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Chapters

A Novel

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1 Atomic Hotel

(Germany, 2030 AD)

I am standing in front of a large, five-story building. A cleaning vehicle chugs along the narrow driveway lined with well-tended bushes. "Hotel El Sol" is written on the sign above the entrance.

I walk through the revolving door. It is indeed a typical hotel reception area. Warm brown and red tones. Wood paneling. Rubber plants. Carpets. Soft music. A small artificial fountain splashes quietly next to a seating area with deep armchairs.

I approach the reception desk cautiously. A young lady in a white blouse and pinned-up hair looks at me kindly.

"What can I do for you?"

I feel dizzy. I have to lean on the counter.

"Excuse me," I say.

"No problem," replies the young lady.

"Is this really a hotel?" I ask.

"I'm not aware of anything to the contrary," says the lady. A smile hides on her face.

"All right," I continue, "do you have a room available?"

"Yes," replies the lady. "There's a single room available. How long do you want to stay?"

"Two weeks?"

"Two weeks. No problem."

She types something into her computer. Then she hands me a form.

"Please fill this out. May I ask for your credit card?"

"My credit card?"

"Yes," she replies. "Unfortunately, you can't check in without a credit card."

I rummage through my backpack. I do indeed still have my wallet with me. With a credit card. Some things you never part with. I hand her the card.

She swipes the card through a machine. She looks at a display.

"Everything's fine."

She gives me back the card.

I fill out the form. Name, date of birth, address. Address. The city is a pile of rubble. But an address is an address. I give the form back to the lady.

The lady hands me a key.

"Room 307, third floor. Breakfast is served from 6 to 11 a.m. Our restaurant is open from noon to 3 p.m. and from 7 to 11 p.m. The hotel bar is open from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Room service is available around the clock. I wish you a pleasant stay, Mr. Müller."

A hotel porter in a red and black livery floats over. I hand him my backpack. He escorts me to the elevator. We go up to the third floor. The porter opens the door to my room and puts down my backpack. He remains standing there.

I still have a few coins in my wallet and hand some of them to the porter. But what if I run out of cash?

The porter floats away. I close the door.

The room is clean and small. A freshly made bed stands in front of a window with a view of the mountains. I thought I would die in these mountains. Now I am in a hotel and can shower with warm water. I am surprised at how clean the water is that drains from the shower. I dry myself off.

There is a bottle of mineral water on the bedside table. I drink it. I lie down on my back on the bed. Sleep is a coffin that closes around me.



He said, again and again, that he was tired of all the physics and the reflections on it. Once and for all. He asked that this be respected.



I wake up. I don't know how much time has passed. There were no discernible dreams. It's dark outside. An unbearable urge to urinate torments me. I drag myself to the toilet and back to bed. I fall asleep again. At times, when consciousness briefly surfaces like a drowning man, it seems to me that I am growing weaker and weaker. A dream finally comes, my muscles begin to ache gently. It gets lighter, it gets darker in my room. I have to go to the toilet again. It's more like staggering, my head starts to throb. I take a bottle of water from the minibar, drink it and swallow two headache tablets. I drag myself to bed and fall asleep again.

I wake up again. The headache is gone. It's light outside. Birds are chirping. They will sing until the end of the world. I feel rested, yet as weak as an old man. I pick up the phone and press a button.

"Service," says a child's voice, "what can I do for you?"

"A cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee to my room, please," I say quietly.

"The breakfast buffet opens in half an hour," says the voice, "if you'd prefer that?"

"I can't make it downstairs," I say. I have to hold back my tears.

"All right," says the voice.

Ten minutes later, there's a knock at the door. I call softly, "Come in, please."

Nothing happens. After a while, there's another knock.

I call as loudly as I can, "Come in, please."

The door is opened from the outside. A boy of about ten, who looks Arab, comes in humming, carrying a tray, and brings it to my bed.

He places the tray on the bedside table and opens the window. "Let the day in," he says with a smile.

I sit up in bed and fish one of the last coins out of my wallet. The boy leaves the room, humming.

I eat the cheese sandwich slowly, like an old man, and drink the coffee. I drag myself to the bathroom. A gaunt vagrant stares back at me in the mirror. I'm surprised they gave me a room.

When I go to the toilet, a beastly smelling green-brown mass of decay and feces appears. I leave. The bathroom ventilation kicks in.

I drag myself back to bed. If this exhaustion doesn't stop, I'll have to go back on the road.



I feel better. I go to the hotel bar. A bartender shakes containers behind the counter. I sit down at the bar.

"What can I get you?" asks the bartender.

"Whiskey on the rocks?" I ask hesitantly.

"Whiskey on the rocks," says the bartender with a mocking look.

He fills a glass with ice cubes and two centimeters of a golden-colored liquid. Is there such a thing as radioactive gold? I take a sip. It feels good. Alcoholism is no longer a social problem.

After a while, a middle-aged man approaches me. Red hair, freckles. His face looks somehow sunken.

"May I join you?" he asks.

I nod. He sits down on one of the bar stools next to me.

"Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Manstein." He extends his hand.

"My name is Müller," I say and take his hand. He has freckles on his fingers too.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he asks. "When did you arrive?"

"Three days ago. But I slept for 48 hours straight."

Manstein orders a martini.

Then he says, "Everyone who makes it here sleeps for days on end. I think I slept for almost three days without interruption. I think it's great that the hotel accepts this. And that room service doesn't kick you out of bed first thing in the morning."

We watch the bartender.

Then I turn my gaze to Manstein: "What is all this? I don't understand. A hotel in the middle of this wasteland. Who runs it? And where do you get all this food and drink?"

"I don't know either," Manstein replies. "I've been here for three weeks and have been trying to find out ever since. But you won't get any information from the staff. They just keep saying, 'Our top priority is the well-being of our guests. Please refrain from further inquiries.' Every Monday and Thursday, two trucks arrive with new supplies. I don't know where they come from. But it doesn't matter. I'm fine here. So I'm not asking any more questions."

"How many people arrive here every week?"

"It varies. Three or four, maybe. At least since I've been here. But some also leave again."

I almost choke on my whiskey.

"They leave again?"

"Yes. Last week, a theater director who had been here for 12 weeks told me he couldn't stand it in this hotel any longer. He said he would rather go back to the grave of his wife and children and die there than stay in this hotel any longer. And then he actually left."

Manstein finishes his martini.

"Well then," he says, "it's late. I'm tired. Good night."

"Good night," I reply.

"By the way," says Manstein, "it's very nice to go for walks in the surrounding area. I always do that for about an hour after breakfast, let's say, a 'mountain talk'. I'm a professor of geology, you see. If you'd like to accompany me sometime, I'd be delighted."

"Geologist," I reply. "Yes, I'd love to come along sometime."

We say goodbye. Manstein leaves the bar. I watch the bartender for a while as he goes about his business behind the counter. Then I go to my room.

Professor Manstein and his assistant Müller. A new pair in literary history.



Muesli, coffee, and toast with English marmalade. Soft music. The breakfast manager staggers between the tables. Is everything okay? Hope you enjoy your breakfast. When he gets to my table, he'll die. It'll spare him the cancer.

Suddenly, a small, slender woman is standing next to my table. She was once beautiful. Now she is a dying ballerina. Her hair is as silver as my cutlery. I have a soft-boiled egg in my mouth.

"Are you Mr. Müller?" she asks.

I nod.

She leafs through a folder.

"Allow me to introduce myself, I am Dr. Weiland, the hotel doctor. We have an appointment today at 2 p.m. Medical examination. Room 415. Please be on time."

I swallow my egg.

"What is the reason for the examination?" I ask.

"Routine," she replies. "We do this for all guests."

"And if I don't come?"

"You'll have to leave tomorrow."

"I'll be on time."

She does a half pirouette and skips away.

The breakfast manager waves to me in a friendly manner.



I am a poor first-person narrator. I hardly ever take advantage of any of the possibilities. I reveal nothing about myself, my thoughts, feelings, or memories. So why was such a narrator chosen? Just to be an observer of one's own self?



I am standing in front of room 415. There is a sign on the door. Examination room. The room is located in the middle of other guest rooms. A guest is just unlocking his room across the hall.

"I've already been through it," he says. "Don't worry."

I knock on the door and wait. The ballerina lets me in. White cabinets with glass doors. A desk. A couch. An ultrasound machine. Stuffed animals sit in a corner of the couch. They don't smile.

"Please take off your shirt and lie down on your back on the couch," says Dr. Weiland.

I take off my shirt and the T-shirt underneath. I lie down on the couch.

She asks me, "How long were you traveling before you checked in here?"

"About two years."

"Where are you from?"

"From the Cologne area."

"I see, interesting. I studied in Bonn," she says.

She listens to me with a stethoscope. She takes my blood. This is followed by an ultrasound examination of my abdomen. The cool transducer moves over my skin. It hurts a little.

After a while, she says, "You have several small tumors in your abdominal wall. Probably lipomas."

"And what does that mean?" I ask.

"They're benign. They grow very slowly and rarely become malignant. No need to worry. You can get dressed again."

She wipes the gel off the transducer.

"Why are you doing these tests?" I ask as I button my shirt. "You can't do anything about malignant cancer anyway."

"No, I can't," she replies.

"So?"

"Anyone with malignant diseases," she replies, "has to leave the hotel. Those are the rules."

"And where are they supposed to go?" I ask.

She hands me a plastic container.

"Please provide another urine sample. I will inform you of the blood and urine test results the day after tomorrow."



Gold (Au) has 63 radioactive isotopes with half-lives ranging from milliseconds to 186.1 days. Its richness is therefore short-lived. It decays into plutonium, iridium, and mercury.



I am sitting in a restaurant having dinner.

A young man suddenly enters and attacks several guests with an axe. He then flees and tries to barricade himself in one of the hotel rooms. The three injured people are taken away from the restaurant, one of them succumbing to his injuries. After a few hours, it is reported that the man was shot by hotel security after attempting to set fire to the hotel room. The cleaning ladies wipe the blood from the floor and tables.

Manstein arrives.

"I heard there was an incident here."

An incident. That day happened many years ago. Since then, the media has referred to it only as the "Marne-Fère" incident.

"You could say that," I reply to Manstein.

He looks at me questioningly. His face is indeed indented.



Breakfast again. Another soft-boiled egg. It's the same as with honey bread. No matter how hard you try, after the third spoonful or bite at the latest, you'll have a mess on the tablecloth or your shirt. This time it's my shirt. I have to remember to button my jacket on the way to my room.

As I'm having my third cup of coffee, a young, petite woman, mouse-like, enters the breakfast room. Fashionable glasses, sailor blouse, black skirt, hair pinned back. She heads purposefully for my table. She is carrying a large folder in her left arm. I put a napkin on my stomach. Women with folders are constantly coming to my breakfast table.

"Good morning, Mr. Müller," she says as she shakes my hand. "We haven't had the pleasure of meeting before. I'm Miss Schmidt and I look after our guests with regard to the entertainment program."

Miss. The miracle after World War II. Because all the young men were dead. It took over thirty years to push this term into linguistic reserve. The word "entertainment program" will probably also have to be deleted soon.

"May I sit at your table?" she asks.

"Yes, please," I reply.

She sits down.

I ask, "Would you like some coffee? I'll get you a fresh cup."

"We're not allowed to accept anything from our guests," she says firmly.

She puts her folder on the table. It almost seems to me as if the tabletop is bending.

"Well," she asks, "what would interest you? A day trip?"

Day trip. A word from memory. We once went on a trip with our school class. I broke my foot because a classmate pushed me down a slope. Or was it the other way around?

"Yes," I reply, "I would be interested in a day trip."

"Well," says Miss Schmidt, leafing through her folder, "we still have the following for this week: hiking in the Ore Mountains tomorrow or a trip to Berlin the day after tomorrow."

It's a shame that smoking is not allowed in the hotel.

"To Berlin?" I ask.

"Yes, Berlin," confirms Miss Schmidt. "Departure at 9 a.m. Arrival around 10:15 a.m. Tour of the government district and the Great Wannsee. Packed lunch provided by the hotel. Return around 10 p.m. Total cost for you is 350 euros. There is still one place available. Would you like to go?"

I nod hesitantly at first, then more decisively: "Yes, why not."

She adds me to a list. Then she hands me a brochure.

"Here are the options for next week. If you want to do something, just check it off and hand it in at the reception desk. If you have any questions, you can also visit me in my office, 217, Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m."

She gets up from the table.

"Then I wish you a pleasant trip the day after tomorrow," says Miss Schmidt. We shake hands.

I button up my jacket and leave the breakfast room.

Berlin is always worth a visit.



There's a knock at the door. I open it. Manstein is standing in front of my door in full gear. Hiking boots, wool socks, leather pants, windbreaker, sun hat, walking stick. A packed backpack. As if he were already carrying rocks around with him. Manstein himself is a backpack, I fear.

With a broad grin, he asks, "Ready for some geology, Mr. Müller?"

I nod and fetch my jacket and backpack. Downstairs in the reception area, we get two packed lunches and bottles of water.

We set off. For the first time in days, one of those thin ash clouds stretching to the horizon hangs high in the sky again.

"Not really bright," I say.

"It'll be fine," Manstein replies.

We hike along a gravel path toward a high plateau and reach a forest clearing. From there, we have a wonderful view of the mountains. The air is fresh and clear, and the ash layer is relatively high up. As long as it doesn't rain.

