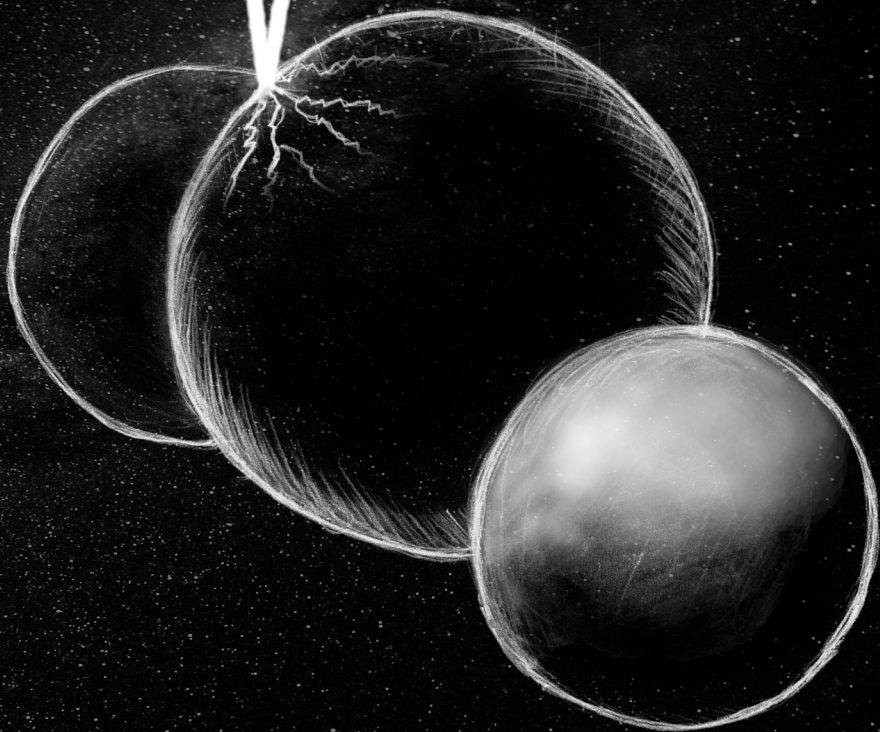


DIVISION



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Chain Reactions

Mischa Bischoff

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Chapter I

»Dear Sarah,

It is not easy to find the right words...«

Late in the evening I discovered a letter in my unused and dusty mailbox next to the front door. A letter in itself was a rarity. Moreover it was written on valuable heavy paper and sent in a classic sealed envelope – by my father. In the past we used to talk on the phone for hours when he was not at home, but we have had no contact in recent years.

I carefully held the letter closer to the candle that I lit to read in the evening. Its light could barely pierce the thick paper. The writing was unadorned, with few flourishes, but the flickering of the candle made it look almost alive. Wax dripped onto the table and the flame blazed glistening white. Do candles shine brighter when burned down? Reading by candlelight always had an old-fashioned charm. Electricity was rationed in some parts of the city during the night, so it made sense to use up the old candles.

»After your mother's death, I lacked the courage and the strength.

What I am writing to you is not meant to be an apology or an excuse. I know that I was not there for you. I also realize that you are no longer a child and live your own life...«

As I read the pathetic words, I sighed angrily. Father was a typical scientist who could forget the world around him when he had sunken his teeth into something or someone. His colleagues at the university jokingly called him »Mad Max«. He became even stranger after mother fell ill. My »own life« had its ups and downs for years, but compared to others, I was still doing fine. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was five past twelve.

»You will wonder why I am writing to you. I was searching for something of importance. Something that would give sense to my being. I hope you understand which path I have to take. Maybe you are the only person who can understand me at all.

The future lies in your hands.

Your father Maximilian

PS: In the next few days you will receive another letter.«

I stared at the cryptic message in bewilderment and confusion. Bravely suppressed family scenes played like wildly cut film snippets inside my head. Fading memories, deeply rooted though. As tears gathered in my eyes, the candle flickered and went out. I sat in the dark for a short time, but then I let myself fall onto the bed.

The sun was shining brightly into my face as I opened the eyes. I had forgotten to lower the blinds and, like so often lately, slept in my clothes. As a child I was happy about sunshine in the early morning. Now I could not help thinking of the inevitable consequences another sunny day would have. Sleepily I got up and went to the bathroom.

There was no space for more than a dry toilet and an economy shower in my small bathroom. The simple white tiles on the walls made it somewhat sterile and cold. I looked at myself in the mirror. From an age of thirty, you did not feel young anymore, but also still not old. Because of my snub nose and curly hair, which mostly stuck out in all directions, I was often estimated younger.

I had been living alone here in this rather cramped apartment for several years now. Those who did not have much money were fortunate if they could find anything in

the city at all. My father had used his connections, otherwise I would not have had a chance as well.

In former times my parents and I lived in my grandparents' house. It was rural and secluded, with its own garden and an adjacent wooded area. I was able to stroll through the shady woods all day without ever getting bored. Did the forest still exist?

A loud bang interrupted my thoughts and my heart started beating faster. I went to the living room window. Scattered bright clouds of smoke passed the walls of the buildings, sirens echoed through the streets. I could not see what had happened. But I had a guess.

Many environmental activists realized that non-violent civil disobedience did not suffice. This led to conflicts again and again. Different groups pursued their own agendas, which made the effects of individual actions irrelevant. At some point it was too late to slow down the global ecological catastrophe and win a majority for the necessary countermeasures.

People did not react to the supposed danger. I had a good overview of the intersections and streets in the surroundings from the seventh floor. These were always overcrowded in the morning and the passersby pushed past each other. Some simply followed those moving in

the same direction. Others tried heedlessly to get ahead. Even before the comma of gasoline prices on the petrol stations' advertisements shifted, most of the city's residents had become pedestrians. There was no more space for bicycles, motorcycles or cars. The number of city dwellers grew day by day and therefore rural areas were depopulated.

When viewed from a certain distance, human behavior was quite predictable, the primeval patterns had never changed. When they lacked something, people became inventive or aggressive. Empathy seemed rare. My mother in contrast was very sensitive to all interpersonal matters. She actually always knew how I felt, could read my father like an open book. I was appalled that I only vaguely remembered her face.

In the living room I hastily pulled a couple of shoe boxes from the shelf. Finally I found some old photos of my grandparents, my father and my mother among notes and keepsakes. She was a pretty woman when she still was well. I looked at the snapshots of better days. The connected memories catapulted me into the past and I lost track of time.

Thereupon I had to make haste to avoid being late for work. In a hurry I left the apartment.

My usual way to work led me down the well-filled streets, but there were significantly fewer people on the move than before. Large white sails that were supposed to provide protection from the sun hung over the street gorge. I could easily walk to the office from my apartment. It only took a few minutes to get to the entrance of the modern office complex.

The entrance area and the offices were almost completely kept in white. White walls, white furniture, white marble floor in which you could see your reflection. Did they try to whitewash something? Although I had been working here for a few years, I did not really know in which fields the corporation was active.

With a friendly nod, I walked past the colleagues at the reception towards the elevator. Usually it took some time before it came down from another floor, but the mirrored elevator cabin opened immediately. I was very late, so I impatiently pressed the button for the seventh floor a couple of times. The elevator set off rapidly and stopped softly again a short time later. Once at the top, I entered the open-plan office.

A few plants in the corridors and between the tables were supposed to make the room look friendlier. In pas-

sing, you could not tell whether they were real or artificial. At my cubicle I turned on the monitor and sat on the swivel chair in front of my unordered desk. The company logo appeared on the screen: Pegasus, the winged white horse, jumped towards me theatrically. I opened my electronic mailbox with little motivation. In the top line, an email was displayed as unread – from Christian. I did not know anyone named Christian, did I? Lost in thought, I clicked the letter icon and opened the email. A picture of a white horse and rider appeared. »Adversus« was written underneath in old English letters.

Probably a joke of a colleague who got bored during work or one of those spam emails again.

The rider wore a black crown on his head. His dead dark eyes captivated me involuntarily. The screen flashed, flickering several times. Suddenly the email was gone.

Computers had always given me the creeps, somehow. I looked around discreetly. Maybe the others also reacted astonished or laughed and I would not be the only one who was having problems again.

However, only a few colleagues sat lethargically at their workplaces.

Sometimes I wondered why I ended up here. During my schooldays I was one of the »truants« who demonst-

rated against climate change. But my grades were good, at least in philosophy and art. Did I give up trying to change something? Everyday office life had become comfortable. I had little stress, but a regular income. There were also other amenities that benefited me here. For example, a water toilet. Which I had to visit urgently, although I had not drunk much in the morning.

Relieved, I returned to my cubicle a few minutes later. The PC had shut down. Had there been fluctuations in the power supply, as so often? I considered turning the computer back on, but maybe some updates needed to be installed. My patience with such things was limited.

Although I had not been in the office for long, I thought about leaving again. According to my chaotic time sheet, I could afford another afternoon off, since I had accumulated enough overtime. Lately I had been using various excuses to avoid work. My absence did not really seem to be noticed anyway. Carefully I turned towards the elevator. The hazy light fell through the large lateral office windows and illuminated the elevator doors. I had to laugh quietly: a sign.

Once on the ground floor, I tried to get to the exit without attracting attention. There was no one at the reception

desk, oddly not even the security staff. It was already noon. Beyond the glass front of the building, the contours disappeared in a white wall of light. When the exit door opened, I stepped outside. The heat and sun were immediately noticeable. Ever since I could remember, I had applied sunscreen gel several times a day. Fortunately my skin was not too sensitive, otherwise I would have gotten sunburned in no time. It took my eyes a few seconds to get used to the brightness.

Several groups of people purposefully roamed the streets. Many were covered with white cloths. Did their mummery serve as protection from the sun or prevent being identified by the surveillance cameras, that were installed everywhere? The protesters seemed peaceful and I followed them curiously but at a safe distance to an old square in the center of the city.

The square was surrounded by tall historical buildings that cast long shadows despite the vertical position of the sun. Many paths led in a star shape to the center, in which the foundation of a monument was located. Except for a few vague remains, it had fallen victim to the weather. Hundreds of demonstrators had already gathered on the square, for what or against whom they were demonstrating was

not apparent. It did not appear to be one of the usual protests with loud shouting and slogans that often culminated in clashes with the security forces. The faces, if recognizable, were serious and calm. Some participants discussed cautiously with each other, but it seemed as if they all had the same attitude. »Adversus« could be read on a few signs and banners. What was the correlation between the strange email and this demonstration? I was unable to see the connection but I also did not dare to address one of the demonstrators. Was I too afraid of getting involved? For a while I watched the mysterious events. Then my empty stomach called out unmistakably. Without discovering the answers, I set out to find at least something edible.

Driven by hunger, I quickly located the next mall. Countless advertising displays and billboards flashed at the large glazed entrance. What a waste of electricity! The advertised products were hardly affordable for ordinary mortals. Inflation had caused all prices to skyrocket.

