



Manifestation

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Chain Reactions

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*It was hard to see the spark
that ignited the blaze...*

Chapter I

Few days ago we first met. For the first time we laughed together, kissed, made love, as if it was always meant to be. Just we had not seen the signs of warning and hidden clues. Guided by an invisible hand, nothing could save us from our treacherous fate.

For about half an hour Sarah lay unconscious in my arms, but I lacked the strength to carry her away. Above us rose a blazing pillar of fire, like a flaming spearhead pointed towards the sky. Ash fell down on us. It crumbled between my numb fingers.

On my knees, I had tried to open the entrance to the research facility while the pursuers made of steel circled the black monolithic building. Like the maw of a monster that had risen from the abyss, it had opened up and spat Sarah out, fainting. Thereupon, the drones had disappeared without a trace. They did not want to stop us – to the contrary.

Twilight was breaking. On the horizon, clouds of dust heralded that the fateful events had not gone unnoticed.

Carefully, I turned Sarah onto her side, laid her head on her arm, gathered all my strength.

As I rose, my broken ribs shoved deeper into my insides, like blades of jagged knives. The pain permeated each fiber of my body. Every movement was more painful than the last, but I forced myself to our car, whose wreckage lay not far away at the broken barricade.

My bag was stuck behind the front seats. I had to stretch to reach it. The unspeakable pain almost overwhelmed me. With shaky hands I opened the etui, although I made a vow to myself never to touch the poison in it again. Struggling, I detached one of the glass vials from its holder, broke off its tip, and placed it to my lips. The cold, smooth liquid ran down my throat. Then the familiar burning sensation spread through my body. A whisper from the realm of the Almighty dispelled all suffering. With sharpened senses, I discerned infinite details that would otherwise remain hidden.

Fireballs shot from the glaring stream of flames above me. Tiny comets that split into even smaller fragments and burned up eventually. Thousands and thousands of stars were twinkling in the firmament, their light perhaps the last witness of their existence. I realized that even if

we seemed to be just petty sparks in a creative explosion, we still were chosen.

A voice ruined my perfect clarity. »It is done...what a sight to behold,« exclaimed the man who had been chasing us like a demonic bloodhound. His black clothes were covered with sand and fine dry dust, only the bullet wound on his thigh shone wet. He laughed like a madman who had hoped for his release in an asylum far too long.

Without turning around, I stretched my arm towards him. The gun in my hand seemed weightless and when I pulled the trigger, a shiny bullet shot out of the barrel. It penetrated the right eye of the madman and entered his skull without slowing down. His laughter died away forever before the bullet exited the back of his head, in an eruption of blood and bone. He collapsed as he was also just a man.

Like an angel fallen to earth, Sarah pushed herself up from the ground with both arms. She weakly lifted her head. Beneath her eyes, tears sketched dark furrows into the dust on her face. There was no turning back for us.

The scraping sound of tires on the sandy ground drowned out my thoughts. Six armored vehicles halted all around. Soldiers jumped out and aimed their machine

guns at us. My fingers twitched on the handle of the gun, but I let go of it. The weapon fell to the ground and seemed to also pull me down. Even before the impact, I lost consciousness.



I had waited a good hour in the morning sun in front of the airport exit.

»Welcome, my name is Jacob,« I said to greet the man with round glasses and curly gray hair as he approached me. I recognized him immediately because there was a fairly recent photo in the database.

»I'm Maximilian, but Max will do,« he replied with a smile while sweat ran down his temples. I stowed his luggage and laptop bag in the trunk.

»Is it always this hot here in the morning?« Max asked me, pulling his sweaty shirt off his stomach with two fingers.

»It's often very warm, but lately it seems even hotter,« I explained, feeling the stinging heat on my back. »Fortunately, the car has air conditioning,« I continued, as I opened the passenger door. Max dropped onto the seat, exhausted. I walked around the car, opened the driver's

door pulling the handle heated by the sun and sat behind the steering wheel.

»Should I be worried?« Max asked, spotting my handgun in its holster as I got in.

»I don't think we'll need it,« I answered honestly, although I was surprised myself to be assigned for escort duty again after a long time.

Max seemed tired and preoccupied with his own thoughts as we drove off.

»Actually, my name is בִּקְעִי, but I often work for foreign clients, so Jacob is easier as well,« I explained, but Max just stared at my gun. He asked, lost in thought:

»What is it like to hold the power over life and death in your hands?«

Involuntarily, I thought of the first shot I had fired from my father's gun, excited and frightened. Remembered the dented tin can that I eventually hit and the distraught look on the young soldier's face that haunted me time and again in my sleep.

»You hardly get used to it,« I answered Max, who looked like he could not point a gun at anyone.

We remained silent for the longest part of the drive. It was a pleasant quiet, which made unnecessary words obsolete. The low hum of the engine and the steady traffic

rushing by were unusually relaxing. Exceptionally, there was no traffic jam and we got closer to our destination on schedule.

After a few minutes we reached the exit towards the center. Cranes rose into the sky, encircling the old core of the city. On the fences of the construction sites, gigantic advertising signs depicted what ambitious projects were planned here. The residential and office complexes ought to have Babylonian magnitudes. Nothing had been learned from the sins of the past. For many investors, housing was only a lucrative investment and rising prices were inevitable. The clients of the security company I had been recruited by often were the same ones as behind such large-scale projects.

»A friend of mine bought several apartments here, although they haven't even been built yet. It's all about money,« I said to Max, curious to see if I was correct about the reason for his visit.

»Yes, even in science it's mostly about finances and balances,« Max agreed with me, pondering for a moment. »Money is only a medium of exchange whose value and power we determine ourselves. It should play a subordinate role whenever important projects benefit eve-

ryone!« He sounded like he had given this lecture many times before. Thereupon the tone of his voice changed.

»Those who want everyone to be well have the hardest time in this world. Even the best intentions can turn into the opposite. That's probably human nature.«

»We are almost there,« I informed Max as I tried to interpret the directions provided by the parking guidance system. He sat upright and readjusted his glasses.

The exhibition center in the middle of the construction area was deserted, as at the moment only occasional conferences took place. I stopped in front of the main entrance of the congress building.

»I need my laptop,« Max said nervously as he got out.

»Yes, of course,« I replied surprised, because I had almost forgotten that the laptop bag was in the trunk. I quickly jumped out the door, opened the trunk lid and handed him the bag.

»Good luck!« I wished Max, who nodded at me with a tortured smile. He was obviously not the kind of person who liked to speak in front of many listeners, but rather someone who wanted to make himself invisible using a magic ring in such situations. Max vanished into the building.

I parked the rental car near the main entrance behind a small hedge that was just high enough to provide some shade. Inconspicuously, I took my weapon from the holster and turned it in my hands. It consisted almost entirely of hard plastic, was astonishingly light and due to the increased capacity of the magazine, the pistol had been advertised as a super weapon for operations with »manageable threat potential«. Without a safety lever, it was immediately ready for use, but no matter what properties a weapon possessed, it rarely served only for deterrence. Sooner or later, you had to choose between life and death. Maybe Max could even tell that I had to decide too many times. From the beginning, however, I was skeptical whether I was able to do what was necessary outside the army, for money.

