me in circles, wafting, materializing and then dissolving again, coming back and then leaving. Undefinable murmurs, quiet, short exchanges of words and the hissing and

crackling of a burning fire mixed with the noise that occurs when boiling fat drips into the flames. One of the figures poured some water into my mouth, just a little sip, but feeling the cool liquid in my throat had an incredible relief to it. As I was about to swallow, a violent pain seared through my throat and made me emerge from my twilight state.

My eyes were getting sharper again.

Above me, in the sky, the sun almost seemed to have set and the clouds, whirled up into bizarre shapes by the evening wind, still shone weakly in its dying light. For a while I watched this everyday spectacle that at that moment seemed so wonderful to me and I almost wanted to close my eyes and let myself fall back into the comforting darkness of my dreams again, when I remembered.

The fight. The degenerates. The burning house. The prisoners.

Adrenaline and panic made me rise into a sitting position. I regretted it immediately. The pain that flashed through me seemed to come from an impossible number of places in my body at the same time. Willingly I let the old man, who had covered his nudity with a rag as a loincloth, gently push me back into my lying position. He made a calming gesture with his hands.

"They're gone?" I ask powerlessly.

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"Only those who still could walk."

"Which ones?"

"One of the two women and the one you shot in the hand. The others are dead."

"Good."

I nodded and he grinned a toothless grin. Horrible images invaded my brain.

I remembered.

I avoid blows and stings, flail everywhere, strike with the machete, hit a hand and stab a face with my knife, leave a fatally injured degenerate behind me and turn to the next. A spear penetrates my shoulder, dull red pain boils up, pain and the fear of death. A punch in the face drives me back and this way pulls the spear out of my

body. Panic and nausea when I see my own blood. Hands close around my neck. They are terribly strong and the skin of the fingers feels like sandpaper. Together we roll down the stairs, a ball of human bodies, pain in the back and coccyx. The smoke from the burning curtain bites my eyes, makes them tear. I manage to regain some freedom of movement through the fall and I bite off the little finger of the sandpaper hand. Blood shoots into my mouth, but I suppress the urge to puke and push the blade of my knife laterally through the neck of the degenerate above me. He collapses on me and his weight presses me down. I can't get him off me. He smiles grimly, his mouth spits hissing, aggressive sounds right into my ear and I see one of his comrades appear next to me and raises a gigantic looking mace with nails on it. He holds it with both arms high over his head, in order to beat it into my face with all the force he has, as an arrowhead penetrates the figure's chest from behind and a red rain comes down on me. The mace slips away from the ragged creature's hands and I now can see that it is the woman whose face I had so terribly deformed with the hammer.

She's come back, some part of me thinks in surprise.

I just perceive the slim female shadow further back with the bow in its hand, then everything grows black when the club, unstoppably pulled down by gravity, hits my head. The people enslaved by the degenerate gang must have taken up arms when they finally grasped the situation. Slower and more cautious than the first time I sat up and what I saw confirmed my assumption.

Around the fireplace, where the impaled animal carcass roasted and developed a more and more delicious scent, lay corpses with terrible wounds. Another degenerate had a spear in his stomach. The dead body of an eight-year-old boy, half of whose blond hair was bloody-red, was buried under him. An old man, naked like all slaves, lay on his stomach with an arrow in his back. Another deg seemed to have been nailed to the wood of one of the carts with a spear. His head hung down limply. I couldn't see his face and I was happy about it. There were more bodies lying around, but I didn't pay any more attention. They were not alive anymore and that was good and I turned my attention to the living. Enough death for today.

The old man next to me looked into my face, probably ready to keep me awake if I should give indication of passing out again. On the other side of the fire I saw a woman with a bow over her shoulder and a little girl on the - on our - battlefield gathering weapons that no one else would carry anymore and collecting them on one of the carts.

"That's Wanda," said the old man. "She saved you."

"And the child?"

"Mariam."

"Who else?"

"None."

"And you?"

"I'm Thomas."

I nodded, and when the break that had interrupted our short conversation had become long enough and Thomas realized that I wouldn't give him my name for the time being, he said:

"Come help me take a look under your clothes so we can see how badly hurt you really are. You almost look like one of them."

He nodded vaguely towards the dead.

I concentrated on my body. My neck hurt, my left shoulder pounded dull and hot, just like my coccyx. When I tried to pull my bloody, shredded T-shirt over my head, I immediately decided to leave it on. Another ache stabbed my brain. One or more of my ribs had to be broken, judging by the pain. I expressed my concern and Thomas frowned. After a short moment of hesitation Thomas helped me and together we managed, slowly and carefully, to undress my maltreated body down to my underpants. After Thomas had examined me, he nodded.

"No. No broken bones. You will make it, I guess."

And indeed: My whole body was covered with bruises, scabbed scratches and minor wounds, but apart from the wound in the shoulder, no major injury could be found.

"We're still going to have to stay here," Thomas said.

"We?" I asked. He looked at me.

"We need a break, too."

He pointed in the direction of Wanda and Mariam. Yeah, he might be right.

“And that one...” He pointed to my shoulder.

“... we’re probably gonna have to burn that wound out somehow.”

I avoided his gaze, suppressed the thought of burning flesh, although I of course knew that he was right. An infection of the wound had to be prevented in any case. However, I was thinking more like sterile bandages and antibiotics than glowing iron and even more pain. We would see.

To distract him, I said:

“We should get ready for the night,” and nodded up to the darkening sky.

“Yes. I’ll help them both. Do you want to go back to your house?”

The way he asked told me, he didn’t think much of the idea. Probably none of us wanted to spend the night in a house full of dead people, but I added:

“It’s got a fence.”

“Yes, it does. But I think there’s enough meat for the dogs out here. We can probably do without the extra protection for one night.”

He looked in the direction of the bodies. I proved him right. The dogs wouldn’t bother us when when they could get so much carrion here without a fight.

Sitting on the floor, I watched as Wanda, Mariam and Thomas carried everything that seemed useful to them into the corpse-free house next door on the west side of the dead end.

Plundered pre-war food, several of the blue garbage bags, which, as I now knew, probably contained the hunting spoils of the degenerates, two large canisters of water and a handful of smaller cans with food, weapons and all kinds of other equipment found way into our new shelter. I wondered what had happened to my own weapons. I’d ask for them later. The three managed to finish their work in a relatively short time. Besides collecting the possessions of the degs, while cursing and panting, they had also dragged the corpses a good distance northwards, almost to the open side of the dead end. That was good. There was no need to see the dogs eat.

The bodies of the other prisoners were wrapped in tarpaulins and laid in the front garden of the house. Finally the three turned to me and Wanda and Thomas came to help me up. Mariam, who had looked shyly at me the whole time, stayed behind and watched.

When they pulled me on my feet, a blazing pain shot through my right ankle.

“Shit!”, I cursed into myself with my teeth bit together. So something was broken after all.

In the end I leaned equally on Wanda and Thomas and together they dragged me past the heap of weapons and other stuff onto the leather couch that stood in the living room of our new common shelter. Mariam had taken the roasting spit, which looked far too heavy for her size, from the fire and closed the front door behind us, a little clumsily and with great concentration, without dropping it.

We left the fire burning.

For a while I sat on the couch with my eyes half closed and watched the three of them busily putting together a kind of meal from the fried meat and some canned food.

Judging from what I could see from here, the interior of this house was a little simpler and of lower quality than that of the house I had previously chosen to hide in. But this I only noticed in passing, because at that moment I was just incredibly happy that none of my new acquaintances seemed to expect me to participate in the work, and more than once the past effort let me nod off for a moment.

Every time I fought my way back from sleep to reality, into my pain-filled body. I was just too curious about these people and in an irrational, dark corner of my mind I still thought it was possible that they might kill me if I lost consciousness - even if Thomas had behaved exactly the opposite way so far.

Someone had put two candles on the table and lowered the shutters, so that we wouldn't make an easy target in their light, because it had become completely dark outside in the meantime.

They haven't stayed naked for a long time. I was sure it was pretty much the first thing each of them had done after the fight - put some clothes on, I mean. The nudity had not only been a humiliation that the degenerates forced upon their prisoners. The resulting absolute defenselessness also created a psychological barrier to prevent the slaves from even thinking of anything like resistance or flight. You couldn't feel more vulnerable or powerless. Given this, one must value even higher that they took initiative and joined my suicidal attack on the degs.

Wanda moved through the room with a strange kind of elegance, but limped slightly on one leg and a fine red cut ran across her left cheek. Her hair was dark, somewhere between black and brown, shoulder-long and slightly curly. At first glance, she seemed very slender, but on closer inspection, one noticed that it was simply emaciated due to too bad and too little food. This was also true of Thomas. Of the three, Mariam looked healthiest. Although her small body was covered with scratches and scars like everyone else's, I was sure that the adult prisoners had given the children much of their own scarce rations and had only taken for themselves what was absolutely necessary. Somehow this thought almost made me happy, because it showed that I had made the right decision. That they were worth putting my life at risk for them. As noble as that may sound, in reality I could not say exactly whether I was really concerned only with the lives of the prisoners, or whether I just could not cope with my own original failure a week before. Was that it? Something in between, I guess. Maybe a death wish, too. Who cares? The three of them now sat at the table and distributed our dinner onto the plates.

On four plates.

I accepted this silent invitation, hoisted myself off the couch and limped to the free chair. Until now no one had said a word more than necessary, but when I sat down at the table, the first knot loosened. Mariam was waiting until I had carefully placed my aching bones on the unpadded chair, then, abruptly and uninhibitedly, with her two small hands, she started to a strip of fried meat and then a ready for baking bread roll, that Thomas had toasted over a candle flame and finally started to shovel all of this in her children child's mouth, swallowed hard, coughed and spit the barely chewed food back onto her plate.

Thomas grinned slightly, then he said dryly:

"Maybe we should use the good silver after all? Or what do you think?"

The dam was broken. We all started laughing unrestrainedly, couldn't stop at all. Also Mariam, at whose expense we were having fun, joined in, and we had to make sounds like a bunch of lunatics on speed. It wasn't just Mariam's little slapstick. The idea of eating with

a knife and fork seemed completely absurd to all of us now, long after the collapse of the old world and after all the killing that lay behind us all.

When we finally had calmed down again and the memories had faded and disappeared again, but then more endurable incarnations, Wanda said:

“You know, maybe we should actually do this,” got up, rummaged through some drawers and then handed out knives and forks to all of us. For a moment I hesitated, but when Mariam and Thomas reached for the cutlery and turned it between their fingers, I also reached for it, carefully speared a piece of meat on the fork and cut off a piece with the knife. Shortly afterwards we all ate in silence and enjoyed the taste of food, the vague feeling of nostalgia and the simple fact that we were still alive.

I was very aware that Mariam had difficulties and didn't know how to use the cutlery properly. Sure. Nobody had taught her. No reason to do so. She was too young. But she learned quickly. Soon everyone had completely eradicated the portion intended for him and an slightly embarrassed silence spread. Finally Thomas took the floor.

“We're all tired. But I think that Mariam and you ...”

He looked me in the face for a moment.

“...should sleep through. Wanda and I will take turns with the guard.”

At first I wanted to fend off the objection that I was not able to take on a watch shift, but when Wanda agreed and said that it was probably best - at least for tonight - I let it go and submitted.

I rolled myself up on the couch full, but with a queasy feeling in my stomach. Were they planning something? We had not spoken much and a fight broke out inside me between my own distrust of other people and my body's merciless need for sleep. It was more of an exhibition match and in the end the need for sleep won effortlessly.

The next morning I woke up kind of hungover. In the living room I didn't see any of the three, but I could hear sounds of movement in the house. I sat up. Judging by the light, I had slept well into the afternoon. My stomach growled again and I had to piss. I got up on

my feet. My shoulder was still throbbing, the coccyx was still hurting like hell, my ribs were constantly sending pain impulses to my brain, but my ankle seemed to be doing a little better.

At least that.

I came to the table where we had our feast yesterday. Lined up neatly, freed from the blood of the degenerates, lay there, between the dirty dishes and the good cutlery, my machete, my cheap survival knife and my crossbow. Also two of the aluminum bolts and four of the homemade ones were ready for me. I could not have wished for a clearer sign of trust. Thoughtfully I looked at the ambivalent still life before my eyes.

In the end I left my weapons on the table and went to see what the others were doing. From above I heard a bright laugh and giggle and the splashing of water on ceramics. Wanda and Mariam must have been in the bathroom washing. I should probably do that too sometime soon.

As I walked on, I casually peered for a water canister. I met Thomas outside the front door. He also smelled a bit of soap and there was nothing left of the sour old man smell I had noticed on him yesterday. I felt like a rotting skunk standing next to him. He nodded towards the pile of corpses at the northern entrance of the dead end.

"The dogs were there. They were really hungry." He looked at me and then added:

"How are you?"

"All right, considering the circumstances," I said, and he nodded and hummed softly.

"Last night I was talking to Wanda. We've decided to stay here until you're well again."

"You don't have to." Thomas grinned crookedly.

"You're barely able to stop us, are you?"

For a moment I wanted to reach back for an answer, but then I let it go. He was right.

Not to let him take initiative out of my hands completely, I changed the subject:

"But I want to go back behind the fence. It's safer over at the other house. However, we would still have to get rid of the dead and

secure the broken, or better right away all of the windows and ventilate properly.”

Thomas nodded again.

“Basically a good idea. But for now,” he tapped me surprisingly rudely against the spear wound on my shoulder, “... we need to make sure you don’t get an infection.”

He smiled at my efforts to dissuade him from burning out the wound, but in the end he let me. I would work with my disinfectant for now and, as soon as my foot was fully usable again, get some antibiotics from some nearby pharmacy that had not been completely looted yet.

While we were still having our little debate, Mariam and Wanda came down the stairs. Both were now newly dressed and each wore a towel wrapped around their heads.

“Bath is free,” Mariam joked and peered at Wanda, from whom she must just have learned this expression, and I smiled at the sight she offered. A garishly patterned towel around her head, a brand-new-looking ScoobyDoo shirt in eye hurting pink, a belt with knife and a field bottle above, which looked much too big on the little girl and - in fact - a yellow skirt and sandals.

Unhandy. On occasion we had to get the little one some more practical clothes. But okay, obviously something else was not to be found in the house probably in the first attempt.

I went upstairs, undressed and washed myself sitting in the bathtub and in pain as best I could. The girls had left me enough water in the plastic canister and also put a bottle of shower gel and towels around the tub in a way that I had to see them immediately. I messed up one of the towels when my shoulder wound started bleeding a little, but that was soon over. Finally, I disinfected the wound. It hurt and I cursed silently. Looking at the injury in the bathroom mirror I was pretty pleased with its condition. So far, no inflammation was in sight.

Not so much with my face. I really needed a shave. I looked around. Ah, yes. An electric razor. Great. Completely useless these days. Just had to wait for the next occasion allowing me to shave.

The rest of the day we spent cleaning up in my original shelter. The Dregs' bodies we carried to the others already gnawed on and torn to shreds by the dogs at the northern opening of the dead end and thrown on the pile. Then followed some cleaning work and then, after several hours of united labour, the puddles of blood had been wiped up, the remains of the burnt curtain thrown into the garden and the broken window had been temporarily suspended with blankets and plastic tarpaulins.

All this time we had casual conversations, and I learned a little about the past of the three. They seemed quite fond of talking about their lives before the war. About her imprisonment with the degenerates ... not so much. Wanda in particular was very silent about this.

In the early evening, it had just begun to dawn, we had brought all supplies and weapons back in my shelter and locked the gate of the fence behind us when a spontaneous thought found its way into my consciousness.

"Say, say.", I asked.

"Where's that book the leader was reading yesterday, anyway?"

They looked at me - and no one said a word.

Mariam stepped nervously from one foot to the other until she finally grabbed Wanda's hand and stood so close to her that they touched. Thomas, who had stared at me like everyone else, could not stand my direct look. Instead, he directed his eyes towards the ceiling of the entrance area for a moment.

"Actually we wanted to burn it," he finally started slowly and hesitantly as Wanda cut him off much louder than necessary.

"Not *actually*! We still want to burn it! We have to burn it! You got that, asshole?"

Wanda was obviously getting agitated and I understood less and less. She reacted way too strongly to my question. Too angry, and suddenly the hair on my arms stood up. Distorted faces and cramped postures. Mariam was clearly afraid.

What happened here?

Maybe I should ask more forcefully for the book to be shown to me?

In the beginning it had only been a vague curiosity, but now, witnessing their strange behavior, this curiosity continued to grow. No, I wouldn't let it go. But then I looked at them again. Maybe it was best to let them be for now. At least for the moment - before the mood completely changed.

Thomas had clenched his old hands in fists and his ankles stood out white. For a moment he held Wanda's gaze, then he lowered his head, seemed to collapse and stood tensed as if waiting for something to happen.

Wanda's right hand, which had moved to the knife on her belt, paused there and then, perhaps to justify her subliminal readiness to fight, stroked Mariam over her head and finally she laid her hand on the girl's shoulder in a futile attempt to give comfort.

I wanted to ease the tension that had built up between the three of them and myself, but especially between Wanda and Thomas, so I clumsily changed the subject and raised my hands soothingly.

"What's there for dinner?" I asked.

This maneuver was so obvious that I would have been embarrassed if I hadn't seen the shadows on the faces of the former enslaved. There was something about that book and I would find out what it was. For now, however, I was more than relieved when the tension seemed to evaporate almost too quickly.

"I'll see what we have left," said Wanda, turning her back to us and walked towards the kitchen where we'd stored our supplies in a kind of a "prehistoric tradition", even though there had been no functioning power grid for years to put a refrigerator or stove into operation. She pulled Mariam along with her, and when I heard them rummage around in the kitchen, I stepped up to Thomas.

"This is not over yet!" I said quietly.

I thought the old man was the weakest link in this chain of traumatized, self-proclaimed secret bearers and when I spoke the syllables, I immediately felt sorry for them, because I had placed such a threat in these five words that Thomas seemed to sink into the ground right away. He began to tremble, his jaws opened and closed, but not one word came over his lips, not a single one. With tears in his eyes he stared at me, then he rushed after Wanda and Mariam.

I was left behind helplessly with nothing but questions in my head. Finally, I turned around, walked up to the front door that had been made almost unusable by the degenerates' attack, and for the tenth time I checked the results of our poor repair efforts.

A strong person would have shattered our improvised carpenter's mess into a thousand pieces with a single kick, but we were definitely safe from the dogs tonight. Even if one of them would make it over the fence against all odds. I had never been good with people, even not before the war. I couldn't read very well between the lines or interpret nuances, was often too direct, offended people.

I had to give the three some time, I said to myself, because one thing was clear: they had suffered more than just external wounds and injuries, much more, while they were forced to roam the devastated lands with this gang of degenerates. If I wanted to understand them, I must not forget that. I thought again about Wanda's face when she had rebuked Thomas. At that moment she had not been far from pure, animalistic desire to kill. I shuddered when I wondered what my own face might have looked like when I had fought and killed the degenerates, whose attack I had deliberately provoked, right here, in this House that was now our refuge. Chasing them away hadn't been enough for me, I now understood. I did make them come at me so I could kill them all - or die in the attempt.

Maybe I should just go and leave the three of them to themselves.

At some point, when the rumbling and whispering behind the kitchen door had faded away, and instead the clattering of dishes got to my ear, I turned away from the front door, made a few steps, knocked, waited a moment and then entered.

The table was set and a plate was also ready for me. I sat down. Wanda and Thomas pretended that this scene back before the door was not real, as if it never had happened. A miserable charade.

Mariam, however, barely touched her food. She felt the tension between the adults and fearfully let her eyes roam between us. Slowly, while we were chewing, something like a fake conversation developed. Meaningless, fearful and false. Soon I left the three.

Before getting up, I asked Thomas, who had been assigned the guard right before mine, to wake me when it was my turn. Then I

went into the bedroom upstairs, which I now somehow regarded as my room, despite the fact that it was absolutely clear to me that I would not stay here forever.

I briefly thought about closing the door behind me, because this whole thing had not exactly helped to increase my trust in the three of them. On the other hand, Thomas would notice the locked door if he wanted to come in and wake me, and then he would probably develop a suspicion towards me in turn.

So what should I do?

Finally, so not to be completely without protection, I placed a chair in such a way that the door, if one would open it, had to bump against it. On the edge of the seat I placed a half-filled glass of water, which I had taken from the kitchen. If someone wanted to rip the door open and storm into the room, he or she would make a lot of noise, and if someone was creeping up on me, chances were good that he or she wouldn't find his way around the chair in the dark and stumble over my little alarm system - even in case the intruder wouldn't hit it with the door right away. I was confident that the noise would be loud enough to wake me up. Relieved in this way, I took off my boots, loosened my belt and stretched out on the bed. My crossbow, loaded with a feathered bolt and cocked, lay next to my boots, the machete within reach as usual.

As I stared at the ceiling, the thing down there did not leave me alone.

This book - what about it?

The thought of it haunted me more than I wanted - that I didn't know where they had it. Who had it. I guessed Wanda. Should I try to search through their things while I was awake during my shift and they were all asleep? What did it say? Why did she want to burn it so badly? Couldn't they just throw it away? It was just a book, wasn't it? What harm could a book do?

Yeah, a book. Right. Why should a degenerate, a looter, an outlaw, a human animal be interested in reading? It was clear that Wanda and Thomas thought it was somehow bad that it was a problem for them, so much so that Wanda had reached for her knife - but why?

My thoughts turned in becoming more and more confused circles until I finally dawned into a restless sleep and in my dreams I fought

all the battles of the past days again and again and when I woke up bathed in sweat, it was bright outside.

Thomas didn't wake me.

I sat up, looked around the room hectically. Everything seemed to be still in place. The chair, the water glass, my weapons - everything was unchanged. I swung my feet out of bed, put on my boots as quietly as I could and closed my belt. I listened deep into the house, trying to hear signs of activity, of life.

Nothing.

In my mind's eye I saw the three lying in their blood. Slaughtered by degenerates who were now lurking silently in the shadows and niches of the house, just waiting for me to show up.