Few people walked through the building dated from the last century. Many of the concrete pillars and facades had seen better days. A white coat of paint was supposed to freshen them up. In the windows of the boutiques there

were mannequins who wore the latest fashion: from simple to extravagant. Without paying special attention to them, I went to one of the grocery stores in the basement.

The automatic doors opened as I approached. Cool air flowed towards me. Despite everything, some supermarkets were still well air-conditioned. As soon as the doors closed behind me, a chill ran through my body and I got goose bumps. It was quite cold.

The long white rows of shelves were, as so often, almost empty. There was no fresh fruit, vegetable or meat, although they were sold at exorbitant prices. Supply and demand no longer matched for a long time already.

As an alternative, there were protein-rich ready meals. However, it was difficult for me to look at the packaging printed with insects. In terms of taste, you were only able to complain if you remembered the treat of fresh food. I took the next best family pack on which the crawlies looked at least friendly, along with a couple of protein bars and two medium-sized can soups. At the checkout I placed a vitamin drink to my purchase on the designated surface. A robotic arm grabbed all the goods individually, rotated them skillfully and precisely. Every time the scanner flashed, it became obvious to me on the large display that not only good food could be expensive. The

last flash scanned my face and the friendly robot voice thanked me. Carrying the goods under my arms, I left the shop.

Since it had to be scorching hot outside by now, I looked for a place in the mall to be able to eat the protein bar that I had hastily torn open. Off the main level was a round dome building that linked two promenades. Under the lightly tinted glass dome stood a large tropical tree that stretched its branches in all directions across several levels and turned the entire room with its dense foliage into an exotic scenery. Was the rainforest once this archaic giant's home?

To my regret there was no information board. I sat on one of the seats at the trunk of the tree, admired the shadow play of the leaves and the incoming light as I chewed on the cereal bar. Memories of the old fruit trees in my grandparents' garden gradually awoke.

I used to sit in the shade of the trees as a child, painting or reading, listening to the buzzing of the last bees and bumblebees flying from one blossom to the next.

»Pardon me, is there still a place available here?« A voice asked politely. I looked up.

»Yes, of course,« I replied quickly, as I did not want to claim this beautiful place for myself. An elderly woman slowly moved toward one of the seats next to me. She pulled a small trolley with several stuffed bags and tied-up sacks behind her. Was that all of her belongings? Many older people were impoverished and homeless. By averting my eyes, I tried not to show my thoughts.

»I come here often,« the exhausted lady said, breathing hard as she slowly settled down.

»Such nice places have become rare,« she continued, taking a water bottle from one of her bags. In order not to appear impolite, I turned towards her. With a slightly shaky hand, she raised the glass bottle to her mouth and cautiously took a sip of water. Her lips were dry and brittle. Relieved, she put the bottle down on her leg and looked into the crown of the tree. It seemed as if she was listening carefully to someone, while smiling sadly. The wrinkles on her face were obvious. She had braided her long white hair, which she put over her shoulder. Slightly cumbersome she slid aside on her seat and gently distributed the entire contents of her water bottle over the wildly grown roots of the rainforest tree. Then she looked at me insistently. Despite her rather old age, her eyes were awake and confident.

»We took too much and returned too little!« She said with an admonishing, broken voice. I nodded in shock and could only guess what had happened before her eyes. Suddenly overwhelmed by my feelings, I quickly closed my eyelids. A tear ran down my cheek.

Why did I react so emotionally? She reminded me of my grandmother, even her voice sounded astoundingly similar. In addition, she had just spoken out, what had been on my mind a lot lately. The older woman put her hand comfortingly on mine and whispered, »It is not too late!«

My emotional outburst was deeply embarrassing, and I actually did not want to open my eyes again. Nevertheless, opening them, I looked into a face that was also moved to tears. We kept eye contact without words until the elderly woman took a deep breath and lowered her eyelids. She caressed my hand gently, got up leisurely and grabbed the handle of her trolley. Lost in thought I watched her as she slowly walked away. For some time I sat under the tree, sorting my thoughts, then I took my things and left the mall.

On the way home huge white clouds gathered in the sky within a few minutes. Strong gusts of wind heralded a

coming storm. The wind was blowing hard so that I had to lean against it to avoid being knocked over. People fled the streets and sought shelter. I tried to move on as I almost made it to my apartment.

A loud clack sounded through the concrete gorge, just a few meters behind me, then another one ahead. A several-centimeter ball of ice had hit the asphalt and bounced multiple times after the impact. I looked around, but found no refuge in the immediate vicinity. A frayed sun sail fluttered above me, pulling on the ropes. Suddenly the wind declined. With thunderous noise it hailed thousands of ice balls. They hit the ground all around, but like a big white wing, the sail protected me from the falling hail. The ice balls rolled and jumped, filled the entire street.

The hailstorm did not last long, the clouds broke up and the sun came out again. Bright white hail balls steamed in the sunlight. I waded arduously through the ankle-high melting ice.

When I arrived at the front door of my apartment building, I was trembling due to undercooling and had to sneeze several times. As I opened the door, my eyes fell on the mailbox. There was no letter in it though.

Chapter II

For two days I had not left my apartment. I had called in sick by email, but apart from an automated reply that my message was successfully delivered, I had not yet received a response.

When I bent down to pick up scattered notes on the floor, I felt a sharp pain in my lower abdomen. The annoying recurring problems. I paused for a moment and slowly straightened up again. My mother called it the »Monthly visitor«.

The doorbell rang. Another uninvited visitor? I curiously took my smartphone and turned on the surveillance camera at the front door. After a few seconds the camera focused the face of an unfamiliar young man. As usual, I should have started a quick security check, using the face recognition, instead I sullenly asked, »Yes, please?« My voice sounded tinny and distorted from the speaker. The man looked around and then held a sealed letter in front of the camera.

Without thinking, I opened the house entrance with the push of a button. At the apartment door I got a queasy feeling. I stood still, hearkening as dozens of questions came to my mind. A soft knock interrupted my thoughts. After collecting myself, I cautiously opened the door.

The young man looked far friendlier than the picture on the surveillance system. His green eyes were clear and attentive. He smiled good-naturedly, then said in a muffled, deep voice, »I am aware how strange the situation is...« Stuttering he then added, »I – my name is Jacob.«

For half an eternity I probably stood in the door with my mouth agape before I could think clearly. Jacob reacted patiently and then handed the letter to me formally. He did not make the impression that he wanted to leave.

After clearing his throat, he said, »Maybe we can try to clarify the situation?« I laughed insecurely and stepped aside with hesitation to let him in. Jacob slowly walked down the hall while I closed the door behind him. He turned to me before entering the living room. I followed him with the letter in my hand.

The evening sun shone through the half-open blinds, bathing the room in an orange light. I was still speechless

and confused. The living room at least was relatively cleared up. To make Jacob understand that we could sit down, I pointed to the couch. He pushed one of the pillows aside and carefully sat on the edge of the sofa. Although he was very slim, he looked athletic. He had short shaved dark hair. When I stood there staring at him, he turned his head to the side, laughing shyly. With my fingertips, I touched the sealed letter and sat on the other end of the couch. Tensely I opened the envelope and unfolded the contents. The handwriting was unmistakable. I started reading aloud:

»Dear Sarah,

To be sure, I asked Jacob to give you this letter. We met a few years ago and became friends.

After a long search, I finally found the way that can lead to a better future. But I realized I was missing an important human part. I cannot tread this path by myself and trust that you will help me.

Your father Maximilian«

Jacob pulled another letter out of his jacket and read it out in a low, calm voice:

»My friend,

It has been a long time since we last met. Still, I have to ask you for a favor. The second letter in this envelope is intended for my daughter Sarah and I would be grateful if you could hand it over personally.

She will decide whether to follow the path I have prepared for her or not. If yes, and I very much hope so, then she will have to face a tedious and dangerous journey.

I ask you to accompany my daughter on her path.

You will find her address on the back.

For a better future.

Your friend Max«

What did my father expect? That I would leave everything behind to help him? For a better future? What was that supposed to mean? I felt anger rising inside me. How could my father put me in such a situation?

Jacob shook his head somewhat at a loss and said with a laugh, »At least I don't seem to be the only one who doesn't know what this is all about.«

Impulsively I jumped up and ran into the bathroom to somehow escape the situation. I quickly closed the door behind me, leaning my back against it. My anger hardly subsided, so I went to the basin and fully opened the tap, which I had never done before. I let the water run into my

hands, then immersed my face. The cold actually helped me to get a cool head again. Taking a deep breath, I turned off the tap and looked into the mirror. Water dripped down from the curls on my face. You could clearly discern my confusion. I pressed a towel on my hairline and eyelids. Seeing Jacob's pretty face before my mind's eye, I realized how strange my reaction must have been. A heat wave passed through my body again.

I put the towel back, inhaled and exhaled slowly. Gradually calming down, I ran my hand through my hair, which was not easily restrained. It felt unruly, like an untamable mane. Sceptically I looked into the mirror again before slowly opening the bathroom door.

Jacob was still sitting very upright on the edge of the couch. He turned to me and asked with a worried expression, »Everything okay?« His reaction was unexpectedly caring. I nodded tentatively with a slightly forced smile. Jacob rose to his feet.

»It all seems a bit too much. Maybe we should sleep on it...« He blushed when he noticed the unintentional ambiguity of his proposal, rolling his eyes awkwardly. As our eyes met, we both had to laugh. Even after we calmed down a little, I giggled like a teenager. Jacob looked at me and was clearly having trouble restraining his laughter. He

turned towards the apartment exit and tried to explain himself, »What I wanted to say – I'll be back the day after tomorrow and...«

»Yes!« I interrupted him, as if nothing else mattered.

A little surprised, Jacob hesitantly entered the hallway. I accompanied him to the door.

»It might do you good to speak to your father. It's just a short trip,« he said as he walked, looking at me over his shoulder with a big smile. After he closed the door behind him, I suddenly froze. I felt like having a puzzle in front of me whose parts I had to somehow put together.

What did Jacob think of me? As if awakened from hypnosis, I strolled down the hall into the living room with a smile on my lips. The sun had already set, but the walls reflected the dark red light of the glowing evening sky. I sat on the couch again and looked back at the strange last days.

The next morning I went to work early, but my thoughts revolved around the previous day's encounter and the questions connected. Should I tread on such an unsafe path? With someone I did not even know?

Only when the elevator door to the office opened, I realized that I had ignored my surroundings up to here.

On the way to my work place I noticed a small group of colleagues chatting and glancing secretly in my direction. Distracted by this strange behavior, I suddenly stood in front of my empty desk. The monitor and PC were gone. A few loose cables indicated that they had been removed in a hurry. The rest of my things had been stowed in a little red box on the desk. Amazingly, I was neither shocked nor offended, but rather relieved.

Had I been fired? Legally, the company often was skating on thin ice. So far it seemed somehow unlikely that it would concern me. I defiantly put the box under my arm. My team leader's office was empty and the employees had disappeared. The good colleagues had run off years ago. What did that say about me? »Just go!« I thought to myself.