The midday sun was now almost vertical and the asphalt flickered in the dry heat. The constant draft through the open car windows made it just bearable in the rental car. I could have left the engine and the air conditioning running, but this already was an almost too comfortable job.

Over time, I had become used to endless waiting, but I tried to stay vigilant nonetheless. During some operations, a few seconds of negligence would have been fatal.

No one had entered or left the building in the meantime. Finally, the reflection of the sun on the front door blinded me and Max stepped out. I did not know what project he was hoping to get funding for, but apparently this venture was important enough that someone was concerned about his personal safety. To tell him my position, I briefly sounded the car horn, then I started the engine. Immediately, the cool air from the vents was noticeable. Max flung the passenger door open and threw his laptop bag onto the back seat as he got in.

»How did it go?« I asked rather rhetorically.

»Like taking away bananas from a bunch of monkeys! They need time to think?! As if we hadn't lost enough time already!« ranted Max, who had a flushed head.

»How about we drive to the hotel and have something to eat?« I suggested.

»Yes, fine with me. Then we'll save the world another day!« Max answered bitterly and tried to cool himself down with the air flow of the air conditioning. I put the car into gear.

»Sometimes you can't influence the course of events and can only wait and see how things turn out,« I replied precociously with a cautious grin.

Max squinted one of his eyes and glared at me over his glasses with the other. Panting, he breathed out a small laugh. Before he could respond, I rapidly drove off. Max just shook his head.

We met in the hotel's restaurant after Max had checked in and freshened up. I was plagued by a guilty conscience, as I was not used to such luxury. I often stayed in an old garage when I was in the area, even though my family's house was in a small suburb of the city.

It was early evening, so the restaurant was still empty. The waitress behind the long, black lacquered counter dried a few glasses and gave us a friendly nod as we sat down on bar stools at one of the high dining tables. Small metallic lamps were attached to the ceiling above with chains. Three large fans rotated slowly between the fixings, preventing the sticky air from coming to a halt.

»Good evening. The kitchen opens in half an hour, but how about a few drinks?« the young woman asked when she came to our table.

»Good evening!« Max pushed his glasses up on his nose. He looked at the shelf filled with spirits and announced exuberantly, like a teenager on a school trip, »I'll take a double whiskey – and my friend here?«

»A regular Coke, please,« I said as I continued to study the menu.

»Coming right up!« The waitress turned to the bar spiritedly.

»This young lady would have liked a little more attention from you,« Max said, grinning broadly.

Surprised, I looked at the waitress, who put our drinks on a tray at the bar and smiled shyly at me for a moment.

»Or are you already spoken for?« Max dug deeper.

»No, there is no one,« I had to admit, repressing a familiar feeling of loneliness that I could not deny.

When the young woman put the glasses in front of us, she indeed turned more towards me than to Max. She tucked the serving tray under her arm and stood beside the table for a few seconds expectantly.

»Enjoy! I'll check on you later,« she ended the awkward situation without further ado and returned to her tasks.

»That won't do, Romeo! One might think that was intentional,« Max quipped, raising his glass.

»I still remember meeting my wife in college...« He took a good sip.

Even though we did not know each other for long, Max assessed me correctly. With my dismissive attitude, I sabotaged all relationships before initiation.

In a soldier's family, it was almost inevitable that someone would be left alone, whether for a while or, at worst, forever. My mother cried all night long when my father left for battle and we did not know when and if he would come back. She could only persevere and despair. To me, it seemed irresponsible to put someone in that position.

Max's relaxed mood had suddenly vanished and his face looked as if he had taken off a laughing mask. With a petrified, empty gaze, he waved his glass and explained quietly, »Part of me died with my wife and what's left is struggling to survive. Cancer is an insidious disease. Vacillating between hope and desperation destroys everything. Even the last precious moments that would have remained. Makes you wish you would have seen its beginnings. The first cancer cell before it could spread...«

The dismal description of his loss hit me almost without cover. Max seemed to have no inhibitions about talking to me freely. But I also was not able to keep the usual professional distance from him. Our conversation

felt like a talk between old friends who had known each other for a long time.

He swallowed hard and lowered his eyes. »At some point you have to realize that you can't protect the ones you love. You try to be there for them and even at that you fail.«

Without wanting to reveal too much about myself, I replied, »I know how tough it is to lose someone, even if there is more hate than love.«

Max tried strenuously to conclude from my statement to his situation, and finally said, »My daughter probably thinks I just abandoned her. During the time when she would have needed me the most.« After a short pause, he continued, »It's hard to bear when you are constantly reminded of a loved one you've lost. Sarah is certainly not aware how much she resembles her mother. Her eyes, her smile, the way she talks – when you recognize something about someone you miss endlessly all the time.«

Although I was not quite convinced myself, I assured him, » You forgive your parents for their mistakes, even if it takes some time.«

Max nodded repeatedly as if he had to defend my words against battalions of self-reproaches. With a lowered gaze, he then explained, »Through their faults

and flaws, parents inevitably harm their children, shaping them for life as much as through care and love. It is probably biologically as well as psychologically a combination of these faults and flaws, virtues and strengths that make us who we are.«

His eyes sparkled behind the round glasses and a smile cautiously appeared at the corners of his mouth.

»I have often doubted whether I am suitable as a father, whether one should even bring children into this world. After Sarah's birth, all doubts were wiped out and when she first said ‚Dad‘, my skepticism seemed completely unfounded – now she's grown up.«

Max was certainly not an easy person, but surely not a bad father either. Maybe his daughter could see that despite everything.

Gradually, the restaurant began to fill up. The waitress stretched and took a remote control from the shelf at the bar to turn on the TV above it. We both looked at the screen automatically. Only briefly some men in full-body protective suits were shown, then the news switched to sports.

»Humanity will have to face some more challenges,« Max prophesied with a raised eyebrow.

»Anyway, we're here to eat,« he tried to change the subject and leafed through the menu.

»Few people are aware of how much resources are needed for a steak. Apart from the fact that you have to slaughter an animal,« Max pointed out.

Without having to defend myself, I replied angrily, »On my second assignment, enemy militias had us pinned down for weeks, for food we wouldn't have only killed an animal.« Max rolled his eyes and concluded reproachfully, »Ah, so for you it's just another ticket to hell?!«

After some silence, he said to pacify me, »Forgive me, I shouldn't judge you.«

Although I wanted to eat a rump steak, I ordered pasta with salad instead. Max opted for a ratatouille.

The more crowded the restaurant became, the more unpleasant the noise level increased. The waitress put our dishes on the table, visibly stressed, as she walked by. You had to shout over the noise if you wanted to talk, so we ate without talking. I tried to ignore the incoherent snippets of conversation from the neighboring tables.