"How old is what we're standing on?" Manstein asks. "What do you think?"

"100 million years?" I ask back.

"500 is closer," Manstein replies. "That's the beauty of geology. Along with astronomy, it's the only science that doesn't care about us humans at all. We are just a footnote in a small section of a very long book. Even this war is completely irrelevant and will only manifest itself as a layer a few centimeters thick."

And he adds: "With the appropriate index fossils."

"But this war has changed the weather," I counter.

"Yes, it has," says Manstein. "But the weather is not the driving geological force. That is the earth's interior. Weather is cosmetics on the surface. We are also cosmetics, and rather ugly ones at that."

He looks into the distance.

Then he asks, "How often do you think about suicide, Mr. Müller?"

"Hardly ever," I reply.

We look at the ash cloud.

"Come on," says Manstein after a while. "I'll show you my personal excavation site. We have to go over there. However..."

He pauses briefly and then continues: "... however, there are a few unpleasant, let's say 'landmarks' on the way there."

"I see," I say quietly.

A landmark is something that shows you the way. That you're on the right path. But even landmarks disappear at some point.

We walk for half an hour. Then we reach a spot with two half-mummified corpses. Bones covered with dry skin. Landmarks. Even soldiers don't get used to corpses, they say.

"I've said several times at the hotel that they should finally be buried," says Manstein.

"And?" I ask.

"The corpses are no longer within the 1.5-kilometer radius of responsibility."

We continue walking, passing three more corpses. There is also a child among them. They say that even war begins to have doubts when it comes to children. And yet it continues.

After a while, Manstein stops.

"We have to leave the path."

He points toward a small valley through which a stream meanders.

We carefully walk down an embankment and follow the stream for a few hundred meters. Then we come to a rocky slope with a cave entrance.

I stop and ask Manstein, "You want to go in there?"

"Geology," Manstein replies, "always requires a little courage. But don't worry, there are no bears or robbers in there. However, there is something that isn't directly related to geology."

"You've got me curious," I reply.

Manstein rummages around in his backpack and pulls out two helmets with small headlamps, handing me one of them. I put on the helmet.

We enter the cave. Cool, damp air hits us. At first, the cave narrows more and more, but then we reach a kind of underground hall. To our right is a smooth wall with clearly visible wave-like sediment layers. Manstein's voice echoes through the hall and its rock layers as he gives his geological lecture, making it seem as if several clones of him are speaking. Afterwards, we have lunch in the middle of this stone world and eat our packed lunches.

Then Manstein says, "It seems that someone else also greatly appreciated this cave."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

He leads me into a smaller side area of the cave and points to something. I step closer and feel the objects.

"These are obviously lead containers," I conclude.

"That's right," Manstein replies. And he adds: "Go ahead and open one."

The containers are simply sealed with several snap closures. I undo one of the closures and open the container. Inside is a stack of papers sealed in transparent plastic.

"What is this?" I ask.

"No idea," says Manstein. "Apparently, someone wanted to store certain documents in a nuclear-proof location and preserve them for posterity."

"Have you taken a closer look at the papers?"

"There are only numbers and unclear sequences of letters on them. I can't make out their meaning. But maybe you can."

I take a closer look at one of these stacks of paper. Through the plastic, I can clearly see a column of numbers and a few letters to the left of it, along with a lot of dirt.

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"I have no idea what these numbers mean," I say. "The accompanying text is too incomplete."

"Let's go," says Manstein. "It's getting a little too cold for me in this cave."

"What about these boxes and papers?" I ask him.

"Take something with you," Manstein replies. "I think that's what the former owner of these containers would have wanted."

I stand there indecisively. Then I put the stack of papers I just examined into my backpack.

Manstein nods. "The rest isn't going anywhere. And others will probably discover this cave at some point."

"Continuity of tradition," I say.

We leave the cave. We all lived in a pre-war era.



I walk through the foyer on my way to lunch. The lady at the reception desk addresses me.

"Mr. Müller, new guests have arrived. Would you like to take care of Mrs. Vandetzki?"

I think about it. Then I say, "I don't know any Ms. Vandetzki."

"I didn't assume you did, Mr. Müller," replies the lady. "Ms. Elena Vandetzki is sitting at table 12. Feel free to talk to her."

I go into the lunch room. It's still quite early, and there are only a few guests there. A woman in her early thirties is sitting at table 12. She has put her anorak and backpack on one of the chairs. She has deep circles under her eyes, and her face is red and gaunt. But beneath her exhaustion and neglect lies a beauty that is like a painting.

"Ms. Vandetzki?" I ask. "May I sit with you?"

She nods.

"The reception desk," I say, "told me you were here."

There is a pause. A waiter comes and brings Ms. Vandetzki a plate of rice and some fish, as well as a glass of water. She eats a few bites. She smells the way I must have smelled when I arrived here. The waiter takes my order and turns away.

After a while, Ms. Vandetzki says, "I was on the road for six months, four of them alone. I was raped thirteen times. Now I'm pregnant."

There is another pause. Then she says, "I still have to wait until I can go to my room. It's still being cleaned."

"I understand," I say. The rapists no longer kill because no one can hold them accountable.

My small salad arrives. We both poke at our plates. There is little to say about all this.

Then a hotel manager arrives.

"Ms. Vandetzki," he says, "you can go to your room now. Number 315, here's the key."

"Thank you," she says.

She gets up and takes her anorak and backpack.

"Will you come to my room?" she asks. "I don't want to be without protection again."

"Yes," I say, "that's why I'm here."

"Call me Elena, if you like," she adds.

We go to her room. She takes a shower while I wait on her bed. She comes out wrapped in a towel. She lies down next to me. She falls asleep in my arms. And it seems to me that I hear her crying in her sleep. Like a child who killed her mother.



A trip, then. I'm in the lobby at 8:45 a.m. An older couple and a young couple with a child are sitting in the deep armchairs. Next to them are backpacks and jackets. A huge man with sunglasses arrives. Model Vietnam fighter.

"Berlin?"

The others and I raise our hands.

"Very well," says the huge man. "Then please follow me."

The older gentleman seems a little concerned: "Are you sure you have enough gas and equipment?"

"Don't worry," Sunglasses Man says to the older gentleman. "We do this tour once a week. It's always gone well so far. But please go to the restroom again. It's difficult to get to Berlin."

And to all of us: "You can call me Ronny."

There were times when a Ronny couldn't get credit from the banks.

We walk through several hotel corridors until we step out onto a large lawn. There is a gray-black helicopter with tinted windows. We shuffle over to it. Another guy with muscles and tendons is loading gas cans, a camping toilet, and other equipment into the cargo compartment. Ronny assigns us our seats. Me and the older couple in the second row, the others in the third.

Ronny takes the front left seat. The muscleman, whom we are to call Achim, sits next to him. The two of them do a function check.

"I don't know if I really want to do this, Martha," says the older gentleman next to me.

"Pull yourself together, Harald," says his wife.

Ronny closes the windows and starts the rotor. You can hear a "whoosh, whoosh" that gets faster and faster. I'm surprised at how quiet it still is in the helicopter.

We take off. First, we fly over the hilly landscape. There used to be a sea here. We reach the plain. After a while, we come across a highway and follow it. If you want to understand a country, you have to race along its highways. At the time, one party wrote on its posters: "Free travel for free citizens." A popular uprising was in the works when seat belts became mandatory for drivers and passengers.

Achim hands us a telescope: "Anyone who wants to take a look."

Harald's wife looks first.

"Disturbing," she says after a while. She hands the binoculars to her husband.

"No, thank you," he says and passes it on to me.

It is indeed disturbing. The highway we are following is littered with broken-down cars and trucks. In some sections, all the cars have been burned.

I pass the telescope to the back: "Better not let your son look through it."

"We can decide that for ourselves," the young man teases me.

"The younger ones," yells the older gentleman, "always know better."

"No arguing, please," Ronny calls out.

We continue north on the highway. It grows quiet in the helicopter. I don't know if the child looked through the telescope. He whimpers softly.

"He's just sick from flying," the young man says to his wife.

After another 45 minutes, Ronny announces, "We're reaching the outskirts of Berlin."

"Our son needs to use the restroom soon," says the young, foolish father in the back.

"I have a catheter," the older gentleman whispers to me.

"Harald," hisses his wife.

I look down. The city seems intact. No ruins, no piles of rubble. But there is no movement on the streets.

We land with a clatter on a wide street. Ronny turns off the engine. We get out. Achim rummages through two boxes and takes out a submachine gun, a Geiger counter, and a radio.

Ronny straps on the submachine gun and the radio and stows the Geiger counter in his backpack.

Then he shouts in sergeant mode: "Okay, here's the deal. You stay with me at all times, no matter what. The route we're taking is safe. Anyone who leaves our group and gets lost will have to deal with the consequences themselves. No one will be sent to look for them. You've already signed that."

"What about the radiation?" asks the young man.

"It's no higher than where we came from."

His face looks as if he is laughing silently.

"It's been a while since all that happened," says the older gentleman. And he whispers to me, "I wouldn't bring my children here, though."

"Bad parents everywhere," I reply with a smile.

"Okay," Ronny shouts, "let's get going. The hike will take about two hours. Achim is waiting for us here by the helicopter."

He distributes the luggage and provisions. We set off. Strung together like pearls on a necklace.

First, we enter a large park with small lakes and streams. "Zoo" is written on a sign.

"But I don't see any animals here," says the older gentleman.

"Be patient," I reply, pointing toward a complex. You can see fences, bars, enclosures, and halls.

Ronny turns into a tour guide: "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the famous Zoological Garden, one of the first zoos in Germany and also one of the largest. In times when long-distance tourism was still unheard of, Berliners could marvel at animals from Africa and Asia here. And the animals could marvel at people from Europe."

We, too, can still marvel at the animals. As skeletons. In the 17th century, a doctor named Severino made a surprising discovery: everything is structurally the same, in elephants and eagle owls, in humans and giraffes.

At the zoo exit, I take a sandwich out of my lunch box. Ronny pours us coffee. The Memorial Church towers above us. It doesn't know what to remember anymore.

We arrive at the KaDeWe. Shopping without end and without products. Looters have taken almost everything. In the book department, I find a badly soiled book on paleoanthropology. But it's too heavy for me, so I put it back on the shelf. We leave the department store again.

"Watch out, dive," Ronny suddenly shouts, pointing to a staircase leading to a subway station. "We're going down. The lowest point of our tour." Once again, his face shows that silent smile.

"A little creepy, don't you think?" the older gentleman says to me.

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" I reply. "To fight horror with horror, right?"

"Flashlights!" Ronny shouts, "The Berlin public utilities are on strike right now."

We slowly descend the stairs and enter the subway station. The flickering light of our flashlights leads the way. The lobby is empty. We move down another level via a disused escalator. The area there is crammed with metal double and triple beds, mattresses, chairs, and small tables. Everyday objects are scattered all over the floor: dishes, books, clothes. It's as if the whole of Berlin once lived in its subways. Just like London in 1940. But no one is there anymore. A few rats scurry about in the light of the flashlights.

We climb onto a subway track and follow the rails. At one point, there is a pile of old newspapers. I shine my flashlight over the front page. The headlines. When the newspapers were still able to print for a few days. The fall of the Roman Empire took longer.

"If a subway came now..." I say.

"Very funny," Ronny replies.

The tunnel forks.

"I don't remember," says Ronny with a grin.

"Very funny," I remark.

"Company to the left," Ronny yells. If there were any sleeping undead, they would be awake now.

"There's another level below this one," adds Ronny.

"We're not going down there now, are we?" the young man teases.

"No," replies Ronny, "I only do that once a quarter with the really tough ones."

We follow the fork to the left. Then the tunnel narrows. The reason for this is the shelves lined up on both sides with shoes. Shoes in all sizes, colors, and materials. It's as if someone had brought all the shoes and boots in the world here and put them on display. I marvel at how small babies' feet can be. We slowly walk past these shelves in reverence.

"You're welcome to try some on," says Ronny. "I don't think anyone needs them anymore."

No one dares to even touch a shoe. The shelves end after a few hundred meters.

Suddenly, Ronny raises an arm and hisses, "Quiet."

He crouches down. We do the same. The older gentleman whispers, "What's going on?"

Ronny waves his right hand and hisses again, "Quiet. And turn off your flashlights."

We hear voices. They are quite far away. Then a shot rings out, its sound echoing horribly loudly in the subway tunnels. Screams follow. Dogs barking. And all of it is getting closer.

Ronny directs us into a side tunnel with a dim light. We crouch on the floor.

After what seems like endless minutes, all we can hear is our own rapid breathing. The shouting recedes. And soon falls silent. We calm down. Ronny allows two flashlights.

"What was that?" I ask him.

"No idea," he replies, "that's never happened before."

The young stupid father complains: "You said the trip was absolutely safe. After all, we have a child with us."

Ronny says quietly, "Even I can't control the whole world."

We leave the subway system and return to the open air.

Suddenly, the older gentleman calls out, "Martha, Martha?"

We look around. Martha is nowhere to be seen.

The older gentleman wants to run back.

Ronny yells at him, "Stay here."

"We have to find my wife."

Ronny takes off his sunglasses for the first time.

"Listen, I clearly explained the rules to you. If you can't keep track of your wife, then you have to live with the consequences. We're going to the helicopter in 10 minutes, and we're taking off in 20 minutes."