I sneaked to the window. The dead end was just as we left it. The burnt down fireplace, the pile of corpses at the northern end, which seemed to have lost a little volume overnight, the locked gate in the fence, which had protected us so well so far. Everything was as it should be - and yet I felt that something was completely wrong.

Silently and still sweating out of all my pores, I first took the glass of water from the chair so as not to trigger my own small alarm system myself in the end, and in this way unintentionally make my presence known to an invisible enemy. Before I threw it towards the bed on which it landed, almost without making a noise, I drank it in one go.

What you have, you have, right?

Then I carried the chair over to the bed and put it down gently. The way to the door was now clear and I grabbed my crossbow and machete. Before I left the room, I put my ear on the wood of the door again. Still Nothing.

When I finally pressed down the handle carefully with the right fist, in which I also held the machete, and opened the door, it gave off a quiet creaking and I lifted the crossbow in my left slightly higher and took a quick step back in anticipation of an attack.

But no battle cry, no sound of death bringing footsteps coming at me out of the twilight of the house.

Just silence.

Now the door was completely open and my gaze glided hastily to the right and left over the upper end of the stairs and the locked doors in the corridor that connected the stairs with the rooms on the upper floor.

No movement, no sign of life. I waited another second until I had enough courage to finally leave the bedroom. The machete raised for a blow and the crossbow stretched in front of me, pointing in the direction I was walking, I worked my way carefully to the landing and peered over the handrail, to which the remains of my net were still knotted. Below, as far as I could see from here, everything seemed to be just as I had left it. The front door was locked, our improvised repairs were also still intact.

No, we hadn't been attacked by degenerates that night and I hadn't been spared by a miracle either, just to wake up this morning as if nothing had happened.

Idiot.

My fear died down a little. Whether it was because I didn't notice any signs of struggle and noises, or because a person only can endure a certain amount of tension before the mind sought ways to calm itself, I don't know.

In any case, I changed my approach. I no longer tried to be quiet at all costs and pushed the machete back into the sheath with a muffled but well audible sound. Now holding the crossbow loosely in both hands, I went down the stairs. Downstairs, arriving in the entrance area, I once turned slowly round my own axis.

All doors to the rooms on the ground floor were closed and now I could hear something. From the living room a quiet child's weeping and a calming woman's voice mumbled muted, tender-sounding words.

I lowered the crossbow, went to the living room door and entered. Thomas sat in the single leather armchair, which completed almost every couch set in the world. His wrinkled arms hung down his right and left armrests, his head had sunk powerlessly on his right shoulder and his dead eyes looked me directly in the face. First I cringed, then I looked a second time, and while Mariam kept crying, and Wanda, pale and mask-faced, turned to me, I saw the big

puddles of blood that had spread across the floor from Thomas' slit arteries.

Mariam freed herself from Wanda and took a hesitant step towards me and when I had put the crossbow down and held out my hand to her, she ran towards me on her little feet, pressed her crying face to my stomach and kept sobbing. I could feel her heart beating furiously and even after I absorbed this scene of death, which the autumnal morning light bathed in unreal colors for a while, she showed no intentions to let me go.

My gaze was searching for Wanda's face. Still pale and not moving, she looked back at me.

Distanced. Solidified.

"He's dead," she finally said.

"Why?" I asked.

She looked down and shook her head slowly.

"Guilt. It was the guilt."

"I don't understand. You were all prisoners, weren't you? You're not to blame."

Was that the touch of a sneering smile?

"Later. Let's bury him first."

I stopped talking, just nodded.

We had decided on the front garden. None of us were looking for unnecessary fights, so we didn't want to lack the protection offered by the high fence. My injuries continued to cause me pain and the physical work didn't make it any better, but a look in Wanda's face told me that she wouldn't help me.

Around noon we finally stood next to the mound around the pit. Thomas' body lay beneath. We had rolled it in a sheet after noticing that Mariam couldn't keep her hoary eyes off the dead, flaccid face. Where his arms touched the sheet, it already shimmered red through the fabric. I heavily leaned on the spade that I had taken from the cellar and used to dig the grave. Wanda really hadn't been much help here. While I had been working, she watched with an expressionless face and only rarely had her gaze touched the dead man to her feet.

Now that we were ready, I waited.

When Wanda still held her eyes upon the clouds after a while, I finally asked:

“Last words?”

She looked me briefly in the face, then she knelt beside Thomas’ wrapped head and stroked absently with the hand over it for a moment. Then, after a last second of hesitation, she rolled the corpse into its grave. The sound it made must have been quiet, but it seemed loud to me. Loud, profane and inappropriate. She rose and reached out her hand towards the spade. I handed it to her. After she three times had shoveled earth onto the dead body with her motionless face, she rammed the spade into the ground and stopped at the edge of the pit.

Then she pulled up snot and spit it to the grave. She turned to me.

“Close it,” she said voicelessly, and as she turned around and went back into the house, I could see that her face was no longer expressionless and rigid.

I did as I was told, and as I shoveled in pain, I thought about the scene that had just taken place.

What had happened between them? I just couldn’t make sense of it. At some point I was done shoveling and was more than happy that I had needed much less time to fill up Thomas’ grave than to dig it.

I pushed the spade into the ground, just like Wanda had done before, and took a deep breath. Only then did I realize that Mariam had stood behind me all the time and watched silently.

“What happens if we die?”, I heard her little girl voice ask. I couldn’t think of a suitable answer.

“Come on,” I said instead, and she took the hand I gave her. We closed the front door behind us and at the kitchen table we found Wanda. She was sitting at the end of the table facing the door and it was clear that she had been expecting us.

The book lay in front of her.

Her nails dug into the leather cover as she lifted her head in our direction.

“Sit down.”

I obeyed, took Mariam on my lap, where she quickly and exhaustedly fell asleep, even before Wanda had said another word. Slowly and haltingly she began to speak.

Her capture. The first weeks full of fear, shame and pain, when her parents were still among the prisoners. Then the miserable, agonizing death of the parents, the permanent mistreatment and rape by the degenerates and even by some of the the other captives. Their joining and the dying of the weak, the constant fear. She unleashed an endless litany of torture suffered, torture and humiliation inflicted under duress on others, making people with names and faces appear in my mind's eye just to fade away again. Some of them she just didn't mention anymore. She told me how they had moved through the land, destroyed and in ruins by the war, how all they had been given during this whole time was the bare necessities of food, just enough to be able to march on without falling over.

She also reported how the degenerates attacked other groups and small, scattered settlements of other survivors, described power struggles within the degenerate gang, duels, intrigues and secret murders. Often she digressed in detail and when she did, I could best get an idea of the whole, terrible thing. When she lost herself in atrocities and strung words together endlessly, I would listen with one ear and the free part of my brain would put the confused, seemingly incoherent information together to form a bigger picture.

I had been wrong. Behind the actions of the degenerates, under all the absolute urge and murderousness, a red thread lay hidden, a method. On the one hand, their pack had grown steadily, although now and then also degs had died in fights or had simply been left behind if they had sustained injuries and therefore became a burden for the group.

In the beginning there were only five men who had joined together to form this gang, but when I met them, their number had already grown to about twenty. Wanda's tale led me to believe that the new members of the degenerates were former prisoners who had undergone brainwashing through brutal rites, forced and endured acts of violence that could hardly be surpassed in malice.

In principle, this recruitment scheme was identical to the one used everywhere in countries where some self-proclaimed bringer of

salvation sent child soldiers into battle instead of being in the front line and risking one's life for some sanctimonious purpose.

Out of the sudden all of this seemed to me devilishly well designed, systematic and within its own terrible logic also quite inspired by intelligence.

Human values were reversed, one's own tendency to evil was legitimized, even distilled out, the victims were given the opportunity to become perpetrators without having to deal with their own conscience, since it happened under duress and incentives were created by a system of rewards and privileges to practice anticipatory obedience. And all this again and again and over and over, until the slaves were other people than those who had been captured by the gang.

Or no people at all. Question of definition.

Rarely did one of the prisoners openly resist or try to refuse all this. Whoever did try was cruelly and bloodily executed in front of all eyes. So it had happened to the little girl, who I had previously thought was a pseudo-superstitious victim to keep the dogs away from the group.

She had refused to whip her own mother with barbed wire. Therefore, a few days later and after a group rape, she was tied to the motorcycle offered to the animals. The same fate had befallen the mother that same night, but I had already been away then, fleeing the place of my failure under the cover of darkness.

I was incapable of any real emotion while the picture of what had happened to them was assembled in my head, but simply analyzed Wanda's words. At some point, after another of the countless raids committed by the group, Thomas joined the gang as a captive. He and Wanda, who had clung to their humanity as best they could, had become friends. And that's when the whole drama got even worse. Open friendships among the prisoners were not tolerated, and all of a sudden the two had become the preferred targets for any sadistic impulse of the slavers, and after Wanda was caught stealing food, Thomas was forced to punish and torture her until she was half dead.

He did it to save his own life, that was clear, but Wanda could see the beast in his face as she called it, could see it grow and take

possession of him. At some point in the course of these abysmally cruel punitive measures, something broke out of Thomas and Wanda could see that he had lost his humanity, or whatever you want to call it.

From that day on, something lurked in his gaze and in his words. Something that came out more and more often. He had apologized to Wanda incessantly and repentantly, justified himself and fought against it, but it was not only Wanda who could see what grew inside Thomas. The leader of the degenerates could see it too. And he chose to feed it. Thomas would soon be one of them.

Every time there was someone to punish - and this happened at least once a day - Thomas had to carry out the punishment. They gave him more and better food and all kinds of other privileges. Sometimes the other prisoners even had to carry him when he threatened to collapse during their hard marches. One day before I started my attack on that pack of soulless creatures, he cut a 15-year-old boy's throat in front of everyone and then held out his hand to receive his reward. In a conversation between the two aides, which Wanda had recently been able to overhear, she had learned that in two days he was to be officially made one of the Degs in one of their barbaric rituals.

Today, the exact day we buried him.

The ambivalent relationship between him and Wanda became even more understandable when Wanda told me that he had shared his privileges with her. He, struggling with his dark side and plagued deep inside by his conscience while at the same time doing unspeakable things, shared his bloodstained food with Wanda, his warm sleeping bag bought with pain and anguish, and she accepted everything because she wanted to survive.

But she hated him all the more, because he this way also shared his weakness with her, stained her, made her his accomplice and alienated her from the other prisoners.

After her punishment she was too weak to refuse the food and the few comforts. She said to herself that she had to keep her strength to perhaps flee at some point. She hadn't even thought of something like revenge and when my first bolt found its target and the great shouting among the degenerates broke out, she had only hoped that

now everything would soon be over. Only when it became apparent that with a little luck this fight would be the last of the degenerate hunting group, the prisoners had reacted and attacked their guards and killed them while paying a high blood toll. Deep inside she had expected that she herself, or maybe at least Thomas, would die in the chaos of the battle, maybe all of them.

But things had turned out differently. The degenerates had lost the fight. Most were dead, a few had escaped and Mariam, Wanda and Thomas were the only surviving prisoners. When they rushed to my aid and then treated my wounds, the conflict between the old man and the woman receded into the background. Their world had changed fundamentally yet another time. They were suddenly free again and I needed their help. Yesterday, however, when I had addressed the book, the dwelling conflict had come up again and, after I had laid down in my bed and Mariam also had fallen asleep, Wanda had given Thomas the choice either to kill himself or to suffer through her doing to him what he had done to her. The old man had made his decision.

Wanda stopped talking, gave her sore voice a break. We looked at each other.

As hard as I tried to find something in my head, there was nothing I could say to alleviate Wanda. Finally, I hesitantly pointed to the book in her hands.

"It's the cause of all this," Wanda said and pushed it over the table towards me.

Wanda looked at me suspiciously, but also expectantly. For a moment I looked directly at her face, then I steered my attention back to the book in front of me. I let my fingers glide gently over the leather cover. In red, somehow handwritten looking letters it said:

THE RETURN TO INNOCENCE

I raised my head, looked at Wanda questioningly. She said nothing, made a gesture.

Just read.

I opened the book. A cover page. Again it said:

*The Return To Innocence
Gospel of the New World*

From Cardinal Raphael Da Silva

Basilica of St. Pietro, Vatican City, 2017.

Wanda, who must have noticed my wrinkled forehead, left her seat and went to the kitchen door.

"I'm putting Mariam to bed. Then I'll go upstairs and keep my eye on the street. You read."

I gratefully accepted this order. I waited for the kitchen door to close behind them, then turned the cover page. Before I really started to read, I collected my thoughts. The last days had been extremely eventful, my shoulder wound was still pounding and above all Thomas' suicide still kept me very busy. Curiosity, however, ensured that I eventually somehow managed to dispel the billions of thoughts and emotions in my head and to concentrate on the book to some degree at least.

*You who still walk on earth - hear the gospel of a dying world.
You who still walk on earth - see the blessed way I show you.
You who still walk on earth - hear what I, who touched God, have
to say to you.
You who still walk on earth - hear what Jesus, lying son of God,
does not dare to tell.*

Those were the first lines my eyes found. But there was more. For every line that immediately caught my eye, there were ten others in this strangely printed looking handwriting. I quickly realized that these were translations. Directly below each other, line by line in different languages everything was repeated.

My over the past years rusted school education enabled me to safely identify Latin, English and French after a while. Two of the lines had to be written in Spanish and Italian, then there were two

lines that I would put to some Scandinavian country. I also thought to guess Dutch. Or was it Walonian? Two more lines I had no idea of. I pushed my upper body back in the chair, overwhelmed for a moment by the effort the obviously confused evangelist had made here. For a moment I let all the pages of the book rustle past my eyes like a flip-book. Indeed. This system ran through the entire writing. An almost unimaginable effort. Well. There was one good thing. The many pages were actually only filled to a tenth with content. So I would finish reading much faster than I initially thought.

I read on.

The suffering that has afflicted us, destroyed our world and led many of us to eternal damnation - it is an old suffering.

Since Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, since Prometheus brought fire to men, we have been doomed. Since that moment we are all cursed, for our forefathers have reviled God and we must repent for it.

These days of war and death that we, the last children of sin, are the days of purification, the time of catharsis.

It is ten times ten years left for us to regain the love of the Lord.

Ten times ten years to make up for the mistakes of countless generations of human life.

Each of us must strive to recover our innocence.

Each one of us must strive to prove his purity before the eyes of the Lord.

We, the last to walk on earth, must go back in time, far back, back way beyond the commandments that the Lord gifted us, and even further back.

Back before the Fall.

Back to paradise.

For it is our hubris, that so-called knowledge, that has led to our damnation.

It is our desire to shape the world.

Our desire to create the greater things.

Our desire to be like God.

It is the knowledge of our own being.

*The urge to be more than a child of God.
The urge to rise above.
Everything that led to this time of death and damnation springs
from our original sin.
We, the children of God, are not made to dream of more than food
and reproduction, more than innocent lust and blessed
thoughtlessness.*

*Cursed be the knowledge - for it takes humility.
Cursed be the pursuit - for it is an abomination to the Lord.
Cursed be morality - because it was made by us.
Cursed be love - for it springs from an unclean mind.
Cursed be the law - because it was made by us.
Cursed be the speech - because it does not belong to man.
Cursed be our medicine - for it defies the lord's own wish.
Cursed be all technology - for it's defies the Lord's world.
Cursed be your marriage - because it's against God's will.
Cursed be the goodness - for it is false and pale.*

*Praise be to the fight - for it calls the Lord to watch.
Praise be to our urge - because it is clean and pure.
Praise be to those who know no conscience - for innocence is
theirs.
Praise be to rapture - for its calls the Lord to us.
Praise be to the dumb - for the Lord does always walk along with
them.
Praise be to our rage - because it is clean and pure.
Praise be to those who seek forgetfulness - because innocence is
their goal.
Praise be to those who seek to forgetfulness - because purity is
their goal.*

*Praise the one who lives my words - for blissful he will be.
Praise the one who spreads my words - for it is innocence he
brings*

Slowly, the knowledge about the degenerates I had been able to gather in the past merged with the new information.

Cursed be all technology - hence the degs camped in the street instead of seeking the security of the walls and doors in the millions and millions of abandoned houses on our raped planet. That's why they equipped themselves with homemade weapons instead of guns and pistols and all the other modern murder toys left in the world. There really were enough of them available in case one looked in the right places. Praise the one who spreads my words - hence this constant recruitment and abduction of people. A mission order.

What I couldn't understand was how someone could believe this complete nonsense, how one could actually be convinced that the path to salvation was not in our own hands and in the preservation and application of the way too little knowledge about technology and medicine that we had left as a collective.

I didn't use guns because they made too much noise. The degenerates didn't use them because they condemned technology. Well, after the fight in the house, which I only survived by a hair's breadth, I would probably have to reconsider my attitude towards firearms - at least that's what I decided for now.

I read some more.

Next followed some pages on which the fine Mr. Raphael Da Silva justified his status as sole bringer of salvation. He described in anointing words that under the influence of ritual self-flagellation and drugs he had heard the voice of God and received his divine mission. But before he had devoted himself to writing his pamphlet, according to his own statement, he had been subjected to the seven stages of purification.

Something that each of his disciples who wanted to find his way back to paradise also had to go through. The first and second stages dealt with sexual brutality, described forced and voluntary acts with men, women and animals. Levels three and four described rites about killing living beings. They slowly worked their way up to bigger and bigger animals. Began with mice, rats, rabbits, went on to cats and dogs, until one finally arrived at adult humans and at the very end at infants.

All this under the pretext that only in this way could recognize one's own nature and return to one's original state - the state desired by God for all mankind. Levels five and six were aimed at destroying instincts of self-preservation, health consciousness and vanity.

Da Silva simply responded to nature's call where he heard it, was suffering from lice and fleas and other vermin, describing every developing eczema, every pustule and every millimeter of scratched skin as a gift from God himself. According to Da Silva, the first six stages of cleaning had to be repeated constantly until they really were mastered. Repeated until all acquired and socially handed down inhibitions and behavior patterns had been discarded.

According to Da Silva, one was only then a true child of God when one no longer knew any sense of injustice, drive control and conscience. When one has been completely dehumanized. An animal. And an animal could feel neither remorse nor guilt.

Then followed the seventh and final stage. The completion of dehumanization. That's what I call it.

Da Silva calls it 'sealing the metamorphosis.'

In order to say a last goodbye to his humanity, he had gradually pulled off his skin and rubbed salt into his raw flesh. At the climax of the ritual, he finally etched his face off bit by bit and subsequently burned it. At least that's what he wrote, because if all this was true - which I didn't assume, since in my experience all self-proclaimed prophets were miserable liars and cowards - then it was hard to believe that he could still put anything on paper, no matter how confused.

I needed some time to let his poisonous, mad words sink in a little.

It was obvious to blame all human aspirations, technological progress and the various ideologies for the great bang, the war and the end of our civilization. At first glance, the thought was obvious. If all of humanity had remained hunting and gathering, it would never have developed such a gigantic destructive potential; indeed, many of the fundamental problems that led to the last war would never have existed. Overpopulation, large poisoned and uninhabitable areas, industrially exploited to the point of complete desertion, hazardous waste dumps that made people sick, large-scale border

conflicts, religious fanaticism, poverty-born uprisings - all these grievances that were halfheartedly looked at and listened to when there still were news broadcasts, but constantly ignored - there simply would not have been enough people in the world to cause all these things. There wouldn't even be words for it.

On the other hand, it was not technology, art or science that led to the last escalation, but greed, fear, envy, ideological stubbornness and religious delusion. Imagining, all this, how the war and the devastation must have affected the already very religious, or superstitious if you like so, survivors of the bombed-out Rome and Vatican City, it was somehow no longer that incredible, that in their trauma they longed for an explanation for all this and this perverse muddle-head Da Silva found his followers, who, in turn perhaps also clerics, fanatical, confused, but eloquent and educated, spoiled other weak spirits.

A twisted religious mass hysteria.

I let myself get carried away in the flow of my speculations, beholding inside my mind how an ever-growing, blood-red and cancerous circle spread from Vatican City across the ruined Europe.

What followed in the malicious gospel then was a long list of rules and laws that the members of the sect had to obey to. They were divided into three categories, which determined the severity of the penalties for violations. I do not remember everyone, but on the whole it was about the ban on the use of civilization goods and technical objects, which was repeatedly and extremely inconsistently loosened up, and it quickly became clear to me that the degenerates should remain reasonably effective and capable of taking action during their hunting expeditions - despite all the bans.

The hierarchy I had noticed in the degenerate group was also anchored in these laws. Leader of such a group was automatically the longest-serving man. However, he could be challenged and killed by the next eldest at any time. Women were excluded from the hierarchy and could not advance any further.

What surprised me was that women in general were not simply regarded as the cause of Da Silva's original sin and therefore as absolutely inferior lifeforms. That would have fitted in the overall picture, I thought. But he probably knew how much he needed every

breathing person who was ready to follow his confused gospel if he really wanted to free the world from the remnants of civilization.

The sectarians were commanded to destroy all knowledge of the old world where they encountered it. On the road to innocence and to paradise, where the miserable remnants of humanity would reach in ten times ten years, it was necessary to step by step erase civilizational achievements from the map and from the collective consciousness - for only in this way could the progression from depraved, arrogant sinners to true children of God take place successfully for all of us.

Then rules and laws, regarding details of the missionary mission, that had led the group I had come across as far as Frankfurt followed. Every full moon there was an initiation fest for new candidates who should or had to walk the *long way to true innocence*, as Da Silva called his system.

After the great initiation ritual, which of course only Da Silva himself could perform and which could only take place in Vatican City, the candidates were sent out in groups of five.

For a year they were to roam the world, let their desires run free and return to Vatican City with twenty-five new cult members and deliver their prisoners. Those who had completed this cycle three times were either allowed to stay in Vatican City or could find another place to settle and establish another sectarian center.

The task of these branches, as I called them for myself, apart from recruiting new members by persuasion or torture and brutal brainwashing, was to burn and destroy all still existing cities and settlements that did not want to bow within a radius of at least seven days on foot.