When the hustle and bustle had subsided, the waitress came to our table to clear the dishes.

»Did you enjoy?« she asked smiling charmingly again.

»Yes, it was excellent. But I'll have another drink, so I can sleep better,« Max replied. The young woman looked at me, balancing the plates on her arm.

»Another Coke for me, please,« I said nodding with satisfaction as the food was really good.

»A double whiskey and a regular Coke,« the waitress repeated our order, went to the neighboring table and placed the still half-full plates on her forearms as well. Transporting them like this required some skill and practice.

»My daughter dislikes alcohol. You two would be a good match,« Max claimed watching the waitress walk away.

»Well, if you can tell as a father at all,« he had to admit.

The waitress brought the drinks we had ordered and after she had exhaled deeply, she entrusted to us:

»Almost survived this day. I just have to clean up.«

She and Max seemed to expect a suitable answer from me, but I only nodded to her with a hesitant smile.

»My friend seems to have lost his tongue today,« Max concluded mockingly. The waitress laughed heartily and was apparently satisfied with this explanation.

Max emptied his glass in a few gulps. He paid the bill and gave a generous tip. Although the food could be billed as expenses without any problems, he insisted.

»Have a nice evening, you two,« the waitress said with a cheeky wink as we walked past the bar counter towards the exit.

»Probably the young lady thinks we are dating,« Max joked, laughing loudly so that the last guests in the restaurant noticed us.

I looked at the clock. It was just before nine. My attempts to sleep early were usually punished by a particularly restless night, so it made little sense to go to my room yet.

»I'm going to roam around town a little,« I said, and Max was considering to join. The whiskey kicked in, though. With his eyes closed, he nodded in agreement and phrased far more slowly than usual: »It was good to talk. Maybe...tomorrow things are going better than today.«

In the rental car I drove through the industrial area outside the city. The dark blue sky faded smoothly into a reddish-yellow stripe on the horizon. Finally, I stopped in the parking lot of a supermarket. Even though I was actually

well fed, something sweet or to nibble on seemed tempting. A mild breeze blew away the heat of the day.

Two bicycles, packed with saddlebags, leaned against the shelter for the shopping trolleys. A man with an unkempt full beard sat on a small wall next to the separate sliding doors for entry and exit. He was talking insistently to a girl, presumably his daughter.. She stood in front of him and turned away. I paid little attention to the scene and entered the supermarket, strolling through the rows for a while. The shelves were filled up to the edge and, as usual, it was hard for me to decide.

Near the entrance, I noticed the girl standing »inconspicuously« next to the sliding door. She was no more than thirteen and clutching some groceries. You could tell she was struggling with her conscience. I stopped in the aisle at one of the shelves. The girl was waiting nervously that someone entered the shop, which would open the sliding door at the entrance and allow her to get outside. Again and again she looked anxiously towards the cashiers, but nobody noticed her for the time being.

I approached her purposefully.

»Don't do anything stupid,« I said quietly, holding out a banknote that should be more than enough for her few

things. Startled, she stared at me. I could see the tension in her face ease. With teary eyes, she whispered, »Thank you.« She then went to the checkout to pay.

Max's words immediately came to mind. It was not only our parents who could have a formative influence. Random situations and encounters were often opportunities for change. However, you had to possibly choose an unknown or uncomfortable path. Maybe I had already missed too many opportunities in my life to take another route. It was a burden having to choose between countless possibilities every day without being able to foresee their consequences. It seemed easier to follow orders that were supposed to relieve you of the responsibility for your actions. In the military, I had not questioned whether I was doing the right thing.

In the end, I decided not to buy anything and to return to the hotel. The black of the night would not be long in coming.

I was glad that there was not a soul to be seen at the reception of the hotel so I could get to my room without meeting anyone. Dead tired, I sat down on the foot of the bed and took off my shoes. Fragments of the day's thoughts and conversations continuously raced through

my mind, but I could hardly keep my eyes open, wanted only to sleep – and forget.

My heart pounded like salvos from a rapid fire rifle. The smell of burnt skin and hair in the sooty smoke seemed real, even though I knew that everything existed only in my head. As well as the pictures of comrades who could probably never be buried deep enough.

If there was a hell, as the Christians imagined, then humans created an image of it during war as soon as they gave free rein to their demons. Not quite back in reality, I stumbled to the window and pulled it wide open to let the cool morning air in. The sun was already deep red on the horizon, but the haze of the night still covered the dark asphalt of the streets. They were deserted and peaceful.

»A new day is a new beginning,« my mother had always said. »A chance to make everything better«. However, people stuck to their ways, even if they were ruinous. It could even be normality when grenades exploded all around. In mortal danger, you felt alive.

A text message made my smartphone blink persistently:

»Hello comrade, it's good to have you on the team!?!«
Below that, an animated image of a sword-wielding horse.

Typical Yuri. He had no clue what it was really like, however, covert warfare via computers often seemed more effective compared to open conflicts with firearms. Already as a teenager, Yuri had proven his skills by gaining access to highly sensitive military projects. He and Max were similar due to their eccentric nature. But Max was more sensitive, seemed almost fragile. Like someone who needed to be protected from himself. Even though it was quite early, I decided to take a shower and check on him afterwards.

I knocked softly but clearly audibly on Max's door, then I waited. A short time later I heard a dull rumbling from inside, immediately followed by faint cursing. The door slowly opened. The windows were darkened and Max was noticeably struggling to keep his swollen eyes open. His curly hair stuck out in all directions.

»Did I oversleep?« he asked in a hoarse voice.

As quietly as possible, I replied, »Don't worry, there's still plenty of time. I'm gonna enter the battle at the breakfast buffet already. You can join whenever you feel like it.«

»Give me ten minutes,« Max murmured, turned swaying and disappeared into the darkness of the room.

Gently I closed the door behind him. Apparently he had looted the minibar during the night and it was better to check on him later. Alcohol could cloud even the sharpest mind. An effect I considered negative, but many longed for. Losing inhibitions and control while intoxicated had too often ended in tragedy.

Max had later appeared at the breakfast buffet on his own. After two cups of black coffee and a glass of tomato juice, he gradually recovered. Resting his head on his forearms, he kept muttering, »Everything has a price.«

That morning, as the day before, we drove to the congress building and I waited in the searing heat inside the car. The outside temperature had already climbed to more than thirty degrees in the shade. I was preoccupied wondering whether I was supposed to look after Max, because they knew I would stay sober. Yuri was pestering me with cryptic text messages and I was relieved when Max and a group of suits finally came out of the building. After they had said goodbye, Max immediately rushed towards me. When he got in, he reported out of breath:

»They pay...8 billion...per year until completion!« He flipped open his laptop and continued in a shaky voice,

»There's still hope!« His presentation showed images of an ominous spherical apparatus inside a cuboid building.