The elderly gentleman bursts into tears. He cries, "We can't leave without Martha."

Ronny puts his sunglasses back on.

The older gentleman comes up to me. "Help me, please help me."

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you," I reply.

The elderly gentleman runs back to the subway station. Ten minutes later, neither he nor Martha have returned.

"Let's go," says Ronny. The boy asks his father, "What about Grandpa and Grandma?"

"They want to stay here," his father replies.

"In the subway?" asks the clever boy.

"I don't know," replies the stupid father, "you live where you live."

We fly back. Without two old people who decided not to retire. And without Achim. He was no longer at the helicopter.

According to Ronny, he often stays overnight in Berlin.

As we say goodbye, Ronny says, "Give me a good rating in the hotel system."



There is no war. We are at peace. Peace wraps its claws around us like the warm wings of a dove.



I return from a walk with Manstein. I go up to the second floor and knock on Elena's door. We have arranged to meet for coffee.

An elderly woman opens the door.

I am taken aback.

"I actually wanted to speak to Mrs. Vandetzki, who, to my knowledge, lives here."

"I live here now," says the elderly woman curtly and closes the door.

I go downstairs to the reception desk. My mouth tastes of grief.

The lady at the reception desk leafs through her documents.

"Mrs. Vandetzki passed away this morning at 9:14 a.m."

It's as if an invisible fist has punched me in the stomach.

All I can stammer is, "Excuse me? I don't understand..."

"Dr. Weiland can surely tell you more," says the lady.

I stagger into the elevator and ride up to the fourth floor. I knock on Dr. Weiland's door.

"Come in," says a voice.

I enter the doctor's office. Dr. Weiland is sitting at her desk, typing something into the computer.

Her head barely rises above the edge of the table.

"I've been expecting you, Mr. Müller," she says. "Please take a seat."

I take a seat opposite her.

"What happened?" I ask. Water collects behind my forehead and eyes, pushing forward more and more.

"Ms. Vandetzki," Dr. Weiland begins, "asked me to abort her fetus. However, I told her ..."– She pauses briefly.– "that I have no experience in this field and don't really have the right equipment."

"But you did it anyway?" I ask.

"Yes," Mrs. Weiland replies, "she begged me, saying she would kill herself otherwise. So I did it. But there were complications. Mrs. Vandetzki bled to death. I couldn't help her anymore."

After a while, I ask, "Where is she now?"

"In the basement," Ms. Weiland replies. "Room 15. I'll give you an access card for Mr. Maier."

"Mr. Maier?"

"The employee in charge," says Ms. Weiland.

I take the elevator again. Anyone who has a problem goes back and forth between floors.

Knock. Come in. Open the door. Take a seat.

Mr. Maier looks at my authorization card.

"Tragic, tragic," he mumbles. "Come with me."

We go through a door behind his desk into a larger room. He hands me a gown and a cap.

We enter a very cold room with several large refrigerated compartments.

"This is a real morgue," I say.

"Even hotels have dead people," he replies. "Most of them are suicides, though."

He pulls out one of the refrigerated compartments.

"I'll leave you alone for a while," says Mr. Maier, "but please don't stay longer than fifteen minutes."

"Where do the dead go?" I ask when I'm done.

"Someone picks them up. Or have you ever seen a hotel with a cemetery?" he asks.



The lady at the reception desk addresses me.

"Mr. Muller...?"

"Yes?"

"Unfortunately, you have to leave the hotel tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"Your credit card was blocked today by your card company."

"That can't be."

"Yes, it is. Look."

She turns her screen toward me and shows me the entry: "Credit card blocked."

"You're right," I say.

"You can stay until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning," says the friendly lady. "Everything, including breakfast, is paid for until then. But please don't take anything else from the minibar tonight."

"I understand," I reply.

I go to my room. The last night in a hotel is the hardest. You no longer belong. You have been betrayed by a close-knit community. I start reading the pocket Bible from the bedside table drawer. I fall asleep.

During the night, I feel water dripping on my head from the room above. Elena sits on the edge of the bed with her head buried in her hands.

I wake up. I pack my few belongings into my backpack.

In the breakfast room, Manstein approaches me. "I heard you're leaving us today?"

"That's right," I reply.

"Probably the credit card," he says. "That's what they usually say."

"Yes, the credit card," I reply.

"I'll probably have to leave in a few days too," says Manstein.

He leaves the room.

I finish my breakfast, relieve myself once more in my room's bathroom, and brush my teeth. Then I go to the reception desk.

Check-out goes smoothly. I step through the revolving door in front of the hotel. A cleaning vehicle chugs along the narrow driveway lined with well-tended bushes.



2 Josu

(30.000 BC)

It was this green Josu loved so much. This fresh, saturated, innocent green the blades of grass, the trees and bushes were showing during the first days of spring. There was no need for any other colors, such as the red or blue of some blossoms. This paramount green was simply enough.

However, it did not last for long. When the sun heated up, the green became dryer, browner. As if a hidden fire continuously were burning inside the leaves. And finally, in the mid-summer, the green shifted into a dirty brown-yellow mix. And everybody knew: The time of drought and then death had come again, as every year.

But Josu's grandfather had once said, "Beyond the desert, toward the great hills, lies a land of eternal green." Josu could hardly believe it. A land of eternal green with plenty of water. When Josu reached the age of five, his grandfather instructed the clan to march north. As the signs were showing that a great dryness would come. So, they marched north, though it was a dangerous and exhausting march. Some of them didn't want to leave their current place. But the grandfather, by then the clan leader, forced them to follow. And was right. Other clans did not march north. Survivors, joining them years after, told horrible stories about starvation, murders just for a few drops of water.

When his father died, Josu became in charge of the clan. And learned that sleep may not come even when you are tired to death. And during such nights, when he could not find sleep, he thought of this wonderful green that once would arise again.



Two years after Josu had become clan leader, his younger brother died. During a hunt, the brother had seriously broken his leg. Part of a bone broke through the flesh and skin. The pain was horrible. They carried the brother back to the camp. Fever came two days later. His son Neito, 8 years old by then, squatted beside his father, trying to cool his burning body by watered clouts. The mother had passed away years ago. After giving birth to a little girl. That followed its mother days later.

When Neito's father finally died, they buried him. Neito's face became a wall of pain and accusations.

Josu put his hand on Neito's shoulder and said, "Let me be your father now. I will do everything to protect you."

Neito said, "No one is my father from now on. No one."

A hazy thought wandered through Josu's mind. The thought that Neito never again would recognize the fresh green of spring.



They moved north. As only the north could provide enough food and water. But nobody really knew if that still was true.

Dara, Josu's wife, had just given birth to a boy. They called him Kujo-in-Teha. It meant: the child heading north. Three months later, Kujo suffered a severe fever. And died. As his two sisters before. Only one son and one daughter, Senu and Iga, were still alive.



One day Neito said to Josu, "Show me the place."

"Which place?" Josu asked.

"Where my father broke his leg. Where it happened."

Josu was surprised, "Why?"

"Because I want to see it."

"It is impossible. We moved north for so many weeks. We even won't find the place anymore. It's impossible."

Full of anger, Neito threw a stone against a tree. And ran away.

Hours later, Neito came back, smeared all over with dirt and mud. And sat down at the fire, staring into the flames without a word.

Again, a thought, sharp like a cat's claw, crossed Josu's mind, "It will not work for long."



Show me your hands, Josu. Who designed them? Nature? God? It doesn't matter.

Your walking – so gracile it is. A choreography of superiority, it seems. Like a bipedal gazelle, you move forward.

Wolpoff wasn't right. Out of Africa II is right.

Wolpoff did not commit suicide.



Rasu, who led the way, suddenly stood still, and raised his right arm.

The others stopped and listened into the wood anxiously.

Josu whispered to Rasu, "What?"

Rasu said, "Voices. Ahead."

Josu gave a sign to kneel down. They waited. They couldn't perceive anything else except the birds and insects of the wood.

But then, they heard a child crying.

Josu's breathing became calmer. He stood up. They moved forward cautiously.

A few moments later they detected a group of about three men, seven woman and several children. Heavily packed, the group seemed on the way to a new location. Then they detected Josu's group. They stopped, and the foreign men reached for their spears.

Josu shouted to them, "Do not worry. We are friends."

The foreigners lowered their spears. One of them came closer. He seemed to be the leader.

He asked, "Who are you?"

Josu had some difficulties understanding him. But it was his language — not the language of the men who raided his clan in his youth and killed his father, before being killed themselves by Josu's relatives.

Josu answered, "We come from the river down there." He pointed in the direction.

The leader nodded. He said, "We come from the mountains. Very cold. "

He smiled.

"My name is Zaron," he added.

"I am Josu."

"Can we stay at your camp for the coming night?" asked Zaron.

"Yes," said Josu.

Together they marched to the camp of Josu's clan. They had food together. The foreign women sang melodies Josu did not know. But they were wonderful.

The next morning the foreigners prepared for departure.

Josu said to Iga, his daughter, and Zanda, his deceased brother's daughter, "You both will go with them."

Iga started to cry. "No, no," she screamed.

Josu thought he better should send Neito with the foreigners. But only women were exchanged. That was the tradition.

Josu said, "You will go with them. Two of their women will stay with us."

The foreigners left the camp. With Iga and Zanda. Who became foreigners, too.



One day they went hunting again. Neito did not come with them. Because he had been running a temperature the night before. And was laying exhausted and pale in his sleeping place in the morning.

So, Josu said, "You stay at the camp this time."

Neito nodded. Josu had a strange feeling in his chest. As if he too would develop a fever.

They hunted for two days. And came back with a large, culled antelope.

Josu saw his wife Dara waiting for them. When she discovered them, she stumbled towards him. Josu ran to her. Her face was pale, and she was shaking all over. As if she were now experiencing the fever Neito had suffered from.

"What happened?" asked Josu. "Did you get a fever?"

"No," she shouted. And added, "Neito ..."

"Neito?" asked Josu. "Has his fever become worse?"

"He ..." whispered Dara.

"What?"

"He tried to rape me," said Dara.

Josu ran into the camp. He found Neito lying on a mat, apparently sleeping.

Josu shook Neito awake.

He shouted, "What have you done? I break all your bones, you bloody bastard."

Neito looked at Josu with feverish eyes, "What do you mean?"

"Dara," said Josu.

"What?"

"You tried to rape her."

"I did not," Neito said. A horrible smell of illness came out of this mouth. He shivered and writhed on the ground.

Josu took a step back. He was baffled. In the condition Neito seemed to be, no one would be able to rape someone.

He went back to Dara.

"What happened exactly?" asked Josu.

She was hardly able to speak. She had to force the words to come out of her mouth.

"He was nude. He staggered to me like a wounded rhino. He clung on me jabbering dirty words. He touched me everywhere. It was horrible. He pushed me to the ground. And ..."

She cried again.

"And what?" asked Josu.

"His penis was stiff," she said.

The cat's claws moved deeper into Josu's brains.



They called a clan council. Josu and the two oldest of the clan headed it.

They argued. How could Neito commit such an attack on Dara with high fever?

One said: Maybe the fever was not always present. Another said: Or the fever had driven Neito insane at that moment.

There was no doubt about the act itself. Nodana, one of the elder women, had seen Neito being nude and trying to throw the screaming Dara to the ground. Nodana had come to help Dara, and Neito immediately had run away after noticing her.

Neito said he couldn't remember anything. Except laying on the ground with fever and pain.

The council decided not to punish Neito. But he was told that he had to leave the clan if something similar happened again. Neito swore he never would do something like this again. And asked Dara for forgiveness.

Poison was in their clan from now on. The poison of mistrust, fear, and madness.



They camped at a creek. It started raining. The next day the rain became worse.

Josu asked Rasu, "Shall we move to a higher place?"

Rasu shook his head, "Not yet."

Not yet. During the next night, a flood came. It washed half of the camp away. Fortunately, nobody drowned or was injured. But it took them three days to find and dry all their belongings.

"Not yet," said Josu to Rasu a few days later.

"Not yet," answered Rasu. And smiled.



Josu was preparing one of his spears. Suddenly he heard a scream. It was the scream of a mother and her baby. The cat's claws tore Josu's mind.

Josu ran into the direction of the scream. Behind a tree he saw Jano, one of the two women they took over from the other group a year ago. Last month, she had given birth to a little boy. But this boy now lay some meters aside from her in the mud screaming in a horrifying manner. Jano was hysterical, and one of her breasts was bleeding. She shouted, "He threw my baby into the mud and hurt my breast."

And pointed to ... Neito. Who stood a few meters away. He held a sharpened stick in his hand. With obviously blood on it.

Josu ran to him. He started beating Josu. He shouted at him. Some other men, who had joined, dragged Josu away. Neito fell into the mud. He was bleeding. Like the breast of Jano. And seemed to smile.

The decision was made the next day. Neito had to leave their clan. It was a death warrant. Josu knew. In the best case, Neito would become an animal among other animals.

In the evening after the attack, Josu had asked Neito, "Why did you do this?"

Neito had not answered. He just had a horrifying grimace. As if he already were an animal.

The next day, two men left the camp with Neito. Three days later they returned. Without Neito. They said to Josu, "He never will find us again."

Josu said to Jano, "You don't have to worry about him anymore."

She looked at Josu. Her baby was at her breast. The wound was healing well.