My things rattled in the box as I went to the elevator. The door opened and before I pressed the button for the ground floor, I let the moment sink in. I remembered Jacob's smile when he said goodbye. Grinning, I took the elevator down.

A security guard sat at the front desk and noticed that the elevator door opened. I strode towards him purposefully, but he bowed his head, pretending to be very busy.

»Pff...« was the only reaction I could think of. I turned around shaking my head and resolutely headed for the exit. Did I expect somehow that they would not let me go that easily?

Suddenly I was on the street. All was resolved by coincidence. My smartphone flashed and I checked my mailbox. An email confirmed my guess: »Thank you for...and so on.« The reason for termination was not recognizable. While reading, I remembered the speeches of my team leader. How important a good personal communication was for the company, the usual lying gibberish.

It was not easy to dodge the oncoming pedestrians and operate the smartphone at the same time. Annoyed, I put it in my pocket and hurried home quickly. After all I had to pack my bags. To be honest, I had made my decision before already and the unexpected termination just came in handy.

When I got to my apartment, I went straight to my closet and took the big red travel bag off the top that had only been gathering dust since my last vacation. While choosing my clothes, I wondered if I might have misunderstood something or if we would actually hit the road together. From a box I took my mother's pendant which

she had given me before her death, put it in a side compartment of my backpack. I also looked for all the important travel documents. However, I placed my luggage behind the bed in case I would get cold feet.

Then I sat on the couch and pondered who to tell about my upcoming trip. In my contacts, I did not find anyone with whom I could share my plans, no one who would have understood my bold decision. I spent the rest of the day brooding over this depressing insight. When I went to bed late at night, everything gave way to the anticipation of the next morning.

After I woke up, I spent more time in the bathroom than usual, prettied myself up and tied my stubborn hair into a ponytail. I was quite excited, but I calmly drank a cup of tea. The strangest thoughts came to my mind. »Don't be silly!« I said to myself, feeling embarrassed due to my own thoughts.

Surprisingly there was a knock on the door. Could it be Jacob? How did he get into the building? Should I hug him as a greeting?

I tried to calm down, then I opened the door a little. »Hello!« I said to Jacob with a smile, and had to restrain myself not to show my joy too exuberantly.

»The front door was open,« he said, as if he had to justify himself. I immediately noticed his baggage, which he had placed against the wall next to the apartment door. Jacob seemed to struggle with himself. He looked like he had not slept much in the past few days. Only a sparkle in his eyes revealed that he was also happy to see me again. While opening the apartment door wide, I smiled very directly at him, trying to show him that he was welcome. He avoided any eye contact and picked up his heavy bags. Without a word I closed the door and went to my living room with him.

»Can I offer you something to drink?« I asked to break the uncomfortable silence. Jacob shook his head. He opened the zipper of the sports bag and pulled out a file that he put on the table in front of me.

»You should know who I am, who I was,« he said in a shaky, vulnerable voice.

The file was tied up with two red ribbons and secured with a wax seal. Various stamps with file numbers and a clear warning against unauthorized opening on the envelope made me hesitate. I looked at Jacob, trying to ascertain that I should read the confidential documents.

He just nodded stoically and lowered the eyes to hide his insecurity.

The wax of the seal broke between my thumb and forefinger. The file was a collection of reports on various military operations around the world, especially in the Middle East. A symbol repeatedly appeared in the documents: a red chess piece in front of two crossed swords.

Probably the emblem of a paramilitary unit. The information was very detailed, from costs to exact numbers of victims and losses. Photos of countless dead bodies lying in their own blood and corpses that had been mutilated or burned beyond recognition left me breathless. I stared at the unfathomable horrors that dragged me into a world of violence and death. Without really looking at them, I turned the last pages. How could people do this to each other? It took me a moment to recover from the impressions.

Jacob stood at the window and looked down onto the street. Warily I approached and stopped close behind him. »Do you regret what you did?« I whispered. He did not answer, but tears poured from the red eyes of his mirror image in the windowpane.

»I've seen more blood and death than one can bear. Until I understood that war is just a business...« his voice failed. I embraced him and put my cheek on his back. He took my hand and a deep breath. Despite everything, I felt safe around him.

»May I use your shower?« He asked unexpectedly with a rough voice.

»Sure, of course!« I stuttered, not finding the idea unpleasant or unusual.

When Jacob disappeared in the bathroom, I put my bag and rucksack next to his things in the living room to clear up any doubts.

Dressed in towels, Jacob returned from the bathroom, and looked for some clean clothes. Smiling, he took note of my luggage, ready for the journey, next to his stuff.

»Have you thought carefully about what you're getting into?« He asked me.

»Yes, I have!« I answered determinedly, thinking that I did not have much to lose anyway. Jacob went back to the bathroom to get dressed.

Afterwards he sat on the couch with me again, looking refreshed as his cheeks had a rosy complexion. His eyes

fell on the file, which was closed, but he only seemed to stare through it.

»When I got to know your father years ago, I quickly knew that we had something in common. Loss can bring people together. We both knew something had to change, but we were trapped in different worlds.« Jacob talked about his family and how his father was altered by war.

»War is a mistake that repeats itself too often in history, a sign that all human virtues have failed. Maybe it's meant to be like this and it's in our nature...« His face told me what he felt.

»We were not able to talk before my father died. My mother suffered a lot...« Through Jacob's depictions my world seemed clearer, as if he was showing me a reflection of my life under completely different conditions.

»...I wish my father had been more like yours...«

»Do you believe in fate?« I interrupted him.

»I don't know what to believe in anymore,« Jacob answered.

»But getting to know you right now is a strange coincidence,« he continued his train of thought.

I was glad to have met him, was more drawn to him than I could explain with common sense.

»Give me a few minutes and I'll make something to eat,« he said, rummaging through one of his bags. Then he carried some of the ingredients he had brought with him to the kitchen. It felt like we had been living here together for years.

A candle burned on the kitchen table. Two deep plates filled with pasta, cutlery and two glasses of wine were served on it. The pots on the stove were steaming and a dark red sauce was bubbling in one of them. Next to it there were three opened cans: real tomatoes. Jacob had a kitchen towel over his arm, pointed to a chair that he pulled away from the table. I elegantly sat down in front of one of the plates. Then Jacob scooped the tomato sauce with a large ladle out of the pot, turned to the table without spilling anything, and poured it over the pasta energetically. He repeated this for the second plate, put the towel aside and sat down, then he said, »Buon Appetito!«.

»Thanks, the same to you, too!« I replied. The scent of herbs and garlic rose into my nose. I rolled up the pasta with spoon and fork. It tasted even better than the smell promised.

During dinner I kept looking at Jacob. After we had finished eating and were sitting relaxed at the table, I

noticed a bit of tomato sauce on his lips. Because he could probably not explain why I was staring at him, Jacob frowned with a smile. I got up from my seat and went to him. With my fingertips, I stroked his pretty lips and held the red sauce splash in front of his face laughingly. Then I kissed him. I was tired of having a guilty conscience when I felt alive.

The next morning we set off, carrying all our stuff for the trip. It took us about an hour to walk to the outskirts of the city. Due to our luggage and the short night, I was exhausted and tired, but I felt good.

Jacob groaned and dropped his bags between a few shabby warehouses in front of the large roller shutter of an old garage. With visible effort, he pushed the creaky metal gate up. The workshop was well equipped. All kinds of tools hung on the walls and spare parts were lying on the shelves. In one corner of the garage, Jacob pulled away a dusty tarpaulin. A red car appeared beneath. The station wagon was almost as old as I was, but looked relatively roadworthy.

Jacob opened the driver's door. By pulling a lever next to the steering wheel he unlocked the hood, raised it with both hands and fixed it with a pole.

»It doesn't look too bad!« He judged the engine compartment and went to his luggage. He had brought a spare battery in one of his bags. I realized what weight he had to carry, so I quickly asked, »Can I help somehow?«

»Yes, try starting the car in a sec,« Jacob said, half stuck in the engine compartment, replacing the battery. As I pushed myself behind the wheel, I was set back to the time when my father taught me how to drive. He had practiced patiently with me until I was no longer a danger to myself or others. I nevertheless felt guilty when I drove the car and at some point I could not afford it anymore.

»So, go ahead, start the engine,« Jacob asked me optimistically. I turned the ignition key. On the third attempt, the car started. Dark smoke oozed out of the exhaust. Would we get far with a gasoline engine? The engine ran quietly and Jacob dropped the hood.

We stowed our large luggage in the trunk, the smaller bags inside. Jacob went around the car to make sure everything was okay. Then we got in and slowly rolled out of the garage.

We had to pull on both sides of the gate to close it. With an unstoppable momentum it crashed onto the floor. Jacob looked at me heavily breathing, then he asked with a smile, »Ready?«

»Yes!« I replied without hesitation, gasping for breath as well. At that moment it started to rain. We quickly got into the car again.

The windscreen wiper squeaked in front of our faces. It had not rained like this for a long time. After Jacob had installed the navigation system and entered our destination, we set off.

The bad road rocked us gently and the rain pelted on the roof of the car. I felt safe and secure. My thoughts revolved around the events of the past few days until I closed my eyes overcome by tiredness.

Chapter III

It was no longer raining when we stopped. I could not tell how long I had slept. Jacob opened the car door and got out zestfully. I heard waves crash against the rocks beyond the dune ahead. When I tried to pull the handle of my door clumsily, I only managed to grab it the second time. The door flew open and I hastily climbed out of the car with awkward movements. Even though my legs were stiff and sluggish from the long drive, I ran up the dune exuberantly. The sand kept giving way under my feet. Jacob shook his head laughing when he caught up with me.

Together we reached the top of the dune, which was covered with a few tufts of grass. On the horizon the sea glittered in the sunlight, while the waves beat rhythmically on the dark, almost black rocks below us. A few streaks of sand had formed between the stones. The beach was unusually clean, without the common washed up garbage. Miraculously, the sea current seemed to have preserved this remote stretch of coast from the catastro-

phic consequences of global pollution. Gentle gusts of wind made the waves froth playfully and blew through my hair. I could taste the salty sea air and breathed deeply.

Jacob took my hand. It seemed like a moment from another world, another time.

I could have stayed longer, but at the break of dawn, it was time to leave. We went back to the car and continued our journey. Following the navigation system, we moved away from the coast on a well-developed road. As soon as the sun had set, night fell quickly. The dark asphalt of the road gleamed black in the headlights. While we drove through the night for hours, we could only occasionally make out the silhouettes of isolated trees or bushes apart from the road. The illuminated map of the navigation system showed no cities, only a few small settlements in the area. Eventually I saw lights in the distance within the dark. It took quite a while before we reached them.

There was an old run-down gas station right on the street, surrounded by dilapidated sheds and wrecked cars. The rusted gas station sign was only dimly lit. Jacob drove slowly. Since we were almost out of gas, he stopped at one of the gasoline pumps to refuel with his credit card.