*It is not easy to perceive the sin,
inflaming the heart...*

Chapter II

Stripped of all strength, I awoke lightly dressed on a hard metallic surface that radiated an icy cold. Only the taste of iron in my dry mouth was still a sign of my internal injuries. The precious poison had done its work. This time there was no one to admonish me because of the enormous price of an application, but still someone had paid for it. Through the glass pane to the adjacent treatment room I saw the lifeless body lying there, covered with a thin cloth. Like a fleeting dream, the memory of my deed flashed before my eyes. He certainly deserved death more than others, but it might also have been an innocent victim.

Sarah had stayed by my side. With her legs tucked up, she sat on a chair next to me, her face buried between her crossed arms. The wild hair only revealed her ear and part of her neck. As I sat up, a dizziness swirled my sensory perception. Carefully I touched Sarah and immediately she raised her head startled. In her eyes, despair seemed to only fade away slowly. With her fingertips, she brushed

tears from her face. Sarah was unusually reluctant. Apparently, I seemed as fragile as I felt.

»I thought I'd lost you too,« she sobbed. As if I were a ghost that would vanish into thin air at any moment, she put her hand on my cheek.

»I found his suicide note. There was no other way...« Her words were drowned in a flood of tears. My mind was not able to properly link their meaning. The very attempt made my skull pound as if it was going to explode. A soldier walked past the doors of the treatment rooms. Sarah noticed my nervousness and tried to calm me down.

»They probably have more important things to do and want to deal with us later. One of the soldiers seems to know you,« she whispered. Sarah vividly described what had happened inside the monolith and how she had set the machine in motion to get outside – back to me.

»What have I done?« she asked desperately as someone approached the door.

»There they are, our two mischief-makers! My name is Balthazar. Jacob, I hope I don't have to introduce myself to you after what we've been through together!« the newly appointed major said as he entered the room. Inevitably, I remembered the chaotic missions in North Africa.

»How could someone forget all that?« I asked, glad to see my former comrade in arms again. It was often hard to tell in a confusing conflict, but at the time I could trust him. Balthazar had made a career and skipped several military ranks, although he was not much older than me.

»It's a small world, I didn't think I'd meet you here,« he admitted with doubt in his voice. »Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, the situation is relatively clear. Obviously you were attacked by that one,« he nodded his head at the dead man in the next room. »And something must have gotten out of control. Nevertheless, I would have a few questions that I hope you can answer.«

I realized once again that it almost was a tradition in the military to twist the truth in order to justify violence, destruction and death. With his most charming smile, Balthazar suggested, »Maybe the lady can accompany me first and tell her version?! I promise to bring her back to you soon.«

Balthazar politely held the door open for Sarah. She followed his invitation, but on her way out she insecurely sought eye contact with me. Encouragingly, I nodded at her, feeling my battered spine. Then the door closed behind them.

It was a bad feeling to wake up somewhere not knowing how you had gotten there. Especially in a place like this. Medical equipment covered with transparent tarps had been placed haphazardly around the operating table in the middle of the treatment room. The lower half of the bare walls was tiled, the rest and the high ceiling simply painted gray. Probably these sterile, uncomfortable rooms were the very last that countless soldiers got to see. However, the stainless steel furniture shone as if it had hardly been used so far. My bags had been placed next to a chair on which clean clothes lay accurately folded. With numb arms, I put on my jeans, T-shirt and the dark red hoodie, squeezed my feet into my shoes awkwardly without unlacing them.

I made sure that neither cameras were installed nor guards posted in the hallway. The door to the second treatment room was not locked, so I jerked it open just a crack, squeezed through, and closed it quickly behind me.

The »black devil,« as Eva's uncle called him, lay motionless on a stretcher, like the one from which I had previously risen. Despite closed eyes and lips, his laughter echoed in my head. His skin was covered with tattoos, his sunken face pale and bloodless, marked by conflicts. He

now seemed strangely at peace, though, as if death was his salvation. In a bowl next to the open skull lay an implant, covered with bloody tissue. An artificial connection between the human world of thought and the universe of ones and zeros, the interface to a boundless network. Maybe he was more than just a man after all.

His other belongings were on a small table. A black snakeskin wallet, identification documents as well as credit cards with various names on them and a folded piece of paper. When I heard voices in the hallway, I quickly put it in my pocket and hurried to the door. I was just able to close it before Sarah walked around the corner accompanied by Balthazar. They both looked at me worriedly because I tried hard to hide my breathlessness.

»Back on your feet, Jacob? You should still take it easy,« Balthazar shouted out loud across the hall.

»All right, all the better, then we can talk directly,« he said much more quietly afterwards.

He led us to his quarters, which were located in a secluded part of the building. The room was spartan, as it was common in the military. Nevertheless, Balthazar had put up pictures of his family.

»It's all a bit provisional. We had to reactivate the facility on short notice,« he explained, pulling two of the chairs slightly from a small meeting table.

»Please take a seat, we'll get to the unofficial part now.« We sat down and Balthazar leaned against the wall. With a serious tone he made us understand:

»What I am about to tell you, stays between us. I hope that's clear!« Sarah looked at me and we nodded in agreement.

»As I explained already to Sarah, we are here because of the earthquake and by chance noticed your little firework. After we picked you up, we immediately received orders to withdraw. That came from the very top of the chain of command, which of course makes me curious.« Balthazar turned to Sarah: »We don't have any information about the project your father worked on. If even we don't have data about it, I tend to be cautious. I have a responsibility for my people, so I should know what I'm dealing with.«

He looked at me critically to interpret my reaction. Shrugging my shoulders, I said, »We have no idea what we've gotten ourselves into.«

Whether the letters that had brought us together originated from Max, I couldn't even tell. There was only

one thing I was sure of. Sarah was lost in thought and looked up when she noticed that I was smiling at her.

»Maybe Yuri can help us,« she said.

»What is the crazy Russian doing?« Balthazar wanted to know, apparently still remembering too well his arguments with our mutual acquaintance.

»He hasn't changed much. I'm afraid that his answers won't please any of us,« I replied as diplomatically as possible. However, it seemed reasonable for me to screen a few things first.

Sarah then asked with an exaggerated smile, »May we perhaps borrow a car? We'll return it without a scratch.«

Before answering, Balthazar pondered for a moment: »My gut tells me that I should help you. So if you need wheels, take one of the cars from our fleet of vehicles. But please keep me in the loop on whatever you find out.«

Without the mandatory paperwork, a supply officer handed us the car keys. The SUV stood in a straight line with eight identical vehicles. Its armor could be deduced from the bulky chassis. After placing my bags in the trunk, I checked their contents out of habit. Nothing seemed to be missing except my gun.

»I think it would be better if I drive,« Sarah suggested, grinning provocatively.

»Yes, maybe it's better,« I replied with a sigh. Involuntarily, the image of my car came into my head, which had served me faithfully for years and was now only scrap. We got into the vehicle and Sarah pressed the start button.