They prepared for the next hunt. Gohu, whom they also called Strayer, had reported a hippopotamus pod some miles west.

"We may find a young female with its baby alone offside," said Josu.

The other men groaned.

"Too heavy," replied one.

"We need the meat," said Josu. "We use a travois."

The next day they set off. Six men. And one woman, Nodana. She was best with a knife. In cutting an animal into pieces.

After some hours they arrived at their destination, the swamp area around the big river. The hippo pod was residing in one of the larger swamp ponds. The dominant bull had an impressive size. He certainly could stamp to death Josu and the others within a few moments.

They scanned the surroundings. And indeed, some hundred meters away, they found two separate females, each with a newborn, in a side arm of the river.

"They will come out of the water in the evening to eat," said Gohu.

"Good," said Josu. "We then take the younger one and her baby."

They hid behind some bushes far away enough. The heat was horrible. But then the evening approached, and it got cooler. They approached their prey.

Shortly after dusk, the two females came out of the water with their newborns. They started grazing. The newborns always tried to catch the teats of their mothers.

When the two females were about twenty meters apart, Josu and the others struck.

Four of them attacked the smaller female and her newborn with their spears. The others scared away the larger female and her child. The death rattle of the two dying animals was horrifying. The whole animal population of the region would hear it.

They pulled the body of the female on the travois and fixed it. It was as heavy as three adult men. They fixed the cadaver of the newborn on Rasu's back.

"Away," shouted Josu. "Away."

With all their strength, they moved the travois. Meter by Meter. Terribly slow.

"Faster," shouted Josu.

Then, suddenly, the ground started to shake.

"The bull," screamed Rasu, "the bull."

The bull. Never had Josu expected him to appear so fast. He must have been somewhere around when they attacked the female.

Josu looked back. And saw a monster approaching.

"Run, run," shouted Josu. "And drop the travois. Drop it. Only the baby."

They left the travois with the cadaver behind. They ran for their lives. Josu and Gohu dragged Rasu, who had the baby on his back, with them. Josu expected them all to be trampled to death at any moment.

But suddenly the bull stopped. His terrifying sounds became quieter. They were able to flee.

Exhausted to death, they rested for a while at a safe distance.

"Why did he stop?" asked Josu.

"A bull never leaves his territory," answered Gohu.

They returned to the camp. The women greeted them silently. Some with a mocking look. For six strong men and a woman had only been able to hunt and bring back: a baby.



As often as he could Josu watched the birds. Their majestic overcoming of gravitation. Their red and yellow feathering, their shape of elegance. He loved these birds as much as the green of the trees. For him, the birds were messengers of paradise. They flew there; they came back from there. And communicated – with their glugging voices – words from this world beyond pain, illness, and strains. In a language, Josu could not understand in detail. But which he recognized as fundamental. Somewhere, in the north, to which the birds headed every autumn, there was this paradise.

But he had the feeling that the more he and his clan headed north, the more desperate he became himself.



It started during the night. First, it was just a slight paresthesia in one of his left lower cheek teeth. Then, two days later, it became quite a strong pain when he was chewing. After three more days, his left cheek swelled and felt warm. The pain got awful.

"You look quite funny," said his wife Dara.

"I do not feel funny," answered Josu.

The next night he got a fever. He lay on the ground and shivered. Dara sometimes gave him a few drops of water.

He went to their old shaman. The shaman looked into his mouth. He shook his head.

He said, "Very bad. We must get it out. Lie down."

Josu lay down. The shaman called two other men and ordered them to press Josu's shoulders and head down to the ground. The shaman picked some bizarre animal claws from one of his bags. He started pottering around in Josu's mouth. The pain was terrible. He almost fainted.

Suddenly, the pain cleaved through his jaw. The shaman held a bloody white clot in front of Josu's face. It smelled awful.

The shaman then got some herbs out of another bag, grinded them in his hands and crammed them

into the goth gap. He told the men to release Josu.

He said, "I hope the wound heals."

Josu staggered back to his sleeping place. Dara washed his blood-smeared face.

The pain vanished. The fever sank. The wound healed.

A week later, the shaman died.



It was this one sound that did not fit into the early morning panorama of twilight, birds, and soft rain. A sound, as if a large animal moved, then stopped, gasped, and moved on again. Far away yet, but then, suddenly, very close.

It was too late.

Several tall human shapes emerged from the line of trees and bushes surrounding their camp. Josu tried to grab after one of his spears but then felt a blow on the head. A wave of pain flooded through his skull, jaw, and chest, accompanied by horrible nausea. Darkness followed.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself bound to a wooden trunk. Together with Dara, Rasu and Jano. He heard the screaming of other members of his clan. He could not see Senu, his son. Jano shouted continuously, "Where is my baby? My baby?"

Josu saw the baby beside a tree. With a shattered head. He did not tell Jano.

The men who had captured Josu and the others spoke a language he had never heard before. Only a very few words he recognized.

But the foreigners didn't talk much at all. Their language seemed more to consist of beating and kicking their victims.

After a while, they forced Josu and the others to get up and move. Always four of them bound with their arms to a wooden trunk, they stumbled like lame spiders over the muddy and stony ground with their eight legs.

Their destiny was unknown. It definitely wasn't the green of paradise.



The pain in Josu's head, his hands, everywhere, was horrible. The thirst, the sickness, it all mingled into a mush of despair and hopelessness. The last water he had was yesterday when they were forced

to cross a deep creek. On the verge of being drowned.

Now they were encamping in the darkness. A fire warmed two guardians. The other torturers were sleeping in a circle around the fire.

Some hours ago, Josu had only vaguely perceived that Jano had been raped to death and then thrown into the mud like a useless cadaver. He did not expect to survive the coming night. Dara, his children, all the others of his clan transformed into ghosts of the past.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of splintering bones. A spear stuck in the head of one of the guards near the fire. His body tilted into the flames. Before the other guard could react, he had a spear in his back, too.

About half a dozen men appeared. Tall as Josu's torturers, but with more massive bodies. They killed the other men. And seemed to laugh.

One of them was a bit smaller. He looked at every prisoner. Every man, every woman, every child. Then he stood in front of Josu.

It was Neito, his nephew.

3 Wanderers

(early modern period)

Abraham stood in the front yard of his farmhouse, rummaging through a toolbox. Something, or someone, kept damaging the fence, always in the same place. It had happened again that night.

He bent down and examined the damage. It had to be a marten or a ferret. He would certainly have to use his shotgun.

As he stood up again, he saw three men slowly approaching him. The first two men were already almost a head taller than Abraham, but the third was at least two heads taller than him.

Abraham reached for his shotgun and aimed it at the strangers.

The men stopped. The taller of them, apparently the leader, raised his left hand slightly and said in a voice unusually high for his size: "Fear not. We are only looking for some rest and food. Then we will move on."

Abraham looked the men over. He lowered his shotgun: "Forgive the unfriendly welcome. But there's a lot of evil going around these days."

"Like that," asked the leader, "which apparently broke through your fence?"

Abraham said, "I will gladly entertain you. Come with me."

The men entered the front yard. Abraham went into the house and instructed one of his servants to set up a table and chairs outside, and asked his wife Sarah to prepare a meal. Slowly, the morning sun warmed the air and the ground.

They sat down. The servant and Abraham's wife brought the food, water, and wine. The three men ate and drank.

When they had eaten, Abraham asked, "What is your destination?"

"We are on our way to the district capital," replied the leader. The other two men nodded. It was as if there was a secret agreement between them.

"Why there?" Abraham asked. "There is so much sin in that city."

"I know," said the leader.

Abraham drank his wine and remained silent.

After a while, the leader asked Abraham, "Tell me, do you have children?"

"My lord," said Abraham, "I have a son, Ishmael is his name."

The leader replied, "You don't seem happy with your son."

"Yes," said Abraham, "I love him dearly, but he is the son of my maid and not of my wife."

"Why don't you have children with your wife?"

"God has closed her womb, and now we are both too old to have children."

"Be patient and trust, your wife will also bear you a son one day, and you shall name him Isaac."

Abraham stared at him in disbelief.

After a pause, the leader said to one of the other two men, "Let's play some music."

The man took a fiddle out of his backpack and began to play. It was a slow and sad tune, like a funeral song. The notes of this song wove themselves into Abraham's body like a web of warmth and hope, and he felt himself falling asleep.

When he awoke, he was lying next to the fence he had wanted to repair. He must have dozed off during his breakfast break. He heard his wife's voice: "Abraham, come on, lunch is ready."

From now on, these three wanderers are called: Big, Small 1, Small 2.



"Paint me angels," said the king to his court painter Balthasar. "Angels who guard my throne. But beware of mistakes. If you do well, I will reward you generously. If you fail, you will be thrown into the dungeon."

So far, so good. The least of the problems was that – strictly speaking – only God's throne may be guarded by angels. The more serious artistic problem, however, was: What gender are angels?

Balthasar did the obvious thing and asked the bishop. The bishop threw his hands up in the air and said, "Don't I have more serious problems than this? If the Scriptures don't say anything about it, then it's irrelevant."

"That may be so," replied Balthasar, "but a painter must give color to a flower, form to an object. He cannot choose no color, no form. And he must give a figure a gender."

"What does that matter to me?" the bishop sneered.

Balthasar asked the rabbi.

"Cherubim, seraphim, fleshless, or yet of form, wings or not," cried the rabbi, kneading his cheeks, "all a hopeless mess."

He thought for a moment. And said to Balthasar, "Angels must be male."

"Why are you so sure?" asked Balthasar.

"Women," replied the rabbi, "don't make themselves look so ridiculous."



Master Alcohol is a bad friend. And an even worse advisor.

The three men—Tall, Short 1, Short 2—enter a pub, into a fog of noise, smoke, beer fumes, and sweat. Silence falls almost instantly at the sight of these unusual figures, who sit down at a free table in the back. The tall one, sitting against the wall, almost appears to be standing. A girl hurries over to take the three men's order. And later, anxiously brings three mugs of tea. Then slowly, conversations, laughter, and singing begin again.

Master Alcohol gave orders. A man from the village, perhaps 40 years old, moved toward the table where the three were sitting. His face was bright red and his eyes were glassy. He stood in front of the table and spoke loudly, slurring his words at times:

"Who are you, strangers?"

Almost immediately, silence fell in the room, as if everyone sensed that such questions were not wise.

No answer came from the table of three. Second after second passed.

The red-faced man roared: "And what do you want here, strangers?"

And he banged his fist on the table where the three were sitting, causing the tea to spill out of the jugs.

Seconds passed again. The silence in the bar became increasingly agonizing.

The big man said, infinitely slowly: "Go your way in peace."

The silence that followed crept into every corner of the room like viscous slime.

The drunkard shouted, "What kind of monster gave birth to you? No coffin is big enough for a freak like you."

G o

i n

P e a c e.



When even the angels begin to doubt. What about all the children? The divine command as a constitutional fact. William Somerset Maugham, frustrated and weary of the eternal theater, wrote darkly: "A God that can be understood is no God."



Your Excellency, I fear our worst fears have come true. The city is doomed, and with it all who dwell therein and hoped until the end.

How did I come to this conclusion? We were both aware that all these circumstances could not remain without consequences, but we constantly hoped in prayer and in our thoughts that we would be spared. What fools we were.

There are three men on their way to the city. The least of the ominous signs is that one of them is of a height that can no longer be described as earthly. But I heard firsthand what happened when a drunkard tried to attack the three in a tavern. He burned to ashes in seconds, as if struck by lightning. I truly have no sympathy for those who indulge in alcohol. But you know what this means.



Small 1: I suppose a lot of people will be wandering quite far down.

Small 2 (laughing maliciously): With a boys' choir to welcome them.

Small 1: If you have a sense of humor.

Big (looking at both of them warningly): You should speak a little more respectfully.

Small 2: Or else what?

Big: You may be untouchable here. But not where we're going back to.

(Pause)

The eternal mercenary conversation:

Small 1 to Small 2: What are you going to do when we're done here?

Small 2: No idea.

It is this "no idea why, no idea where" that makes a mercenary a mercenary.

Small 1: I'm going to buy a farm somewhere in the south and grow cocoa.

Small 2: Cocoa?

Small 1: Or rubber, coffee, whatever.

Small 2 to Big: What about you? What do you want to do after all this?

Big: I'll figure something out.

(Small 1 laughs)

Small 2: The question is whether there will be an after all. Whether we'll survive. And whether we have any choice at all, except to choose the path to the predetermined destination.

The punished cities. There are so many of them: Carthage. Magdeburg. Leningrad. Dresden. Bakhmut.



The emergency meeting of the venerable Council of Twenty lasted a full six hours, from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m., interrupted only by a short 15-minute break for refreshments and restroom breaks. At the end of the meeting, which at times took on tumultuous proportions and during which one of the older participants, 72-year-old Heinrichus Hohenkliep, had to be permanently carried out of the hall due to a fainting spell requiring medical treatment, the following decision was made, which went down in the city's history as the fateful "Double-Track Decision I + II":

I: The day after next, a group of unarmed city horsemen would be sent to meet the three wanderers in order to persuade them to give up, should they be found. As an incentive, a document would be sent guaranteeing the three – including a one-time cash gift of 1,000 talers per person – the right to reside in the city for an indefinite period and to freely choose their occupation.