This was especially aimed towards all of the many new communities of survivors who had emerged from the chaos of the great war, but the command for destruction also included abandoned libraries, schools, hospitals and everything that reminded of the time of hubris.

The book was dated 2017. Were there new centers of degenerates already? Were they already finishing their destructive work? When did it all start?

My head was now full of confused propaganda, my own counterarguments formulated unintentionally in my thoughts, an infinite number of religious phrases and metaphors that Da Silva used to lend weight and credibility to his words and thus in a somehow eerie persuasiveness. Horrific visions of the effects that the mad cardinal and his sect would have on the miserable remnants of civilization waved around in my mind's eye.

I just skimmed through the rest of the book and decided to read it another time and more carefully tomorrow. He described, I grasped this during cross-reading, the methods that the disciples had to use to break the will of their prisoners, gave instructions on torture methods and systematic psycho terror - everything that Wanda, Thomas and Mariam had endured.

Then followed some sides with promises. They basically said that those who would die in the course of Da Silva's purification phase in ten times ten years when the great goal would have been achieved would rise again and receive their holy blessings.

For the Lord tests the soul, and he who is pure of heart and full of innocence shall be witness to his love.

I imagined Da Silva preaching day after day in his decayed chapel to slaves and abducted, shouting his confused message into the world, a burned and scarred figure in red cardinals cloths, enthroned above raw orgies of animalistic lust and darkest violence and again and again secreting his insane slogan in ever new form:

Dehumanization brings innocence.

In fast motion I saw groups of five degenerates spreading out in all directions and returning to their place of origin with their prey. I saw the number of disciples around Da Silva grow until they populated all of Rome, a seething anthill overflowing with malice, like bacteria in the petri dish, nourished by blood and pain and fear. Again I saw them swarming out and forming new tumors on the map of Europe. The Cardinal built himself an army.

I closed the book, had a sip of water.

What should we do?

What could we do?

Travel to the the settlements one by one to warn them? They wouldn't listen if they didn't believe it, and even if they did - they

were small, self-sufficient groups. To my knowledge, there were hardly any settlements that accommodated more than fifty people. Such a settlement did not have much to oppose Da Silva and his disciples. Maybe ...

Suddenly I was torn from my thoughts when the door burst open and Wanda stepped into the kitchen. I wasn't quite over the small shock yet, when I saw how worried she looked.

"I think Mariam's sick," she said.

While we were rushing to the girl, I remembered how quickly she had fallen asleep. I didn't think anything of it.

When I left the property and Wanda closed the gate behind me, I wondered how best to proceed. If I were moving in the middle of the road, I would be easy for everyone to see. If I stayed on one side of the road, close to the buildings, I'd make an easy target for a surprise attack. Because around every corner and every bush a wild dog could lurk and also the two Degs, who had survived the battle of the dead end, suddenly came back to my mind.

We hadn't seen a trace of them in two days, and Wanda and I were basically of the opinion that the two had gone for good. Maybe they would try to get back to Rome, or, more likely, join another marauding gang. However, there was also the possibility that the two of them, the man with the shot through hand and the woman with the jaw shattered by my hammer throw, were lying in wait somewhere and were out for revenge.

But all that speculation didn't help.

We couldn't do more than keep our eyes open and be on our guard. Me here, on the streets of overgrown Frankfurt and Wanda on her guard post in the house. She and Mariam were halfway safe for now - and as long as they remained quiet. At least, that's what I thought. Mariam lay feverishly and with chills in my bed and Wanda had to keep an eye on the dead end and take care of the sick girl.

I still reproached myself that I hadn't discovered the wound in Mariam's little foot earlier, but that was probably because she hadn't sustained the injury in battle, but that it must have happened a few

days earlier. Basically, it wasn't a big deal. The girl had stepped into a splinter of wood during her imprisonment, which must have drilled itself into the sole of her foot and because of the merciless marching speed, which the degenerates had demanded and also from fear of their drastic punitive measures the child had said nothing and walked on and on.

Mariam had concealed her injury, perhaps even forgotten it for a few days, and had now been caught up with her failure. I should have wondered as soon as she fell asleep so early last night. I should have noticed her high temperature, but I had been far too absorbed by the dam book to look after Mariam. I was angry with myself and this Da Silva in equal measure.

Now, in the first light of the pale sun, I set out to get antipyretic drugs and antibiotics. Wanda would have left too, referring to my shoulder wound and my bruised ankle, but I had not accepted that. Not because she was a woman, but because Mariam and Wanda had known each other for a long time and the girl had much more trust in Wanda than in me. She could still go for medicine on her own if I didn't make it back by tonight. We discovered the splinter in the night and cut it out and disinfected the wound. But the inflammation was already too advanced. We feared that if the fever lasted longer, Mariam would not have enough strength to resist it.

Wanda still stood waiting behind the fence. I wanted to say something encouraging, but in the end we both left it with a timid wave.

I turned around, put the ready made crossbow in my left crook and walked up the dead end with my right hand loosely around the handle. When I reached the hill of dead bodies that Wanda and Thomas had piled up at some distance from our fence, I could not help but look at the dead, some of whom were on my account. The decay was not yet very far advanced, but if you looked closely, you could see movement in those, in their agony distorted faces. The insects were at work. Some of the bodies had also been pulled out of the heap by the wild dogs and their innards lay scattered on the pavement. Averting my gaze, I listened inside myself.

No, I hardly felt pity. The sight of the horribly disfigured dead only stirred up my anger at Da Silva, who ultimately was responsible for all of this with his mad sermons and his poisonous words.

Arriving at the entrance to the dead end, I peered down the crossing road to the right and left.

No movement. Not a sound.

I turned left first. Then, after a few meters, I turned right again. As in our dead end, the front gardens, which separated the abandoned houses from each other, were completely overgrown.

About fifty meters in front of me two cars had jammed into each other and I could see that in one of the cars there were still two dead people sitting on the front seats. One could see that they must have died a few years ago, and I didn't perceive the sight as an alarm signal. Apart from occasional bullet holes in the facades of the houses, the former residential area had obviously been spared major destruction. This changed about a hundred meters further.

The bridge that spanned the fallow, overgrown railway tracks that began on the left in my field of vision and disappeared from it again on the right lay in ruins. The newly grown grove could not be wider than the track bed, I thought. I decided to cross it and continue on my way northwest, although I would have preferred the bridge.

After I had passed the small slope leading to the track bed without further damaging my bruised ankle, I sneaked through the thicket undergrowth, tensed to the extreme. It made me nervous that I couldn't see what was ahead of me. The dense, dark green simply made it impossible to see anything more than five meters away. Once I was startled when some animal right behind me made the tall grass and the young, about man high trees tremble and rustle. I held the crossbow aimed the direction of the noise and stopped for a few seconds, but the sound moved away from me and relieved I turned again and continued on my way.

Soon thereafter the vegetation cleared and the terrain rose gently. I had made it without any major incidents and crossed the tracks. A rotten street sign at a crossroad told me that if I kept to the left I would move along Hohlbeinstreet. There were two other streets branching off. For a short moment, I let my gaze glide a little helplessly between the three possible paths. Then, to my great relief,

I saw the characteristic red pharmacy sign shining out from behind a tree. I approached it, and I could quickly recognize the words "Bonifatius Pharmacy".

That went like clockwork. Not even two kilometers from our shelter - and I had already found what I had been looking for.

I accelerated my gait and with each step I could see a little more. The glass front of the pharmacy was still intact, although the lower part of the large window was barricaded with wooden boards, beams and some sandbags. The entrance door was a gap wide open, contrasting the improvised fortification.

Looking back, I should have been more careful, but the thought of being able to bring Mariam the necessary medication as soon as possible made me slack. For a short, strange moment I saw my face reflected in the glass of the door and I noticed it smiling. I pressed the door open with my shoulder, and as soon as I had done so, a deep, rumbling growl came from the twilight to my ear. Hectically, I tried to see more detail.

The stands with the toiletries and vitamin supplements that identified pretty much every pharmacy I had ever entered had fallen over and their contents lay scattered all over the floor.

Then I saw them.

Two large, shaggy dogs, scared from numerous fights, lay on the semicircular sales counter.

They rose slowly and frighteningly self-confident, remained standing tensed and growled in my direction with malicious eyes. They hadn't gone over to the attack yet and I took my chance and pulled the trigger.

Since I hadn't taken the time to aim, the shot wasn't perfect. I hit the left of the two animals in the shoulder. The bolt must have got stuck in the bone because it penetrated only a few centimeters deep. Both dogs made a leap towards me. The injured animal was a little faster. I held the crossbow with my left in front of me, with my right I tried to draw the machete. It all happened very quickly. Even before this information was completely processed by my brain, the injured dog came up on the floor and jumped. But instead of attacking me, it pushed past me, pushing my left leg to the side and then howling out of the pharmacy. I had trouble keeping my balance. The second

animal had bitten into the bow-part of my crossbow and tugged wildly on it. That dog didn't really stand a chance. As he drooled and tore and growled, I finally drew the machete all the way out of its sheath and let it go down on his neck, making sure that the blade found its target without any problems by pulling on the crossbow in the exact right moment.

The dog collapsed with his neck severed and a few seconds later he died without making another sound. I breathed heavily. After I had convinced myself that the crossbow had not been damaged, I cleaned the machete on the dead animal's fur and put it back into the sheath. While I readied the crossbow again and inserted a new bolt, I was mildly annoyed that the other dog had disappeared with my bolt in his shoulder. Deep inside I knew, however, that I had been more than lucky to have survived this situation, into which my lack of caution had brought me without even a scratch.

I allowed myself a few more seconds of breathing deeply, then I methodically began to search the pharmacy for useful things, whereby I, probably following an old habit, did not immediately store the objects in my parka or my backpack, but first collected them on the counter. I started my search in the sales room, even though the drugs I primarily was here for were more likely to be found in the back of the shop. Two bottles of disinfectant spray, two first aid kits and some multivitamin pills made the beginning. Even a small pack of disposable gloves found its way onto the counter. Cutting the shard out of Mariam's foot could have been performed much more safely and sterile with some of those.

Who could say when I'd get into a situation like this next time?

I turned on my own axis once. I had searched the front. Now I searched the shelves behind the counter. Yeah, there's paracetamol and ibuprofen along with the other medications. Very good. I went to the counter and put some packs of each preparation to little pile with my prey. Then there was an iodine ointment and, after a few minutes of searching, I found a drug that I only identified as penicillin after having read the small print. I grabbed four packs. I ripped one of them open and swallowed a pill dry. As far as my shoulder wound was concerned, I did not want to rely on the disinfectant alone. Also I collected all kinds of other stuff, including some disposable scalpels,

a small brown bottle of medical alcohol, blister plaster, even more shrink-wrapped gauze bandages, a box of tampons and the like.

I had to think about the dogs again and about Mariam's inflamed foot.

Were there any vaccines against tetanus in pharmacies? No, I thought I remembered vaccines were usually stored directly in the doctors' offices. I'd keep that in mind.

I quickly put my prey in my backpack and shouldered it. As I turned to the exit door, I thought about the dog. If it had bitten in my forearm instead of my crossbow, I could probably still have taken him out. However, it would have been possible that his saliva could have injected a rich potpourri of bacteria into my bloodstream, the deadly effect of which would only have come to light some time later. In the end, the bite may have killed me after all.

On the one hand, I decided not to take the direct route on my way back to Wanda and Mariam, but to expand my exploration and to keep my eyes open for a practice of a general practitioner. I was good in time and an hour more would hardly make a difference.

Secondly, I wanted safer clothes for all of us. My idea was towards motorcycle equipment or at least more resistant work clothes. Thick leather and protectors would make me feel less vulnerable. The temperatures would drop significantly in the next few weeks anyway.

Busy with these thoughts, I stepped outside the door again. The dog I had shot was nowhere to be seen. I looked to the left, because something on that side caught my attention. I can't tell you exactly what it was. Maybe a noise, maybe the unnatural movement of the plants in the small grove in the track bed, about eighty meters away from me.

And then I saw them.

They came up the same way I had taken. Degenerates.

Was it a coincidence?

Had the dog fled in their direction, and they were now tracking back his path?

Or had they been sneaking up on me the whole time?

When I saw that one of them, the last to emerge from the thicket of the wood, was wearing a blood-crusted bandage around one hand, everything was obvious.

He must have found another degenerate group faster than I had thought possible and he had also been able to get them to stay close and keep their eyes open for me and his former prisoners. When he saw the shot dog run past him, his hunting instinct awoke, because the guy could surely remember crossbow bolts only too well, I guess. That at least this how I explained their presence to myself.

A moment later I had other worries than useless theories or to think about vaccinations and solid clothes. While I was standing way too many seconds at the entrance of the pharmacy and looked towards the group, which had grown to eight figures in the meantime, he had discovered me.

He raised his bandaged hand and pointed at me. He spit out a barbaric scream, not a word, a mere sound. Then he burst off in my direction and a second later his companions did the same.

The direct way back to Wanda and Mariam was cut off. So I turned around and ran along Hohlbeinstreet to the north. During the first three hundred meters I was able to keep the group at a distance despite my aching ankle. While trying to lose as little speed as possible, I searched my way through the wrecked cars, young plants breaking through the asphalt and craters from old grenade impacts covered with all kinds of grasses and ferns.

I reached a crossroad in the middle of which stood a huge, burnt-out tank, like the skeleton of a steel dinosaur. Towards the city center, the fighting had apparently become more destructive and deadly than in the militarily uninteresting residential area in which we had found shelter.

Around the tank lay corpses and parts of them, almost completely skeletonized and distributed almost in a circle, which I discovered only at second glance. Had the crew of the tank killed these people, or were they part of a platoon of infantrymen who, protected by the armed vehicle, had pursued long since become irrelevant targets? I guessed the first, because the remains of the clothes of the dead did not indicate any uniforming, even if that did not always have to mean something. The strangest plants thrive in the chaos of war.

I had no time to think any further, because while I was still standing in front of this involuntary war memorial breathing heavily, an arrow

rushed right by my left ear and bounced off the perforated steel skin of the vehicle with a metallic clack.

Quickly I looked back and saw that the faster members of the group had approached me up to thirty meters. The archer, one of three, as I had spied out in the meantime, just put another arrow on the string and I lifted the crossbow and shot.

I had aimed roughly at the middle of his chest, but my bolt hit him in the abdomen and while the foremost of the three hunters were still running towards me, he collapsed with a cry of pain.

I had no time to get the crossbow ready again. I turned around, circled the destroyed tank and ran further towards the city center, throwing my crossbow over my shoulder and pulling my machete.

The fast steps of my pursuers in my ears and trying to avoid the constantly appearing obstacles, our unequal race shifted further and further to the north. I didn't dare to look over my shoulder anymore, because on the one hand I had to keep an eye on the terrain in order not to fall, and on the other hand I didn't know what I should have done at the moment anyway - except simply running away.

So while I was running, two more arrows passed me by. First one way too close, close to my right hip. The other one flew a few meters over my head and got stuck high up in a tree. In front of me I saw the bank of the Main and an intact looking narrow bridge supported by steel cables leading to the other side of the river.

I had just passed a large, somehow official looking and partly bombed-out building and crossed a street intersecting my path in a right angle, when the steps behind me became louder and gasping breath met my ear. The fastest runner of the group had caught up. I tried to estimate the distance between us by the sounds, and wondered if he had already raised his spear to throw, but soon gave up trying, because my own panting breath made it impossible for me to assess the situation correctly. A staircase led up the bridge on the left hand side, and to be able to use it I would have to reduce my running speed considerably. My lungs were burning painfully anyway, and so I made a full run to the left, slowed down, thrust myself around, the machete raised to the blow.

The deg was a few meters further away as I had imagined it with my adrenaline-flooded brain and he wasn't carrying a spear but a

club. No, it was more of an old, gnarled branch, if I saw it right. His face was strongly reddened and distorted by his efforts and in his eyes I could see that I had managed to surprise him with my maneuver.

While he was still trying to brake and bringing his club in a defensive position, I attacked him with a feint, fooled a high blow and then pulled the machete down at the last moment. The blade went deep into his upper leg and dark, sticky red blood shot out.

Driven by pain, shock and primal rage, a loud scream left his throat. He dropped his club, pressed his hands on the gaping wound and fell to his knees. I would have liked to have finished him, but his comrades just came to a standstill ten meters away and struggling for air.

I heard another arrow approaching which it the ground just a few centimeters from my foot and slipped clattering further when the guy with the injured hand gave order to form a semicircle and advance on me.

I was surprised at two things. First: he had given the order in German, which might mean that the Cardinal's influence had already reached further than I had assumed, and second: I wondered why the others, who in my opinion must have belonged to a separate group of degenerates, accepted his orders in the first place. Had he killed their original leader?

No time to think, they started coming closer. I had to leave. My opponents blocked my way to the right and left. The only way out for me was the narrow bridge over the Main.

As I took a deep breath and got ready to give the degs another hunt, I looked into the hate-filled face of *Onehand*, as I had baptized him in the meantime, even if that was not completely correct.

He grinned and run his thumb over his throat. Then he yelled: "Get him!"

I did not wait for his entourage to react to the command, but, accompanied by the sound of released bowstrings, ran up the steps to the bridge, away from the degenerates, but also away from Wanda and Mariam.

As fast as I could, I ran over the small bridge. I didn't dare to look over my shoulder, didn't want to give up a fraction of a second of my scarce lead. My lung burned, my ankle ached, and in spirit I begged an indefinite, higher power full of fervor for its favor, for a miracle, or at least an idea what's to do. That I would endure the murderous chase despite my ailing physical condition and decide the race to my means. The wheezing sound of my own breaths reached my ears miserably and asthmatically and made it impossible for me to determine the distance between me and my pursuers without looking back.

The circumstances left me no time for that at all.

Another arrow flew over my head when about fifty meters away from me, at the other end of the bridge, three figures suddenly appeared. They were also ragged and armed with bows and who seemed to wait for the Onehand's degenerates to drive me towards them, to a distance they could not miss me. As I came closer and closer they put the arrows on the tendons and pointed the bows at me.

Panic and fear stretched their greedy fingers for my brain, all my actions were completely blocked and somehow ... crystalline, like frozen. It was more than unlikely that I would survive the next few seconds. Maybe the first or second arrow would miss me, but I was sure that at least one of them would find its target.

I had no choice.

The only way out I could think of was the river.

Not a fraction of a second too soon did I put my desperate decision into action.

Better cold and wet than cold and dead.

At full speed, at the same moment that the three shooters released the tendons of their bows, I started my jump. When I wanted to push my body into the air, a hellish pain twitched through my damaged ankle and my jump, which should have catapulted me head first over the handrail, fulfilled its purpose, but my right foot remained stuck on the upper edge for a terrible moment, which added a new component of pain to my fearful scream.

Then the moment was over and I saw the muddy-brown river racing at me. The impact was literally breathtaking. It tore the machete out of my hand, the cold water flooded my mouth, bit into my clothes in a flash and pulled me down with a sluggish but terrible force.

I fought with all my might against this leaden weight, which reached for me, because under no circumstances did I want to lose the backpack with the medicine for Mariam to the river. With an unbelievable mental effort I pushed my fears away and forced myself to calm and even movements and a few endless seconds later I broke through the surface and gasped for air.

My eyes inevitably looked up, towards the bridge. I registered that I had drifted about twenty meters away from there, and while I did the only thing that occurred to me at that moment, namely to simply increase the distance to the degs, rowing backwards with my arms, I saw something that astonished me.

There was fighting on the bridge above me!

In the end, the three newly arrived figures may not have targeted me at all, but Onehand and his gang of degenerates - or perhaps just anything and anyone who should dare to cross the bridge.

It didn't look good for the three, though. While one was parrying a blow with his bow, which in course of this broke in the middle, another fell to the ground with a spear in his body. About where I had jumped into the river, the body of one of Onehand's men lay in death, his hands cramped around the shaft of the arrow sticking out of his chest. Another degenerate hung limp and upside down over the railing of the bridge. The rest reached the battlefield the moment the bridgeman with the broken bow managed to get rid of his useless weapon and drag a large kitchen knife out of his belt, dodging a fierce blow from his opponent. He immediately went over to counterattack and I noticed that something was wrong with his movements. A few meters further back the other survivor of the bridge guarding trio just pulled his bow when his companion was hit in the mouth by an arrow and fell backwards. The archer now stood alone against Onehand and his cronies.

He, too, seemed to have noticed this fact, for he fired an random-looking shot in the direction of the deg who had meanwhile come

closest to him. The arrow only grazed the guy's cheek, but that was enough to dissuade him from his plans of attack and make him feel for the wound, screaming loudly. The shooter turned to flee. When the remaining degenerates reached their wounded man and, without paying attention to him or the blood coming out between his fingers, started chasing the archer, a barking order from Onehand sounded.

"Stop!"

Onehand, the last one to arrive at the scene, stood at the bridge railing and looked in my direction. A few meters further on, his subordinates had come to a standstill and did the same.

I had paddled further backwards the whole time and had not been able to avert my eyes from what was happening. This, however, changed abruptly when I saw that my heavily breathing hunters were paying their attention to me alone again.

I turned around and swam down the river as fast as I could. They'd come after me for sure. If I didn't get out of the water quickly, they could stroll comfortably along the riverbank and every few meters send an arrow in my direction if they felt to do so. Which they would.

I took another look back.

Onehand was still standing there watching me. But his entourage had now finally crossed the bridge and was hurrying down the small staircase that represented the transition to the road. I changed course and headed for shore. I guessed that my lead would be just enough to catch my breath on dry ground for a second or two and then continue my escape.

How successful this escape would be, with my clothes heavy from the icy water and the backpack that became a handicap in the same way, I would rather not imagine - and one thing I knew: As soon as I would pause to breathe and the adrenaline in my body would fade away, a miserable, disgusting coldness would take possession of my whole body.

Then for how long would I be able to keep on running?

The muscles of my arms and legs were already heavy as lead and when I finally reached the shore, dripping and wheezing, gravity hit me with all its might and let me break to my knees.