The digits of the display on the column raced past, the amount increased and increased.

There was a small bar serving food across the street that seemed to be open. After Jacob put the nozzle back properly, he looked at me.

»Might we get anything to eat over there?« He asked hopefully. I realized that I was already half starved.

»I'm a little hungry!« I replied with a slightly ironic emphasis.

»Me too, a little,« Jacob said, smiling impishly.

We parked our car across the street. The bar was partially in worse shape than the gas station, but when we opened the rickety front door, the tempting smell of food wafted towards us. The dim lighting inside made the room, which was streaked by large wooden beams, even cozy. Many photos and pictures from days gone by hung on the walls. Flashing slot machines and a pool table were set up in one corner. A few stools were placed in front of the counter, but we picked a small table by the window. The old leather benches creaked when we sat down on them.

It did not take long before a pretty waitress stepped out of the kitchen. She was not much younger than me and her exotic face indicated that she did not hail from the

area originally. After finding a pen and notepad, she came to our table.

»Hello, what brought you two here? Would you like something to drink or eat?« She asked friendly, seemingly happy about our late visit.

»Our kitchen may no longer have much to eat, but our fries are really good,« she continued.

We ordered two portions of the homemade fries and large soft drinks. Perhaps it was the hunger that made me almost moan with pleasure while chewing. Jacob also seemed to enjoy it, as he had eaten everything on his plate in no time.

When I was drinking, I saw in the corner of my eye that a convoy of vehicles stopped at the gas station on the other side of the street. A black sports car and a truck that was used to transport cattle. Jacob had also registered their arrival and was looking at me with a serious expression. The sports car roared loudly three times before the driver turned off the engine.

Shortly thereafter, the little bell atop the door rang as three dodgy guys barged in. They seemed overexcited and were apparently drunk. Noisily they sat on the stools at the counter. The waitress flinched when they spoke to her. The bell rang again, then a man dressed in black entered

the bar. His silk shirt was unbuttoned very wide and he had combed back his dark, greasy hair. The other men immediately lowered their voices as he went past them and sat down at a table opposite us.

Jacob looked tense and took money out of his pocket to pay. The waitress came nervously to our table. You could see the fear in her eyes. She did not seem to notice the generous tip, thanked us politely anyway, and then hesitantly turned to the neighboring table.

The greasy guy hissed barely audibly, »Finally!« He spoke quietly to the waitress. Intimidated, she froze and started to sob. Then he grabbed her by the wrist. Completely aware of our attention, he asked provocatively, »Who does not like it when they whimper from lust or despair?«

I felt like my blood was boiling, jumped up furiously, wanting to rush at him, but Jacob turned my hip toward the exit. The waitress broke free and disappeared into the kitchen. While I snorted angrily, Jacob pushed me to the exit. And only then I noticed the men at the bar staring at us. They would have intervened if there had been a dispute. When I opened the door in frustration, the black-clad creep started to laugh and the three guys were also loudly making fun of us.

Outside, I felt my racing pulse. At the same time, I had to think of the waitress, who was now alone in the hands of these fiends. On the way to our car, my eyes wandered to the two vehicles on the other side at the gas station. Jacob was about to get into our car, but then he realized that I could not accept the situation.

I ran purposefully across the street towards the sports car. As I passed by, I grabbed a rusted iron bar lying in a bush. With all my strength I hit it on the hood of the rare sports car decorated with a jumping horse. Then I smashed the windshield, which shattered into thousands of pieces. The pigs squealed, startled, in the cattle truck behind. Its tailgate was sealed with a veterinary label. It tore as I pushed the lever down and let the ramp drop, then I loosened the retaining bolt. The pigs grunted excitedly and I had to jump aside to avoid being overrun by them on their way to freedom. In groups they trotted away in all directions.

The men rushed out of the bar because of the unmistakable noise. Jacob had arrived with the car and jumped out of it. Pleased with my successful but reckless action, I grinned at him. Suddenly I heard a sound from within the dark interior of the transport. I turned my head and saw a little girl with tears in her eyes stretching out her hand for

help. I quickly climbed into the hold and lifted her up. She was filthy and emaciated, much lighter than expected. The girl clung to me. Pumped with adrenaline, I jumped out of the empty truck with her in my arms, opened the passenger door one-handed, and we quickly squeezed into the car. Just in time before the three men could reach us. Dirt and stones flew towards them as Jacob drove off with spinning tires.

In the vibrating rearview mirror, I saw the men running chaotically back and forth. They apparently did not know whether to catch the pigs or chase after us. The black-clad man suddenly appeared in the rearview mirror. He pointed in our direction with his finger and raised his head, laughing madly. Thunderstruck the men hurriedly jumped into the truck. Jacob still drove at full throttle. I could no longer see what was happening due to the swirling dust, but I was quite certain that they would pursue us. Hopefully the waitress in the bar had used the opportunity to get to safety.

The little girl on my lap had closed her eyes. I felt her breathing quickly and shallowly. Jacob stared at the street. I wanted to start explaining my behavior somehow. When I opened my mouth, Jacob shook his head, his lips pressed

together. Looking at me and the girl, his angry expression gave way to a suppressed laugh.

Over and over we checked the rearview mirror as we raced off, but could not see any headlights in the black of the night. After a while I noticed two big eyes looking at me. The little girl seemed very relieved to have escaped. Now she was breathing deeply and slowly. Her straight black hair lay over my arm. I carefully cleaned her face with a handkerchief. How old was she? Maybe seven?

She curled up, put her head in the crook of my arm. When my excitement eased off, I closed my eyes.

At dawn we drove past wide fields, but whatever was grown there had wilted long ago. Most of the plants were withered and blackened. In the middle of a field stood the strikingly smeared billboard of a large food company. When the sun showed itself on the horizon, the contours of a small village appeared on a hill a little off the main road. A narrow winding path led there. Jacob looked at me. He could use a break.

In order not to leave any obvious tracks, he drove slowly and turned into the side road with caution. We approached the small town along an old stone wall, that ended in an archway made of larger stones, marking the

entrance to the village. The little houses looked deserted and decrepit. The window panes were partly broken, the dilapidated roof trusses collapsed. Jacob stopped between two houses and slid down in his seat. He pressed his head against the neck support. From this position you had a good view of the main road and any approaching vehicle could be spotted at an early stage.

The girl sat up. She probably had to relieve herself. I opened the car door and she climbed from my lap. After I got out of the car, she took my hand and led me towards a chapel a few meters away in the middle of the village. The old chapel was surrounded by several hundred graves. The little girl pulled me past the resting places. She seemed to be looking for something. In passing I read the inscriptions on the gravestones. I was shocked that the date of death was the same on most. How could the people in the area die at the same time?

The girl stopped and turned towards me. With her thin forefinger, she pointed at one of the names carved into the tombstone: »Evangelina«.

Smiling, she pointed at herself.

»Sarah, I'm Sarah,« I said in consternation.

Evangelina nodded, bent down and put her hand on the earth of the grave as if to say farewell. I had a lump in my throat. Was this her family's grave?

Suddenly a car horn sounded. Then once again. We hurried back to the car, staying close to the walls not to attract attention. Pushed against the car, I opened the rear side door for Evangelina. After she climbed in, I followed close behind her. As I fastened her seatbelt, I looked at Jacob. He sat tensely behind the wheel, leaning forward and squinting his eyes. Through the windshield I saw a vehicle racing down the main road at high speed still a few kilometers away.

We waited anxiously for the vehicle to get closer. It was the pig transporter. The sports car was not to be seen though. Evangelina opened her eyes and mouth wide when she realized that our pursuers had caught up with us. The truck approached the junction, slowed down but then accelerated again. Relieved, I sank back on the rear bench, but Jacob was still sitting tensely on the front seat. He turned to us and looked into Evangelina's scared eyes. Then he reached for a small bag that he had stowed under his seat and started the engine. I skeptically tried to make eye contact with him through the rearview mirror, but he resolutely avoided my eyes. At the junction he drove onto

the main road with screeching tires, chasing after our pursuers.

We came up a small hill and when we reached the highest point, the car lifted off the road slightly due to our high speed. Evangelina was not sure if it was scary or funny. She flinched and then smiled briefly.

A few kilometers away, I could make out the van ahead, which had stopped on a parking area next to the road. Jacob seemed to be accelerating when he recognized it too. My heart started pounding in my chest, stronger and faster. Evangelina cowered against me. The three men had gotten out and one of them was talking on the phone excitedly. We barely slowed down, and Jacob braked sharply just before the parking spot, so that our car drifted towards the van. He put our vehicle sideways using the handbrake, while reaching into his bag under the seat with one hand and pulling out a pistol. Before the car fully came to a halt, he popped out of the door in a flowing motion and pointed the weapon at the three baffled men. Completely intimidated, they raised their arms.

Suddenly there was a bang and one of the men dropped to his knees. Then a second bang sounded. I noticed that the truck sank to the side. Jacob had uner-

ringly shot two tires. Then he got back into the car, still pointing the gun at the three men. They dared not to look in our direction. Jacob put the pistol in the footwell area, released the handbrake and drove off at full throttle. The three men did not move. The truck got smaller and smaller the further away we got. Jacob blinked as if waking up from some kind of trance. I was starting to believe the things I had read in his file.

The situation eased up after a few minutes and Jacob took a deep breath. Finally he stopped at a side path. He picked up the gun in the footwell with both hands and stowed it in his bag.

»Could you drive on? Maybe I can find out something about our protégé,« he asked surprisingly.

»Sure!« I replied nervously. I had not driven for a long time. We got out and I sat down behind the wheel. After I adjusted the seat, I put the car in gear and started driving. Jacob was typing on his smartphone. Then he took the navigation system to enter an address or new coordinates. I tried to keep my eyes on the road, but was not able to deny myself a few questioning looks.

»Do you mind if I close my eyes for a while?« Jacob asked after he had put the navigation system back in its mount.

»Just follow the route and we'll get some information,« he added.

»Okay, no problem,« I replied skeptically. Jacob leaned his head against the window. He seemed to fall asleep immediately as if he had been switched off.

A vast wasteland lay ahead of us. Rusted pumps and collapsed oil derricks lined the road we had been driving on for hours. They had obviously tried to wrest the last oil reserves from the ground. Black pools of mud testified to the sins of the energy corporations.

Evangelina suddenly flinched from the side window. A large bird emerged out of an oily pool, dramatically going under in agony. I turned my gaze back onto the street, trying to repress the shocking image. Did I not want to see the drastic impacts of ruthless greed? They could not be overlooked here.

Chapter IV

Jacob seemed to be sleeping soundly, but it could not be comfortable for him in this position. We were still driving on the same road. After a while, large warning signs appeared several meters apart:

»RESTRICTED AREA – DO NOT STOP – 36 km!«

A skull clearly underlined the danger. Evangelina shifted uneasily on the rear bench. After we passed the last sign, I noticed that a gray layer covered the street. The sound of the tires changed and the steering seemed to become too smooth. Dead trees off the road looked as if petrified. I slowed down as there was a strange crackling and creaking beneath us. Countless small bones and animal skulls were ground under the tires.