II: Since, based on the information available so far about the motivation and capabilities of the three, it had to be considered that the above incentives might not be successful, it was decided – without admitting any kind of guilt – to show goodwill and a willingness to improve, and to substantially enhance the city's humanitarian and charitable image in the estimated 10 days remaining before the arrival of the three travelers. To this end, the following measures were to be implemented as quickly as possible:

- The immediate closure of the city's three brothels and the expulsion without compensation of all prostitutes, madams, and pimps working in these establishments.
- Improvement of the external and internal appearance of the city's two poorhouses by repainting the exterior facade, clearing out and cleaning the interior areas, installing a sufficient number of beds, and renovating the fresh water and food supply.
- The leper colony should be improved in the same way.
- The removal of all beggars and homeless people from the streets by placing them in one of the poorhouses.

The proposal by some participants in the meeting to include in section I a provision to use force to prevent the three wanderers from continuing their journey in the event of non-cooperation was rejected by the majority of the Council after an emotional discussion. This was because it was doubtful whether anything could be achieved by force of arms at all, given the reported previous events; moreover, if a violent action failed, it was to be expected that the measures listed under II, which involved

considerable financial and organizational effort, would then inevitably no longer appease the wanderers.



The campfire dances. And so do the angels. Small 1 plays the fiddle, and Small 2 and Big jump and hop around. Big sings along in a bright alto voice.

The lowest frequency in the universe has a period of 600 million light years.



The Lord God must have loved weeds. Because only they really thrived in this monastery garden. And not the tomatoes, potatoes, or pea plants that Brother Gregor and the other monks grew every year. Perhaps the Lord God also disliked the experiments that Brother Gregor had been conducting on the peas for years. Again and again, he systematically crossed these pea plants, carefully noting the colors of the flowers and seeds for each generation.

Are you on the right track? What are you trying to prove? That even the colors of nature are subject to a mathematical law?

Once again, Brother Gregory reached for one of the tufts of weeds he had uncovered with his rake, shook off the remaining soil, and threw it into a cart that was already almost full. Yes, God must really love weeds.

Suddenly he heard hurried footsteps crunching on the garden path. A voice said, "They're here, Brother Gregor."

Gregor turned around. Brother Michael was standing in front of him.

"Is it really you?" asked Gregory.

"There's no doubt about it," Michael replied. "Even if they don't exactly smell like angels."

They walked through the garden, passed the monastery cemetery, and reached the reception area via the cloister. Three men were standing there, one of them disturbingly tall. Several brothers had positioned themselves at a respectful distance.

How do you address the angels? Or do you wait until they give you instructions?

Gregor knelt before the men and bowed his head.

Their leader said, "It is good. Rise."

Gregor stood up. And kept his eyes downcast.

The leader said, "We don't want to cause any trouble. Please show us to our sleeping quarters. We will leave again at dawn."

Gregor asked, "Would you like food and drink? We would be happy to serve you."

One of the other two men said, "We gladly accept this offer."

The leader raised his right hand and motioned for the other man to be quiet. Then he repeated, "We don't want to cause any trouble. Please show us to our sleeping quarters."

He turned to his companion: "And give this perpetually hungry man a piece of bread and a cup of water at his bedside."

"Would you like to attend evening prayers?" asked Gregor.

"No," said the leader.

Gregor instructed two monks to take the visitors to their sleeping quarters.

Admit it: you would have liked God's emissaries to be a little more sociable.

In the late afternoon, Gregory watered the pea beds. At dinner, Michael asked, "What do you think of our three visitors?"

Gregor replied, "That question is not for us to answer, Brother Michael."

After evening prayers, Gregor lay down to rest in his chamber. A restless sleep tossed his body back and forth. Rows of colors, mathematical formulas, and fragments of his notes stumbled through his dreams.

The rooster crowed. Gregor rose from his bed, washed his face and hands with cold water, and put on his robe.

He set off for morning prayers. Michael came to meet him in the cloister.

"Brother Gregor," he said, "the three have already left. An hour ago."

"I didn't know," replied Gregor, "that it was possible to get up even earlier than we do."

"I am to give you this note from the leader," Michael added.

He handed Gregory a folded piece of paper. Gregory unfolded the note and read it.

"Brother Gregory, you are on the right track with your plant experiments."



These three figures. When did they first enter your life? When you were writhing in pain in your bed because of a bruised nerve? In February, March 2020? Or when, after the Boy Scouts' Pentecost camp in 1977 or 1978, you waited for hours at the entrance to the camp, which had long since been empty, for your father. You were close to tears when he finally arrived in his old VW Passat shortly before sunset. What would have happened if those three figures had approached you before that? Would you have gone with them?



The stars above her seemed like a mystery. Sometimes their light was rigid and cold, sometimes they flickered warmly and restlessly, as if a heart were pulsing in each of them. The sky, the cosmos, spun and collapsed onto the night in which she lay. She fainted again, and the pain in her head merged with the darkness.

After minutes, after hours, she woke up again. The excruciating pain in her abdomen returned. A warm liquid seeped down her legs. She died.

Suddenly, she saw a dancing light between the trees. As if one of the stars had fallen from the sky. The light came closer. This star was looking for her.

A man with a torch bent over her. Another man picked her up and carried her a few meters further to a tree trunk, where he leaned her against it and wrapped a blanket around her violated body. Then he wiped the blood and dirt from her face with a cloth and gave her some water to drink. She died.

Another man approached. He was huge. He knelt down in front of her and looked at her. Like a father looking at his daughter.

He asked, "Child of God, who did this to you?"

She died.



"Stop the angels."

That was what the chairman of the council had instructed him, Anton, the captain of the city guard, with a look of fear and disbelief.

"Stop the angels. At any cost. But peacefully."

Squaring the circle. If they are not angels, then you are doing them an injustice. And if they are angels, then there is no record in the history of salvation that such beings have ever been stopped.

"Stop the angels. At any cost. And save your city."

To make all this easier, Chairman Anton handed him a sealed bag. It contained the documents for permanent right of residence, the gift of money, and freedom of trade. Anton tied the bag under his doublet. He went home. He hugged his wife Heidrun and his son Johannes. He put Johannes to bed.

Accompanied by a sergeant and fifteen other horsemen, he left the city at dawn under the silent gaze of the councilors. The rumors pointed south. The location of the pub incident was known, and there was only one road between that place and their town. Anton calculated that if the fugitives did indeed take that road, they would encounter them the day after next. As a precaution, he sent two scouts ahead to explore possible parallel routes.

They rode at a trot toward their destination. It seemed to Anton that the horses' hooves were spinning the globe beneath them faster and faster. The dust and heat became torture. They had water, but no confidence.

In the evening, a thunderstorm surprised them. A horse shied and threw off its rider. A farmer let them, soaking wet and hungry, spend the night in a barn. How disheveled can one appear before angels? The man who had fallen from his horse died during the night. Anton secretly burned the bag containing the documents. Another man disappeared without a trace at dawn.

Another rider, named Ulf, asked, "If we're already losing someone every six hours, how are we supposed to stop these men?"

Anton replied, "If you want to stop angels, it doesn't matter whether you have one man or a thousand."

Ulf kicked a bucket.

They set off. Around noon, one of the scouts rushed up and reported that the three men had been seen in a village southwest of them and were now traveling on a road parallel to the main road.

They turned their horses around and took the path across the field. A cavalry off course. The lost battle was imminent.



Anna sat in a rocking chair in the living room and nursed her child. She heard noises at the front door.

Anna stood up. She walked toward the hallway with the child at her breast. Suddenly, her husband Stefan was standing in front of her. She looked him over.

"Where have you been all night?" she asked. "And why are you covered in dirt?"

Stefan rubbed his face with his hands.

He said, "The horse shied. I fell into the dirt. I was unconscious for several hours. I didn't come to until dawn."

She stared at him: "And the horse? We only have this one."

He replied, "It didn't run away. I brought it back. It's in the stable."

They went into the living room. Stefan sat down. He drank some water.

Anna put the child in its crib. She stroked Stefan's hair.

She said, "Are you hurt? You have blood on your hand."

Stefan looked at his hand.

He said, "It's just a scratch. Let's eat something. Then I need to lie down for a while."

"You have to go to the bailiff today."

"I can do that tomorrow."

"It will upset him. We can't afford that."

"Let's eat something."

Anna brought bread, some cheese, and milk. They sat down at the table.

Stefan poured milk into a cup. He drank.

He coughed. As if he had choked. He grabbed his throat.

He coughed again. Anna stood up. She patted him on the back.

He raised his right arm. His arm was shaking.

The coughing got worse and worse. Anna started to scream.

Stefan tried to stand up. He fell to the floor. His head and entire upper body began to twitch. Foam came out of his mouth. Anna screamed. The child woke up and cried.

It is not known that a cup of milk created widows and orphans.



The whole thing. The horsemen stopped. Anton dismounted from his horse.

The three stood about twenty meters in front of him. One of them was larger than life.

Anton walked slowly toward them. He stopped about two meters in front of them. He knelt down. He bowed his head. As if a king and his knights were standing before him.

Anton raised his head a little, without looking at the three, and said: "I know full well that no offer from my city, however generous, will dissuade you from your path. But I nevertheless beg you for mercy, for the sake of the children, for the sake of the innocent. Spare my city."

"Rise," said the leader.

Anton stood up and raised his head. The leader said, "Evil always embraces good, and if you want to destroy it, you always destroy a part of the good as well. All this is the will of one whose intentions and commands I do not question. I acknowledge your good intentions, but I beg you to let us go. All this will happen one way or another."

The earth seemed to stand still. Anton nodded. He turned around. He signaled to his men to clear the way.

The riders reluctantly steered their snorting horses to the side. The three men slowly began to walk through the guard of honor.

Suddenly, a shot rang out. Ulf had shot one of the two smaller men with a pistol. The man who had been hit sank to the ground. Half of his skull seemed to be shattered.

Everything froze into a huge group picture. The wanderers. The horsemen. Anton. As if an invisible cold had frozen everything.

Suddenly, a jet of flame shot through Ulf. He became a black corpse sitting on a horse. A corpse that fell to the ground and crumbled to ashes. The horror of the other riders froze into a grotesque grimace. They and their horses also turned to ashes.

After a while, Anton's eyes recovered from the glaring light of the jet of flame. He saw the three wanderers slowly disappear behind a hill.

He was a captain without a horse or a company.



The three sat around the campfire, Small 1 with a bandage around his head.

It is not known from the history of salvation that angels could ever be injured.

Small 1 said, "I can't go on. Leave me behind."

Nor is there any mention of angels ever stepping back.

Big said, "As you wish. You know what that means."

Small 1 nodded.

Eternal wandering. Mortality. And so on and so forth?



Foot by foot, step by step, meter by meter, Anton returned. A wanderer following the wanderers. Toward a city with a wife and child, friends and work, memories and a future. A city that would no longer be if he ever reached it.

After encountering the wanderers, he had spent almost half the night crouching on the ground next to his dead horsemen and horses. A thunderstorm had once again soaked him to the skin. He had fallen asleep curled up in the mud at the side of the road. When he awoke and the returning sun dried him, he was alone. The storm had washed away the ashes of his cavalry.

Filthy, he set off. To warn those for whom any warning had come too late.

People coming towards him avoided him. He was a vagrant, a robber, a homeless person. He washed all the dirt from his uniform, his hair, and his face in a stream. People coming towards him greeted him again. Hunger began to torment him.

A farmer gave him milk and some bread. He prayed at a wayside cross. He moved on. Like so many before him.

He reached the city. Everything seemed unchanged. He looked for his house. There he found Heidrun and his son with another man. Johannes thought he was his father, and Heidrun thought he was her husband. They didn't seem to know Anton. They asked him to leave.

How do you destroy a city? First, you take away its memory.



The next man threw himself at their feet. Abraham?

He whimpered, "Will you spare the city if you find a hundred righteous people there?"

"Yes," said Big, "then the city shall remain."

"And even if you find only ten?"

"Yes, even then."

"And even if you find only one?"

"I promise you," replied Big, "if there is even one righteous person in this city, it shall live."

"Thank you," whimpered the man on the floor, "thank you."

How cruelly mistaken you are.

Not even with a thousand righteous people, my friend, would they spare the city.



The wise call it "wall watching." When you recognize the downfall of others from a distance, from a safe proximity. Their cries, their suffering, their dying. From a wall, as in ancient Troy, or reading the newspaper at breakfast.

There are two kinds of wall watching. The first is not pleasant, but it is more comfortable: you assume that the disaster will not reach you. Because you believe yourself to be safe. Compassion is your emotional response. But it does not rob you of your sleep.

The second type is more critical. You think about what could happen tomorrow, in a week, in a year. Whether the plague, the fire, the horror could reach you. Your children, your loved ones, your possessions. Your emotional response is fear.

Abraham now understood who was constantly damaging his fence. It was Ishmael, his son.



Twenty-year-old Heinrichus Hohenkliep leaned on his walking stick and looked over the railing. Outside, just before the bridge on a small rise in the ground, stood three men, one of them strikingly tall.

Heinrichus descended a long staircase. He walked along a basement corridor. The walls were first made of stone, then metal and glass. Tiny lights sparkled more and more frequently in this metal. A strange humming began to nestle in Heinrichus Hohenkliep's ears.

After a while, he came to another staircase. He climbed the stairs. A heavy steel door blocked his way. He placed his right hand on a sloping surface next to the steel door. A green light came on. The door opened.