No living creature was up there in the middle of the bridge anymore. I could see this from the crouching position, in which I held

out for a moment and waited until a little of the hellish weight had dripped off me. Now all of them were after me. As I grabbed the strap of my crossbow over my head and pulled the backpack off my shoulders, I wondered how much time I had left before they would catch up.

I had to drop my precious payload if I wanted to stay alive.

I could already hear them breaking through the undergrowth without regard for losses and no sense for their safety. I fervently hoped that I actually would be able to find my belongings again after a successful escape, so that I could bring Mariam the medication. But I didn't want to mark the spot. The degenerates were not allowed to find the drugs. Under no circumstances. I hastily cocked the crossbow, inserted a bolt, turned around and continued my escape after depositing the backpack in a bush. I cursed in thought. No more time to wring out the parka. Except for the crossbow and the cheap survival knife on my belt, I had left everything behind. I just had put two more bolts into the back pocket of my sticky-wet jeans.

As well as my tormented ankle allowed, I rushed past bushes, avoided dead wood and large boulders, which must have once been part of the river bed, almost stumbled over a rusty bicycle rim and relentlessly drove myself to hurry. Behind me the undergrowth still crashed and rattled.

Louder now.thirties

They were getting closer.

As I continued to avoid obstacles, I thought I noticed that the degenerates had caught up even more. Right behind me I could hear a quietly mumbled curse, and footsteps that had briefly come out of their rhythm and then found back to it again.

Keep running! Just keep running!

In front of me the green cleared and made room for a debris field of fragmented pieces of concrete. At some point during the war someone had destroyed another bridge for some unknown reason, the remains of which now made my escape more difficult. I climbed further into the debris field, slid and scrambled between the monolithic man-made rocks and after about ten seconds I heard calls and Onehand barking commands behind me. He and his

subordinates had arrived at the edge of the rubble field and set out to pursue me further.

When one of them climbed a breast-high concrete rock, to get an overview I used my crossbow. The bolt struck, and with a much too high scream the figure fell backwards out of my field of vision.

I climbed deeper into this bizarre, chaotic sea of rocks, nudged my shins and tore bloody scratches in my arms as I scraped past a sharp edge of a particularly large piece of concrete and could barely save myself from falling.

While I was still quietly cursing myself, I noticed a black spot in the dirty gray and brown of my surroundings. A black spot about one and a half meters in diameter. A black spot on the ground. A hole that seemed to lead vertically down. Behind me I still could hear my hunters climbing and cursing, but when I turned around I couldn't see any of them. This hole may have been my only chance. But only if no one would see me go in.

My pursuers had been decimated by me and the fight with the strangers on the bridge, but I could not under any circumstances face their superiority and also a continuation of this chase into all eternity was unthinkable.

I couldn't do it anymore.

I covered the last few meters to the mysterious opening lurking in the ground in a power-sapping hurry. For a moment I stood there, still undecided and searching for courage somewhere in my rushed brain. When I had found

it, I sat down at the edge of the hole and swung my legs over the brittle edge. Then I repelled myself.

To my great luck I slipped and slid rather than really tumbling, because after perhaps one and a half meters of free fall the hole did not lead down so steeply any more, but the earth formed a kind of ramp, which led down a little more gentle. Nevertheless, my ankle was exposed to another, extremely painful stress test. The scarce light passing through the opening didn't allow much to be seen, but it was enough to let me sense that I was in a kind of cave that had a diameter of three meters and at whose northern edge the soil had been removed and released a massive concrete wall. In the middle of this concrete wall was another, almost circular hole and behind it

lurked a deeper blackness. From there musty and sick-smelling air pulled in my direction. This hole in the earth was not a dead end. I could hardly believe how lucky I was.

While carefully moving towards the hole to examine it more closely, I wondered whether I should lie in ambush with the crossbow. In the dark I would be invisible to my pursuers, whilst they would make perfect targets, as they would stare down into the cave at their feet, illuminated by autumn daylight.

I crouched down next to the breakthrough in the northern wall and made my crossbow ready for shooting again.

The bad smell escaping the hole was now much stronger. However, I could not define it further. Through the telescopic sight I aimed at the rim of the cave above me. I was sure the first of my hunters would show up every moment and stare down at me with murder in his eyes.

And indeed, a dark silhouette emerged. My finger was approaching the trigger. Just a little more pressure, and my bolt would drill into the skull of the degenerate and give him a swift death. I was just about to shoot, when the silhouette became smaller, moved backwards and was no longer visible a moment later. I kept my eye on the rim and listened. Steps of several people became louder.

The dogs are gathering in front of the badger's den.

Another head appeared up there for a few seconds and then disappeared again, and I wondered whether it had probably been Onehand.

There followed a mumbling and whispering, a louder, protesting word, a thud and then a gasp.

The dogs discussed their approach.

Then the footsteps went away, and I heard nothing more.

Were they on the lookout?

Quite like me, pointing their arrows at the opening in the ground?

Or had they moved on?

They couldn't be sure I was actually down here. Maybe they've continued to search the debris field. Maybe they had left a single guard at the cave entrance that would sound the alarm as soon as I stretched my head out of the opening.

No, at the moment I couldn't go back to the surface and in the next few minutes I didn't dare to make the slightest noise either.

I seemed to be forced to stay in this position forever, until at some point I tried to find a position in which my limbs would not fall asleep or cramp as quietly as possible and then kept a constant eye on the access to the surface again.

The foul-smelling wall breakthrough, next to which I huddled, seemed to be my only, halfway safe way out of this situation. It was simply impossible to estimate what was waiting for me up there on the surface.

Well, the same was true for the smelly blackness behind me, but I assumed that I at least would not be spiked with arrows immediately, as soon as my head would become visible in the opening in the wall.

Many minutes had passed and I hadn't heard the slightest sound that suggested the presence of other people. The cold, intensified by my wet clothes, crept into my bones, became more and more cruel and unbearable. I forced myself to stay a few more minutes, but I was aware that I could not crouch and lurk forever, down in this hole in the ground. Still I had not heard a sound from above or from the black behind me and finally I got up. My left knee crashed so badly that I was sure that one could hear it loud and clear even at the top of the surface.

But nothing.

No perceptible reaction.

I carefully laid down my crossbow on the damp ground and stretched myself, checked the functioning of my limbs and, after I had endured the disgusting, painful tingling accompanied by my improved blood circulation due to the changed posture, I ducked and pushed my body through the northern opening of the cave, which had saved my life in such an unexpected way.

Well.

At least for now.

When I stood up again on the other side of the wall, I realized that it had to be a tunnel or an underpass running from east to west. Of course I could not see as far as the opposite tunnel wall, but the resounding, clattering noises and their echoes caused by a little stone that I had accidentally hit with my foot at least told me, that this

black, gigantic and new universe that I had just begun to cross blindly like a mole, had to be something that had been created by human hands. Also, the floor at my feet was smooth and even, which seemed to confirm my assessment.

I had put on the crossbow again and felt myself along the wall in the direction I liked to believe was east, because I had the unfounded hope of somehow getting back near the narrow bridge that was to lead me back to Wanda and Mariam. Somewhere there would be another way up. Wouldn't it?

Every few steps I stopped and listened into the impenetrable darkness. My presence here didn't seem to have been noticed by anyone or anything. Occasionally my feet hit an obstacle, but as I found out, whenever I knelt down carefully and felt with my hands into the blackness, it was always something broken or something dead. An old wooden fruit box, a car tire, a rat carcass, a bunch of damp, cold blankets or rags and the like. Once I came across the body of a big dog that must have made its way down here somehow. It wasn't skeletonized yet, but despite that I couldn't say if it had actually died recently or if it was the cold darkness down here that hindered its decay.

After these experiences, which I guess I had made in the first thirty minutes in this stinking blackness, my initial, anxious caution gave way to a somewhat more confident routine. I still took a break every few steps and listened, but I wasn't as tensed and nervous as in the beginning. But I was still miserably cold. Also the omnipresent stench down here, which I in the beginning perceived as really unpleasant - I almost didn't even notice it anymore.

While my right hand continued to keep me in contact with the wall of the tunnel, I felt around with my left hand in the pockets of my jeans.

And indeed, there it was!

A disposable lighter.

I had unconsciously hoped the whole time that I would have one with me. Of course, it would be wet and not work right away, sure. While I continued to fumble my way through the blackness, I shook the lighter out for several minutes while walking, flint-stone down of course. Didn't work yet.

When I thought I had shook enough and once again hit a soft obstacle with my left foot, I stopped. Hesitantly and carefully groping, I stretched out my fingers towards the unknown thing at my feet.

It was a leg.

A leg that stuck in a pair of trousers and ended on a shoe or on a boot. Crouching I groped further up, in the direction of the upper body. The flesh under the fabric held my touch and felt quite firm. When my hands arrived at the dead man's hip and sensed the cold metal of a belt buckle, I got all excited. Hastily and eagerly I felt from the buckle to the right and left. There were bags attached to the belt, bags that could only be made to hold tools.

Or guns.

Or replacement magazines.

Or flashlights.

I felt and felt and indeed - on the left side of the dead body my hasty fingers could identify an elongated cylinder that became thicker upwards. I had to take a deep breath. Slowly and carefully I pulled the object towards the head of the body, and finally I held it in my hand - the flashlight!

I held it in my hand, the tool that with a little luck would make my way up so much easier.

I held my breath as I pushed the switch forward with my thumb.

Nothing.

Disappointment.

Anger.

The fucking thing stayed dark.

Damn it.

Already I wanted to throw the useless, eternally extinct light source from me, then I thought of something better. I unscrewed the battery compartment at the lower end of the round housing and diligently placed the lid next to my right foot so that I could find it again without any problems. Then I let the two batteries slide into my hand and carefully placed them on the floor, too. I took the whole lamp apart as best I could in the darkness and rubbed off every single piece on the dead man's trousers firmly and carefully. With forced calm I then put the flashlight together again and checked with extreme

meticulousness the firm fit of every single part. Especially with the bulb and its frame I took my time almost infinitely. At some point it was done. I operated the switch, and the brutal brightness pricked into my optic nerve, which had become accustomed to darkness, ate into my brain and made an universe of rainbow-colored stars appear before my eyes.

I wheezed.

A few, infinite seconds later my sense of sight had normalized and I had the flashlight beam cut through the blackness around me. The first thing I noticed was that the dead man at my feet must have been a soldier of the old Bundeswehr.

All other perceptions merged into a complete picture only after a few seconds of dull staring.

The body in front of me wore camouflage, the old, black-red-golden German flag was represented in some of the sewn-on badges and under the helmet a gas mask covered the dead face. What was that guy doing down here? Was he hiding? Had there been a battle here? In a few moments, I would start looting the body. But first I wanted to get some kind of overview.

The tunnel was nearly ten meters wide and I had done well to hold myself close to the wall. For, as I could now see, the whole tunnel was paved over and over with corpses, and by no means all of them wore uniforms.

Some leaned and sat across the wall. Men, women and children. Soldiers and civilians alike. The cause of death was not immediately apparent in any of them. No gunshot wounds, no bloodied clothing. No sign of violence. But still, the postures in which these people had died indicated great pain. Eyes and mouths torn open. Cramped facial features disfigured by spasms. Miserably perished.

The strange smell that had escaped from the passage came to my mind.

Then my eyes fell on the dead man's gas mask at my feet. Hectically I looked over this forgotten cemetery in the middle of which I found myself.

I was dizzy when I noticed that almost without exception each of the uniformed corpses wore such a protective mask.

Only the uniformed ones. And it hadn't helped them.

What my brain concluded from this information almost made me faint. I dropped the flashlight, slapped my hands over my mouth and nose and staggered against the wall, paralyzed with fear.

I can't remember how long I stood still in the middle of the underground mass grave. My heart threatened to burst my chest, my limbs were soft as rubber and my skull hurt from the loud throbbing of my arteries. The flashlight had rolled a few meters over the ground and its beam lit up an old woman's face, distorted in death and rotten, wearing a house coat, casting monstrous shadows on the other side of the tunnel.

Only slowly I realized that I would not die immediately.

Whatever killed these people - I assumed it was a gas that the soldiers' respiratory masks had nothing to oppose to, or a warfare agent that was absorbed through the skin or something else, that the disgusting but always amazing human will to destroy was able to invent - it was either already completely gone or the concentration was so low that my circulatory collapse was the only thing it's could cause.

At least for now.

I repressed the word "late effects" from my brain and laboriously and weakly I crawled on the dirty-wet ground the few meters to the flashlight and again took it into my possession.

This tiny effort caused me a heavy sweat and so I lay down on my back again, next to the old woman for a few minutes, staring at the rough concrete ceiling of the tunnel and doing nothing else but to concentrate on my breathing.

At some point I managed to get the furious, panting movements of my lungs back under control and take slow, steady breaths.

Hyperventilating has never helped anyone - a pseudo-wisdom of my PE teacher that I thought I had long forgotten, a shadow out of time, as spooky and surreal as the shadows of the dead in this tunnel.

But there had to be something about the saying, because slowly the paralyzing nausea vanished.

I kept breathing for a few more minutes until I thought I could get up.

Then I did exactly that.

On still slightly shaky legs I picked the crossbow off the ground and suppressed the vague urge to vomit. Leaning against the cold concrete wall, I waited for another sweat to break out, and when it was over and I had managed to see my situation objectively again, I took some cautious and then increasingly confident steps into the middle of the tunnel.

Above me were degenerates who were probably on the lookout, and then there were the three figures who had attacked Onehand's hunting group.

Well. Actually, there was only one of them left.

I wondered if there were any more of them up there.

But it didn't help. I couldn't go back the way I came. All I had left was to flee forward, and I could only hope that in the threatening darkness, somewhere at the end of the tunnel, there was a way to the surface. An exit that Onehand and his Degs hadn't discovered yet.

The thought of the feverish Mariam, who was waiting for her medication in our fenced-in domicile, I successfully suppressed. It wouldn't help me to go crazy over it right now.

Hyperventilating had never helped anyone.

More alert and sober than before, I looked at the dead around me. Not far in front of me lay the bodies of three soldiers. Next to one of them was an assault rifle that had slipped out of his cold hands. They all had guns in their holsters. I went over to them and began to loot.

After a few minutes of searching through pockets, pulling out the loot and rolling around the bodies, I was the owner of a dirty, olive-green backpack containing two pistols, five full replacement magazines, two water bottles, a pair of high-tech-looking binoculars, some field rations sealed in silver foil and two replacement magazines for the assault rifle.

I had tried to place these objects in the backpack's pockets in such a way that they would not rattle when I walked and, having pulled it on my back, was relieved to discover that I had been quite

successful with this undertaking. I put another gun in the pocket of my parka and then slung the belt of the assault rifle over my head. I was aware of the fact that I had very little knowledge of firearms, but I at least knew that it did not make much sense to some test shooting down here.

First, the noise could give me presence away and second, a shot down here in the tunnel would surely shred my eardrums into little pieces. So I simply hoped I wouldn't need the weapons while down here, grabbed my crossbow tighter and set off.

I alternately put one foot after the other on the concrete floor, careful not to kick one of the bodies. I let the beam of the flashlight glide permanently from right to left like a primitive radar.

After a few minutes of sneaking, walking around the corpses and peering forward, the dead lay suddenly no longer as dense as before and the air also got a little better. It still seemed to me somehow musty and smelling of fungus infestation and decay, but this haze was now and then interrupted by a gush of freshness. After another minute I felt a steady stream of fresh air blowing towards me and pushing back the poisonous, invisible mist I had just passed through.

It was an incredible pleasure to suck the cool air deep into my lung and after a few more minutes I had left behind the mysterious mass grave and the painful throb in my temples became less intense with each step.

Where fresh air came from, there had to be a way to the surface. And so I accelerated my steps and was almost convinced that I had successfully tricked the degenerates. While Onehand and his cronies had been lurking in vain outside the hole in the ground for quite some time, I had moved away from them step by step, would circle around them and return to Wanda and Mariam.

I smiled inside at the thought. The tunnel in front of me was now completely empty. No dead bodies, no garbage, no orphaned belongings. In front of me just normal darkness, around me just ordinary concrete, cracked and damp.

I kept walking. With concern I noticed that the flashlight beam had weakened a little - but maybe I was just imagining that. Even in case the flashlight would let me down, I had no choice, because there was only one direction for me anyway. Continuing towards the fresh air.

I was just about to lose myself again into my fantasy of the degenerates, in which they lurked in vain and unsuspectingly, nervously and with uselessly tensed bows in front of the hole in the earth through which I had entered the tunnel, as suddenly the flashlight beam uncovered something new.

An upturned table.

Right next to it a little ... an ... an old oil barrel?

A quick turn of the lamp revealed the improvised barricade in front of me about fifteen meters away.

Behind the barricade shadows moved, then a loud, electric “clack” - and then I was blind.

“Drop your weapons and go down on your knees!”, barked a hoarse voice through the tunnel. Since I was unable to respond to the command before the shock, the barking was repeated. With much more emphasis on the second time. A grinding, metallic sound, then I heard the footsteps of several people coming at me. Finally I managed to take my hands off my blinded eyes and sank to my knees. Soon they were all over me, grabbed my arms, pressed me to the ground with iron force and tied my hands behind my back.

“Where does this one come from?”

“I saw him on the bridge. That’s the one who jumped in the river.”

“Then you weren’t lying at all?”

The voice that asked sounded honestly astonished.

“No, you asshole.”

After these sentences were spoken, I was roughly torn to my feet and made move forward by pulling and pushing. After a few meters I heard the rusty grinding, metallic sound again, but this time it was behind me. They had dragged me behind their barricade with it’s blinding then dazzling trap and closed the gap again. I involuntarily wondered how they had so many strong lamps and above all where they had the necessary electricity from to power them?

“Stop!”, someone growled to the right of my ear. “Let’s see what you’re carrying.”

I stood still while they started searching me.

“Is he alone?”

“Yes, I think so. It looked like the other guys wanted him dead.”

“A shame with Mark and Pit. You really should have called for backup. Sure the Ivan will have to say a word or two.”

“Pah! Fuck the Ivan. The bridge was a perfect narrow spot to attack the pack, you know that. If we had let them through, we would have had to hunt them first and who knows what they would have done with the protees in the meantime. I barely made it back myself.”

“Yes, yes. And right after that, you volunteered for basement duty, hero of all heroes. In the end it just happened that way, only now Pit and Markus are dead. Those strangers roam our territory now and you know we don’t have enough capable people to get to them quick.”

The body search continued and they set out to open the backpack, which, unlike the assault rifle and the crossbow, they could not tear from my body so easily, since my hands were tied behind my back. When they had taken the rifle from me, the one who had first spoken of this “Ivan” had whispered a soft whistle, and when they opened their backpack and found the ammunition, the other one gave me a slight blow to the head from behind left.

“Where have you found this stuff, huh?”

“Ugh.” I cleared my throat.

“I... there’s a lot more of that stuff in the tunnel. Help yourselves. Smells a bit like death back there, though,” I understated.

Finally I dared to open my eyes a little and blinked carefully.

I could see more again and turned my head back and forth to get a big picture of the situation. I was astonished to see that the tunnel here behind their barricade was illuminated by many lamps on the floor and on the walls.

“I don’t want anything from you. I am not a threat,” I said, very anxious for a calm, sensible tone of voice, although the treatment I have just received had caused a faint glow of anger in me.

“I can see that you’re not a threat, tied up and all,” it came grumpily from the left.

“Yet you have brought your trouble in our territory, and I don’t like this, nor does the Ivan like it. And our protees will like it even worse.”

The mouth that spoke these words was, to say the least, a prime example of lack of hygiene, poor nutrition and general neglect, and it was in the perfectly fitting face of a sixty-year-old man of sturdy stature, who had his hair far too long and greasy growing out of his skull in tangled, gray-mottled strands.

The one of the two who must have been on the bridge was equal to his friend in terms of the degree of neglect, but in a completely different way. Where the Stumptooth was swollen and red nosed, the bridgeman's skin stretched across his skull, and on the whole he looked like someone who had fully committed his life to severe drug abuse over the last few decades. He spoke now, and I saw that he also had some teeth missing and that the teeth that were still there looked unnaturally large because his gum had receded.

"So there are guns waiting in the tunnel, yeah? Real guns? Right under our noses? The whole time?"

"The Ivan has forbidden to go into the tunnels and you know that," it came from Stumptooth.

I asked who the Ivan was, but only cashed a harsh:

"Shut your mouth, dumb-ass!"

Then he went on.

"Remember how we had the struggle with the ones from the mall? That's when the blender discovered the tunnel. He then sent the rat girl to Ivan's with a message. When the blender wasn't back after two days, Ivan told us to barricade the tunnel and guard it, and this we did. Since then, there's always only been two or three guys here to stand guard. But nobody went in deeper anymore. We've had enough trouble upstairs with the mall people. Whoever was down here at the time wasn't shot at on the surface."

"And then Ivan simply forgot about the tunnel again, or what? Stupid! If we'd had decent weapons on that bridge today, we would have had that one...", he gave me a weak punch,

"... and those other wankers shot before they even set foot on our bridge - and Markus and Pit would still be alive."

"You better shut up!", it came from Stumptooth.

"Don't say anything against the Ivan. You know very well what happens to the ones who open their mouths too wide, don't you?"

“Yes, yes, the Ivan. Don’t cross the river, don’t go further from the station than to our lookouts, everything is very dangerous and we need to keep the good weapons for emergencies only. It’s funny how all of Ivan’s boys have guns. Yuck! Do you remember when Fairy-David came here with a handcart full of booze and food? Ivan beat him up so bad, he’s been blind in one eye ever since. And that’s happened only because he dragged the stuff from a store in Bockenheim to us, from outside our territory. He was so proud, and rightly so, if you ask me, but Ivan, he must have his hand on everything.”

He spat out.

Slowly a picture of the situation began to emerge down here, and if Ivan really was the kind of guy as the emaciated bridgeman described him, then I would rather not get to know him. As in so many other places, here too a primitive society had developed, an archaic, local power structure, led obviously by this Ivan. Apparently they hadn’t heard anything about Da Silva’s degenerates’ propaganda yet. No wonder, I thought, if they’d simply take down anyone who wanted to enter their territory. For the time being they had spared me. But when one is superior to someone to such an extent, one can certainly afford a little temporary mercy. The trap with the strong lamps and spotlights directed into the tunnel had been very effective. I wondered again where they got their electricity from.