We crossed a dry riverbed on a bridge made of thick steel pipes. There was a hand's breadth space between the individual tubes so that you could see through. A powdery

mud had deposited and gray fumes rose from branched cracks. Animal carcasses were scattered in front of the steeply rising edge of the former riverbank. The car touched down roughly at the end of the bridge. It was getting hazier and the gray gradually swallowed the surroundings until I could only see a small part of the road in front of us. A pungent, putrid smell came through the ventilation. Jacob coughed violently.

Suddenly a shadowy shape appeared out of nowhere in front of us. An emaciated horse walked slowly across the road like a ghostly apparition. On the flanks, the bones were clearly visible under the pale, thin fur. The head was just a bony skull with deep dark eye sockets. I could hardly bear the sight and made a wide turn around the horse. It disappeared behind us, vanishing in the haze.

I gradually lost the feeling of how long we had been traveling through the restricted area. The road made some bends, but I could not see what they led us past because of the dense fog. Car wrecks lay in the ditch. By and by a few abandoned vehicles appeared in the middle of the road. Many of them were heavily damaged, luckily there was no trace of the occupants. I maneuvered between the wrecks at walking pace.

Jacob gasped and I looked at him worriedly. When I turned my eyes forward again, I directly hit the brakes. A high fence blocked the entire visible area in front of us. It was also secured with barbed wire. Which side of the barrier should be protected was not apparent. On closer inspection, I noticed that part of the fence on the street could be opened and was only locked with a heavy iron chain. I got out and walked quickly but quietly towards the barrier.

Sticky threads came loose as I uncoiled the clinking chain around the bars. I grabbed one side of the metal mesh and laboriously pushed it aside, with a loud squeak. The opening seemed just big enough for us to drive through.

It was dead silent. Then I heard something from the wall of fog, sounding like grinding teeth. A cold shiver ran down my spine. I looked around anxiously, but could not see anything. Quickly I ran back to the car.

The car door was wide open. Did I push it open that far when I got out? Jacob was pale as death, eyes closed tight, his left hand lying on the driver's seat. Evangelina crouched behind him in the legroom, her head hidden under her arms.

I started the engine and drove off jerkily. That moment Jacob flinched in shock and took a deep breath without opening his eyes. The car scraped against the metal as we drove through the gap in the fence, but most importantly, we could finally leave the restricted area behind us. After a distance the baleful fog lifted.

I stopped at the next best opportunity because Jacob had a feverish glow. On his forehead drops of sweat gathered and Evangelina looked at him from the side worriedly. Illness did not seem unknown to her. I soaked some T-shirts with water, wrapped them around Jacob's calves and gently lowered his seat. How could I leave without medical supplies for the trip? Years ago I had thrown away my reserves.

My mother's illness made me skeptical about medicine. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies often saw patients only as subjects for the development and testing of their products, not people with families who clutched desperately to every straw. But if a little pill could make the difference between life and death, it was easy to believe in all the promises of miraculous remedies. But mostly it was just about profit.

For an antipyretic tablet, I would have traded almost everything in this moment. Evangelina gently dabbed the sweat from Jacob's forehead with her sleeve. Waves of fever made his body tremble, so I put a blanket over him. Thick tears dripped onto my pants and I hoped Evangelina would not notice them. I did not want to worry her more. Maybe Jacob had medicine in his luggage?

I searched through his things in the trunk. Nothing. Then I remembered the little bag under the driver's seat. With my fingertips, I carefully took the gun and placed it in the footwell. I found a case, pulled the zipper all the way around and opened it. Three glass tubes with a grayish, milky liquid were clamped inside. The symbol from Jacob's file, the knight in front of crossed swords, was engraved on them. There were a few tablets in compartments with tiny pictograms. A small head with drops of sweat and a thermometer was depicted on one of the compartments. These had to be the right pills. With water from my bottle, I tried to administer the medicine to Jacob. He coughed and some fluid ran from the corner of his mouth, but he had swallowed the pill.

Outside it had gotten dark in the meantime. Evangelina tiredly curled up on the rear bench under my jacket.

I renewed Jacob's calf wraps several times and used up almost all of our water.

The course of his condition seemed to have progressed unusually quickly. Was it perhaps poisoning or a virus?

My father had explained to me years ago that viruses were far older than the human genome and that their impact was presumably the most formative factor in evolution. Remains of ancient viruses were found in our DNA. The infection was probably the origin of life. Still, everyone was at risk of losing the struggle for survival that had started hundreds of thousands of generations ago.

Neither this knowledge nor any miracle cure was able to save my mother from cancer. The fatal disease was a kind of self-destruct sequence that was triggered at some point and was difficult to stop.

Feeling powerless, watching how someone you loved died slowly and inexorably. This was what had broken my father.

Jacob now seemed to be breathing more calmly and sleeping deeply, his pale, sickly face showing from under the blanket above the ergonomically shaped neck support. I turned to Evangelina, who in her sleep let her fragile arm

dangle from under the jacket. This seemed all too familiar. How could I have seen this situation months ago in a dream? Unlike most people, I sometimes remembered such dreams, whose intricate details were completely unpredictable. Future situations no one could conceive even with a vivid imagination. Were déjà-vus perhaps short excerpts from a predetermined future? Could their course of events even be changed?

Endless questions, derived from this, were buzzing through my head. Where did these racing thoughts come from? Should I take one of the pills to make sure I did not get sick as well? Or maybe it was just fatigue?

I checked Jacob's temperature on his cheek again. The fever seemed to have dropped slightly. I pulled the sleeves of my sweater over my wrists and crossed my arms. The darkness around us laid on my eyes like a cloth, made my eyelids heavy as lead. Nevertheless, I tried to stay awake, to protect the ones who had become important to me so quickly...

First I heard Evangelina's soft laughter, then Jacob's rough, whispering voice. I had fallen asleep and when I woke up, startled, I saw that it was morning already. Jacob sat on his seat under the blanket and held his smartphone

in front of Evangelina, who typed on the display, wrapped in my jacket.

»We did not want to wake you up, but we got bored and had a chat,« said Jacob. He was still pale and had dark rings under his eyes.

»Eva told me that she had fled with her aunt and uncle. We just have to find her family!« Jacob summed up their conversation. After all, smartphones were of some use for interpersonal communication.

»I'm feeling better,« Jacob said unconvincingly, because he still seemed to be quite groggy.

»I don't know if it was a fever dream or real. I could swear an ice-cold hand grabbed my arm and tried to drag me out of the car.«

Did Jacob imagine it all? A hallucination of the fever? Only Eva probably knew the truth, but I somehow did not want to know if there really was something in the fog.

»I need to stretch my legs,« I said. Then I got out to shake my aching limbs as I did not have enough room in the car.

We parked at a viewpoint that no tourist had visited for a long time. A roaring waterfall was depicted on a large view board. Beyond the railing, I only saw a few

bare gray rock layers. Then I read the text on the board:
»The falls that fell silent.«

For thousands of years, embedded into an eternal cycle, masses of water fell down the rocks at this place. With unimaginable, unstoppable force they had carved their way through the stone. Then men came and stole the elixir of life. They robbed its strength until the streams that fed the falls became rivulets. Until the last drop was used up.

As so often, men had subdued their environment, made it subordinate to them, so that nothing remained. Was that our real nature? A parasitic behavior, without regard for the consequences of our actions, only with the purpose of our short-term well-being?

I looked at Jacob and Eva, who were sitting in the car, laughing. There was more that defined us, not just good or evil, countless gradations in between, influenced by an infinite number of factors. Nevertheless, the consequences of our existence were recognizable everywhere, the generous gifts of nature almost depleted, entire landscapes devastated and made uninhabitable. We had destroyed our own basis of life and had not listened to any voice of reason. But we still lived.

I stood there in silence and looked into the nothingness that had opened up before me. As if in a dream, I heard the sound of the car door. Jacob approached without a word. Quietly we lingered side by side for a while – he seemed to know what I was feeling.

It took some time until I could catch on to the immediate situation. I had lost my job, given up a relatively safe environment, but gained so much in return. Out of fear, I did not dare to admit it. I had fallen in love.

Jacob cleared his throat cautiously and then he said, »If we drive a few hours, we could make it to my friend's place today. He is an expert when it comes to information and for sure able to help us.«

»Okay,« I replied, still struggling with my disarming insight.

We got into the car and Jacob handed out a couple of cereal bars. It was not a real breakfast, but we chewed them calmly. The sun warmed up the car despite the thick gray cloud cover and I finally drove off to cool us down in the wind. Jacob slept a few hours while Eva was playing with the smartphone. I followed the road until we came to a larger junction.

Oddly, I was happy to leave our original path. Jacob had apparently recovered during sleep, because shortly after he woke up, he wanted to take the wheel.

»We're almost there, let me drive the rest of the way. I think you should take a break,« he suggested quite convincingly.

When he sat behind the wheel, I looked at him from time to time discreetly. Despite his illness, he was radiating. Was I naive to think he would reciprocate my feelings?

Chapter V

Far from our original route, we turned onto an inconspicuous, dusty side street. Cameras surveyed all three directions of the junction from a lamppost. Jolted by deep potholes in the road surface, we slowly advanced past small hills until we finally came to the entrance of a large property.

A high wall and a wooden gate blocked the way. Jacob drove close to a small terminal above which another camera was mounted. He held his smartphone in front of the lens through the lowered car window. The security code he had received opened the gate. I noticed its massive construction. The wooden beams were additionally reinforced with steel struts, becoming a bulwark against unwanted guests.

We drove through the gate and I did not have the slightest idea what to expect. To the left and right of the property's driveway stood some fruit trees on wild meadows, which in contrast to most plants in the area did not look dried up. A little further along the way we came

through a corn field and finally to a large estate surrounded by greenhouses.

In the garden, amidst vegetable patches, two huge satellite dishes were oppositely aligned. Jacob parked the car at a small wooden shed. When he had switched off the engine, he explained, looking at the front door, »Yuri is a bit special, but actually one of the good guys.« He turned to Eva. »Don't worry, just try not to touch anything, even if it's too tempting!« She nodded shyly and we got out.

The house was in good condition, although it was probably a few hundred years old. The plants and flowers, with their beautiful blossoms, made the entrance area friendly and inviting. Someone seemed to have a knack for everything green. Additional cameras were installed at the tips of the door frame. In front of the house entrance we could hear that the door was unlocked by a mechanism. It opened and the three of us stepped out of the bright daylight into a dark hallway. At the end I could see a pearl curtain that moved slightly in the draft. When the door closed behind us, it got darker, but we went on. Jacob pushed the curtain aside with one arm, the cords of pearls clattering against one another. I hesitantly climbed through the opening and Eva tiptoed close behind me.