Heinrichus Hohenkliep stepped onto a street. A quiet side street. From the main road about 50 meters away, the sounds of busy traffic reached him.

He passed a kiosk. One of the newspapers on display had a headline that read: "100 years since the Marne-Fère incident."



4 Introduction to Table Science

(USA, present time)

Jonathan Miller was never willing to accept that the Roman Empire had declined. How could this happen, he asked himself at breakfast, at lunch, during the night, when he could not sleep. How could a military and organizational power as formidable as the Romans have been defeated by savage Teutons and pre-Muslim sand soldiers from the North and East? So he went deeper into the matter, being sure that something must have been overlooked by generations of historians, classicists, and archaeologists.

Jonathan's interest in ancient times had emerged during his childhood when he had received as a gift from his mother an illustrated book about the Roman army. He showed it to his female Latin teacher, an old bat. All pupils trembled with her.

"Well," said the bat, "that's an interesting book, see here, the battle of Cannae."

"Yes," said Jonathan shivering, "50,000 Romans killed by Hannibal in a single afternoon."

"What if you give us a talk about that battle during one of the next lessons?" asked the bat. She exposed her vampire teeth.

"Ok," said Jonathan, with a mouth dryer than a desert.

From that lesson on, Jonathan was called ›field marshal‹ by his classmates. They had no idea what "50,000 Romans killed in a single afternoon" meant. But they also had no idea about the beauty of the fourth declension.

But the disastrous battle of Cannae, fought in 216 B.C., could not be the reason for the decline of the Roman Empire 600 years later, Jonathan concluded. The Romans finally won the war against the Carthaginian Hannibal. They cut off his supplies, so that he did not have well-equipped troops anymore to fight additional genius battles. The reasons why the Romans lost against the Teutons and Sasanians 600 years later had to be hidden somewhere deeper in history, and Jonathan, now being an adult, was determined to figure it out.



In the evening, after our little son Jonathan has gone to bed, we usually place ourselves in the sitting room to let the day pass. My wife Elena is a biologist, so there always is some scientific stuff to discuss, if not topics concerning our son or the decrepit house we live in.

"I read some very weird stuff in a newsletter today," I said to Elena.

"What was it?" Elena asked.

"At Lorenz University," I continued, "they offer a quite strange professorship."

Elena looked up from the book she was reading.

"Lorenz University? I never heard of it."

"Nor did I," was my reply. "Guess on which topic the professorship is."

"I hate guessing," she said.

My dear wife. Every morning, I have to guess whether sex could be an aspect of the coming evening or night. Depending on her emotional and biological state. Most times, I guess wrong.

I said, "It is on table science. Data, information organized in tables."

"Table science?" Elena asked. "That must be fake."

"The website doesn't look fake."

"How do you know?" asked Elena.

"I am a computer scientist," I argued. "I can evaluate websites."

Elena put down her book. "I am going to bed. I am very tired. Good night."

She gave me a little kiss.

"Good night, darling," I said.

A little kiss isn't sex.



The next day I called the office at Lorenz University. After having inspected the web site again. Some images of the university really looked strange. And fascinating. I have never seen something like that before.

"Good morning," said a lascivious female voice, "what can I do for you?"

"Good morning," I replied, "here is Doctor Taylor from University of Ohio. I have a few questions concerning job offer No. 276."

"Just a moment, Sir," the lascivious voice said.

Classical music came into the line.

Then a male voice said, "Good afternoon, Dr. Taylor. Here is Professor Stevens. I am the dean of the Department of Structural Science. I would be happy to answer your questions."

"Have a nice day," I said. I rang off. My name wasn't Dr. Taylor. And a lascivious female voice a road too narrow to lead to sex.



In his years as a young adult, Jonathan was always wondering why the Romans had not invented the toothbrush. They had clean water and wastewater systems, so why not the toothbrush? It would have been so simple. Was this lack of the toothbrush one of the reasons for the decline of their empire? But their enemies did not have toothbrushes either. So, it could not be one of the reasons.

"Why don't you investigate why the Confederate States of America failed in the battle of Gettysburg?" asked one of Jonathan's friends.

"That's too obvious, and not worth a research effort. Lee attacked the central position of the Yankees, after an ineffective artillery bombardment, and approaching over hundreds of yards without cover. Failure was inevitable."

One day, an unknown man stood at Jonathan's door and said, "Let us use a time machine and figure out what really happened to the Romans."

Jonathan's mother called the police.



I came back from work. Elena was in the kitchen preparing supper. I heard Jonathan singing in his room. He was always doing this when playing. He told me he often re-enacts the battle of Cannae. I have heard of that battle. It was more disastrous for the Romans than Gettysburg for the Confederates. But the Romans won the war. The confederates did not. I had a data table making this clear.

"There is a letter for you," said Elena. "Looks important."

I thought they would send it by email. So it goes.

I opened the letter.

Elena stopped preparing supper. She looked at me.

"They invite me for an application talk," I said.

Elena started to cut a carrot into pieces. "The table science stuff, I assume."

"Yes," I said.

"You will not cancel your current job for this weird table science position, won't you? It would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?"

"Right," I said.

"Jonathan and I will not come with you, in case of," Elena insisted.

"I can't live without the two of you," I said.

The road to change always starts with lies.



Jonathan did not become a historian or something like that. He became a pharmacologist and worked for a large company, trying to develop new drug formulations so that people could live longer on average than in ancient times.

The first drug experiment he performed at the age of thirteen was applying an antidepressant agent he had stolen from his mother's drug box to their dog. The effects were tremendous. The dog lurched through the kitchen, vomited, and slumped down in the sitting room. The local veterinarian rushed in for an emergency treatment. The dog was rescued, and Jonathan's pocket money cancelled for six months. His father was able to prevent a criminal charge of animal cruelty.

The day after the dog's rescue Jonathan wrote in his diary, "Santa Claus does not really exist. Did the Romans know?"



Only a few are called to create tables. A table is a cathedral of numbers, text fragments, and data. It gathers information, organizes it, elevates it. In the right hands, it can even be wielded as a weapon. If you are in a meeting, a court hearing, a good table will let your enemies become quiet. Reverential. Submissive.

However, there are myriads of bunglers trying to produce tables, too. I met so many. Student bunglers, scientist bunglers, professor bunglers.

Already when I was a child, I made tables. Tables collecting all my friends, their skills and disadvantages, their contact data and school marks.

Some native people felt uncomfortable or got aggressive when white people took photos of them. Because they thought that, by capturing their image, they could be controlled. That they, for example, could be harmed by stabbing their photo.

I learned early on that putting people into tables and data sheets is much worse.



It was a long awkward drive to Lorenz University. I first followed an interstate for two hours, then a local road for one hour. I crossed a river. I drove up a hill. I entered a romantic valley populated by zombie peasants. Then I arrived at Lorenz, a town of about 5.000 people. I could not imagine that students would make their way to this small town. I could not imagine that I myself could live and work there.

I drove through the town. After I had passed it, I saw a large sign pointing to a country road, "Lorenz University, 30 miles". But the setting became bleaker the nearer I came. They fucked me up, I thought.

After 20 minutes, I saw several buildings in the distance. I slowed down. As if I were approaching a hostile castle or secret military facility. I stopped and got out of the car. I saw a large sign in front of an old mesh fence. "Lorenz University," I read on the sign.

I looked around. It was an old, rotten factory site. They really fucked me up, I thought.

I went back and entered my car. I started the engine. I turned the car. I drove about 50 meters. I stopped again. Why should it not be a university?

I walked back to the factory fence. The gate wasn't closed. I entered the site and reached a large building. It seemed to have been the main administration building of a factory in the 1930s. Again, there was a sign, "Lorenz University, central reception."

The entrance hall was full of dust, dirt, and past. Parts of the wall were broken. Stones were lying around. Again, there was a sign with an arc leading to the left, "Central registration and reception".

I walked along a dusty old floor. I reached its end. There was a door with a plate. "Mrs. Jason, central reception and registration."

I knocked at the door twice. I waited. Nothing happened.

I knocked again. Three times.

I heard a weak voice. "Yes please ...?"

I opened the door and entered the room.

I saw a mature lady sitting behind a modest desk. Apart from this, the room was empty. Except the dust that seemed to be the only stable resource of the whole building.

"Good afternoon," I said. "I am Dr. Miller. I have an appointment with Prof. Stevens."

She looked at me, then into some papers on her desk and said – lasciviously – "Yes".

"We were talking some weeks ago," I added.

She again said, "Yes."

I said, "There is a significant mismatch between your web site presentation and the real Lorenz university."

I did not add, "And between your erotic voice and your turtle face."

"At a first glance, perhaps," she answered.

"At a first glance?" I asked.

She grabbed a small device out from a paper box behind her desktop. It looked like glasses. "Take these glasses," she said, "and you will see the real Lorenz university."

She stood up and approached me. She fixed the glasses on my head.

"From the moment on you leave this room again, you are connected with the main VR server. You must not take or switch off these glasses unless you are here again. Now leave the room and take the next floor right, to the office of Prof. Stevens."

I turned around and left the room. What I then saw was stunning.

I tried to take a glance back into the office. But the door was already closed.



I contact an agent for scientific books. In my view, all agents must be morphine addicts. I can't imagine how they otherwise could endure all these unrequested phone calls and submissions.

"What kind of book?" the agent asks.

"Table science," I say.

"Furniture?"

I can see the agents face through the phone.

"No, statistics. Data science."

"So, why don't you call it statistics?"

"It is a specialized textbook on table science," I insist.

The agent seems to think about something.

Then he says, "So, do you know the excellent three volumes textbook of Miller and Lewinsky: Introduction to toilet paper. It was never written, never submitted, never published, never reviewed. Should be the same with your book."

I terminate the call. It always ends that way. Nobody wanted Maxwells – the famous electro-magnetician's – first privately printed book. It was sold only forty times.



"Elena," I asked, "what's the matter?"

She stood in front of me. A sexual body of hate.

"If you," she said, "start working at Lorentz University, I will divorce from you."

"Why?"

"I will not move somewhere else anymore," she said. "Since we married, we moved nearly every year from one university or research institute to the next one. Now, at your current job, they offer you a tenured position. I was so happy for Jonathan. Constant friends, constant school. And I simply do not understand why you want to replace your track for computer science with this dubious field of table science."

"Americans always moved," I said. "They moved from the East coast through the great plains to the West coast."

"But then they settled down somewhere."

There was a pause.

"Are you going to Lorenz University?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Now, then you will be a lonely long-distance runner."

"I know."



Up to now, I cannot look at a map of Russia and Ukraine. During the Russian civil war, my grandfather flew from Ukraine as a child with his parents. The Ukrainians had killed many Russians during World War I with the help of the Germans, and then the Russian communists had starved the Ukrainians to death during the Russian civil war. I remember only one meeting with my grandfather when I was about thirteen.

"All my classmates died," he said. "There was absolutely nothing to eat during winter 1932/33. Nothing."

"And how did you survive?" I asked. "Cannibalism?"

His eyes became as large as beer coasters.

He said, "I wouldn't call it cannibalism. Rather food bridging. And then we were able to walk on a ship at the Black Sea and left for America. Many were not."

What kind of table would that be?

Starvation Ukraine (Holodomor)	
Year	#Victims

1932	1.500.000
1933	2.000.000
Sum	3.500.000

You cannot translate such tables into imagination. Stalin, the wise ironic man said, "One dead person is a tragedy, but 1 million dead is statistics." It was him being responsible for the Ukraine starvation.

Stalin loved statistics. He said, "5 percent of the Russian population is continuously working on my assassination or demission."

Thus, the secret services of Stalin had to arrest, send to penal camps, or execute five percent of the population. That was Stalin's logic. He could sleep better then.



I moved to Lorenz University, into my new office.

"We use to sleep at the university. In our offices," said the dean.

"Why?" I asked.

"To always be in the front line of research."

"But" I said, "every brain needs some rest."

"Shall we order a mobile bed for you?"

"Yes," I said. The office was big enough. I could compart the room into a working research section and a private section hidden behind a mobile wall. There was a shower and a kitchen in the hallway. Physically.

The dean said, "Please make first visits to the other professors and departments. We are a great family."

I thought: how will the babies of this family look like?



I first went to the department of obituary research.

The man there said, "We are working on an obituary for Leopold Euler."

I was stunned, "The famous mathematician? He died more than 200 years ago, didn't he?"

He showed me a bunch of paper sheets.

"Read," he said.

I flipped through the papers.

"Is this the obituary?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "a draft."

"But" I said, "this is more than 50 pages."

"He was an important person, don't you think?"



Mr. Dean had an elaborate lunch appointment timetable to see all his professors at least once a month in the canteen. The management of this table, he whispered to me once, would be more complicated than that of the Easter calendar.

"You are the table expert," he added smiling. "Can you maintain this table for me during the next two years?"

"You can't be serious," I answered. "I work on data tables, not on food tables."

A shadow appeared on his face. "I don't think this distinction makes sense."

"This distinction," I replied, "is one of the pillars of table science."

Ten days later, I received from him an invitation for such a control lunch.

"What about the students?" I asked him then. "When will they arrive?"

"We do not have students so far and will not have some during the next two terms."

"Sorry?" I asked.

"We are still in a test phase."

"But there are lectures already scheduled for all professors for the coming term."

"Is there a rule or law saying that for a lecture there must be a student audience?"