As if on cue, Stumptooth got excited.

“Let it go. Put his stuff back in the backpack. He can carry it himself. This tied up. I’ll take him up to the Ivan. You better not go there when you’re in mood like this. We’ll have to darken again here too, in case the pack that hunted him ...”,

He pushed me again.

“... will dare to show up here, too. I’ll send two more boys to reinforce the barricade. Should be there in fifteen minutes, okay?”

While the drought was tampering with my backpack again, he mumbled.

“Yeah, but tell them to hurry and bring something to warm up, or I’ll start seeing mice here.”

The tugging on my backpack had stopped and a bump against my shoulder made me understand that I should get moving. Strangely enough, the backpack seemed a little lighter than a few seconds ago. The skinny bridgeman must have taken one of the guns.

Well, so be it. Somehow those two experts also had managed to overlook the other gun in my parka.

However, as it soon turned out, this was not part of a stroke of luck.

Stumptooth set a leisurely pace, and as we left the enlightened area behind the barricade, he turned on his own flashlight and lit the floor in front of us. After a few minutes of silent marching, in which the only noise worth mentioning came from the quiet rattling of the crossbow and the assault rifle, which Stumptooth had hung carelessly over my head again and which lightly beat together at every step I took, the tunnel made a bend and ended after a few meters at a heavy and massive looking metal door.

Stumptooth, who had been behind me on my left all the time, now stepped past me, pulled the door open with a little effort and again bright, electric light fell into the tunnel. Bright enough that I had to squint my eyes another time, but by far not as glistening as the spotlights mounted on the barricade.

“Welcome to the rats,” he said while he kept the door with one foot from closing again. As I passed him and to make matters worse, he made an ironic bow.

Clown.

But I didn't care anymore the moment I stepped through the door.

Station, I thought first ... we were in Frankfurt Central Station, somewhere below street level. I had been here from time to time a few years before the Great War. But what I saw now only shared the hectic bustle with what I could still remember. Everywhere on the subway platform we just entered, and also on the tracks, wild looking arrangements of camp beds, old mattresses and sleeping bags had been set up. Every five meters there was an electric hot plate or a small fireplace. It seemed as if this camp had already existed for quite some time. Where once commuting workers, bankers, students and other people had populated the platform, it was now ragged

figures who flocked around the fireplaces or lay or sat under their blankets at their sleeping places.

"These are our protees. All broken and useless." Stumptooth drove me forward.

"Don't you stare so stupid. Go on! We have to go to the Ivan."

He was right in a way. As he pushed me through the crowd, I stared and and was stared at right back. Women, children, old men. Many were missing a hand, an arm or a leg, some even both. They were all dirty, and the stench they emitted was at least as strong as the one in the tunnel, albeit of a completely different kind.

I tried to estimate their number. There were at least eighty people living down here, alone on this platform. There was cooking, eating, urinating on the tracks a little further away, clothes being repaired, an old, naked man who must have lost an ear somewhere and sometime during the war was taken in by two women, in the midst of all the other figures and washed with rough care and within this lively, dirty chaos, little children with no less serious injuries, and also some who were suffering from bizarre adhesions and ulcers, romped around.

The people here - they were all hurters.

"The healthy live upstairs. They are protectors or providers," it sounded from Stumptooth. When he said those words, I looked more closely and managed to see some kind of structure in this chaos. Every ten or fifteen meters along the railway line there were people whose otherness caught my eye only at second glance. They were attentive, looking here and there. Sometimes they exchanged words with the surrounding hurters, or received a bowl of stew or a piece of cooked meat. At the end of the subway platform there were barriers and improvised barricades, similar to the barricade in front of which I had been captured. In the area around these miserable fortifications, the concentration of protectors - for these people had to be right that - increased.

"We owe everything to Ivan. Stop, stop here!"

A touch of pride resonated in these words.

We had come to a stop close to two protectors, a man around fifty and a woman who seemed a little older, and Stumptooth fulfilled his promise and sent them down to the skinny bridgeman. They trotted

off grumbling and Stumptooth drew me towards an escalator that had died a long time ago.

“Go! Upstairs!”

“How many people live here?”, I couldn’t resist asking.

“All together about four hundred,” came the mumbling answer.

“You’re not a spy, are you?” he asked back suspiciously but stupidly and watched my face with nearly hilarious concentration.

“Ivan says the enemy is lurking everywhere and that we are safest underground. Only the strongest should be up, because that is where the danger is greatest, and much of the rays that cannot be seen. Not everybody can take it. And those who can’t stand the rays will be strange. I’m one of the strong, just so you know.”

As if I would dare to doubt his words even slightly.

“How long have you been here?”

“Some of us have always been here, already before the war. Even Ivan. He had a booth here.”

“A booth?”

“Yes, he sold here...”

He spoke the last word in a special way and I immediately understood what he meant.

“So the Ivan is really Russian?”

He looked at me in surprise and then said, shrugging his shoulders:

“Probably, bravest of all law abiding citizens. He’s not saying it. Somewhere from the east. You can hear it. I don’t care. Ivan has always been Ivan. Keep walking, yeah?”

We had now reached the upper end of the escalator, and while Stumptooth indulged in a sip of the flask he had fumbled out of one of his pockets, I was amazed when I let my gaze wander across the spacious station concourse.

Everything seemed to be in order up here. Every twenty meters there stood the two-man-groups of guardians that seemed so common in here.

Where there had been lively chaos down on the subway tracks, there was a strong sense of organizedness. As we crossed the hall, I noticed carefully stacked and arranged water and food supplies, two improvised workshops where repairs were done and a tent pitched in

the middle of the hall with a red cross on it, which was probably a kind of sick bay or hospital.

There were more tents, and there were also some trains on the tracks which, it seemed, were also used as shelters or dwellings. The large glass dome that spanned over the tracks had holes in many places, and here and there steel struts hung down in crazy angles.

We just passed a larger group of protectors who were audibly debating what to make of today's incident on the bridge, Stumptooth said:

"We're almost at Ivan's," and nodded towards another tent guarded by men with red bands all around over the worn out jacket sleeves. Each of them carried a hodgepodge of improvised weapons, and some of them even had a pistol on their belt or a rifle over their shoulder in addition to the usual knives, clubs and homemade spears.

"You better not try anything funny," Stumptooth warned me as he approached the guards.

"Take everything off him and empty the backpack. He's from outside, and he's got something that Ivan will be very happy about," he turned to the redsleeves, which looked really pleased when they took the pistols, the assault rifle, the crossbow and the rest of my stuff.

I prepared myself, because now I had to convince this Ivan to let me go again. One of the redsleeves pulled back the tarpaulin and once more Stumptooth pushed me forward into the unknown.

I could hardly believe what my eyes passed on to my brain. The inside of the tent, into which Stumptooth and I had been led, was diffusely illuminated by some, apparently indiscriminately attached lamps. Numerous antique, or at least antique looking furniture lined the outer edge of the base, and in the middle of the resulting room, slightly raised on a pedestal, a greenish, moth-eaten armchair stood enthroned.

On this armchair was the bizarre figure of Ivan. A bushy full beard covered much of his face, but I could still see that it was criss-crossed by deep furrows. The eyes lay deep in their caves and shimmered feverishly. Ivan was no longer a young man, but he radiated something, a kind of vitality that I have only seen in a few people so far.

The pedestal was flanked by two of his boys with the red armbands. I inevitably and not entirely seriously wondered if he would like to see me kneeling before his throne, but when he said nothing, but kept staring at my, certainly torn, miserable figure, I did nothing like that, but kept looking around the tent.

Behind the back wall there seemed to be another separate area. Certainly for sleeping or maybe a private kitchen. By and large, the tent looked like the tent of a medieval warlord, or at least like most filmmakers had imagined such a tent before the war.

Did Ivan feel like such a warlord?

The large street map of Frankfurt, which was spread out on one of the tables, and on which red, black and green figures were placed, at least suggested this. On the numerous tables at the edge, which, together with some cabinets and shelves, traced the outer outline of the tent, there was all kinds of other stuff. There an old cavalry saber with an engraving I could not decipher, next to it a coffee machine and a microwave, whose glowing lights indicated functional readiness, here a few old flintlock pistols together with all possible accessories next to a stuffed buzzard, in whose claws an equally prepared rat seemed to squirm. Everything here was stuffed with junk, which had obviously been towed from the surrounding orphaned apartments and houses.

While I was still trying to figure out where the microwave and coffee machine cables were going, I heard for the first time the deep, rumbling and accentuated voice of the Ivan.

“Who’s that? Tell me. Looks like he got wet.”

Stumptooth began to babble eagerly, told the events one by one, beginning to report how I, hunted by at least twenty guys who were armed to the teeth ran across the bridge, and, as the wretched coward I doubtlessly was, jumped into the river as soon as I laid eyes on the Ivan’s people and had them do my dirty work. He

constantly praised the bravery of the bridge patrol, which, completely outnumbered, had fought a fierce battle with the new invaders, so that now only a handful of them were now roaming the terrain that Ivan claimed for himself.

In short, Stumptooth made sure that he and his skinny pal stood tall like heroes on duty and also sold my capture as the greatest deed a man had ever done and in the course of which he had not only more than fulfilled and mastered the tasks assigned to him with flying colors, but had also always remained master of my unruly and deeply shrewd nature.

I wondered whether he acted like this out of fear of the Ivan, who was obviously an irascible tyrant, or whether it had always been his way of profiling himself at the expense of others.

Meanwhile, Ivan had continued to pattern me throughout the entire report, and I was trying as best I could to withstand his gaze. When he finally addressed me, his face seemed slightly amused, but his eyes expressed more calculation and a touch of anger.

“So you like to swim and crawl down below, under the ground, huh?”

He did not expect an answer, but continued speaking without a break.

“What do these people on the bridge want from you, eh?”

Ivan now examined my crossbow and the pitiful rest of my equipment, which his boys had put down at his feet in front of the throne. As was to be expected, he was mainly interested in the assault rifle and the pistols.

“See, see, so this stuff is waiting right under our noses?”

This was directed at Stumptooth, who suddenly no longer felt so heroic, but fixed a point between his feet to avoid Ivan’s piercing glance.

“Why hasn’t anyone brought me this before, eh? None of you? Why is that?”

Stumptooth began to apologize as he looked nervously at the guards with the red armbands.

“You have ... I mean ... it was forbidden for us to go into the tunnels. We were just supposed to make sure nobody got into the station this way, and we did. If any of us had known that...”

“Enough!”

Ivan jumped up, and I could see how big he was. The fur coat, which he wore over his tattered clothes despite the relative warmth in the tent, reinforced the impression of bearlike strength and uncontrolled wildness. The guards to the right and left of Ivan’s throne tightened in anticipation of an order, but where spontaneous rage had just distorted Ivan’s face, an expression of fatherly mildness now spread through it.

Amazing.

“All right, all right. You’re free to go. Go away and have the food master give you a bottle.”

For a moment he seemed to think about stammering words of thanks, but in the end Stumptooth was content with rolling out of the tent with his head down, banging against one of the guards who had led us in.

Ivan’s eyes turned back to me. With a grand gesture, he spread his arms.

“Excuse me, excuse me. What happened to my manners? Come on, sit down.”

He gestured towards a table surrounded by chairs and one of the guards pushed me quite rudely towards one of them. I sat down and Ivan came down from his pedestal and sat across from me, still looking at me incessantly.

Without Ivan giving any further instructions, three women came out of the back area of the tent, separated from the main room by cloths and heavy curtains. Their age ranged from early twenties to mid-fifties. Calmly but quite quick they brought plates and tablets with food and placed it on the table between the Russian and me. They must have been either very, very quiet since I entered the tent, or I had been too distracted to notice their presence earlier.

Two glasses and a bottle of vodka, a loaf of bread that smelled as if it had just left the oven, and a pile of shrink-wrapped sausage and canned meat. Finally, a bowl of wrinkled apples was placed on the with scratches covered tabletop.

The surprising and nostalgic smell of fresh bread and the prospect of eating some of it struggled in my mind with my concern for Mariam, but most of all I thirsted for the warmth that a mouthful of

vodka promised to me. The cold that my bath in the Main had brought me, and which had been successfully banished from the adrenaline into the background of my perceptions, was constantly pushing forward.

Luckily for me Ivan didn't seem to be averse to a good sip, because the first thing he did was to fill the two not so small glasses to the edge with an excessive gesture and to push one of them over to me.

"We eat first. Then we'll talk. But before that...!"

He made a huge move, emptied the glass and energetically banged it on the table with a red head. Then he gave me sign to follow his lead. I also tried honestly, but I could not process more than two mouthfuls of the clear, high-proof liquid at once. Ivan grudgingly laughed at my coughing attack, but I didn't really care, because after I got the coughing behind me, I finally felt the burning warmth that quickly spread through my body. For a few seconds I closed my eyes. On the one hand to simply enjoy the feeling for a second or two and on the other hand to collect my thoughts.

Ivan certainly wanted to know if I posed a danger to his little empire. Whether there was more of my kind where I came from and what my presence might mean for him. They had not given me a knife or any other cutlery, but when I opened my eyes again, I saw that Ivan was cutting the loaf into eight large pieces with his own blade. He casually threw two of them over the table in my direction, opened a jar of pickled cucumbers that had escaped my attention so far, fished out a handful and then too pushed the jar of cucumber onto my side of the table.

"Eat," he said with his mouth full, and I did as I was told. The three women had again retreated to the separated part of the tent, and apart from Ivan's boys who had been lurking around me, we were alone. I was grateful for the break Ivan gave me, because while we were eating in silence, I managed to sort my thoughts a little more.

What was I supposed to tell him? The whole story of the degenerates? Should he know about the existence of Wanda and Mariam? About Da Silva's sick gospel? Or should I rather tell him that I simply roamed aimlessly and that I had become the hunting

game of the dog pack that was now causing trouble Ivan's territory in search of me by sheer chance?

Would he believe that?

Ivan almost stuffed a whole slice of bread into his mouth, barely chewed it, and even before he had swallowed it completely, he said, underlining his words with much wagging of his greasy fingers:

"Well, here's the thing: Those guys who were after you - my boys exactly know where they are right now. I could have them killed without a hint of a problem. But the question that arises is, what's best for me and ..."

He spread his arms.

"... for my little community? When it comes to the fight, more of my boys could die, and it could very well happen that more of these guys show up here and cause turmoil when the first ones don't return to back their kin. Should I take that risk, and if so, then what for? For one single man, huh? To be honest, right now I tend to just turn you over to them and send them on their way."

He took a little break and drank a sip before he continued speaking.

"After all, you've already cost me two lives, haven't you? And we've already lost more people this month than we can afford."

While he was talking, he fixated me with his otherwise always fluttering, unfathomable gaze, whose only constant seemed to be a glowing rage at everything and everyone, hidden deep within.

I remained silent for a moment. Then I started talking very carefully.

The whole story, from the beginning.

When I had finished my monologue, I added:

"So you see, I didn't come here to make trouble, and even though two of your people died on the bridge, which I really regret, but with the guns I found, you can..."

I stretched out my arms like Ivan had done.

"... protect your community from just about any enemy, and the risk of losing more people will tend more or less towards zero."

Ivan had had a booth, so he had been a kind of businessman before the great war changed the world forever, and I hoped that my

sober, objective attempt to balance the facts would be acknowledged by him.

Ivan nodded slowly, pretending he was still thinking, but I knew he must have prepared what he would say next at least a minute ago. He started with his strange eastern accent:

“When you have the girl and the woman back with you, where will you go? Would you come by one of our neighbors and tell them about us? That we have good electricity maybe? That we have weapons and enough food for the next two years? Would you tell them about the guns or the tunnel you found? Wouldn’t it be best, from my perspective, simply to eliminate you and these handful of *degenerates*, as you call them? Just in case? We don’t need beggars or a bunch of people trying to take what we consider our property by force.”

He was obviously getting excited in the meantime. Didn’t he just say he wanted to avoid a fight with the degs? Or was that just to make me feel guilty?

“All this can only work if there is a certain order. People need someone to make clear announcements and you...”

He pointed at me

“... you’ve brought chaos. You’re forcing me into things I don’t want to do.”

Ivan jumped up, and began to walk up and down in excitement.

“It’s hard to keep things going around here. I’m the only one who can. Without me...”

Again he spread his arms.

“... all the people here would have died some miserable death long ago. Thanks to me, they’re United, thanks to me they have a purpose!”

He continued his sermon and I realized two things.

Even if Ivan was right about some of the things he said - the man seemed to be at the end of his rope on the one hand, and anything but emotionally stable on the other.

As tall as he was and as imposing as his appearance may have been, his regime was a reflection of all his fears. He was afraid of his neighbors, and I assumed that with that he meant other newly formed communities that I just hadn’t seen yet. He was afraid of his

own people, for why else would he have had to create several classes in his new society?

There were the ones with the armbands. Those were obviously the ones he trusted to some extent and whom he probably kept on track with some privileges. Among them were people like Stumptooth, whom he kept under control by more or less arbitrary laws, rules and punishments, and also by their simple fear of the redsleeves. And then there were the sick hurters and the weak who had to live down on the tracks and who had to be grateful that they occasionally were allowed to eat the bread crumbs from Ivan's table. Out of weakness and inability, they probably never even had the idea to seek their salvation elsewhere. The world was merciless, and here they at least had protection, even if they had to vegetate in an underground camp and do the low level work.

I changed my tactics. Quietly I said:

"Someone as hard working as you, Ivan, with that much weight on his shoulders needs someone who understands him. Who helps him. You've come a long way, you've built all this up from nothing. You gave these people food and warmth and order. But if I may say so, you seem ... tired. I can see very well what kind of weight presses down on you - to keep all this going, all by yourself and ..."

And indeed, where in the movies the warlords and kings had a staff of advisers on their side, in Ivan's tent there were only silent underlings to be found. Slowly I turned my head to convince myself of my impression once more, just to be sure. Yeah, none of these men looked like they had any decision-making authority. Two were obviously too young, barely seventeen years old. Another was clearly addicted to alcohol and the fourth had his war trauma and depression dug clear signs in his face.

I continued.

"... You need someone who understands the needs of an operation like this. To take over some of your everyday decisions so that you can devote yourself to the real important things. Let me bring the woman and child here, Ivan. We need a safe place for the winter anyway. My interest is in the survival of the two, you should have learned this much from what I just told you. We'd be safe here with you and we wouldn't be interested ..."

I made the all-embracing Ivan gesture.

“... harming your community. You wouldn't have to kill me or turn me over to that bunch of lunatics out there. You ...”

Ivan's massive body suddenly tightened. He took a surprisingly quick step towards me, grabbed me by the collar and pulled me up from my chair and over the table, leaving me breathless.

“Who are you to presume to understand my thoughts? Who are you to think you could be of help to me? Who are you to think you're more than the dirt under my fingernail, huh?”

He screamed right into my face and I closed my eyes and mouth too late for not taking in any of his vodka, sausage and cucumber smelling breath.

He kept yelling at me in this way, pulling me around in the tent like a light cloth doll, shaking me, bumping me against tables and other furniture, and some of the junk Ivan had piled up there fell to the ground or broke. The redsleeves hastily made room for their master and watched the scene with caution, but without real surprise. I did not resist, let him run riot, let him show that it was he and only he who was in charge here.

When the outburst of anger slowly died down, he finally thundered his fist into my stomach. I collapsed and remained on the floor, struggling for breath. Ivan stood above me, also breathing heavily, and I looked up into his deep red, sweating face. First he looked scared for a moment, shocked at his own reaction and I thought I had scored, that I had found this man's weak spot.

His face was replacing the expression of amazement with the caricature of an excusing laugh, and I was sure that his anger was gone for now, when his eyes suddenly narrowed again and an animalistic scream yelled out of his throat.

He fixated a certain point on my body and I followed his gaze.

The handle of the pistol, which Stumptooth and the drought had overlooked, had slipped a bit out of the pocket of my parka. With another scream, Ivan came at me again and dropped all his weight on my chest so that it pressed the air out of my lung once more and grabbed for the gun.

I couldn't even gasp anymore because his knees hit my damaged ribs. There was just pain. Pain that pushed the fear of what the angry Ivan would do to me next far into the background.

Then he pawed himself up again, by repelling himself painfully with one of his huge hands from my face. It almost broke my nose. He stood over me with the gun in his hand. He looked at it for a moment, apparently pensive.

Then he unlocked the safety and pointed the barrel at my forehead.

He growled quietly:

"I knew it after all. They sent you to kill me."

I laboriously sat up, held my hands in Ivan's direction, trying to calm him down, trying to say something reassuring to the raging man, but...

I unsuccessfully tried to penetrate the darkness surrounding me with my eyes, and I was not even sure whether I was really conscious or whether I was still in a twilight state somewhere between dull, painful red nebulae and blessed, black non-existence.

Only when the pain in my head slowly became sharper because my increasing pulse pumped the blood through my veins faster than before, I was sure that I was actually awake and alive. With my hands I reached for my skull. Carefully my fingers crept first over my face, and then over the rest of my head.

No hole, no moisture - no blood.

But an elevation that hurt when I touched it, that hurt so much that I immediately pulled back my fingers. Ivan obviously didn't shoot me. I had probably been knocked out from behind. At least that bump on the back of my head suggested it. I wondered if it had happened on Ivan's orders, or if one of the guards had tried to save my life with such an unauthorized blow, interrupting Ivan's raging tirade and bringing him back to reality. I recalled their dull faces. I didn't think so. But if it did happen this way, I was in deep debt.

Carefully I put my body in a sitting position, and I almost got sick. After a pause of several minutes, which I used to breathe slowly and

concentrated and to push back the pain impulses that raced through my brain to a tolerable level, I finally began to explore my surroundings crawling and groping.