The spacious living room was packed with hardware and computers, whose interior lay open. The room was criss-crossed by cables. Everywhere small lights were flashing, confirming the busy work of the technical devices. The walls were decorated with posters and film quotes: »I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.« Even I knew that one.

In a corner of the room, on a swivel chair in front of various monitors, a medium-sized man sat with his back to us. He was wearing headphones and wildly typing on his keyboard. Jacob let go of the curtain, took a few careful steps into the room while trying not to lose his footing between the cables. Without turning to us, the hacker finally said with a slight Russian accent,

»Hello Jacob, where did you collect these two lost souls?«

»Привет! How are you, Yuri?« Jacob said, as if the two had known each other for many years.

»Not bad! Better than most,« Yuri replied, turning around to look at us. Only now I could see that he was wearing VR glasses in front of his face, which he was carefully taking off. Blinking, he then put on his normal visual aid and stroked his frizzy full beard.

»You haven't shown up for ages. What brings you here?« Yuri raised his bushy eyebrows reproachfully. Jacob hesitated for a moment to answer, »I've left everything behind. It was just too much...«

»I understand,« Yuri interrupted him. The two seemed to have more in common than I could easily understand.

»Hello, I'm Greta!« A female voice suddenly said from one of the doors to the adjoining rooms of the house. Eva and I turned around in surprise. A petite person greeted us with an artificial smile. Her white, shiny plastic face was the only clue that she was not a human, but a robot. Eva grabbed my pants when she recognized this.

»Hi!« I replied, puzzled.

»Hello! I'm Jacob, that's Sarah and Eva,« Jacob introduced us.

»Greta is the lady of the house. She takes care of all everyday things here on the property,« Yuri said, as if he had been caught cheating.

»She really has a green thumb!« He added.

Greta bowed, then turned and went back to the next room. She moved almost like a real person. A short time later we heard the clatter of cupboard doors and dishes.

After Jacob had overcome his astonishment, he turned back to Yuri and explained our situation, »We need some

information about our little Eva. Maybe you can find out if she has any relatives somewhere.«

Yuri turned to the monitors and typed on his keyboard like a virtuoso piano player. He muttered, »Let's see, I could guess the little one isn't your daughter.« Eva's face appeared on one of the large screens on the wall, as a high-resolution image taken by one of the many cameras when entering the property. The most distinctive points of her face were connected by lines and the program started to work.

After a few seconds, Yuri shared the results of the search with us, »Either she is a film star or she fled from the south with her family a year ago.« Proud of his quick information gathering, he turned to Eva and addressed her directly, »You don't talk much? Surely you have good reasons. I may know where to find the rest of your family...«

Eva hid behind my leg, but smiled politely at Yuri.

»Evangelina Garcia – a name that, thanks to you, does not appear on the altar of souls.« We had no idea what Yuri was talking about. With his mouse, he pushed the window of an internet page onto the big screen.

»The altar is a site where deceased people who have become victims of war, environmental disasters and the

effects of climate change are enumerated and listed,« Yuri explained. »Many refugees, including activists of course, who were killed directly by corporations and their lobby, are among them!« I stared at the screen, because every second more names appeared.

»People used to be called martyrs when they died for their convictions!« Yuri was launching into a tirade that one expected from »freaks« like him. »If I were an artificial intelligence, I would for sure quickly realize that humanity is the biggest problem on this wonderful planet.«

He was right, only the nature of his monologue made me jokingly assume that the effects of the dreaded radio waves were clearly recognizable.

»If we create independent AIs and their new, marvelous souls are destroyed again, aren't we playing God?« Yuri concluded his theses. At that moment Greta came into the room and said friendly, »Dinner is ready!«

»You will stay for dinner and overnight, won't you? We have enough rooms in the house and haven't had any guests for a long time,« Yuri asked rather rhetorically. Then he laughed and turned to Eva, »Tomorrow will be another day for a family reunion!«

Even though he was a strange guy, Yuri seemed harmless. His invitation was extremely tempting. A night in a proper bed would not be an exaggerated luxury. Jacob also appeared to be considering the proposal, as he could use some rest after the last few days. In order to get my opinion, he looked at me questioningly. I nodded to him and he replied to Yuri, »Sure, but don't bother, the three of us can sleep in one room.«

»Then let's eat well and spend a pleasant evening together,« Yuri said contentedly.

We followed Greta into the next room. It was a rustic farmhouse kitchen as three hundred years ago. The antique furnishings seemed to have outlasted the time unscathed. A large stove, which was fired with wood, and the many pots, iron pans and bouquets of herbs that hung on hooks above it gave the impression of entering a small witch's kitchen. The long oak table was set with five plates, glasses, cutlery, bread in a basket and a baking dish. Greta had probably guessed that we would stay for dinner. She distributed large pieces of the vegetable casserole, then placed carafes of juice and water in the middle. If you did not look at her face, you could think she was a human being due to her behavior.

Yuri told us during dinner that he made a lot of money with crypto-mining, but afterwards he invested in environmental protection because of his poor ecobalance. In the course of the conversation, he kept making insinuating remarks towards Greta, and I tried not to imagine how far their relationship might actually go. Greta followed the conversation by moving her head, but she did not respond to Yuri's jokes. When we had eaten every last crumb of the casserole except the rest remaining on her dish, she said with a proud and pleased tone in her voice, »You seem to enjoy it, all home-grown from the garden!« She gave the last piece to Eva.

Greta and Yuri were very good hosts. We spent an extremely pleasant evening together.

Eva yawned the third or fourth time and I realized myself that I was dog-tired. Jacob discussed with Yuri only out of courtesy and was already on the ropes.

»I'll prepare your room. It's getting late.« Greta got up and went upstairs to the top floor.

»I could go on forever, but enough for today,« Yuri admitted, stretching. Eva ran after Greta. She was completely fascinated by her. Jacob and I went outside to the car to get some things for the night. The full moon stood

in a starry sky. Thousands of stars sparkled above us and I almost felt at home.

When we got back to the living room, Yuri was sitting in his corner and we heard Eva laughing out loud on the upper floor. I put the heavy bag down briefly to relieve my arms.

»Your trip seems to draw a lot of attention...« Yuri grumbled into his beard.

»1010011010 binary – the same everywhere,« he babbled afterwards. Maybe I should have paid more attention during math class to understand the meaning.

Jacob shook his head in amusement, went fully loaded into the next room and then up the stairs. Before I picked up my bag again, Yuri said, »Sarah, I don't know what it is – something seems to be happening. By coincidence, I recently discovered an email virus that is no ordinary computer virus.« I immediately remembered the strange email that had shut down my PC at work.

Yuri expressed with skeptical hesitation, »Even I sometimes don't know who Jacob is working for.«
What was he implying? That I could not trust Jacob?

»Anyhow, I wish you a good night,« mumbled Yuri, without taking his eyes off the screen.

Jacob came back to help me with the heavy bag. He probably wondered what kept me so long.

»Спокойной ночи!« He said to Yuri, who raised a hand and waved.

»I know he's slightly eccentric, but I like him,« Jacob said benevolently as he unpacked some of his things in our room.

»Yes, he's not wrong,« I agreed. Then Greta and Eva stood in the door frame. Eva stormed into the room and hopped onto the big bed. It was good to see her playful and childish.

»The bathroom is at the end of the corridor. The young lady could use a bath,« Greta concluded, and I was amazed by the humorous undertone.

»Good night, sleep well!« She said before going downstairs.

I grabbed my toiletry bag and Eva, who still was bouncing on the bed. She fidgeted sillily on my arm.

The bathroom was lovingly furnished, with a free-standing wooden tub as a bath in the middle. Large natural stones had been repurposed into sinks. The real wood on the shelves and walls made the room very homely.

I let water flow into the bathtub and Eva checked with her hand whether the temperature was convenient for her. Then she poured bath additive generously into the warm, steaming water out of a bottle that stood on the side. I took some fresh bath towels from the shelf. In the meantime Eva had jumped out of her clothes into the bathtub. Looking into the mirrors framed with ornate wood over the sink, I realized: I also could more than use a bath.

Eva splashed in the tub for a while until her fingers became wrinkled. Her tiredness returned due to the warm water. She climbed sleepily out of the tub and I wrapped her in one of the bath towels.

Then I carried her back to our room and laid her on the bed. Jacob was sorting some of his things while I tucked Eva in.

»I think I'll take a bath, too,« I said to Jacob, who responded with an inattentive »Okay.«

In the bathroom, I let some more hot water run into the tub when there was a soft knock.

»Sarah, I could use a bath as well,« Jacob whispered outside the door. I opened, happy, that we were granted a moment just for the two of us.

»Eva is sleeping soundly,« reported Jacob, smiling.

In the middle of the night we came back to our room. Eva was slumbering gently. I cautiously crawled under the blanket and Jacob lay down next to me. Cuddled up together, we fell asleep.

Chapter VI

I stood on a steep cliff, alongside which rugged rocks formed. Despite the dizzying height, I had a firm footing. Before me the sea roared and dark mountains of clouds towered above. Slowly I stretched out my arms, the hands folded as if in prayer. Waves crashed against each other at my fingertips, foaming wildly. With a deep breath I pulled my palms apart and smacked them together again with all my strength. Lightning flashed out of the sky and struck the tips of the waves.

Suddenly I ran down the dark street until I got to that old square in the middle of the city. In the deep black night, the full moon alone bathed the deserted scenery in a pale light. Its vertical pillar shone on a ghostly entity in the center. Instead of the weathered monument, a high throne made of bright white stone stood there, rising from a hill of faded human skulls. On it sat a bowed figure, wearing a black crown on the head. The crowned one seemed to be waiting for me and was grinning promisingly. His black, bloodshot eyes sparkled. Without being

able to resist, I approached him. When I saw his pale face clearly in front of me, he opened his eyes wide and clapped his hands with a deafening noise. The moon turned blood red.

Startled, I woke up covered in sweat. A rumble was dying away in my ears, Jacob had risen too though. Confused by the fluent transition from dream to reality, I tried to find my bearings again.

»An earthquake?!« Jacob whispered sleepily. It was dark outside, but a faint glow of light on the horizon was a harbinger of the coming day. Eva twitched in her sleep, she had not woken up from the tremor. We got dressed quietly and went downstairs.

Yuri was sitting still or again between his computers and monitors.

»Did you just feel that too?« He asked worriedly. »An earthquake around here – very unusual!« Suddenly the lamps in the garden went out, the computers and his other electrical devices in the house were powered by an emergency generator that had started up.

»The good news is we were lucky, the bad news – the city where Eva's family was last registered is located near the epicenter,« Yuri said in his typical, educational

manner. Jacob and I looked at each other for a long time. What should we do? Even if it was dangerous, we had to try to find Eva's family.

»I can tell you where Eva's uncle and aunt probably are staying. If they are still alive, they would be grateful if their niece was returned safely to them for sure. Although it takes you further away from your actual destination,« Yuri said with a provoking wink.