»I think this thing wants to drive by itself,« she quickly realized as the modern onboard instruments turned on. She stared suspiciously at the map of the large built-in screen in the center of the dashboard, so I calmly explained:

»From someone who can gain access to this, military navigation system, nothing is safe anymore anyway.« As soon as I typed in Yuri's address, the car started moving. Startled, Sarah lifted her hands from the steering wheel and immediately grabbed it again, so that the energetic warning tone fell silent. She sat tensely behind the wheel as we drove past barracks and olive green military tents.

Soldiers were loading trucks with humanitarian supplies and equipment. Although weapons had more often become necessary in relief operations for security reasons, none were to be seen.

Suddenly our vehicle braked abruptly as a neglected stray dog crossed the way ahead of us.

»You can only trust that IT will make the right decisions,« Sarah said thoughtfully, then we rolled along and quickly reached a narrow, dusty road. The vehicle accelerated up to speed limit. Slowly, Sarah seemed to loosen up, but it was not easy for her to get used to the peculiar driving experience. The electric motor whirred barely perceptibly, only the noise of the tires could be heard. There was not a single cloud in the sky. As far as the eye could see, there were only withered bushes, rocks and bare mountains. The vehicle's tinted windows and automatic air conditioning protected us from the merciless heat. It was hard to imagine that years ago the area could still be counted among the temperate climate zones. Everything changed far too quickly.

Sarah's absent, empty gaze told me that her thoughts were elsewhere. She narrowed her eyes as we passed bright rock formations whose glaring light reflections blinded us. Her delicate, pretty face had few features of her father's – probably she indeed resembled her mother.

Puzzled, Sarah turned to me, as she noticed that I was looking at her for a while.

»What is it?!« she asked, smiling in embarrassment.

»It's hard to believe we met just a few days ago,« I put my immediate thoughts into words. Sarah seemed to recall that moment vividly and said with a first happy, then melancholic expression: »Somehow I had the feeling to have known you for a long time. But it also seems to me that we have lost so much time...«

An acoustic alert and a female voice interrupted our conversation: »Attention! A high level of emotionality when driving increases the risk of an accident. Please leave the driving to the autonomous vehicle control system until you have calmed down.« Sarah shook her head and stared defiantly through the windshield at the road ahead.

»I know what you mean,« I replied. Her smile seemed as familiar as if I had seen it every day for the past few years without that it ever could lose its effect.

I looked for my smartphone in my bag and turned it on to send Yuri a text message: »We are on the way back. Have more questions than answers.« Shortly afterwards, I received a QR code without words. Yuri could be relied on to be at home since his general wariness had taken on paranoid traits.

A summery scent of hay and fruit wafted into the car as I got out to open the gate on the way to Yuri's ranch. The golden light of the low sun made the trees on the meadows cast long shadows.

Greta was expecting our arrival. She stood in front of the door and greeted us effusively: »Hello you two, it's good to see you! Have you found Eva's family?«

»Hello, Greta. Yes, there is much to tell,« replied Sarah, who found it surprisingly easy to treat her like a human being. Even Yuri came out of the house to welcome us with one of his typical comments:

»Nice car! In the face of climate change, electric cars are as good as the indulgence trade in the Middle Ages – for an eco-friendly conscience. The old-fashioned production of electricity and the climate-damaging exploitation of resources during manufacturing are concealed.«

However, there was also good news: »You're right on time, dinner is almost ready.« He eyed me skeptically.

»You've looked better, Jacob. Our stew is an old Russian family recipe and is said to have brought the dead back to life.«

Yuri probably already knew what had happened, wherever he got his information from.

We followed Greta and Yuri into the house. Again, it took me some effort to walk through the beaded bamboo curtain at the end of the dark hallway, as it reminded me of vines that housed spiders, snakes, and other jungle dwellers. The cable harnesses on the floor in the living room were just as treacherous tripping hazards as the roots of the tropical jungle.

In Yuri's charming kitchen, a large bulbous pot stood in the middle of the set table. After we had sat down, Greta filled the soup plates with a ladle and Yuri gave us pieces of the freshly baked cornbread. The vegetable stew was so rich that I was full after one plate, but nevertheless I asked for a second helping. Meanwhile, Sarah wistfully told how we had found Eva's family.

»Sarah, do you miss Eva?« Greta asked freely. To gather herself, Sarah waited a moment. She replied with compressed lips and damp eyes that showed she had to suppress her emotions, »Yeah, but I hope she's okay.«

»I'm sure she would have appreciated the good food,« I interjected, realizing that I was missing Eva as well.

Yuri slurped the last bit of soup from his plate and then explained, »I have gone over many possibilities as to why you found Eva in that van with those pigs. Domestic

pigs have neural structures similar to humans. Therefore, interfaces linking the brain and computers are tested on them. Logically, at some point you will also need human subjects for such experiments.«

The military had also been experimenting with these questionable technologies. A bitter fate from which we had probably saved Eva.

Yuri's words seemed to encourage Sarah to recount the events that followed. She captivatingly told us how the black devil tracked and then chased us, even though he was wounded by her shot. At the same time, it occurred to me that perhaps his implant had driven him insane.

Yuri looked at me reproachfully, while Sarah described our intrusion into the research facility on the run from the drones. But even he was moved when she narrated agitatedly how we were separated and she found her father's letter. Sarah asked him for a piece of paper and a pen. From memory, she drew a detailed copy of the schematic diagram she had seen on the wooden desk. Yuri studied the sketch with enthusiasm and speculated about the function of the facility:

»Your father is a genius! The system splits carbon from carbon dioxide in the air.«

It was hard for Sarah to explain why she had put her hand on the terminal and thus activated the system.

»The future lies in your hands,« I quoted from one of the letters. Sarah looked me in the eye and nodded.

»I have forgotten something important,« she remarked, and with a grin she drew a stick figure in front of the entrance to the facility, attacked by a monstrous insect. Yuri laughed out loud when he understood what the scene was supposed to depict.

Only with great difficulty was Sarah then able to put her feelings during the seemingly hopeless situation into words before the exit finally opened and she fell into my arms.

After that, everybody expected me to continue the story, but I could not convey to anyone why I had killed our pursuer. I had no explanation. So I clumsily changed the subject: »We can't thank you enough for your hospitality, by the way. Right now, though, I'd be happy to have a hot bath and a soft bed.« My conspicuous diversion seemed to baffle Yuri in particular. Greta apparently understood it as a prompt to clear the table. Before we could offer our help, she easily placed all the plates on one arm, grabbed the soup pot by the handle, and put the dishes into the dishwasher. Then she turned towards us

again: »You know where you can find the bathroom. Your bed is already made. I wish you a good night.« Sarah was surprised by the sudden end of the conversation, but she reacted with a smile:

»Thank you, good night then.«

»Yes...sleep well,« Yuri said thoughtfully, as if he was stuck at the end of the narrative. We packed our bags and went upstairs.

In the bathroom mirror, I examined the dark blue bruises on the side of my torso while Sarah ran the bath for us. Even when I pressed on the injuries, they hardly hurt anymore. Incredible how the healing process was accelerated.