The result of my effort was sobering. I was obviously in a small room about three by two meters. The walls were probably made of concrete, at least they were not bricked, but smooth and cold. In one wall was a heavy metal door. Twice I hammered against it, then, attracted by the resulting noise, the pain crept back into my head and I gave up my attempts of communicating with the outside world for the time being. No one had reacted anyway.

I had not been able to feel a door handle and thus condemned to inaction, I looked for a bearable reclining position with quite moderate success and waited.

If only I knew how long I've already been in here.

The degenerates on the bridge, Wanda and the sick Mariam in the house, Ivan and his community in Frankfurt Central Station, the girl and the dogs, Thomas, the pile of corpses at the open side of the dead end - all this seemed almost unreal to me now. The thought that the backpack with the medicine for Mariam was laying useless in the undergrowth on the bank of the Main almost drove me crazy and only with great effort did I manage to force myself to rest.

I had to accept that there was nothing I could do. I just hoped Wanda would take the initiative in time if I didn't return. Sure she would. She wasn't helpless. On the contrary. Considering what this woman had endured and survived, one could only be amazed that she had not lost her will to live long before we met. The opposite was the case. To a large extent she probably owed this to Mariam's existence, I thought, and I realized that it was kind of similar for me.

As long as I had traveled through the destroyed country alone, I had managed to avoid most of the dangers and let the things around me run free. I had been aimless. Indifferent. Not necessarily careless, but somehow ... superfluous.

Only since I had met this gang of degenerates and their prisoners had there been something like goals for me again.

Necessities.

Wishes.

The urge to put an end to the atrocities of the degs had driven back the emptiness in me. Not completely, but at least to such an extent that I had developed a kind of drive that somehow helped me to a strange kind of calm contentment that had not felt for a long time. While I was still thinking about all these things, exhaustion came back and ambushed me.

When I came conscious again, it was still dark all around, but something was different. Soon I realized what it was. There was a new smell in the room.

Actually, it smelled like food. Like roasted meat and fresh bread. My mouth watered instantly. After some crawling around I felt the tin plate that someone must have brought into my prison while I slept. I forced myself to eat slowly, which I managed with great effort. When I had eaten everything completely, I scanned the whole floor again. They had also brought me a bucket for my needs and on its floor I actually found a roll of toilet paper.

Very obliging.

It looked as if I was going to be kept in darkness here for a longer time. But for what purpose?

It made me angry that I didn't know how long I had been down here already, and I took it upon myself not to fall asleep again.

I'd grab the guard and escape the next time they would bring me food, I said to myself. I had no weapons or tools, not even shoes on my feet, but the swelling on my skull had decreased significantly and the pain was only a faint echo compared to my last waking period.

I got up, stretched my body, did some timid push-ups, but when the headache threatened to get worse again, I let it go.

Go slow.

Take it easy.

Why didn't Ivan just shoot me? He had accused me that "they" had sent me to kill him. Who was he talking about? Some neighboring community? The people from the mall that Stumptooth talked about? I was angry with myself. I should have just voluntarily surrendered the gun that had been the cause of the whole drama when they had scanned me. But instead I had laughed at the inability of the two henchmen and was proud of the little trump card up my sleeve.

Yeah, well.

That backfired.

Since physical training was still canceled, I had little else to do but to continue to get angry about myself, to put my ear to the cold, rusty-gray metal door and to listen.

To my displeasure I couldn't distinguish concrete sounds. What came to my ear was a kind of jittery background noise that arose from the everyday life of Ivan's community. Far-flung murmurs, sometimes a laugh, sometimes sounds of pain, sometimes knocking or hammering, which pointed to some kind of repair work and an omnipresent deep chugging, everything from far and fading away irregularly. None of this had struck me in my first waking phase, so I assumed it must have been night when I woke up. And then I'd gone back to sleep.

So the next day must have begun, right? Or the day after that.

My thoughts turned back to Wanda and Mariam. I could only hope that Wanda had found a way to get medication or otherwise help Mariam.

While I was still thinking my helpless thoughts, sounds came through the metal of the door, new sounds and closer this time. Hectic clattering of feet that came to a halt somewhere near my prison. A man and a woman following the voices, but I could not distinguish individual words. Then something heavy bounced against the door, giving off a hollow, dull sound. Somebody moaned. For a moment a faint strip of light penetrated into the darkness of my cell and I could see that I had correctly estimated the approximate size of the door. A little rustling, a few more hoarse whispered words, then slow, weak blows started to shake the metal door. Within two minutes, the frequency and strength of the shocks increased, followed by suppressed wheezing and became louder until the two had finished their hectic, secret act.

Then a short moment of silence, again quiet, incomprehensibly muttered words, the new rustling as they put their clothes back in order - then the steps went away again, but this time in different directions.

While I had witnessed this little intermezzo, images of Wanda had crept into my head time and again, and I had only partially

succeeded in banning it. So far she had shown little personal interest in me. I was there, she was there, Mariam was there and otherwise only a hostile outside world, which hardly allowed for anything like romantic feelings. There also was no need to talk about the terrible experiences Wanda had made during her captivity. If Mariam had not survived her fever, Wanda would probably not waste any thought on me, but just assume that I was dead or simply left her and the child behind.

Drop the ballast and move on.

A little while ago, I probably would have done exactly that. I wasn't sure why I even thought about it. Why did I care what Wanda thought of me? Somehow, however, we were connected by what had happened. At least, that's what I secretly seemed to hope.

I forced my thoughts to return to the unknown couple. Where did one go, if one wanted to be undisturbed for a few minutes, in a situation like this, in an improvised camp that seemed to be bursting with life and yet was in an indeterminate, permanent state of war with the outside world?

You'd go to a place a little more out of the way. That was a bit remote, but not that remote that one ran the risk of being attacked by something or someone from outside. A place within the area controlled by Ivan's people, in any case.

They had left my cell in different directions and the fact that they had loved each other here - if it had been an act of love and not a deal for better food or something like that - suggested that my cell was located in some passage way, which probably bent a few meters away from the door and in this way protected from unwanted looks. Furthermore it was very unlikely that during the whole process a guard stood next to my cell door and watched the two of them ... unless the man was the same guard who was now patrolling up and down the corridor ... but no, he's been gone too long.

Should I try to communicate with them the next time? Would they even come back here?

I wrapped my arms around my upper body. I was cold. Maybe I could get in touch with them and get them to let me out of here. But what could I offer them, with nothing on but my pants and a dirty T-shirt?

The door obviously sat a tiny bit loosely in the frame, as the faint light that the two had caused had shown when one of them, probably with the back, hit it hard at the beginning of the short love play. Was that a possible starting point for an escape?

A brief hand check of the door brought a sobering result. Without tools I could tamper with the door until I turned black. Not a chance.

Time passed miserably slowly. At some point the sounds of life around me gradually faded away and things around me calmed down. Another day lost, another day of uncertainty.

For the last few hours I had been walking around in my cell in circles, one hand loosely against the wall. The contact with the cold concrete seemed to calm me down somehow and my thoughts shot a little less quickly through my head.

I had to stay awake. Stay awake and listen.

When did they bring me food?

I couldn't tell.

The next time I should not eat all at once, I decided because I had got quiet hungry again in the meantime and slowly but surely I made friends with the idea of using the bucket, which I had delayed as well as I could so far.

I was walking in circles for a while again. Then, groping and with great care, I checked the length of my fingernails. Then those of the toenails. Then I tried to determine the number of joints in my body. Then I tried to pass the time by pulling out beard hairs and tried to count them, too. I wondered how much longer I could stand my imprisonment without going mad. At some point I fell asleep again.

I woke up when the heavy door swung open with a metallic noise and the figure of Stumptooth appeared in the frame in front of the glistening bright light that so suddenly maltreated my eyes and made them tear. He came in sniffing and threw a casual look in the bucket. Behind him in the passage I could see the blurred silhouettes of at least three other men and one woman. So many. Too many.

"Ivan wants to see you, get up!"

He was now closer, only one step away, which forced me to look up to him. I pulled myself up and stretched. Behind Stumptooth two of Ivan's boys with their red armbands had entered the cell and

watched me carefully, their hands on the pistols on their belts. I tried to look as harmless as possible. With a shrug of my shoulders and a nod, I expressed my silent agreement. Stumptooth went ahead, and I could smell his alcohol vapors. Ivan's boys took me into the middle and a third, a blond, tall guy in his forties, who had been waiting outside the cell, was the tail light.

I was reasonably correct in my assessment of the placement of my prison. When I took a quick look backwards past the blonde, I could see that the passageway led at least fifty meters away from the center of the camp before the lights faded and finally went out completely.

They made me walk me in the opposite direction, and already after a few meters the passage made a sharp bend to the left, before after another fifty meters it hit one of the underground platforms on which Ivan had placed the hurters, his "protees".

I was led through the crowd and had to be careful not to step my bare feet in any unsavory dirt or stumble over one of the figures who, although it was probably noon judging by the highly frequented cooking places, were still lying here and there in the middle of the former subway platform. Either they actually slept or were unable to move on their own. After just a few days of absolute isolation, this crowd of people represented a serious overload of stimuli for me.

Quiet conversations, murmurs, laughter, whimpering, curses, asthmatic cough - all this merged into a cacophony of dirty life, and the smell of excrement, open wounds, skin diseases and cancer, paired with the scent of boiling stew and other canned food warmed up over small fireplaces, made sure that I was happy when they roughly pushed me up the stairs, high into the, contrasting the claustrophobic confinement down here, almost gigantic-looking station concourse. I sucked the comparatively fresh air deep into my lung and let my eyes wander over the center of Ivan's camp a second time. Only now did I realize that not only tents had been set up to give space to the individual "departments", the infirmary and the workshops, but also the premises of the prewar shops, which delimited the station towards the city and whose glass fronts were covered with rubble and wooden parts, were partly used by Ivan's

people and almost everywhere hectic-looking, but nevertheless well organized hustle and bustle could be observed.

I was sure I still hadn't seen or understood everything that was going on here when we finally arrived at Ivan's tent.

Two things caught my eye, though. Today Ivan's redsleeves were much better armed than when I arrived. About one out of three of them carried an assault rifle with a belt over their shoulders. Ivan must have sent people into the tunnels to get the guns from there. After all, I had crossed the tunnel unharmed and so there was little danger for Ivan's people to be expected. The other thing I noticed was this: The low-frequency hum, which I had noticed several times before, obviously came from two old, red-and-white locomotives of the Deutsche Bahn, which - probably to keep the noise and exhaust pollution within limits - were standing far behind on the tracks, just under the gigantic, perforated dome, which spanned the station concourse. From the locomotives an insane cable construction led to the individual tents. That was how Ivan supplied his camp with electricity. Whether these locomotives had standardized generators built in or whether Ivan's technicians had put their hands on them, I could not say with my limited technical knowledge. However, I hoped for the people here that there was enough diesel to get them through the approaching winter. Stumptooth abruptly tore me out of my observations when he told me to move on and enter Ivan's tent.

In the tent it was dim, as usual, and when we entered, only the blond guy who had been behind me the whole time accompanied us, while the two redsleeves who had flanked me seemed to consider their job done and stayed outside, I could not believe my eyes.

Ivan was not sitting in his throne-like chair, but at the table that now stood in the middle of the tent. A true feast was waiting there on this table. Ivan looked at me and smiled a broad smile as our eyes met.

But that's not what shocked me so much.

Right next to Ivan sat, tensed and with a black eye in her pale face - Wanda.

Tangled thoughts racing through my head. At the outer edge of my mind I noticed that the four men of Ivan's guard, who had positioned

themselves at the back wall of the front area of the tent, tightened up and watched me closely.

I forced myself to stay calm and let my gaze roam through the room deliberately slowly once again. Ivan's scary face still smiled at me, his massive body signaled absolute self-confidence as he pointed magnanimously at the place opposite him and Wanda. Stumptooth had turned to me and grinned at me gloatingly.

"What a surprise, huh?", he mumbled.

I didn't see the blond guy, but I assumed that he was waiting behind me just as attentively and tense for my reaction as the rest of Ivan's boys. As I slowly moved the few meters from the tent entrance to the seat offered to me, I could see that Wanda had a rope tied around her right wrist, which, meandering loosely, disappeared somewhere under the table.

Her gaze was searching mine, and in her eyes I could read anger, pain and also a little bit of fear.

"Where's Mariam?", I asked Wanda and Ivan alike as I sat down. I had digested the first shock and now tried to face the new situation as cool as possible.

"They took her," Wanda replied with an indeterminate gesture of her free hand.

"Gustav takes care of them," it sounded from Stumptooth, who was about to sit down, too, but was stopped by a malicious look from Ivan and then retreated to some place in back with his head bowed. You could literally feel his childish disappointment, and I almost smiled.

No feast for you, my friend.

"The child is well."

Ivan was now paternal and benevolent.

"Gustav is a doctor, and he'll do anything to make the girl feel better."

Then he added:

"You see, you owe me, don't you?"

I was beginning to realize that Ivan wanted something from me. And he was willing to use Wanda and Mariam as leverage to get it. I knew that I was by no means in a position to negotiate. Yet I replied, as unimpressed as I could:

“We’ll see when she’s back on her feet. If she doesn’t get better, Ivan, I’ll do anything to make you pay for stopping me from bringing her the drugs.”

An empty threat, without any chance of coming true. But still.

I of course knew, that the girl probably had a way better chance of survival here in Ivan’s camp, at least if it was true to what Ivan said and that Gustav was actually a real doctor. I could not be sure if the medication and my and Wanda’s good will alone would have been enough to help Mariam.

“Yeah, yeah ... listen,” Ivan began, ignoring my words.

“I’ve been thinking about things for a while, and you might even be a little right when you say I could use some help here. Therefore...”

He tilted down a big, half-filled glass with a clear liquid and shook hardly noticeably. Then he slowly began to walk around the table.

“... I’ve decided to check out your story. And lo and behold ...”

He laughed briefly and laid one of his bear paws on the back of Wanda’s head, who involuntarily ducked away a little and then turned around and sparked at him.

“... my people have found her ...”

He gave her head a slight push aside and then used his paw to refill his glass.

“... and they found your girl. I’m very, very happy you didn’t lie to me. Would have been a real shame for you.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I put my index finger under my left eye, and Ivan understood.

“Oh, the black eye ... Yeah, you know, sometimes women just don’t know what’s good for them, and then you just have to convince them.”

His eyes sparkled maliciously as he added with laughter:

“So far, by the way, we’ve only made your girls come along - and nothing else.”

I continued to say nothing, but looked at Wanda, who confirmed the truth of Ivan’s statement with a barely perceptible nod.

After all.

I waited until Ivan continued.

“Well, you know... there are a few things that ... must be done. Things that are important to me and my people...”

Once again his all-encompassing gesture, before again taking a seat opposite me.

“... and that are necessary for everyone here to continue to be fine. As you said yourself - I can't take care of everything myself, as much as I would like to. And besides this one...”

He pointed his fleshy finger behind me where I suspected the blond guy.

“... as you observed, do my people actually have relatively little initiative of their own, which in fact means that most of them are either too stupid, too broken or too sick to be entrusted with somewhat more difficult tasks ... guard the bridge, don't let anyone through here or there ... something like that works quite well. But an order like: Take a few people and see if you can get a little diesel out of the gas stations in the area, and if not, steal the stuff somewhere without being traced back here - you can't do something like that with the guys being unsupervised. And the diesel-thing is just one small example of the more difficult tasks that arise from time to time. Actually, Rolf here...”

I guessed that's what the blond guy was called, because the Ivan looked straight over my head and behind me again.

“... already took care of the diesel business very well. Rolf knows exactly why he does what I ask him to do. He knows that safety can only be achieved through numbers ... the larger the group, the safer the individual. That's why we need to feed all of us so well here. That is why we need a hierarchy at the end of which there is someone who can make the important decisions quickly and correctly. That someone...”

He explained unnecessarily.

“... Is me. And for me to make the right decisions, I must be kept unbothered by the lower tasks. You've proven that you've got something inside that brain of yours, and that one...”

He gave Wanda another push.

“... and the child... they are obviously your motivation.”

He grinned again.

“And at the same time they are my assurance that you will do everything in your power to carry out all the tasks assigned to you to my absolute ... sa-tis-fac-tion. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

I understood very well - despite his heavy accent. He needed someone to do his dirty work. Part of me just wanted to jump up and strangle this disgusting, smug man with my bare hands. But two things kept me from doing it. On the one hand, the presence of his bodyguards, and on the other, the logical part of my brain understood this: Even if I was deeply opposed to his methods - Ivan was quite right about certain things.

It took a large group to allow to live in a relative security, at least here and now. And this group had to be well fed and nurtured. And once such a group had exceeded a certain size, you really needed a hierarchy to get everything under one roof. Even though Ivan probably secured his status by distributing weapons, food rations and consumer goods and exercising direct and indirect violence, he had obviously been quite successful in protecting his people so far.

He used Wanda and Mariam as leverage to get me to cooperate, and I decided to play along.

For the time being. Talk again in spring. Then ... we'll see.

"I have conditions," I said out loud.

Ivan, who had tried to read the content of my latest thoughts directly from my face, jumped up roaring.

"What have you got? Conditions? You..."

His roar suddenly stopped. He smoothed out his beard, brought the bottle of vodka he had knocked over when he had yelled out back into its original position and sat down again. The anger had disappeared from his face but was still glowing in his eyes. With seemingly emphatic kindness, he asked aloud:

"And what kind of..."

An erratic gesture with the hands.

"... what are your conditions?"

"One", I started without looking at Ivan.

"... Wanda and Mariam will not be locked up in the same damn cell you put me in, nor will they be placed on the subway with the hurters. They get their own tent and are to be left alone by you and your people. Two: I want my things back, the crossbow, my knife and so on. Three: ..."

And now really raised the stakes.

“... I want to move freely here, without any watchers constantly following me. Fourth, you’re gonna answer some of my questions. There is much else I need to know about this place to be of use to you, and...”

I broke off. I could think of nothing more and I cursed myself for it. It almost worked, this showing self-confidence-thing. For a few seconds Ivan looked at me in silence. The dangerous glow in his eyes was still there and in his head it worked.

“One,” he said then.

“... Yeah, they’re getting their own tent up here, as a sign of my confidence. But you will hopefully realize that it will be those two, who will have to pay for every mistake you make? They’ll get a nice big tent with everything they need and where they can rest for a while. Guards will be standing outside, and if one of them sticks out the prying nose without being asked to do so, then it will be cut off, and then the two ...”

He pointed to the separated part of his tent behind him, in which his private rooms and probably also his small harem were located.

“... Will have to stay here. At my place. Two: Yes, you get your weapons and your other belongings back - but certainly not in here. Not inside the station. You’ll only get your stuff outside the camp. Under no circumstances you will be carrying weapons in here, and if you get caught with one, the ladies will move in with me too ... understood? That one...”

He pointed to Stumptooth.

“...will take care of your stuff. He’ll hand it out to you when you go outside and make sure you give it back when you don’t need it anymore.”

Stumptooth nodded bravely, but felt visibly uncomfortable with the whole thing. He had just been given responsibility. He obviously didn’t like the feel of it.

“Three: forget about free movement. As long as I don’t hear any complaints, you can sleep with the woman and the girl in the tent. Otherwise you will always and everywhere be accompanied by two boys while in camp. I can’t have you running around trying to do some nonsense. If you need anything, you can tell your guards. Fourthly, I will not answer any questions, but I will of course give you

any information that I consider necessary for the successful fulfillment of the respective task.”

Okay, so he played the tough guy, but I still was glad to have been promised temporary safety for Wanda and Mariam.

I’d have to earn the rest of my trust and privilege.

Time would tell.

As a sign of my agreement, I merely nodded.

Wanda, who had been staring at the tabletop the whole time, suddenly raised her head.

“In case the gentlemen are done now, I want to go see Mariam.”

Not loud, but clear and precise.

Ivan turned his head in her direction, took an painfully slow sip out of his water glass, which had been filled again in the meantime. Honey-sweet, he said:

“Of course, my dear. Go!,” and waved us smilingly out of his tent. Wanda, who, unlike me, had not made any preparations to get up, demonstratively lifted her wrist with the rope on it and looked at Ivan in an inviting way.

“Oh, my... how could I forget?”

Surprisingly gently he took her hand in his huge paw and I could see that Wanda had to pull herself together in order not to show her reluctance.

With the other hand, Ivan took a knife from the food aching table and drove down the inside of her extended forearm from the crook of her arm in the direction of the rope, with the tip of the knife leaving a reddened line, but without actually carving Wanda’s skin. Then he suddenly grabbed

her hand tighter, Wanda gasped and Ivan cut the rope with a quick, precise movement.

Wanda had jumped up before the loose ends of her ties touched the table top and for a moment I feared that she was going after Ivan.

It took me a second to realize with relief that this was not the case.

“Got fire, the bitch. Now take her to her girl,” Ivan gave his final instructions for us for today and grinned.

Wanda snorted contemptuously, walked around the table and we left the tent accompanied by two redsleeves, while Rolf prepared to

take my place at the table and sit down opposed to Ivan. As we went out, we could hear Ivan ordering the remaining redsleeves to pitch a new tent.

We approached the hospital tent, in front of which another guard with a red band on his arm stood and looked forward to us with mild interest, side by side and under the attentive eyes of our own guards and the bystanders. After confirming that, as the redsleeve had already expected, we wanted to go see the “new girl”, we were granted access.

In the tent there were eight beds, apparently looted from ambulance cars, and three real hospital beds. Four of the mobile beds were occupied. A man in his sixties had recently undergone a leg amputation, so it seemed and stared at the ceiling with his eyes glassy from the painkillers. Next to each other, on the other side of the corridor that the beds formed, lay two obviously pregnant young women who interrupted their whispering when we entered. As we moved further inside the tent, I took another look at the fourth patient. It was a young boy who looked like he had just survived a fight with one or more wild dogs. He was asleep.

“Mariam?” Wanda shouted questioningly.

From one of the back hospital beds, under a thick eiderdown, sounded a quiet and weak:

“Here, I’m here.”

I was incredibly relieved to hear Mariam’s voice and Wanda and I immediately rushed towards the bed. There she lay, pale, sweaty, fearful, but awake and in her right mind.