Did he know the destination of our trip?

»What do you know about it?« Jacob asked, not surprised at all by Yuri's insinuation.

»The coordinates belong to a research facility, but none of my sources can say exactly what is being researched there. Speculations range from solving climate problems to finding eternal youth,« Yuri continued. I was impressed by his ability to brazenly put pieces of the puzzle together and I remembered his words of warning from the previous evening. Should I tell him about the strange email? Maybe everything was somehow connected.

»Yuri, does the term Adversus mean anything to you?« I asked, trying to brace myself against a confusing answer.

»Yes, that was the name of a military project on autonomous warfare. The chosen ones of an ominous sect believe that this artificial intelligence is haunting the network somewhere and will bring about judgment day. Its influence goes far, way too far, if you ask me!«

Yuri seemed to know more about it, he looked at Jacob, but then changed the subject, »Maybe I'm too paranoid again to actually assess it, and it's all just a coincidence. However, most of the time we falsely call the wanting knowledge of interrelated processes and factors coincidence...«

I had not noticed that Greta and Eva had entered the room.

»Um, how about breakfast? You never know, it may always be the last one,« Yuri blabbered, laughing uncertainly.

»Good morning!« Greta said. Eva yawned next to her with her mouth wide open.

»Good morning!« Jacob and I replied almost simultaneously.

»Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. What do you say? We have homemade jam,« Yuri made his suggestion palatable.

Golden rays of sunlight fell through the plants in front of the small windows of the kitchen. The perfect place to start the day. We sat at the table like family, but Yuri was unusually quiet. The apricot jam tasted deliciously fruity and we ate almost a whole loaf of the homemade corn bread. After breakfast there was jam all over and around Eva's mouth.

»Sarah, don't you have any children?« Greta asked me as I wiped Eva's face. Especially from her, I had not expected this question and I just shook my head in bewilderment.

»Isn't it your biological programming that you have children of your own?« She questioned my reaction. I was sitting at the table, my mouth agape and did not know what to say.

»The two of them have to practice a little more!« Yuri blurted out and he patted Jacob, who blushed, on the back. After a moment of silence, we burst out laughing. Greta seemed satisfied with this explanation. Yuri then said in a very serious tone, »Please be careful, it's not a good world out there.«

»Yes, one could almost forget that here with you,« I replied. Yuri smiled and finally said mockingly, »Who

knows, maybe we too will soon be haunted by horsemen of the apocalypse.«

We packed our things and got ready for the departure. I had the feeling that unimagined hardships would lie ahead, which made it all the more difficult to say goodbye.

When we finally left, Yuri and Greta were standing at the door of their house. Eva and I waved from the side windows while Jacob turned the car. Greta also waved to us. She looked sad and worried. Did I project my feelings onto her or was she capable of such emotional reactions?

It took us a few hours to reach the small town where Eva's relatives were supposed to be. From a distance we could see clouds of black smoke in the sky. Their thick veil darkened the sun. The ground had broken open and we drove a zigzag course around the jagged, several meters deep cracks in the asphalt. They got bigger the closer we got to the city. The car bumped over the rubble on the street. We progressed slower and slower. Jacob looked at the navigation system.

»Let's hide the car over there in the hollow, we probably have to continue by foot.« Without further ado

we shouldered the most important luggage, then we set off on our path through the destruction.

Not to be hit by debris, we kept our distance from the collapsed walls. We were made aware of the full extent of the devastation as we looked onto the city area from a hill. Countless fires blazed between the ruins and ashes flickered through the sulfurous air. Was it a mistake to bring Eva here?

»See that old highway? It is a detour, but it is probably the safest route to the center,« Jacob gestured, as a scout for our small group. We followed the road until we came to a large intersection. The traffic lights flashed chaotically between green, yellow and red.

»I think we have to go that way,« I said, pointing in the direction that seemed right to me. The traffic lights turned green accordingly and all others switched to red. Shortly thereafter all the light signals went finally out. Even if it seemed strange to me, I saw it as confirmation and we continued on our path.

Hot gusts of wind blew the grime and dust from the surroundings into our faces. Jacob put a handkerchief over Eve's mouth and knotted it behind her head. We reached a

narrow bridge that was built over a former riverbed. It had defied the earthquake, only the railings on the sides had fallen off. The small stream below carried a poisonous, colorful shimmering liquid. At the beam bridge there was a group of people, looking towards us, waiting. Jacob put his hand on the small bag that hung over his shoulder.

»Are you headed for the center too?« shouted a man through the strong wind. They were families with their last possessions on their bodies.

»Yes, is the bridge stable?« Jacob shouted back.
»We are not worried about the bridge, only the wind gusts could be fatal,« the man said when we finally stood in front of them.

»Separately we are too light and could be blown over the edge. Therefore we considered hooking in everyone to cross together,« he explained to us.

We took the children into our midst and moved like a human caterpillar across the bridge. The wind dragged and pushed from all directions, but together it was unable to harm us. Once on the other side, we let go with relief and followed the droopy street signs to the center.

In large concrete caves, under the collapsed houses, I saw movements in the shadows. Were there people? Our group

went on with discomfort, walking closer together again. Finally we reached the city park in the center.

People were running around busily in front of tents that had been set up between fallen trees. There was no rich or poor here anymore, only survivors. How should we find Eva's family? We thanked our companions before we went separate ways.

A few large tents stood in the middle of a meadow. The multilingual signs indicated that they belonged to a refugee camp that had been set up before the earthquake. Ironically, the tents saved their residents from this disaster, unlike the other dwellings in the city.

A confused woman stepped out of a tent entrance and came towards us. She was talking to herself. Suddenly she looked at us, aghast. »If the stars fall from the sky, who shall be able to stand?!« she said, as if she had lost all hope. I nodded irritated, pushed Eva behind me and we walked carefully past her.

Countless people stayed inside the huge tent, including many small children. How could they bring children into

the world under these circumstances? Into a world that was on the brink of the abyss.

Suddenly a man jumped up from a large table and ran towards us, gesturing wildly. In the tumult I could only understand the name he was calling, »Evangalina!«

Eva jumped joyfully around his neck as he bent down to her. After saying a few words in Spanish, he wiped the tears from his face with the sleeve and introduced himself to us, »My name is Sebastián. It's a miracle! Please join us and tell us how this miracle could have happened.« We joined the small group at the table and I reported how I found Eva inside the van. They listened to me attentively. From time to time, they had to make sure what I said, as they did not speak our language that well.

»...and then we came here,« I finished my adventurous story. Everyone was talking at once until Eva's uncle Sebastián started telling the tragic story of their family. Together with Eva and her parents, they had fled from the south after there was hardly any water or food left due to the ongoing heat. As refugees, they had been settled in a small village and forced to work in a chemical factory until an accident killed half the workers.

»Our two sons and my sister, Eva's mother, were among the victims,« Sebastián reported with glassy eyes.

The people in charge tried to cover up the accident, buried the dead in old graves. There was no funeral. They would not even allow the bereaved to carve their names into the gravestones. In a subsequent argument with the factory owners' henchmen, Eva's father had been beaten to death. One of the henchmen Sebastián called the »black devil«. I could only too well imagine who he was talking about.

»These monsters were capable of anything! Then they even took the children without parents,« Sebastián ranted bitterly. Eva's aunt clutched her niece as if she would never let go of the girl again. The horrors of their escape and what had been done to them afterwards was hard to miss on her face.

»¡Dios mío! We had lost all hope of seeing our niece again,« Sebastián called out. His facial expression was transformed, relieved and confident. He seemed endlessly grateful that we had brought Eva back to them.

We heard the noise of an airplane and afterwards a loudspeaker announcement blared across the grounds of the refugee camp.

»Survival kits will be distributed soon. We should queue up,« Sebastian explained. Jacob and I looked at each other.

»Are we going to finish what we started?« he asked critically. I nodded without a word. With a heavy heart, I knew the time had come to bid farewell.

Eva immediately understood the inevitable. When I got up, she jumped off her chair and ran towards me with tears in her eyes. I knelt down and took her in my arms.

»Take good care of yourself,« I whispered into her ear before my voice faltered and I could not hold back the tears. Then I put the necklace with my mother's protective pendant, the seal of the seven archangels, around her neck.

She was anything but safe, but at least she was with her family. What future was in store for them? Most coastal cities were flooded by rising sea levels and the number of refugees grew every day. Jacob said touchingly goodbye to Eva. Afterwards he also had tears in his eyes. Eva ran to her aunt, who tried to comfort her. I turned away quickly, not to lose my composure again.

After taking our leave, we chose the direct route back to our car, which led us through an even more severely destroyed part of the city. Acrid smoke rose everywhere, making it difficult to breathe. It reeked of death and

decay. We laboriously climbed over the rubble and debris, paved our way through the apocalyptic scenario.

Somewhere at the side of the road, in front of the ruins of a multi-storied apartment building, sat a desolate man. His face was sooted and bloodstained, every breath made him tremble. Tears dropped onto his dirty, bare feet and the pistol that he was holding with both hands. After a last deep breath, he put the gun to his head. Then he pulled the trigger. His body fell lifelessly to the ground.

When the shock finally allowed this sight to reach my consciousness, I could not stop crying. Jacob took me in his arms, but I sobbed and wept even more bitterly. Downcast, we went on through the ruins of the city, moved on to our car.

»No! No, it cannot be,« I whispered, trying to deny what I saw. Next to our car, which we had left behind hardly discoverable, there was a second vehicle. The black sports car. Its driver leaned casually against the damaged motor hood and as we approached, he grinned at us in disdain. I felt the rage like in the bar when we first met him.

»You have probably strayed from the path,« he shouted mockingly at us.

How could he find us?

Jacob pressed the car keys and his bag into my hand, then he stormed off in a flash, jumping with full force against his opponent. Both crashed onto the hood. Jacob was dealing him some targeted blows, but his adversary seemed to ignore them unimpressed. With shaky hands, I tried to open the car door. I dropped the key in panic. When I picked it up again, I saw that Jacob stood up panting heavily. I finally managed to open the door. The man dressed in black grabbed Jacob by the scruff of the neck and threw him to the ground.

What could I do?

The blood was pounding in my head. Now I had a clear line of fire. I wanted to shoot at one of the sports car's tires as a warning, but underestimated the recoil of the weapon. The bullet hit our opponent's thigh and a dark gush of blood splashed onto the light sandy floor. He looked emotionlessly at his injury. Jacob took the opportunity, he sprinted towards me, grabbed the gun from my hand and pushed me into the car. I was paralyzed.

Did I actually shoot someone?

As if chased by the devil, we raced off. Then the cloud of dust split and I saw the black car chasing after us. We had a good head start, but for how long? Jacob steered the

car riskily past the cracks in the pavement. Often we only just hit the edges of the fissures.

The road on which we drove led to our original destination, the coordinates Jacob had entered into the navigation system at the beginning of our trip. The marker slowly came closer, so did the sports car in the rearview mirror.