"Yes, the rule of common sense."

"Maybe," he replied after a while, "we can use virtual students from the next term on."



A colleague from my department sends me a message.

"I have cancer," he writes.

"I am sorry to hear that," I answer.

"Perhaps," he suggests, "the department could then be renamed as ›The Albert Manchester Department of Structural Science‹.

"Why?"

"That's my name".

"I know it's your name."

I thought for a while. Then I said, "Ok, maybe we could name a window in the building after you."

"That would be fine," he says.

"What is the time frame?"

"The physician says probably six months. Pancreas carcinoma."

"Oh," I say. I knew someone who lived only for three months after such a diagnosis. And the last month wasn't really life. It was more a morphine state.

I send a warning note to the Faculty of Obituary Science.



Winter term. I start my lecture "Introduction to Table Science" with a so-called "Surprise Table".

It has the following form:

Surprise Table		
No.	Question	Answer
1	How many Jews were killed within 36 hours by the German SS and SD at Babi Jar at the 29th and 30th September 1941?	33,771
2	What is the weight of 1 cm ³ of a neutron star in kg?	4 * 10 ¹¹
3	How many neutrinos pass one cm ² of your skin every second when you are walking through the sunshine?	60 * 10 ⁹
4	How many soldiers did the US army execute during second World War because of desertion?	1

I then ask the virtual students to order the question / answer pairs with respect to the surprise level, i.e. A = most surprising, D = least surprising. The ordering is always:

A – 4

B – 2

C – 3

D – 1

After having discussed some further aspects of the table, I continue as follows:

Dear students,

this course, as you may have read in the schedule of lectures, is entirely about tables. It is structured as follows:

- Introducing example (today, just shown)
- General definition of a table
- History of tables
- Classification of tables
- Transformation of tables

After that, I request the students, on a voluntary basis, to present own tables from their personal context, to discuss them in the seminar.

The most disturbing table from one of the students was the following (by courtesy of virtual Karl Everton):

Approximation of Hell		
1	Amount of nonsteroidal pain killers I have taken so far (3 kg is the red line w.r.t. renal failure)	2,8 kg
2	Amount of beer my father has drunk since I started recording	8.400 liter
4	Times my father sexually abused my younger sister since recording	84



Next morning, I got an anonymous phone call somewhere from California.

"Do you remember Marne 1914?" a voice asked.

"The battle of the Marne in World War I?"

"Yes. But did you know they registered about 20 Sievert in this area when the battle was over?"

"Who registered 20 Sievert?"

"A time travel team send to this area in September 1914."

I blocked the conversation.

"So what?" asked my dean a few days later. "You want to time travel to a French river in 1914 because of a mysterious message? Why? This will be quite a bunch of travel costs."

"Intuition," I said.

"Intuition about what?" asked dean boss. "Can't you get there virtually?"



My mother was on the phone.

"You should come as quickly as possible. Your father," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"He doesn't stop whistling anymore," she answered. "And is smearing toothpaste into his face the whole day."

He died three days later. I did not attend the funeral.



From New York, I took a plane to Paris. I then rented a car and drove to Fère-Champenoise at the river Marne. It was a beautiful village with about 2.000 inhabitants. It was the 6th of September 2015. There had been no time machine to use.

I visited the vicar of the local church. My French wasn't that good.

I asked him, "What happened here, during the Battle of the Marne in 1914?"

"Not very much," he answered. "According to my grandpa, who was seven then, the Germans shelled the village by mistake and killed two cats."

I asked, "How did your grandpa die?"

"He got cancer," said the vicar, "when he was thirteen."

The vicar laughed like an ape.

"That does not make much sense," I replied.

The table of the victims of all wars and genocides. That would be it. Monstrous and simple together.



We do not know which human beings first used a data table. One of the first known tables is from Mesopotamia. It is a clay tablet from about 1800 BC and shows four columns and fifteen rows with numbers in the cuneiform script of the period.

The table respectively lists two of three numbers constituting so-called Pythagorean triples, i.e., integers a , b and c satisfying $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.



I visit the Department of Experimental Law.

"What is your research about?" I ask the head.

"We are searching for new forms of punishment to reduce crime."

"For example?"

"Generation custody."

"Meaning?"

"So, imagine the case somebody is sentenced to 120 years in prison. And that he has three children. Thus, if he dies after 40 years in prison, there are 80 years left. Thus, one of the children can go to prison for 80 years or two of them for forty years or three of them for ... um ... "

"26,67 years," I assist. "If you round it up."

"Thanks," he says.

And adds, "And so on, until there are some members of some generation that finally complete the years."

"So, what if there are no relatives at all or not enough, to serve the sentence?" I ask.

"Um ...," he says, "I have to think about that still. I'll tell you soon."

I'm starting to have doubts about whether Lorenz University always hires the right people — me included.



Do you know of any family members who suffered from the Spanish flu during 1918-1920? About

25 to 40 million people died from that horrible disease. My grandmother got infected in 1918, when she was seventeen. One evening the doctor said to her parents that she probably would not survive the coming night. She did survive. That's me.

I introduced the following table to my virtual class:

Spanish Flu Victims	
Country	Number of deaths
USA	500,000
Germany	426,000
GB	228,000
France	200,000
India	17 million
Japan	390,000

One of the students asked, "How do you know?"

"Of course," I replied, "these are estimations, not secured numbers. There were no standardized medical statistics at that time."

"I do not mean the number of victims."

"So what?"

"How do you know that the Spanish flu really ever existed?"

"This is scientific consensus."

"It wasn't flu. It was the first experiment of the US military on a biological weapon. To finally destroy Europe. The experiment went out of control."

I do hate virtual students.



Dean says to me, "I want to show you something."

We enter an elevator.

Dean presses the Down key.

After going down for some time, I say, "I did not know that we can move down that far."

"What you see in awful movies is all reality," dean replies.

Surprise is what you always expect.

And: Can you go down a table such deep?

By the way: I never found the road to deeper sex.



I have a dream. The dream of a table consisting of an infinite number of rows and columns. To represent everything in the world. Everything. Every atom of the universe and its position, status, at every point in time.

"But" says dean, "the number of atoms in the university is finite."

"How can you be sure?" I ask.

"I counted them," he answers.



Then, during a summer night, when Jonathan could not sleep and was laying sweating on his bed, he suddenly understood why the Romans failed eventually. How could he, how could historical science have overlooked this? The answer was so clear, so eminent, so obvious.

The Romans, all their administration, their military, their lawyers, they all together failed, because they never used tables.

Jonathan's Latin teacher died hard.

I booked my next holiday in the Ore Mountains in Germany.



5 Emperor

(German Empire, 1890-1914 AD)

Oh, my emperor. How much I love you. The morning wind refreshes our faces. We ride out into the Tiergarten, through the clear air, long before the city slowly and painfully awakens with its machines, its hustle and bustle, its greed. There is only you and me. And the horses, their strength, their innocence. The young flesh of the aides-de-camp accompanying us.

Return to the palace. Breakfast. The immediate reports. When the hyenas whisper. They deceive you. Day after day. Year after year. You speak wisely, decree what is right, but they do the opposite, the foolish, the wrong, the evil. But slowly, my youthful, my beautiful emperor, you understand their dark nature and will put an end to their shadowy activities. Rule, shape the power in your own hands. Become one. Get rid of their whisperings. Get rid of them themselves.

The second breakfast. You and your wing adjutants smoke a cigar afterwards and tell each other jokes. I am jealous. How could I not be? You are my one and only. My emperor. But an emperor also has a people. He must share his love. Lunch comforts me. I sit to your left. Your wife to your right. I am not jealous of her. It is a different kind of love. It is not love. Only I truly love you.

Afterwards, a short, refreshing nap. You in your chambers, I in my little room in the other wing of the building. How I would love to be with you. To watch over your sleep, to lovingly observe your face in complete relaxation. The sleeping sovereign reveals the gentleness of power, the beauty of the ruler.

Then politics. Consultations. From 5 p.m. until dinner, you retire once more. You come to mature decisions. The empire must grow. Be strong where necessary. Gracious whenever possible.

Then at 8 o'clock in the evening, the "big feast." The aides-de-camp together with the empress's ladies and the court marshal on duty at your imperial table. You lead the conversation, your wisdom and wit refresh and delight me.

One more cognac in the library. Occasional cigars. Night descends on the castle. Will you give me that one sign, just before you retire to your bedchamber?

My time with you is coming to an end. I must return to my wife and family. The hate whisperers are becoming more skilled, more brazen, more dangerous now.



The man took off his frock coat. He paced up and down the room. After a while, a secretary arrived.
"Dr. Hauser, the district president is waiting for you now."

The secretary opened a double door.

Hauser entered a large room. It was almost a hall. The hall of the Prussian district president of Hanover. How must kings and emperors reside? Bent over a desk, with his back to Hauser, stood another man, rustling through some papers.

Hauser stopped and said, "Count Bismarck..."

The man turned around, walked toward Hauser, and shook his hand. It was the same face, the same posture.

"Just call me Bill," said the man. "We don't always have to be so formal."

Hauser asked, "How is your father, Bill? We miss him so much in politics."

"Old age," said Bill, "can be very ugly at times. But sit down. Cognac?"

"I'd love some," replied Hauser.

Bill took a bottle and two glasses from a wall cabinet and poured them a drink. They sat down in a seating area by the fireplace.

"Well, Hauser," Bill asked, "what brings you to me?"

Hauser took a sip of the golden brown liquid in his glass. He put the glass down.

Then he said, "Miss Love has been in touch again."

Bill raised his head, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. He folded his hands as if in prayer.

Then he looked at Hauser and asked, "So she obviously has more letters?"

"It looks that way," said Hauser.

He reached into his jacket and handed Bill an envelope.

Bill opened the envelope and unfolded a sheet of paper. He put on his reading glasses.

After a moment, he said, "This is undoubtedly his handwriting."

"I'm afraid so," said Hauser.

"What does she want?" asked Bill.

"10,000 Reichsmarks for four letters. The last ones she has."

"She said the same thing five years ago," replied Bill.

"I know," said Hauser. He finished his cognac. As if he had to leave soon.

Then he asked, "What do we do now?"

Bill closed his eyes again. And opened them again after a while.

"Arrange a meeting with her. As soon as possible. Same hotel, same room as five years ago. I am relying on your discretion, of course."

"Of course," said Hauser.

The two men said goodbye. Hauser left the room. Bill wandered around the room for a while, his hands clasped behind his back.

Then he pressed a bell.

After a few seconds, the secretary entered.

"The district president sent for me..."

"Yes, Schmidt," said Bill, "I'm taking the night train to Hamburg. Get everything ready. And..."

He paused.

"Yes, District President?" asked the secretary.

Bill pointed to the seating area.

"You can finish my cognac if you like."



It is August 8, 1898, and I am beginning my experiment. The experiment will consist of the following test constellations:

Type	Result	Condition in the following solution			
	after n weeks	Tap water	Sodium bi-carbonate solution pH 10.5	Glucose solution 5%	Acetic acid 60%
Blank pages	4				
	24				
	52				
Daily newspaper	4				
	24				
	52				
Book pages	4				
	24				
	52				
handwritten in pencil	4				
	24				
	52				
typed	4				
	24				
	52				

How long will the paper survive, i.e., more importantly, how long will the writing remain legible, thus preserving it for posterity? If paper survives the coming fire, moisture will be its greatest enemy.

If it survives all that, it is stronger than humans. The radiation discovered by Antoine obviously cannot harm it.



The night train rattles through the darkness toward Hamburg. Prussian S 1 puffing away at the front. Bill in the dining car. Only for upholstered class and above. The first three courses: beef consommé. Leg of venison with salad and compote. Dessert. So what? You hardly get to eat during the day at the police headquarters.

The waiter, suddenly standing at the table: "Would the district president like cheese now?"

"Yes, please, Anton."

Mostly Anton. Bill travels the route three or four times a month. That's how often he needs advice. From the Iron One. Rusty absolution. A meager sign of love. Anton once lost his wife and child.

Now serving cheese, butter, and bread. With a mocha. Just as Bill likes it. The lights of a city outside swaying past the windows. Like souls on their way to heaven. Then darkness again. Lüneburg Heath. Scattered moor fires.

Another guest with a Panama hat sits down at the table opposite.

The guest orders. A bread plate with cold cuts. A dry wine. And greets Bill: "Mr. District President..."

Bill greets him back. You can't know everyone who waves at you in the world.

Anton brings the wine and, after a while, the bread plate. The man does not take off his hat to eat. Prussian secret police?

The train rattles on. Everything becomes unreal: the lights rushing by outside like glistening bullets, the shadowy figures in the train, the vibration of the carriages that goes through your whole body. During the maiden voyages of the first trains in Germany, some predicted: a means of transportation faster than a horse ride is certainly deadly.

The man with the hat finished eating and ordered an espresso. Then he smiled at Bill: "May I sit with you, Mr. District President? For the duration of a quick coffee?"

Bill raised his hand and invited him to his table.

The man came over with his espresso. He finally took off his hat.

"Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Hans Blum."

"Do we know each other?" Bill asked.

Blum drank his espresso and explained: "I've been traveling this route day in and day out for months, hoping to meet you on the train one day."

"Why?" Bill asks. "And why don't you just make an appointment at the police headquarters?"

"I have to," Blum replied, "keep moving. I can't sit in a house or a building for long periods of time."