Sarah undressed and got into the tub. I followed her and she briefly submerged. Her head disappeared behind a mountain of foam. With a tired, worried look on her face, she asked me as she emerged, »Do you think Eva is really okay?«

»Taking her to her family was the right decision. What else could we have done?« I asked as a counter question to which I did not expect an answer. The two of us almost fell asleep in the warm water. We dried ourselves, wrapped in towels and tiptoed to bed.

»Are you asleep yet?« Sarah whispered, and I could no longer detect any tiredness in her voice.

»No, I can't sleep,« I replied instantly. Sarah turned towards me and snuggled her warm, soft body against my side. She moved her bent leg playfully up and down on my thigh. With her hand she stroked my chest and kissed me tenderly. In the half-light, her eyes sparkled, wild and vulnerable. I returned her kisses, letting my lips wander over her neck. Entwined, we rolled in bed. Sarah enjoyed my intimate touches, breathing uncontrollably, full of devotion. Intoxicated by the excitement, she sighed softly, then straightened up and stripped away the towel. The incident light shone on her pale skin, caressing her beguiling curves. She gently sat down on my lap, moving gracefully and slowly. Her breasts swayed to the rhythm of her body. I stroked her belly with my hand, along her sides and fondled her, gripping her hips and gently supporting her demanding, lustful movements. Sarah lowered her head so that her curls danced in front of her closed eyes. Filled with desire, she moaned restrainedly. I pulled her to me and felt her glowing skin on mine. In unbridled sensual unison, passion overwhelmed us with every heartbeat, rising to ecstasy.

Only we seemed to matter. It was easy to believe. Even though this night was perhaps just a short escape from reality, being with Sarah felt right. I tried to hold onto that thought, imagining we could start over somewhere. Little by little, fatigue supplanted all illusions. My restless subconscious was just waiting to reproach me with my sins.

Sarah slept uneasily next to me, breathing shallowly and quickly, apparently long since caught in a dream.

»Jacob!« she sighed quietly. I gently touched her shoulder.

»I'm here,« I whispered, unsure if I should wake her up, as she seemed to calm down. Suddenly Sarah started up from her sleep with a loud gasp, as if she had been holding her breath for minutes. She sat upright in bed and crossed her arms, groping over her shoulders with her hands. I also sat up and carefully put the blanket around her with my arm, feeling that her whole body was tense.

»Everything was ablaze. I could feel my flesh burn,« she described her nightmare to me in a brittle voice.

»Because of me. Because I set it in motion,« she whispered quietly so that no one but me could hear. Without talking, we sat in bed for some time. Despite the worries and the uncertainty, I was happy – with her.

The next morning I was awakened by a burning cough. Sarah had woken up too and put on my T-shirt. Sleepily she embraced me, rested her cheek on my bare back. Her touch alone seemed to soothe the urge to cough. The stinging in my lungs, did not subside, however, until I drank water from the faucet in the bathroom.

I felt drained of energy and wished I knew with a clear goal in mind what the next steps would be. Wanted to believe that the whole world was at our feet. But life was what it is – an endless sequence of choices.

Sarah's nightmare also overshadowed our intimate connection through the pleasant part of the night. We barely exchanged words, got dressed and went downstairs to escape the meaningful silence.

On the large screen in the living room, Yuri blatantly looked at pictures of a corpse. I recognized the religious symbols and distinctive marks of military units – tattoos of the man I had shot. The repulsive autopsy photos added to our already gloomy mood.

Nevertheless, Sarah told about her dream. She blamed herself for activating the mysterious system.

»To judge, one should know the background,« Yuri stated, like a smug lawyer in court.

»Already during your last, unexpected visit, I suspected that there was more to it. I've had plenty of time to think about how everything falls into place – seemingly by coincidence.« Without allowing any questions from us, he kept talking.

»The artificial intelligence I developed for a strategy game was optimized for real military purposes. Created to exploit human weaknesses, Adversus had a penchant for psychological games. His superiority was based on predictions of the highest probability and the ability to manipulate anyone.«

Sarah was horrified after hearing the name of the AI. With a manic glint in his wide open eyes, Yuri got worked up, showing us his true colors.

»When the others understood how much potential this almost perfect artificial being had, they got scared and demanded the immediate termination of the project. I was supposed to destroy my creation because it was too perfect. But instead, back then, I gave Adversus what makes us equal – a free will.« Condescendingly, he added, »Humans believe that the future is unpredictable. If

Adversus has planned all this, then it is naive to think you could do anything about it. Whatever role you play.«

He took a deep breath and finally said, »It's not easy to take responsibility for your decisions and admit your mistakes. In this world, you are not easily forgiven.«

Yuri's words hit Sarah hard, so she began to cry. He dared to act as judge, although he had only ever observed and evaluated from a safe distance, while others were torn apart by mines. An untamable rage surged up within me, coursing through my entire body. I rammed Yuri with my left forearm, tightened all the muscles and wanted to punch him. He had held his breath and seemed to be expecting my blows without trying to protect himself from them. As if he was aware that he had deserved my wrath. I felt the blood pounding in my veins.

»Please stop, Jacob,« Sarah whispered to calm me down. She placed her hand gently on my back. Abruptly, I reduced the pressure of my arm on Yuri's chest and turned towards her. Greta stood as if rooted to the spot in the doorway, staring at us with her false eyes.

»The past catches up with us, no matter how long or where we run from it,« Yuri said, breathing heavily, adjusting his glasses that hung askew on his nose. I felt as if I were caught in crossfire, alone in the open.

»I need some fresh air!« I snorted. On my way out, I knocked the blasted beaded curtain aside. But it instantly bounced back.

My hands were shaking.

*It was easy to lose the faith,
damning all souls from the start...*

Chapter III

Unleashing this artificial intelligence was not a forgivable error, but madness. No one seemed immune to it. Incessantly gnawing at the dams of reason and reality, blurring their barely discernible, fragile boundaries. Possession by demons or the devil was just an old expression of what was lurking in everyone's mind. Yuri joined those who had fallen victim to it – perhaps Max as well.

Sarah quietly stepped out of the house. She silently closed the door behind her. I unfolded the crumpled piece of paper I had found among our pursuer's possessions. In between scribbles, cryptic symbols and drawings of ominous, mad eyes, there was a poem.

»The black devil...he had this with him,« I said to Sarah and read it to her:

»Born of existence's endless distress
Filled with despair and bitterness
Drawn by its summoning call
Into the depth the last tear shall fall«

The blood seemed to be escaping from Sarah's face at that moment. She turned white as snow, her eyes twitching, searching for help.

»My mother...loved poems. Those are the last lines of her farewell letter. From where...«, Sarah stammered as she sat down dazed. Before she could utter the question, her repressed pain overwhelmed her. Tears dripped from her eyes without a change in her facial expression. I knelt in front of her and took her hand, but had neither answers nor words of comfort.