When she saw me and Wanda, she began to cry softly and reached for our hands. So we stood for about ten minutes until someone approached me from behind and gently touched my shoulder.

A tall, slim man in a white coat, which he wore over his clothes, stood behind me, perhaps about fifty, with curly- brown hair getting a little thin and a narrow pair of glasses, probably already mended several times.

“Hello. I am Gustav,” he said. Meanwhile Wanda had sat down on the edge of the bed, stroking Mariam’s little head and looking at me

and Gustav attentively.

"The little one is doing quiet well," said Gustav, shaking my hand, which, to say the least, threw me a little off balance. Gustav, who noticed my surprise upon this gesture, smiled and said with a wink:

"Oh, there is little to hold on to these days, but good manners are certainly not the worst thing. Do you agree?"

A little embarrassed I did agree and he got back to the point.

"Well, the girl still has a high fever and is dehydrated, but in a few days we'll have her nursed up again. I've given her antibiotics and I'm going to give her a light sedative. Sleep is still the best medicine."

He pointed to the free loungers.

"You can sleep here tonight," he said. "...and I'll check on both of you ..."

He looked at us one by one, and got caught briefly in the bruise on Wanda's face.

"... for your own sake and for mine. We don't want you to bring any epidemics or vermin into our camp, do we?"

We accepted his offer. When Mariam thanks to the sedative quickly fell asleep again, Gustav asked each of us briefly and professionally behind a screen improvised from some sacks as used for garden waste, stretched in the back of the tent and examined us quickly and thoroughly.

While he was looking at my older and newer injuries, he was making small-talk, but it wasn't unpleasant for me. I had seen this form of distraction with many other doctors before the war. It somehow seemed to be part of the standard medical repertoire.

Soft-skills was the name used for this back then ... or something like that. If that was true, he in any case had some. When his examination arrived at my ankle, the whispering stream of harmless words broke off.

"I'd like to x-ray that tomorrow."

"X-ray?"

When he saw the unbelief in my face, he for a fraction of a second looked as if he just had aged twenty years. This expression vanished instantly and his usual smile returned.

"Yes, Ivan is very concerned about the health of his people. I have almost everything you need here. We have to be very grateful to

Ivan.”

I agreed with him politely, impressed by the living standards here in the camp, but I did not forget the moment when the mask of carefree happiness had fallen. When he released me, he made me promise to come back for x-rays the next day.

I waited at Mariam’s bed while the doctor devoted himself to Wanda’s wounds and I tried unsuccessfully to eavesdrop on the conversation between the two. Mariam slept deeply and soundly, and in the meantime I was sure that I could be reasonably satisfied with the way things went.

Mariam would live, Wanda had a black eye, but she was as safe as she could be from degenerates and wild dogs.

How things would work out with the Ivan - well, we would see.

The next days went by so relaxed that it almost drove me crazy. The x-ray of my ankle, not in the hospital tent, but in a separate tent located on the tracks near the chugging diesel locomotives, showed that nothing was broken. Gustav said some words of relief, yet splinted the foot and encouraged me to take care. Mariam recovered completely within three days and then moved from the hospital tent over to the tent that Ivan had had set up for us. Wanda and I did some catching up on the things that had happened since I left that day.

She and Mariam had been surrounded and overwhelmed early in the morning by a dozen of Ivan’s boys, obviously led by Rolf. In the course of the short brawl, Wanda had already done half of the leg amputation of the man we had seen in Gustav’s tent with the help of an axe - perhaps the same one I had thrown when the degenerates had stormed the house - so that Gustav probably not even had to cut the bone. The guy had the misfortune to be the first get too close to, but Rolf then had commanded his men so skilfully that she could do no further damage among them and she had been overwhelmed without suffering serious injury. She seemed almost ashamed of it.

Smiling, I pointed out to her that it could have been worse all in all, but regretted it immediately when I slowly realized that Wanda had just been escaped from captivity and was now a prisoner again,

even though this new prison - at first glance at least - was much more civilized and pleasant than the previous one.

At some point everything was said.

Also a question that had been haunting me all this time in the back of my mind had been answered by Wanda. I wondered if Wanda hadn't tried to find medication for Mariam herself, as agreed, after I hadn't returned at the appointed time.

Wanda's explanation was simple.

Shortly after I left, a large pack of wild dogs appeared in the dead end and had begun to besiege the house after the bodies of the degenerates outside the fence had been eaten. Wanda assumed that they could smell Thomas' corpse.

One of them, obviously the pack leader, had been injured and was particularly vicious. He had attacked the fence several times in frenzied rage and almost made it over it. Only the appearance of Ivan's people had been able to persuade the searing pack to retreat. However, this retreat had not been complete, because after Wanda and Mariam had been captured, the troops were surrounded and pursued by the animals all the way back to the camp in the station.

Wanda, while being tied up, had learned from the nervous words of Ivan's men that the dogs were becoming an ever-increasing problem. The injured boy, whom we had seen sleeping in the hospital tent, made this impression appear credible.

Gustav, who always visited Mariam in the late morning, lent us some books from which we read to her alternately. However, he exchanged only a few words with us. She was still sleeping a lot, so the printed pages provided us with entertainment for a few days. In the reading-free time we were busy to stay halfway in shape and motivated ourselves with small competitions. I was surprised how much strength was hidden within Wanda's lean body and I had to work very hard to keep up with her.

Of course we discussed our situation and made plans and plans only to discard them shortly thereafter, but soon this topic also was exhausted, and then everyone hung on to their own thoughts.

Wanda still completely shielded her inner life from me and the rest of the world, and even when she twitched in her sleep at night and

spoke confused words, her face was an impenetrable mask most of the time and especially during the day.

We had no contact with the rest of the camp. The food was brought to us, and we were only allowed to leave the tent when we had to go to the public toilets of the station, which were still fully functional and in tiptop condition.

Of course, this could only ever happen one after the other and always accompanied by two redsleeves. We picked up conversations around us then and when and over time it turned out that the remaining Degs from Onehand's group had been discovered and killed by Ivan's patrols. Onehand himself, with one or more bullets from one of Ivan's new assault rifles in his body, managed to escape successfully.

Too bad.

On my short trips to the toilets I got the overall impression that the degree of organizedness

in the camp had increased even further in the past few days. Everyone seemed entrusted with some task and was working with zeal.

After five days all our wounds and major injuries had healed as far as possible, which slowly but surely made the forced inactivity more and more unbearable. Of course we tried as best we could to make plans and predict the coming events, but neither the fragments of the conversations of our guards nor those of the women and men passing by the tent, whom we could eavesdrop on, gave us information about relevant events of any kind.

I watched from my cot as Wanda began to teach Mariam the basics of mathematics after her quick and precisely performed daily push-ups. While looking at them, I wondered for the thousandth time what Ivan could ask of me, and especially when that finally would happen.

I had discussed the situation more than once with Wanda, whispering quietly, and we now agreed that I should try to make the best possible henchman Ivan could wish for.

By doing this we wanted to gradually gain privileges and trust, which in return should enable us either to flee here at a time of our choosing or to actually get things to a point where we could convince

Ivan to take action with us against Da Silva and his degenerates. The small settlements and ruin-communities only had a chance against the Degs if they could prepare themselves, preferably under an united leadership. None of us considered an escape attempt feasible at this time. We were too well guarded and the risk for us, and especially for Mariam, would simply be too great.

I had told Ivan about the events of the last weeks, but he hadn't shown too much interest. Luckily for me, he didn't seem to be a religious person either, although you could never say that for guys like him.

Of course I had not taken the book, *The Gospel Of The New World*, with me when I went to get the medicines. Wanda confirmed to me that it was probably still in our shelter in the dead end, because Ivan's boys had not stopped looting after they had overwhelmed Wanda.

"You didn't burn it?"

"No. Changed my mind. You weren't finished. And it's proof that maybe makes it easier to convince people that the danger is real. That the degenerates act systematically and are not just some unorganized raiders."

I nodded.

She was right, and I liked the fact that she had put this logic above her impulses.

Anyway, our big goal was to leave Frankfurt in spring at the latest and head to Vatican City to put an end to this madman. After all we had experienced with the Degs, it was out of the question for us to just look for a warm place and hope that nothing more would happen to us.

We disagreed about Mariam. Wanda wanted to take her with us, which I could understand very well, because she had already lost way too many people. I on the other hand preferred the thought of leaving her here, perhaps in the care of Gustav - in a quasi-monarchic society, yes, but still as safe as possible.

Neither Wanda nor I had a place we belonged to and the only, desolate alternative to our megalomaniacal, dreamy plan of murdering the insane priest was to somehow go on with life and eventually, somewhere, somehow, sooner or later, to die.

To die without leaving a trace, like so many before us.

But if you took a closer look, we wanted two different things. Wanda had suffered much more from the degenerates than I had. She didn't just want to neutralize the Degs' danger. She wanted revenge. Retribution for her own suffering, for the death of her parents, for Thomas' suicide - and for everything else. It was an impenetrable web of guilt and lust for revenge that drove Wanda.

I too felt anger, but my anger was less personal, my need to take action against Da Silva from a more fundamental, logical nature and based on my morals. And in quiet moments, when I was completely honest with myself, I realized that I was just looking for some sense in my existence, and that's one of the reasons why Wanda's Quest became mine.

In this barren, hopeless time, something as destructive as the plan to assassinate someone could give you the necessary strength to carry on, and Wanda and I clung to that like drowning people to a straw. I knew that it was the same for her, even if she perfected her mask face more and more.

But before we could devote ourselves to Da Silva, there would be other things to tend to in the here and now, and we could at best make guesses what the world around us and above all what the Ivan might throw at us.

Foreworld II

Toni

Toni was crying in pain. The man had beaten him again. He had no idea what his real name was, only that his mother knew him from before, from her time in Rome, and that he was not allowed to talk about him - with anyone. When his mother gave him these instructions, her face was so serious that the accompanying blows hadn't been really necessary.

When Toni asked what he should call him, he had only said: Call me Azrael.

Azrael simply had shown up at some point and hadn't left the house a single time ever since. Toni knew Azrael was the name of a demon or something. It had not seemed inappropriate to him to call this man by that name. Azrael had a strange accent. Toni could not assign it directly, but he did not believe the man an Italian. He liked to beat his mother too, but that didn't really bother Toni. Often he would have liked to do so himself.

Carefully, so as not to hurt himself even more with a thoughtless movement, Toni put his clothes back on. He always had to undress when he was to be beaten in the basement. Kind of weird. He didn't think that the man felt the same way Toni did when he watched Luca's sisters bathing in the lake. There had to be another reason for the nudity.

In general, the man was very odd. He read strange books and had strange beliefs, which he vehemently advocated, and did not tolerate being contradicted. He seemed to have nothing but contempt for the Italian way of life, for soccer and for the Church. He always called normal people *sheep*, priests and the church were liars and their web of lies for him. He was always talking about energy that had to be released. Toni was not sure if the man - Azrael - was really that much smarter than everyone else, or if he just was some kind of lunatic. He had been bossy and violent from the beginning.

Toni's mother had her fair share. But unlike him, she didn't seem to mind much. Toni even suspected that she liked it when she was

stripped and beaten. This daily ritual always resulted in sexual acts between her and Azrael.

More and more often the man ordered Toni to watch them. That he should try to see the energy that was supposedly exchanged between the two while Azrael was fucking his mother. Then the same question every single time: Did you see it? Say, Toni, did you see the energy?

Toni knew what answer the man was hoping for, but he hadn't said yes yet. He hadn't seen shit so far. Nada. Nothing but his mother's bare and striated ass and Azrael's coarse hands clawing into her flesh as he pushed her from behind. Often his mother had to be gagged because otherwise she would have screamed too loudly, either with pain or horniness. It was different with Azrael. He seemed highly focused. Mumbled to himself. He looked more like a man who had a particularly complicated and strenuous task to solve. He often used the blood of rats and mice, of which there were more than enough to catch in the cellar, to paint strange symbols on his mother's body before taking her.

When Toni had finished dressing, he heard Azrael calling for him. He guessed it was that time again.

"I'll be right there," Toni called back.

He didn't hurry. Azrael had been so mad because Toni had drawn the attention of the village preacher to himself and his mother - and thus to Azrael himself - that he had beaten him particularly hard. For a moment Toni had even seen something like fear in the coarse, badly shaved and strangely triangular face of the man.

What could he be afraid of? A man like that, tall and strong, who considered himself smarter than anyone else?

"Hurry Toni, it's really important!"

That was his mother's voice. Toni was annoyed that she liked everything Azrael did. She constantly backed up everything the man said and permanently repeated what he preached. Yes, he preached. Just like that damned Bianchi. Only it was different things he said. And when he wasn't preaching, he tried to influence Toni in other ways. According to Azrael's philosophy of life, you had to take what you wanted - no matter how great the risk. Only such a life was worthy of a man-god.

Man-god.

This word had already disturbed Toni when he first heard it in connection with Azrael's philosophy of life. He gave himself the name of a demon and rejected the Church, but described himself with terms which had been conceived by the very Church which he denigrated as a web of lies. In fact, Azrael had to a large extent caused the problems Toni had brought home with him by himself. With his never ending speeches.

You must be a predator.

You mustn't know hesitation.

You have to be smarter than the others and hit harder.

Feel no remorse, for none of your desires you may ever apologize.

Stupid talk, wasn't it?

When he told at dinner how he had stolen Luca's sister's panties and joyfully played with it and his dick, his mother had praised him. Azrael was just asking:

"Why do you take the panties, when you actually want the girl, you little idiot?"

Then he slapped Toni hard.

When Toni told Benno had fouled football, Azrael said:

"He betrayed you. He stole your victory. Go and take away what is precious to him most."

Speaking those words, he had looked as if he had just received a divine vision. It had been similar with Pietro and Fillipe.

Nevertheless, it did not seem unfair to Toni to be beaten bloody for the priest's appearance, even if it had been Azrael who had encouraged Toni to his actions. Toni just wasn't good enough.

Toni had somehow managed to do everything Azrael had asked for, but he obviously wasn't smarter than anyone else. Otherwise the priest wouldn't have noticed anything, right?

Toni climbed up from the cellar into the twilight of the strange smelling candles burning in small brass bowls on the steps of the wooden stairs. Azrael had burned the reports, the essays of Toni's intimate enemies in the oven so that no one could read them anymore. Slowly and timidly Toni opened the door to the kitchen. They were sitting at the table. Azrael pulled Toni's chair back a bit and patted on the seat.

“Come. Sit down.”

Toni hesitantly obeyed. He knew that it was rarely a good thing when adults chose to use this official tone of voice. Hesitantly, Toni sat down and tried to stay out of the reach of Azrael’s big hands. He folded his own hands under the table top. His mother noticed it and said:

“Give me your hands, honey.”

When Toni did not react, but glided his gaze back and forth between the two adults, she took the initiative and came over to him. Her touch was surprisingly soft as she took his wrists and finally enclosed her hands around his. Toni tried not to show his surprise as she squatted down in front of him and, holding his hands, looked deep into his eyes.

“Azrael and I have been talking over this whole thing. You can’t let these guys get away with what they did. They didn’t just refuse you what you wanted. They also humiliated you and then slandered you to this wretched priest. This game, Toni, you gotta win, you hear me? Otherwise it will forever bind your energy and overshadow all your lifetime. Maybe you’re too young to understand ... to understand how important this is...”

She was right. Toni didn’t understand exactly what she wanted him to do. But he slowly but surely understood one thing, without knowing when exactly this realization had befallen him:

Azrael had been right. He didn’t want the panties, he wanted the girl. He was just a coward. He didn’t want to win the soccer game. He had wanted to destroy the opposing team. He had just been too weak. All this and more he had wanted. But instead he had gotten himself defeated and humiliated.

“Toni, if you ever want to be a shining one, a godlike one, a man-god, then you have to strike, do you hear? No leniency. No remorse. Only the will to win. You must claim the absolute right to be yourself,” Azrael also interfered in the mother-son conversation. Toni saw Azrael’s hollow face. The eyes deep in the caves glowed with an eerie fire.

“This time I won’t help you. I’m not giving you any advice. You’re gonna make it on your own, and you’re gonna take them down. Not

just the boys. The priest, too, has earned a hard lesson for his impudence. Do you understand that?"

His voice sounded soft, child-friendly and completely perverted. Toni could more than clearly perceive the threat that lay within those words. He didn't say anything. He just nodded.

"Good. I think you actually do understand. Now go to your room and make your plans."

Toni obeyed, but only slowly and sluggishly. He didn't want Azrael to think he was afraid of him.

"Good night, mother. Good night, Azrael."

"Go."

Toni did as Azrael had ordered him. Lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling of the small chamber he had to live in since the strange man suddenly moved in with them, he saw the faces of Benno, Luca, Pietro and Fillipe in front of him. The beatings they had given him had not physically hurt half as much as what Azrael did to him when he was in a bad mood or wanted him not to forget a certain lesson. Nevertheless, as Toni now recognized, the defeat - the powerlessness - had clearly afflicted him way more. Azrael's blows had not been full of rage and mockery. They were just his tools. And Azrael was right. He shouldn't let those pissers get away with it. They simply were not allowed to feel superior. He had to be smarter than them. He had to make them feel safe. They were not allowed to suspect anything. Tomorrow he would go back to school.

All in all, the following two weeks were quiet. At school Toni behaved inconspicuously and Luca, Benno and Pietro and Fillipe also ignored him as best as they could. Only the priest showed signs of increased vigilance. Constantly his gaze seemed to rest on Toni and when it didn't, Bianchi mainly watched Benno with attentive eyes. The other students hardly seemed to be touched by this whole matter. Some avoided him, others, unaware of why their classmates did so, expressed their sympathy for him being bound to the oxen

and the beating that had followed, which he endured with an impassive expression, but most simply he behaved as usual.

During this time Toni even made two learning appointments with other children. These afternoons were calm, concentrated and friendly. But inside Toni was still boiling with rage. This feeling never did let go of him. And Azrael did the rest. It wasn't like he put Toni under direct pressure, but when they were in the same room, he watched him with his dark and yet somehow glowing eyes at least as intensely as the priest did in class. This, however, was a little rarer than usual, as Azrael retreated to his room more and more often. He would study there, he said. One day as Azrael accidentally had left the door open and Toni used the occasion to take a look. Piles and piles of strange-looking books. They had aroused Toni's curiosity and he wished that at least every now and then the man would leave the house so that he could take a closer look into the room and at the writings that were treasured there.

His wish was not granted.

Azrael stayed where he was and so Toni had no reason to doubt his testimony. More than once Azrael had helped him out in the natural sciences and seemed to know his way around. On these occasions Toni did discover that the strange, malicious and violent man was a surprisingly good teacher. Thereupon Toni had tried to give more weight to his words. The fact that Azrael refused to help him with the boys and the preacher seemed to mean one thing: Toni was to be tested.

All right, Toni thought, let him test me.

Now he held back when playing soccer and usually stayed on the bench voluntarily. In class he was quiet and obedient and as inconspicuous as he could. But in his head the wheels were spinning. In his daydreams he saw himself triumphantly standing above his tormentors with his arms torn up, whilst they lay on the ground and wept.

The more often Toni had this daydream, the more devastated the bodies of his defeated opponents looked and the more dark red blood ran down from his hands over his forearms and dripped down onto the ground.

Yeah, that's what he wanted. What he wanted with all his soul. But - how should he achieve this goal? As much as he liked to dwell within his childish fantasies of omnipotence, he knew that the idea of luring his tormentors to a remote place and defeating them there in something like a great final battle was bollocks. And then there was Father Bianchi. How would he get to him?

Besides, Azrael hadn't specifically requested that he should kill him. He was tossed to teach him a lesson he wouldn't forget for the rest of his life. The longer Toni thought about that, the more certain he became that he would not be satisfied with teaching just a lesson.

It had to be something big. Something glorious.

He had to think of The Valiant Little Tailor. A fairy tale that his mother had read to him from time to time when he was still small. Seven at one blow.

Well, five in this case.

If the little tailor managed to kill seven, then he certainly would somehow manage to do five.

With poison, perhaps?

Or a traffic accident?

No. That was bullshit.

Toni continued to think for two weeks, but none of his ideas seemed suitable to him.

Maybe I could ...

Time passed and Toni felt as if the hours and days had become considerably longer than before. His life had changed in some hard to get way. At some point during the second school week since Father Bianchi's visit nearly had come to an end and the weekend was just around the corner.

Toni left the house early on Saturday. He had still not made a concrete plan for passing his test and earning Azrael's respect. He hoped that he would find a solution to this problem in the course of the day. He wondered if he should walk to the lake in order to clear his ever circling thoughts. Maybe Luca and his sisters would be back at the lake.

A little later, he felt disappointed to find that this was not the case. Discontentedly he looked for a nice place, sat down and let his feet

dangle in the crystal clear water. The walk hadn't been very long, but the cold water did him good and refreshed him. After he had recovered in this way for some time, he became restless. The burning thoughts were back again.

He got up, put on his socks and shoes and made his way back to the village.

When Toni had already walked for ten minutes, he stopped abruptly. The hairs on his arms had straightened up. He turned around. Was someone there? A rustling of leaves. The barely perceivable cracking of a small branch. A blurred movement at the edge of his field of vision, twenty meters away. Someone had scurried from the small gravel path down into the undergrowth in order not to be discovered by him.

Toni went on.

One minute.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

He kind of listened backwards with great exertion. He was sure he was being followed.

Soon the path would make an almost right-angled bend, Toni considered. With his lead of twenty meters, he would then disappear from his pursuer's field of vision for a few moments. He wanted to watch out for this moment, hide himself, like his persecutor just had done, into the undergrowth and lay himself in hiding there. He wanted to know who came after him. Toni found it strange that at that moment he was not flooded with adrenaline like in the heat of the fateful football match.

No, it was more of a cold kind of rage that was spreading inside him. When the time had come, Toni put his plan into action.