Bill took a deep breath. And asked, "So what do you want from me?"

"I'm writing," Blum replied, "a biography of your father."

Bill, sounding a little bored: "That would probably be the tenth or eleventh I know of."

"Much honor, much biography," Blum responded.

"And how far along are you?" Bill asked.

"Actually, I'm finished," Blum replied. And stirred his leftover espresso. Like someone reading coffee grounds.

After a while, Blum said, "One thing is strange, though."

"And that would be?"

"The assassination of your father in May 1866."

Bill took another deep breath. And then explained: "Dear sir, since that terrible day in May 1866, we have heard and read this nonsense over and over again: Isn't it strange that my father was hit by five revolver bullets at close range without suffering even a serious injury? And how could it be that the assassin Cohen was able to fatally injure himself with a knife while in police custody just one day later? Conspiracy. Lies. Fraud. Staging. Elimination of the assassin as a witness. Blah, blah, blah."

"I don't mean the revolver and the suicide," Blum replied.

"What then, if I may ask?" said Bill.

"I want to show you something."

Blum mysteriously took an envelope out of his jacket and opened it.

"Take a look at this photo."

Blum handed Bill a photograph.

Bill looked at the photograph for a moment. And concluded: "That can't be. Impossible."

"Yes," said Blum, "this is undoubtedly a photograph of the assassination. Taken from one of the adjacent houses, at the exact moment Cohen shot your father for the first time. You know what that means."

Bill is at a loss, shaking his head in despair.

"Given the lengthy preparation required for photography at that time," Blum explains, "the photographer must have known what was going to happen. It can't be a random photo. And this photo has never appeared in a newspaper or anywhere else."

"Where did you get this photo?" Bill asks.

"I got it years ago..."

Suddenly there was a horrible screech, the wail of brakes. The train apparently came to a halt with an emergency brake application, and Bill, pushed from his seat by an invisible fist, hit his head on an edge. Unconsciousness, darkness, questions. Eternity.

"Mr. District Administrator. Mr. District Administrator," Bill heard a voice as if from far away.

Bill opened his eyes and saw a blurry face above him. He recognized the voice. It was Anton.

"What happened, Anton?" Bill asks.

"The train had to make an emergency stop in front of a railroad crossing. Because of a broken-down carriage. But it was too late. Four people in the carriage were killed, including a child. Our journey will be delayed. How are you? You were unconscious for a moment."

Bill sits up again, feeling nauseous and with pain in his head.

"Please bring me some tea," Bill said to Anton.

Bill looked around. The waiters were clearing away the dishes that had fallen from the tables.

Blum had disappeared, along with his photograph.



The train jolted across the Elbe bridge. Steel on steel. Again, the screeching of brakes. Only gentler this time.

Hamburg, Hanover Station. A station like this never sleeps. The murmur of ships. Waiting on the platform is Hans, the old man's most loyal, most silent servant.

Car ride through the city. Car ride through the countryside.

Car ride through the forest. Owls, little owls singing their death song. Friedrichruh. All the windows are dark. The old man is already asleep. That's good.

At breakfast the next day, Bill spoke to him: "We could take revenge for all the humiliation we suffered at his hands."

The old man shook his head.

"The empire must not be weakened. It may currently have an infantile idiot as emperor, but the empire is greater than this emperor. Under no circumstances, therefore, must these letters be made public."

"So what should I do? Pay Miss Love off?" asked Bill.

The old man continued poking around in the stove with his hook.

Bill would never tell him about this photograph.



The carriage took him to one of the rear entrances. He turned up the collar of his coat and pulled his hat down low over his face. As if he were an agent. He entered the hotel.

He climbed a staircase and walked down a hallway. He loved these carpeted hallways. They swallowed every sound.

He knocked on number 532. He heard a voice. He entered.

Everything was just as it used to be. A sofa and two armchairs with burgundy upholstery. A baroque table. The entrance to the bedroom.

A woman of about thirty was sitting on the sofa. She was wearing a white, long-sleeved shirt and a brown skirt. She was smoking a cigarette with a black cigarette holder. Her hair was pinned back. And her face had the beauty of an ancient goddess.

"Hello, Bill," said the woman.

"Emilia," said Bill, "I greet you too."

"Sit down," Emilia invited him.

Bill sat down in one of the two armchairs. He looked at Emilia. They were two chess players waiting for the opening move.

"Would you like something to drink, Bill?" Emilia asked. "The red wine I had brought is excellent."

She poured him a glass. He took a sip.

"A very good wine, Emilia," he confirmed. And after a while he said, "You're obviously still as business-minded as ever."

"I have to be," she replied, "a woman of love has to be."

And she asked, "Do you have the money with you?"

Bill reached into his jacket pocket and placed an envelope on the table.

"Thank you," said Emilia. She stood up, took a folder from one of the cabinets, and handed it to Bill.

He leafed through the folder. He closed the folder.

Emilia sat down again and drank her wine.

"It's hard to believe that the writer of these letters is now the German emperor," she said.

"No, it's hard to believe," replied Bill. "And I fear that he conducts politics in the same way as he conducts his love affairs."

She lit another cigarette.

And said, "I have something else."

Bill folded his hands.

"Something else?" he asked. "From the emperor?"

"No," replied Emilia, "from a French officer."

"And what would that be?"

"Probably a blueprint."

"A blueprint? Of what? You must be joking."

"If you think I'm joking, then we should end this conversation."

"I understand that an officer who has been physically intimate with you might become a little talkative. But how on earth did you come by a blueprint?"

She stood up.

"If you're interested, send someone to Metz next Sunday. At four in the afternoon at Café Reiser. I'll be wearing a red hat with a yellow ribbon. He should address me as Madame De la Cronier. I'm asking 20,000 Reichsmarks for the plan."

Bill also got up. He put the folder under his jacket and left the apartment.



Well, my dear, there's a cannon now, aimed straight ahead, and to its left and right two bulging ammunition boxes. I'm just waiting for you to give the order to fire. Can you come tomorrow around 5 p.m.? My wife is out on a cake maneuver. A carriage will pick you up. Cheers, Prince Willilutsch.



The visitor had announced his arrival for 11 a.m. Fifteen minutes earlier, Planck entered his study.

He stopped in the middle of the room. And, as so often before, he had the feeling that the walls, which were covered with bookshelves, were moving a little closer to him every day. As if one day they wanted to crush him with all their knowledge.

He placed two chairs at his desk. He sat down behind the desk. He looked at a sheet of paper with formulas on it. What could two officers from the German General Staff want from him?

He heard the heavy doorbell ring. He looked at the clock. It was eleven o'clock sharp. The German General Staff always attacked on time. Europe hated Germany for it.

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Planck heard footsteps. Someone knocked on the door.

"Yes, please?" Planck called out.

The door opened slowly. As if it were being moved by heavy ropes, like the portcullis of a castle.

The face of a young girl peered in.

"Professor, the gentlemen are here."

Planck stood up and went to the door.

"Come in," he said, "I'll be right with you."

Two officers entered the room. A major carrying a huge briefcase and a colonel. They shook hands.

"Professor," said the colonel, "thank you for receiving us."

"Please take a seat."

The two officers sat down. The major placed the heavy briefcase on his lap.

"Would you gentlemen like some coffee?" asked Planck.

The major seemed to nod his head.

"No, thank you," said the colonel. The major raised his head.

The young girl was still standing in the doorway.

"It's all right, Antonia," said Planck.

The door closed heavily behind her.

Planck sat down behind his desk.

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

"First of all," began the colonel, "I must point out that everything we discuss in this room is subject to the strictest confidentiality."

"The fatherland can rely on me," said Planck.

"We would like to show you something," the colonel continued. "May we have some space on your desk?"

Planck moved some books, notes, and magazines aside.

The major opened the huge briefcase, took out a large sheet of paper, and unfolded it on the desk. Then he handed the colonel a small pointer.

"We believe," said the colonel, "that this is the blueprint for a bomb. An aerial bomb that is larger in size than anything we have seen before. This part you see here is obviously a time fuse. But the explosive charge it detonates here is far too weak to achieve an effective primary military effect. Apparently, the explosive charge only drives a hollow cylinder about 18 cm long and 15 cm in diameter onto a bolt of about the same length, which fits exactly into the hollow space of the cylinder. We don't know what purpose this is supposed to serve."

"What material are the cylinder and bolt made of?" asked Planck.

"We don't know exactly. Based on the specified total weight, this material is more than twice as heavy as steel."

"So," Planck summarized, "in your opinion, the explosive charge causes this bolt to be driven into the cylinder."

"Yes," said the colonel. The major nodded.

"Does the bomb have any other unusual components?" asked Planck.

"No," said the colonel. The major shook his head slightly.

"If the weight of the bolt and cylinder is more than twice that of steel, only an actinoid can be considered," Planck stated.

"Would you please explain that to us," asked the colonel.

"Actinides are the heaviest of the known elements," Planck explained. "Significantly heavier than iron, lead, and so on."



Klaproth, Martin Heinrich; Wolff, Friedrich: *Chemical Dictionary*, Volume 5: Se - Z. In der Vossischen Buchhandlung, Berlin 1810: "The concentrated hydrochloric acid caused a barely perceptible attack on the uranium, and the slightly yellowish solution, which caused a similarly colored precipitate to fall through ammonium. The metal appeared to be unchanged in color and volume. Nitric acid, on the other hand, completely dissolved the uranium except for a trace of carbon, producing saltpeter and heat."



My emperor, what have you done? The news reached me today. Why, why did you not bring me this bad news yourself?

You are rejecting me. Me, the only one who ever truly loved you.

Why do you listen to these whisperers, schemers, sycophants? Do you not recognize their true intention? To control you, to impose their will on you perfidiously and deceitfully? Yes, they are clever. They delude you into thinking that it was your decisions that led you, the court, and the empire to ruin.

You are sending me into exile. I am no longer allowed to send you any letters or notes. And I will never again experience your tenderness. A never-ending shadow descends upon my soul.



Political murder. Secret service murder. Ideological murder. Nothing personal. You're just in the way. The way is the goal. It's not about morality, class, intelligence. It's about the goal.

Miss Love left the building. The houses, the front yards, they were a shore. The edges of a stone river. A maelstrom of concrete, vehicles, people. Who was the deceiver, the blocker, the perpetrator?

A child held out its open hands to her. Hungry eyes. Another child bumped into her. A third held her arm.

She felt a twinge. The children were gone.

And dark, a cut flower, she sank into the river.



At first, it seemed to be just a warm wind.

Victory, holy victory. It was so close. Captain Salben and his men felt this victory in their heads, their blood, their breath. This victory could no longer be taken from them.

For three days, they had been firing relentlessly at the enemy with their guard field artillery unit. The ammunition column could barely keep up with the supplies for their four field guns. Every few hours, a messenger galloped up from the unit headquarters and delivered the same kind of order over and over again: cease fire, reposition, new position four or five kilometers west, continue firing. The enemy retreated. Towards the Marne. The Marne was their river of destiny. The river of victory. The river of enemy corpses. The French had been defeated.

Once again, they reloaded. Harnessed the horses. Moved westward. Dead Frenchmen lay in the fields, torn apart by the shells from their guns. War is cruel. But it burns away the rotten, the wounded, the corrupt. And purifies souls through an incomparable victory.

A cavalry unit thundered past them. The cavalymen were the spearhead of victory. But Captain Salben and his men were the hammer of victory. The hammer that smashed its victims to blood and mud.

At Fère-Champenoise, they showed off again. The men brought the guns into position. Captain Salben gave the new targets. The gunners adjusted the barrels. The loaders pushed in the shells. The first salvo was fired.

Then the sergeant called out, "Captain, look!" He pointed upward. To the sky.

Captain Salben looked up. He saw an airship. A large airship. It was not a reconnaissance ship. But it was flying toward them from the French side. As if it had no fear. A German biplane was already approaching it and firing at it.

Suddenly, the airship lost something. It looked like a gondola. But it wasn't a gondola. Because the gondola was still attached to the airship. And what the airship had lost was hanging from a parachute.

Captain Salben saw the parachute sinking. A kind of barrel was hanging from it. Suddenly, while still in the air, there was an explosion. A huge flash of light blinded the battery. The men cried out and covered their eyes. The pain in their eyes was unprecedented.

Then Captain Salben felt this warm wind. Warmer than any wind he could remember. Within seconds, this warm wind turned into a hot storm. The storm knocked the men over like an invisible fist. The guns spun around in the air like wooden toys. It grew dark. Dark. Dark.



My paper dissolution experiment is complete. Only the blank pages survived.



Captain Salben dragged himself onward. He reached the regiment's command post. Corpses and horses lay everywhere. Only the stone hut was still standing.

Inside, his colonel sat at a map table. As if nothing had happened.

The colonel said, "Don't mourn. The dead are not children."

"But entire villages have been wiped out. Families, children, everything. The enemy is destroying its own people to stop us."

"We would do the same," said the colonel, "wouldn't we? What is a people worth that has been contaminated by the enemy?"

"You are out of your mind, Colonel," Salben shouted.

The colonel looked at him with a blank stare.

Captain Salben left the command post. He had to vomit. Horsemen rushed past, their faces charred. Victory was burned.



My Emperor. What has happened? The newspapers, the journals, they are all reporting it. Did you see it coming? In your wisdom, your goodness, your strength? I don't understand.