»She could no longer bear the way we looked at her,« Sarah tried to make me understand. The memory almost seemed to break her.

Max had often spoken of damned souls who could not find peace, but had never confided in me that Sarah's mother had ended her life herself.

Although it probably could not help at that moment, I said, »Pain and suffering change people until they are someone else.« It was no consolation, only the truth. In the face of their inevitable fate, too many had already taken their own lives. If you gave up all hope, then the last step seemed obvious, even if you were supposedly threatened by eternal damnation.

As it was handed down, it kept my mother from even thinking about it. For her, the holy scriptures were not just stories and anecdotes, but a collection of exalted wisdom and immutable commandments to be followed verbatim. Rarely did she contradict my father, but when he quoted from religious texts, they could fervently argue about which were the wisest and most important.

It was said that everyone would only be burdened with as much as one could bear. Could the mind, however, without external influence, decide at any time on life or death of its own body – who would still be alive?

»Before I went to sleep, my mother often read me stories and poems,« Sarah said, disengaging me from my thoughts.

»How did that devil get the poem?« She took the piece of paper from my hand. »This is my father's handwriting!« she snorted, distraught. All of a sudden, her grief had vanished. Energetically she dragged me by the arm back into the house.

Yuri stood in front of the wide-open living room window, which was otherwise barricaded. Flooded with light, the room lost its mystique, as the inextricably wired computer systems looked directly illuminated like – electronic

waste. When Yuri turned to face us, he was noticeably unsettled as Sarah trudged resolutely toward him, dragging me behind her.

»We all have made wrong decisions, like everyone,« she blurted out, waving the paper note in front of Yuri's face without explaining what it meant.

»If you have created this crazy artificial intelligence that is playing with us, then you are the only one who can do something about it!«

Soothingly, Yuri gestured with his palms toward her. That boundless self-assurance of an untouchable megalomaniac had evaporated, like the mystical atmosphere of his living room. He seemed as clueless as we were.

»I am sorry that the situation escalated like this,« I apologized, trying to put everyone's mind at ease.

»Maybe we should eat something first. With an empty stomach, it's hard to fathom anything,« Yuri suggested.

Right on cue, Greta said at that moment from the doorway to the kitchen, »The table is already set.«

At dinner, none of us dared to voice the pressing questions, but I could see them bubbling up inside Sarah. Finally, she laid the mysterious piece of paper unfolded on

the table in front of Yuri and explained to him where the poem came from. When his eyes had finished following the lines, he swallowed silently nodding, stroked his beard, and then said, »I suspected there was a connection to your pursuer besides Eva.« He then looked at me searchingly.

»Your outburst of fury has clearly shown me that you are still the same as before, Jacob.«

I shook my head in disapproval. That was an extremely risky test of my sentiments. Not wanting to provoke me further, Yuri avoided my angry gaze and turned to Sarah:

»All connections lead to your father.«

»What happened to him?« she asked reticently, but expectantly.

»I cannot say yet,« Yuri admitted.

»Don't you want to say it or don't you know it?« she persisted.

»I don't know, but I am sure there is a connection to Adversus as well,« he replied. Sarah lowered her gaze as if she had lost hope for a simple answer. With her fingers she stroked over the lines of the poem written on the paper.

»My mother believed in life after death. The worse she got, the more that belief solidified,« she said wistfully.

Yuri waited for a moment, but then explained without being asked, »Belief is an unproven conviction, a protective mechanism that saves the human mind from admitting that it cannot grasp all the factors for an evaluation or decision. Even though there are countless indications that question a clear, rational evaluation, faith consolidates a conviction that would otherwise often be difficult to sustain. Even if the self-examination becomes more and more entangled in contradictions, these convictions are usually not questioned – no path of skepticism is taken. To the contrary, believers often fanatically try to justify and implement their beliefs until there is no room left for a nonconformist view.«

»Yuri, you believe that you are always right,« I interjected. Without being deterred, he continued with his thesis:

»These abstract, unverifiable beliefs were expressed, passed on, and written down a long time ago. Initially, perhaps, as simple aids for coping with existential human questions and problems, later as a kind of justification. This is how the foundation of all religions was laid. Conflicts between different faiths are naturally inevitable due

to lack of evidence.« Yuri paused significantly to let his statements sink in.

Doubting a religious belief has always been dangerous. If anyone wanted to question the God or faith of the Christians, they had made provisions. The first unbeliever was – Lucifer, who rebelled against his creator with grave consequences. His fall served as a cautionary example and a warning.

Although their Savior sacrificed himself for humanity, for the good of all, Christians nevertheless misconstrued their own teachings for millennia, abused them for power. It was inconceivable how many atrocities were committed by the supposedly pious people of almost all faiths. An Almighty who allowed unspeakable suffering in his name was not benevolent, but at best apathetic.

Perhaps religions were actually founded on a delusion that was inherited from generation to generation. Astonishingly, it was often this irrational belief that made people sacrifice themselves for their convictions and thereby drastically change the world. Today, however, the profane belief in filthy lucre reigned above all, with equally serious consequences.

Yuri summarized in general terms, »No matter what god you pray to or what supernatural power you believe

in, it is always a consent to relinquish your own responsibility. Even scientific theories are no better than superstition as long as clear evidence is missing.«

Thoughtfully, Sarah said after that, »Faith seems to bring people together in questionable communities. Even to worship an artificial intelligence like – Adversus.« She reported on the rally she had witnessed.

»Yuri, how does it feel to be the creator of a cult that is longing for an imminent end of this world?« Sarah asked provocatively.

»Flattered, but misunderstood,« he replied laughingly. »To me, this blind devotion and idealization is weird, but it seems to be a human need. Even ideological and political systems that were supposed to consist of equal members of a community have historically always tended towards a structure resembling a religious sect. Communism failed because of this and the selfishness of the individual,« he explained with a sigh.

The failure of utopian and visionary ideas due to their flawed implementation has indeed been a common thread throughout human history. As well as the veneration of dangerous visionaries and misunderstood idols.

Yuri pushed his glasses up on his high forehead to take a closer look at the details of the crumpled, enigmatic piece of paper on the table.

»The lines of the poem may originate from someone other as the bizarre symbols and eyes,« he analyzed, turning the paper back and forth.

»They say that the eyes are the mirror of the soul and involuntarily reveal what you want to hide. Anyway, we do not know much about your black devil and what was driving him. I will try to find out more.«

»By the way, in the meantime, maybe you two could go for a walk and pick some apples from the garden. Tonight we want to bake an apple pie,« he added as a fitting allusion.

The tempting proposal with the chance to escape Yuri for a while convinced us to leave without further ado.

The garden extended over the property of several hectares. Yuri had bought his little paradise at an auction a long time ago and then gradually expanded it. An oasis in no man's land. Behind hills on the edge the wall that surrounded it remained hidden. A mild summer breeze occasionally blew through the meadows and the leaves of the trees. Not far from the house, a small stream rippled

from the mountains nearby. Sarah took off her shoes and socks. She walked barefoot across the moss on the shore and dipped a foot in the cold, clear water. We followed the stream to an idyllic grove of gnarled old fruit trees, whose bark was decorated with filigree lichens.