Unlike his clumsy pursuer, he managed to avoid making treacherous noises. He hid behind the thick trunk of a tree and waited. He could hear the quiet footsteps of his unknown hunter slowly approaching. While he concentrated on the sounds, part of him again wondered how calm his heart was beating. His eyes fell on a gnarled branch sticking out of a fern. He could get to it just in time.

Should he take it now?

Would the other one hear the sound?

The decision was taken from him when an airplane flew by at low altitude. He took the opportunity. The roar of the engines hid his actions from the ears of his hunter. The soft rustling faded unheard and the gnarled branch lay soothingly heavy in Toni's hands.

However, Toni could no longer hear the footsteps of his pursuer. He waited. It was exactly then when the engine noise slowly faded that he peered around the trunk of the tree, shielding him from the path.

It was Benno. And he had already walked about fifteen meters past Toni's hiding place.

Benno.

That little asshole.

And stupid, too.

He just kept running in order to catch up with his prey, turned his head to the left and then back to the right and hadn't noticed that Toni was now in his back. Toni evaluated his options. He would have to go back on the path if he didn't want Benno to extend his lead and if he didn't want to attract his attention by rustling leaves. He took his steps carefully. The bright white fabric of Benno's T-shirt was like a target for Toni. He started running, too.

The distance between hunter and prey decreased agonizingly slowly.

Five more steps.

Four more.

Three more.

Then two.

Toni swung out overhead. The branch in his hand felt good. Satisfying. Strong. In a moment, he'd let him go down on the back of Benno's skull. In the last step, Toni's foot hit a small stone that was slightly larger than the others that formed the surface of the gravel path. Suddenly startled by the noise, Benno took a leap forward and turned around.

His eyes widened in horror as his eyes first fell on the raised branch in Toni's hand and then on his face. Benno's mouth tried to open, his lips wanted to produce a frightened scream, and then Toni struck.

Benno's evasive movement came too late to completely dodge the strike, yet it saved his life. Instead of hitting him directly on the head from above, the gnarled, heavy branch grazed his cheek and tore it open. A suffocated sound of pain escaped Benno's throat. The sudden pain also caused the paralysis from the shock to fall from the boy. Panicked, he turned around and started running. The momentum of Toni's stroke had thrown him off balance for a moment. By the time Toni got caught himself again, Benno had already gained a few steps ahead and ran. While he held his bloody cheek and branches whipped into his face as he tried to flee into the undergrowth, he already had a small lead.

Now Toni also started moving and began to run with the primal blood-thirst of a beast of prey. Along with the swing of his arms, the bloody end of his weapon kept periodically reappearing in his field of vision for a fraction of a second. For a moment Toni was tempted to stop and lick the wet red from the stick with the tip of his tongue. He resisted the impulse. He had to get Benno. Benno's white T-shirt was like a beacon for Toni. It shimmered and flashed before his eyes through the undergrowth and led him the way. It helped Toni a lot that his first strike had put Benno into a condition of animalistic fear, into panic yet.

In a straight line Benno ran deeper and deeper into the forest. He neither hooked nor tried to make any tactical decision. It was the mere escape of a wounded animal. An animal slower than its fevered, rabid hunter. Toni reduced the distance between Benno and himself further and further. Part of him was surprised Benno wasn't screaming for help. This part found two possible explanations. Either the blow had broken his jaw or Benno just couldn't believe that his life really was in serious danger. Maybe he thought Toni just wanted to beat him up.

He was mistaken.

Only when Toni had formulated these thoughts in his head did he realize that he would kill the other boy today. Up until that time, he had only been driven by the vague but strong desire to hurt him, to hear him scream. This was different now. He wanted Benno's this disgustingly white-glowing T-shirt to be soaked with blood.

Like violent flashes, memories raced through Toni's brain while he ran. Memories of how he killed the foal. How the blade of the axe had slipped through the fur and into the flesh of the young animal. The lovely panic in the big brown eyes. How it had trampled with its skinny legs in the agony. His own excitement and arousal as he watched all this. The feeling of pure power. Then the mare. How the sticks had gotten into her. Like Azrael's cock in his mother.

Toni noticed that he now was aroused, too. For another whole minute Toni's body mechanically performed the movements necessary for the pursuit. Then Benno fell over a root and cried out.

As Toni stood up in front of him, he had both hands around his left ankle and whimpered as he stared into Toni's face with his eyes wide open. Toni felt as if he should say something, as if he should end the matter with a big gesture.

He couldn't think of anything.

He just started hitting.

Again and again and again.

He dyed Benno's shirt red the way he had desired it. Then, at some point in time he suddenly was finished. He felt a little dizzy and sat down in front of the dead body on the soft, fragrant forest floor. He looked at it. Face and head were terribly deformed. *How ugly you suddenly are when you no longer have any teeth in your jaw and one eye is missing*, Toni thought. Then he stretched out long and looked up into the sky past the branches of the trees rising above him. As the clouds passed over him, he listened inside himself.

He felt good. Easy. Satisfied.

And he had an erection.

When he had finished staining the corpse, as he stained Benno's little sister's panties and Azrael did sustain his mother, he pulled his pants up again, got up and knocked dirt and fir needles out of his clothes. His glance touched on his hands. Bloodied. He'd have to wait. Wait until dark. Looking like this, he could not possibly walk home through the village. Judging by the position of the sun, it was about noon. Again he looked at Benno's body. Toni had taken the clothes off and turned it on its stomach. He had plenty of time left to deal with it until night would come.

He was sure no one would disturb him in the middle of the forest.

Again and again Azrael's belt came down on Toni, hitting every inch of skin on his naked torso. As always, Azrael made sure that no traces were to be found on Toni's face, arms or hands. Toni wasn't feeling any pain. He was way too happy with himself, too drunk by what he had done. He also knew that Azrael did not punish him for killing and living his full potential, but for the careless, unplanned way in which he had done it.

The man and his mother had already been waiting for him when he sneaked home after dusk. Toni had literally felt their eyes gliding over his face, his bloodstained clothes and his no less treacherous hands. He didn't have to explain to them what he had done. Azrael had only wanted to know who his victim had been.

"Benno."

That was the only word he had said before he sat down on his chair at the kitchen table and shoveled the already cold dinner into his mouth with an inexplicable greed. The two adults watched him in silence. It was not until Toni had completely consumed a second portion that Azrael began to ask questions. When Toni had answered them all to the man's full satisfaction, Azrael got up. He seemed upset. Then, for the first time since he was here, he had left the house under the cover of darkness.

Four hours later the door to Toni's small chamber was blown open and Azrael had ordered him to the basement where he used to punish him. Azrael had started the beating without saying a word after telling Toni to undress. When the man finally let go of Toni, the boy could see that his face was covered in sweat.

"You may get up now."

Toni rose carefully and slowly from his kneeling, forwardly bent position and looked at Azrael expectantly. Usually Toni was sent to his room after such a beating, but today it was different. The man's gaze glided over Toni's naked, striae-covered body. With a pale red tongue, Azrael ran over his meatless lips.

“Do you know why I punished you? Because you haven’t thought. You didn’t even hide the body of that stupid brat. Not even covered with branches. You left him just like that. And I had to clean up after you. I can’t be seen here. You know that. Why do you think I’m not leaving the house? You put us all in danger. For the second time, if you recall. But I’m still proud of you.”

A strange plea now lay in Azrael’s eyes.

“When you did it, did you feel the energy you released?”

Azrael’s gaze now pierced right through the eyes into Toni’s brain.

“No, you haven’t. I can see it in your face. What a pity! What a waste of potential! So much precious power that you have unleashed and you have simply let it return into the cycle without using it for yourself ... but ... maybe I expect too much from you. You’re too young to understand the dark mysteries. But maybe ...”

Azrael broke off the verbalization of his thoughts. Disappointment had spread to his face.

“Forget about it. I may be too impatient. Come with me.”

The man led Toni into his mother’s bedroom. He must have arranged it with her, Toni thought when he saw her lying on the bed, also naked. It was obvious she was expecting them.

“Sit there.”

Azrael pointed to a shabby wooden chair in a corner of the room. Toni obeyed. Then Azrael started using his mother. It took a long time and he stained her often. And every few minutes he asked Toni if he could finally see the energy. Toni could not, and after Azrael had poured himself for the seventh time into some opening of his mother, who shamelessly enjoyed the event, and Toni had repeatedly denied the eternal question, Azrael finally gave in.

“That’s probably enough for today. You’ll learn, boy. You will learn. By the way, I put the remains in an old silver mine. Shut down long ago. I don’t think the body will be found too quickly. In addition, I had an idea how we could settle this matter with the priest and the three other boys once and for all.”

Then he began to explain it to him.

The next day, Sunday, Azrael would not get out of his study. Toni talked to his mother from time to time about trivialities, even if she didn't really seem to be in the same universe as he was in. In fact, she seemed to be alive for several months now only when Azrael was near her and tried to release energy with her. *Nonsense*, Toni thought. She did the housework with a certain routine, but she wasn't quite there.

What Toni only noticed now was the fact that her drinking excesses became less and less frequent. She didn't even seem to enjoy them anymore. Azrael had changed her. Whether for good or for bad - Toni could not say that. Still everything hurt, but he endured it. He fled in memories of his deed and the resulting erotic fever dreams.

When he came to school the next day, no one noticed him. The whole class and Father Bianchi were in a flurry of excitement. Benno's place would remain empty, Toni rejoiced, and nobody could do anything about it. Not even the priest. His red veined eyes looked tired and worried. He dragged himself more through the class than actively designing it, made inappropriate pauses and mistakes in reading out the texts and calculating the arithmetical problems, and again and again he looked out the window worriedly, just as if he hoped that Benno would simply come walking across the schoolyard and yet take part in the class.

Hardly any of the students followed the caricatures of lessons that the preacher held for them that day. They talked and whispered quietly and anxiously and Toni enjoyed seeing the worry lines in his teacher's face get deeper and deeper as more time passed by without Benno showing up. Of course, word had got around in the small town that the asshole hadn't come back from his trip to the lake on Saturday evening as usual. Already on Sunday, Toni learned from the quiet, whispered conversations from his fellow pupils, some parents and siblings and other adults had gone out to look for Benno.

No one had seen him or even a trace of him.

Yes, priest. Your spy's been blown.

Toni grinned and calmly mirrored Father Bianchi's gaze as he later in the morning stared through the classroom again and again in his direction. He forbids himself to blink at him. That would have been a

little too much. But the preacher had understood that something terrible had happened and that Toni had something to do with it. What he didn't know was that when Azrael had taken Benno's body away, he had found the note that Bianchi had written to Benno. The stupid priest had asked Benno to lie in wait outside Toni's house and follow every step Toni would take and watch out for the strange man.

So basically Bianchi is to blame for Benno's death, Toni grinned again. He'd tell him. But time wasn't right just yet.

Soon it was time for the big break. Opposed to when they were playing ball or roughing up to get rid of excess energy and laughed or argued, a ghostly quiet at befallen the schoolyard. Toni stayed away from everyone and watched the groups of pupils, who had groups around each other, from some distance.

Like small animals during a storm they are.

He was not sure whether this thought had originated from his own mind, or whether he had adopted it from Azrael. When the school bell signaled the end of the break and Toni wanted to go back in, he was grabbed by the shoulder.

Father Bianchi had stepped behind him and held him with an iron grip.

"What have you done with Benno? What do you know? Where's the boy? Talk, Toni, talk to me!"

Although the priest's fingers dug deep and painfully into his shoulder, Toni returned his gaze with an arrogance and serenity not befitting a thirteen-year-old. It just seemed wrong. Toni slowly let his gaze wander away, away from the priest's despaired face and towards his hands. When Father Bianchi realized that he was about to make a scene, if not a serious mistake, he let go of Toni.

"Toni, please! It's not too late. I know about the man at your house. Is he threatening you? I can help you, Toni. You and your mother. But you have to talk to me, you know?"

Toni heard the words coming from the priest's mouth, but their contents had no meaning for him. The village, the school, even the whole world no longer mattered to him. What seemed so important to these strange people around him, what determined their actions, their lives - all that no longer had any value to Toni. All that kept him

busy were the memories of his deed and the pleasure he had felt in it and his efforts to keep those memories fresh as long as possible so that he could enjoy them and feast on them.

And while he stared at the preacher with expressionless, dead eyes, until he broke off his speech unnerved, something else became clear to the boy: he would have to do it again.

He'd want to do it again. Even after he was done with Luca, Pietro, Fillipe and Father Bianchi.

Azrael's plan was pretty good. But today wasn't the time. Should the lambs go continue to worry and wear themselves out in search of Benno. At least they'd leave him alone this way.

How much of a mistake he had made with this assumption became clear at dawn the next day. Angry knocking and the calls of the police tore Toni from his sleep.

"We have a search warrant! Open the door now!"

He threw off the blanket and slipped out of bed to the window to peer out onto the street. Five uniformed policeman had assembled there. One of them held a heavy looking metal battering ram in his hands and the others had drawn their pistols. Behind the uniformed man stood Father Bianchi, the stupid Provost Costa and another man Toni did not know. He was wearing a cheap-looking suit and the tie was waving loosely and sloppily over his coffee stained, cream-white shirt.

Coming from the bedroom Toni could hear his mother's hysterical screams. Shrill and high and distorted. Then the slapping of Azrael's hand on her face as he ended the screaming. Then rumbling, slamming doors and creaking on the stairs. Quick steps. Frightened steps. And yet somehow hesitant. Then his mother's trembling voice, calling out through the closed door.

"Just a moment, please. I'll get the door. Just wait for a moment."

Bianchi and the man in the suit came a few steps closer. Both spoke at the same time when they gave instructions to the policeman holding the heavy battering ram to break down the door.

The man stepped forward and Toni could no longer see him. Then a dull crash.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The bursting of wood. More hysterical screaming from his mother. Then the policemen roared around and the steps of heavy boots rumbled through the house. Toni's thoughts just stopped. They were overflowing his brain's capacity.

Had his mother washed the blood-contaminated clothes he was wearing when he did Benno?

Would he be arrested?

He was only thirteen.

They couldn't arrest him, could they?

The noise of the policemen, the fearful screams of his mother and the wooden sounds when furniture was knocked over prevented him from thinking these thoughts further. He went back into bed and pulled the blanket over his head. If the priest thought that Toni was a victim who needed help, it could only be an advantage to appear exactly that way. Suddenly the rumbling stopped and for a second or two Azrael's angry voice arose.

"You can't catch me, you fucking..."

Three shots were fired almost simultaneously.

After that there was no more rumbling downstairs. The silence now was almost absolute. Scary and final.

At some point the stairs creaked, which led up under the heavy steps of several men and the door was opened. Toni had pulled up the blanket over his nose, so that only his eyes peeped out. It was the man in the suit, the priest and another police officer in uniform, who entered his room and set themselves up in front of him with all pale, concerned faces.

"Francesco Santoro is dead. You have nothing more to worry about, boy!"

It was the man in the suit with the sloppy tie who spoke.

"You've been incredibly lucky. You and your mother. The man was wanted all over Europe for multiple murders. He was a maniac, and

you're lucky you're still alive. Your mother will have some explaining to do, but I think your torment is over now."

Toni didn't say a word while the thoughts in his brain were twirling. But still a part of him was able to follow the policeman's words when he reported what he knew about Azrael.

Francesco Santoro. Contract killer. Angel of death. Entire families executed.

"But now he's dead and the danger to you and your mother is over."

The cop rose from his kneeling position, threw a last glance at Toni and turned around to leave the room. Bianchi, who had been standing quietly in a corner of Toni's small chamber listening with a pale face, raised his voice.

"What about the missing boy? What about Benno? Don't you want to question Toni like we talked about?"

"Yes, of course I will. Tomorrow. First of all, I want to make sure that the body is taken out of the house so that Mrs. Da Silva and her son can move halfway freely again."

The interrogation actually took place the next day. Father Bianchi had had a substitute teacher from the neighboring community come and squeezed Toni and his mother into a rickety VW and drove them to the building of the Homicide Department in Bologna. There they were welcomed by the commissioner and entertained with coffee and biscuits. Toni's mother did the talking. In a broken, weepy voice, she reported how Azrael - Francesco Santoro - knocked on her door one fateful night and everything that had happened afterwards. Well, not everything obviously. Why he had just chosen Mrs. Da Silva, she could also not tell, only that they have had a short affair in former times - much earlier, shortly after their common school time. Azrael probably simply had not known where else to turn to after Rome had become too hot for him.

After the first details of what had happened at the Da Silva's house had been properly documented, the Commissioner, who was dripping with compassion, sent a doctor and a photographer to

examine and document the traces of the mistreatment Toni and his mother had suffered. Toni had to pull himself together so that he didn't giggle when he looked into the affected faces of these idiots while slipping out of his clothes in an adjoining room to show them the marks of the beatings.

The commissioner and the priest then asked additional questions in turn, but most of the time they listened silently to Toni's mother, while a young female journalist with pretty legs, as Toni noticed, typed in everything that was said in the light-flooded room. At some point the interrogation was brought to an end with the somehow bored remark from the commissioner that it had been enough for today, but that there were still more questions to be asked, and the preacher drove Toni and his mother back home.

"And you really don't know what happened to Benno?"

Toni denied just as briefly and unemotionally as he had already done during the interrogation.

"All right. The Commissioner told me that Francesco Santoro's belongings will be picked up in the next few days. I'll come back tomorrow."

So Bianchi turned and walked away. Toni knew he didn't believe him. But it didn't matter. Maybe that even helped his plans. After all Toni knew, there were still groups of parents, pupils and helpful third parties looking for Benno.

For the next two days, Toni did not attend to class but stayed in the house to explore Azrael's study. The books he found there absolutely fascinated him. Feverishly he read one after the other, took notes, wrote down whole chapters that seemed particularly interesting to him.

He was that absorbed in the occult scriptures, so captivated by them, that he did not even notice that his mother did nothing but lie apathetically on her bed. The dark and the mysterious, the strange philosophies and views in the works of which Azrael's library consisted, captured him completely. So much that in the night of the second day of his manic studies he did not even notice how the front door was quietly opened and closed again.

On the morning of the third day, at the time of the big break, there was a knock and he woke up, his head on page one hundred and forty-nine of Lavey's "The Satanic Essays".

When he reluctantly went down the stairs to see who was bothering him, it was the priest who had knocked on his door. Toni noticed that the worry lines in his face had become even deeper when the man told him with a broken voice that his mother had drowned in the lake.

Astonished, Toni noticed that the cautiously spoken words and the Bianchi's caring, worried look caused nothing in him but strong reluctance against this man and everything he stood for.

Disgusting.

Nevertheless, a few days later, after his mother's funeral, Toni agreed to move into the Bianchi's modest house and live with him until he would reach the age of maturity.

To Toni it seemed like the greatest, no, the most fantastic prank ever played by a child of his age: pretending to be the good boy while the priest gave him lessons to make him a faithful sacrificial lamb. The only thing Toni regretted very much was the loss of Azrael's library. They had come a week after his mother's suicide. With some delay, admittedly. They had taken everything. But it was just books, Toni said to himself. He'd get new ones when he was done here. He had to be more careful now that he was under the well-meaning but imprisoning protection of the priest.

Nevertheless, on several occasions, he managed to sneak out of the house and prepare his last prank during those nights when the preacher, who had suddenly aged considerably, had consumed too much wine. It took him two months to secretly make his preparations. Then he decided it was finally time to set the bait.

In the early evening hours, a tragic accident happened in the small mining town of Mircin. An explosion has occurred in a disused tunnel, a silver mine formerly operated by the now insolvent company Monti-Farrina. Three boys from the village and the pastor and village teacher Bianchi are missing. It is assumed that they were

buried in the tunnel that the victims visited during an unauthorized excursion. The salvage work is in full swing. Our reporters will keep you posted.

[THE GOSPEL OF MADNESS is continued in book 2 - "Under Ivan's Knout". Just a click away!](#)

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POSTSCRIPT

You have reached the end of this book. If you enjoyed the read, I would be honored if you would leave a short review and recommend my work otherwise.

In case you found any typos, it would be great if you could send me a short mail to nachwelt2018@gmail.com . Quality is important to me, but things can always slip through.

So, thank you for your time, I hope we'll meet again in the next volume. :-)

Links'n'Stuff

Bloodword.com

(My humble site)

Youtube

(Mostly German content, but there will soon be some fine music available. And music – as we all know - is universal. And sometimes it can do bad and terrible things ...)

Let me introduce: OLD BARON - The Chronicles of the Red Rage!

The Old Baron and her little crew are in trouble. On the run from Grailknight von Juntzt, the Baron was badly damaged. In order to raise the money for the necessary repairs, the team around Sternenreich deserter Günther von Richthofen accepts a job that turns out to be much more difficult than initially thought.

Governor Talla Ozzynski, who manages the free trading station Pri-C5, operates an ore conveyor station on a moon of Rizon 325 without the knowledge of the Sternenreich, to which the contact has broken off for unknown reasons. Her son also works as a warehouse logistician at this station.

In equal parts, out of fear for her child and out of fear that the Sternenreich will gain knowledge of her black-op, she sends the Baron to see what's going on.

The crew around Captain Gunther von Richthofen quickly realizes that it will not be easy to fulfill the mission.

The station is refusing communication, the defenses are still active. Something's wrong on the third moon of Rizon 325.

<>

Captain Günther von Richthofen is a disillusioned deserter. Together with the clone couple Ryder and Hook, as well as pilot and hacker Alyhda, he makes his living on board the stolen and badly beaten Old Baron with mercenary jobs and tries to stay under the radar of the Sternenreich.

However, this proves to be a lot harder than expected and the Reich isn't the only problem the crew of the Old Baron has to deal with.

The "Red Rage", a devilish psi epidemic that turns the worst nightmares of the infected into a cruel reality, begins to spread in a mutated form.

Yeah, right. I am mixing space opera and horror in this project, and on top of that I am releasing this as audio-books. If you like your freakshow, go listen to a German guy narrate in English and follow one of those links below.

[Bandcamp](#)

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Hope you enjoy – this is a challenging experiment for me! :)

In case you absolutely can not stand listening to me, there is also an [ebook](#) containing episode one. Go grab it! :)

Special thanks for this one go out to Robert Graczyk.