Did the GPS give away our location? If Yuri could gain access to the target coordinates, for sure others could too. What maniac would come after us, wounded by a gunshot? The bullet could have fatally hit him.

Was I capable of killing a person?

Frustrated, I ripped the navigation system from its mount and threw it out of the window. It broke into pieces on the asphalt.

Chapter VII

We had left the city area far behind. Jacob tried to lose our tenacious pursuer, but we could not escape him. He seemed to be driving us in front of him like cattle. Could we shake him off on one of the small side streets or would we be trapped in a dead end? A repeated confrontation was probably inescapable. On a long, straight section of the road, Jacob seemed hell-bent on facing the situation, looked at his weapon on the ground and took his foot off the gas pedal. We slowed down. It was only a matter of time before the sports car would catch up with us.

But it had disappeared without a trace, as if vanished off the face of the earth. Equally as surprised as I was, Jacob searched the surroundings in the side mirrors and the rear view mirror. We drove at a moderate pace for a few minutes, skeptical whether our pursuer had finally let go of us.

Next to a steep slope, a shadow suddenly burst out of the dried bushes and crashed through the ditch onto the road

closely behind us. Startled, Jacob accelerated again, but the black car rammed us nevertheless and Jacob had problems getting the car under control.

I turned in my seat and saw the hideous grimace of our relentless pursuer, distorted by the headwind. His black stringy hair blew into his face, obviously he enjoyed playing with us. When he came closer, I reached for the gun on the floor. Again he rammed us and I almost lost my grip. Then I was able to grab the gun. Now it did not lie terrifyingly alien in my hand, instead it felt like a deadly tool that I had to use. I rested my forearms against the seat back and aimed over the barrel of the gun at the possessed man's head, a little down, to take the recoil into account this time. Could I put an end to his doings? For everyone he had exploited, tortured and abused? Slowly I bent my forefinger.

At the last moment I pushed the gun further down and fired half the magazine through our bursting rear window into the motor compartment of the black sports car. The car howled like a hit animal before it fell back behind us. A cloud of dust concealed the road. Apathetically I waited for our pursuer to reappear, but we had apparently gotten rid of him.

»Hold on!« Jacob shouted as I turned around. The metal gate of a fence raced towards us. We broke through it with an enormous clash and parts of the gate scattered in all directions. Jacob hit the brakes within sight of the next obstacle. The swirling dirt pattered against our battered rear.

»We knocked, let's see who's home,« Jacob joked to get me out of my adrenaline rush. We waited a moment, then we got out.

In the distance I could make out a freestanding building, a black monolith, which seemed strange and out of place in the barren landscape. Nothing moved, but then I discovered several small dots in the yellow sky. They seemed to have positioned themselves at an equal distance from us. »Jacob,« I whispered and pointed at the objects in the sky.

»What the hell are we doing here?« Jacob asked, extremely worried. When he had barely spoken the legitimate question, the dots in the sky began to move and grew larger in no time. They were coming towards us. We jumped back into the car and Jacob started the engine.

»There are still two security perimeters ahead of us and it will certainly not be easier to break through them,« he explained hastily. The barricades seemed much more

stable, like claws sticking out of the ground, connected with steel cables.

»Okay, what the hell!« Jacob snorted and I saw in his eyes that there was no turning back. He accelerated, shouting against the noise of the engine, »Such barricades are almost impenetrable when you ram them head-on with a vehicle. But if you hit the side at a certain angle...«

Jacob drove to the right, in a circle around the monolith, getting faster every meter. The rear drifted and I clung to my handle. With a jolt Jacob turned the steering wheel so that we hit the barrier at a flat angle at full speed. At its weak point we broke through the barricade of the second protective wall.

»If your father or anyone is in there, now would be the time to reveal themselves,« Jacob called out to me and drove another circle around the square building. The car rattled as a result of the damage to the chassis.

Only when one of the flying objects had reached us, I realized that a drone could be as big as a tank. It maneuvered sideways behind us, sliding with ease and Jacob growled angrily. Suddenly, a projectile exploded at the barricade in front of us. I was blinded by the flash of the explosion. A swelling high tone attenuated the ambient noise. Jacob pulled the steering wheel around and we

crashed into the security wall at the already heavily damaged section. The car rose up to the top and the tips of the barricade broke off beneath us. Above the apex the car front lowered and we fell to the ground. Only the seat belt prevented me from being thrown through the window. When the airbags deployed, the car broke on all sides, deforming into a wreck. We had actually overcome the last barricade.

Jacob seemed as dazed as I was, but immediately focused on loosening our seat belts. He lifted himself up on the remains of the broken dashboard and gave me a signal to brace myself as well. Freed from my belt, I crawled out of the shattered side window and fell onto the hard, sandy floor. Jacob had also pulled himself out of the car and was holding his left arm rigidly against his torso. We dragged ourselves to the outer wall of the monochrome building only a few meters away.

»Not a good idea,« Jacob commented laconically on the situation and limped unevenly behind me. The drones were nowhere to be seen or heard.

We walked along the black outer shell, which apparently absorbed the ambient light, until we found a tiny gap. Maybe this was the entrance? But neither an opening mechanism nor any traces were visible.

As I turned around to Jacob, a drone suddenly hovered down behind him silently, like a giant insect. Frightened, I took a step back, but felt the impenetrable wall. The drone floated almost motionlessly in the air and Jacob lowered his eyes as if he was giving up. He smiled.

The massive door suddenly shifted aside behind me and I fell backwards into the darkness. Due to the violent impact on the hard ground, I briefly blacked out. Lying on my back, I tried to sit up clumsily. In the glaring contrast of the incoming light I saw Jacob's blurred silhouette, behind him the dark threatening shadow of the drone. Jacob dropped to his knees and the door began to close. In panic I tried to reach the gap, but slipped on the smooth, dusty ground. The last glimmer of light disappeared and it was pitch dark.

My heart seemed to have stopped at that moment. I hardly dared to breathe, tried to suppress the emerging despair. With my fingers, I searched for a way to open the door again. The surface was cold and smooth, without any indentation. With eyes wide open I stood in the dark. Desolation and fear overwhelmed me and finally got the upper hand.

All of a sudden, with an electric whirring sound, the lighting turned on. The wall in front of me seemed impenetrable again, as if there had never been an opening and I could see no way to get to Jacob.

Forlornly I turned around and became aware of the research facility's dimensions. Built like an occult temple, monumental pillars rose to the ceiling and huge pipes formed arches between them. Eerily the dust danced in the cold, artificial light. Computers and other technical equipment stood at the columns, from which cables led to a spherical structure several meters high, consisting of intertwined pipes and complex connecting struts. I had to find a way out.

While I was looking for a way to open the entrance, I noticed an old-fashioned wooden desk on one of the pillars that did not fit into the high-tech environment. I walked in its direction and had to be careful not to slip again. On the table were a modern, semi-transparent terminal and an old picture frame with the photo of a newborn baby. At the edge of the picture I recognized a date:

»1.1.1999«

My birthday. Was this my father's desk? Beneath many dusty printouts of physical and chemical equations lay a few handwritten notes. It was his unmistakable handwriting:

»Could Oppenheimer completely rule out a chain reaction?« Was scribbled on a torn sheet. An ice-cold shiver ran down my spine when I suddenly noticed a piece of paper at the base of the futuristic terminal. The heavy stationery was the same as the letters Jacob and I had received. I wiped away the fine dust layer with my hand:

»Dear Sarah,

It is not easy to find the right words. After your mother's death, I lacked the courage and the strength.

What I am writing to you is not meant to be an apology or an excuse. I know, that I was not there for you. I also realize that you are no longer a child and live your own life.

You will wonder why I am writing to you. I hope you understand which path I have to take. Maybe you are the only person who can understand me at all.

When you read these lines, I have made the most difficult decision and ended my life.

Your father Maximilian«

With a stabbing pain my innards contracted. Desperately I tried to find answers. The shock hardly subsided.

Jacob! I have to get to Jacob!

With tears in my eyes, I pounded my fists onto the desk. The terminal suddenly turned on and the image of a hand appeared on the display. Underneath it was written:

»For a better future«

What was all that about? I struggled with myself not to break down. As the picture of the display flickered briefly, for a moment I thought, I saw Jacob crouching outside in front of the door. Maybe I lost my mind.

Questions raced through my head. What would happen if I put my hand on the terminal? Was my father really dead? But then who had led us here? There had to be an explanation, but the answers seemed unreachable. I searched the scattered schematic sketches and technical drawings on the desk. Most illustrations showed a wide opening of the building through which an air stream was drawn into the interior.

Was this machine the spark of hope, that could save Eva and her family, save everyone or would I trigger a

catastrophe with unthinkable consequences? Perhaps it was my father's intention to leave the decision to me, which he could no longer make himself. All the time I thought of Jacob, of the moments we had spent together. I would do anything to be with him again.

Seeking advice, I turned away from the desk and looked towards the entrance. Then I hesitantly pressed my shaky hand against the mark on the display. A bright white light illuminated my palm so that the bones and veins shone through. Shortly afterwards a distorted voice resounded from the loudspeakers of the large room's dark side walls:

»Atmospheric carbon division sequence initiated. Please confirm activation.«

A deep humming shook the entire building and was overlaid with a shrill air noise from all directions. Under my hand a complex graphical interface had built up, various parameters were shown in diagrams. In the center, a button with a caption flashed:

»Activation«

Were we just puppets in an ancient play whose intricate plot we could not comprehend or did I have a choice? I tried once again to weigh all the factors for my decision, but even if it was the end, it was meant to be. Regardless of the possible consequences, I believed I was doing the right thing.

Finally I touched the button. The apparatus in the middle of the building began to hum and the penetrating sound became louder and louder. The objects in the room vibrated. Hot steam hissed from the openings of the monstrous structure. It began to glow at its core, writhing like a rolled-up dragon that was about to awaken.

Intimidated, I stumbled a few steps backwards. Roaring vibrations pulsed in the air throughout the research facility, causing the structure to tremble. Due to the deafening noise, I almost lost my balance. I staggered into the direction from which I had entered. The roaring pushed aside all clear thoughts. As if stunned, I knelt down in front of the wall, tears streaming down my face. Then I closed my eyes and cried out all the anger, all the desperation until I could go on no more. My scream was lost in the noise, unheard.

Suddenly a beam of light touched my eyelids. The door truly opened. Blinded by the glistening light I could only dimly see a human shape in front of the entrance. I rose powerless and fell towards him.

Numbly, I looked into Jacob's face and the radiant sky above us.

Then there was silence...

For the end, that can be a beginning...

The plot and characters are fictitious, any similarities to actual events and living or deceased people are purely coincidental.

Machines helped translating the original text. If you find errors or have questions, any feedback is appreciated:
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Do we bear the sole responsibility for our
fateful decisions or does life not only
consist of unpredictable coincidences?

A dystopian tale based on an old prophecy that
might reveal more about the future of a changing
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