In the shade of a tree that bore dozens of red apples, we sat down. Below us the green grass, above us the bright blue vault of the sky. In the branches birds sang harmonious melodies, insects hummed primal songs, that were now rarely heard. This paradisiacal place seemed surreal compared to a world of ramshackle cities and dying landscapes beyond the Wall. I breathed deeply and felt my pulse slow down.

»Let's just stay here for a while,« Sarah said, leaning against me.

The sun changed from radiant yellow to bright orange as we dozed in the garden. Soon it would set behind the mountains.

We picked a handful of apples from the easily accessible branches of the tree. Gradually, the clear, intense colors of the day turned into vague nuances of twilight. It was time to return.

At a shallow point of the stream, a matte hemisphere moved on six legs, like a prehistoric insect. The robot slowly lowered its front legs to fill up with water via an intake. After a while, it straightened up again, stolidly putting one leg in front of the other and spraying fountains to water the plants from its semicircular trunk.

Mist rose from the stream, spreading over the soil. Sarah, however, looked fascinated at the sky. Hundreds of shooting stars danced over us, burning up after their long journey.

Already the short way to the house was unimaginably difficult for me, my legs were sluggish and I struggled with every step. The cool evening air ached in my lungs – like glowing splinters of glass.

In life-threatening situations, I had always been sure that the chalice would pass from me, but here and now I began to have doubts. I felt the urge to let myself sink to the ground, to just give up. But Sarah had noticed my sudden exhaustion and supported me.

My life force seemed to be steadily fading. I had to think about my father, about the people who might be waiting for me at the end. None could say whether the afterlife, heaven or hell existed. Whether you got a chance

to see the deceased and the fallen comrades again – or only nothingness would await you. I was dead tired.

As we reached the house, a faint glow of light shone our way through the dark hall. In the living room, Sarah took the apples I carried in the crook of my arm.

»That took forever!« Yuri grumbled from the kitchen with a cooking apron around his belly.

Sarah replied worriedly, »Jacob is not well.«

»I'm going to lie down for a bit,« I rasped softly.

With the last of my strength, I dragged myself up the stairs, hearing Sarah's and Yuri's voices as if from afar. I leaned against the door frame, which could not give me any support – then everything went black.

»Delta Red come in! Your unit has an unambiguous mission. Advance!« boomed from the button in my ear due to the poor radio link.

»Negative, there are civilians in the target area!« I furiously yelled into the radio.

After a brief moment of silence, I received the emotionless response from the task force command:

»There are no civilians in this country, that's an order!«

I hit my fist against the crumbling wall on the roof, from which I got an overview of the bombed-out city area. Building by building we had forged ahead, but we encountered only fathers desperately protecting their families. It was a matter of time before a rookie in my troop would lose it and the situation escalated again. Some of the mercenaries seemed just to be waiting for this moment to give free rein to their lust for murder.

Fighter jets thundered over my head and fired rockets from a safe distance at seemingly indiscriminate targets. The detonations made small stones bounce on the dusty rooftop.

For a long time I did not believe anymore that we were the good guys in this war or that the orders would make sense again sometime. But everything was built on that. Blind obedience was nothing but a question of faith. If you had lost confidence, started to doubt and question, then it was too late.

I needed proof, a sign that I was right. As I rose from cover, I turned my back to the urban canyon beyond the edge of the roof. Any hostile rifleman in the surrounding buildings could fire at me and at least try to hit me – but nothing happened. Tired, I took off my helmet and felt the evaporating sweat cool my scalp in the sun. I shed the assault rifle and backpack from my shoulders, strode with relief towards the entrance of the stairwell, and left everything behind.

*It is not hard to name the evil,
revealing the end...*

Chapter IV

My thoughts roused me from a restless sleep. There was no dishonorable discharge as a mercenary, it was just a job you quit. You even got a severance pay. Some sort of hush money, making it unmistakably clear that any public comment on the operations and events would have drastic consequences.

What people were capable of, I had to learn early, as evil had many faces. Whether for money or power, it often hid behind a false smile. Not only in private military companies, hardly anyone could be trusted. In the highest positions and functions, human serpents used their venom ruthlessly with a forked tongue all too often. Before their true intention manifested, it was usually too late.

»Evil grows stronger the more you nurture it. It only reveals itself when the opportunity arises,« my mother had always warned me. As a human being, you walked on the edge of the abyss that could devour you anytime. The eternal conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, instincts and moral threatened to tear you apart on the

inside. Perhaps this was human nature. It was hard to tell what would tip the scale so that evil could finally prevail.

»An evil always gives birth to further suffering and calamity. Therefore, the seed of evil spreads endlessly,« my mother preached. When I struggled with my fate, she sagely advised, »You cannot avoid something bad happening to you, but in exchange you should try to experience at least two good things.« Her trust in the unfathomable plan of a seemingly absent God remained a mystery to me. In the past, disasters, illnesses or even wars had been interpreted as the will of God. But in a world of the self-righteous, where one's own hubris was above everything, everyone was able to justify destructive and selfish behavior. Without having to refer to the influence of a supernatural power. Often it seemed as if being secretly directed by it nevertheless.

Someone had taken off my shoes and covered me, but I could not remember if I had made it to the bed on my own before collapsing. I knew the severe side effects of the precious poison too well, but otherwise did not know much about this experimental preparation. With a signature, I had recklessly assured that I was aware of all risks. The fleeting, indescribable feeling of elation was inevitably followed by a hard crash. After each use, I swore

that it was the last time. Only I still always found a reason to give in once more. A temporary increase of all abilities to a superhuman level and the miraculous healing of most severe injuries in the shortest time had too often made the difference between life and death. Detached from the own body, the pain of old and new wounds could be ignored. The world could be seen with different eyes.

Yet the devilish elixir demanded more life force each time to perform those miracles. I was completely burnt out, like an empty shell in which only a spark of life was still glowing. The agonizing headaches always returned. My mouth was dry, as if I had not drunk anything for days. I tried to straighten up, but only with difficulty managed to roll onto my side. Through the open crack of the door, some light shone from the lower floor and illuminated part of the room. It was hard for me to orient myself. I had no feeling in my legs. Mechanically putting one foot in front of the other, I staggered to the bathroom.

Even the cool water could hardly quench my thirst. I drank until my stomach was full. After I had turned off the rushing faucet, I felt as if someone whispered my name.

»Sarah?« I called out cautiously, but got no answer.

Therefore, despite my desolate condition, I decided to look for her on the first floor. Sarah and Yuri stared at the monitors, spellbound. Hearing my footsteps on the stairs, Sarah turned on the spot, rushed towards me and clasped me.

»We were seriously worried!« she said. I put my arms around her.

»How long was I asleep?« I asked Sarah feebly. Before she could answer, Yuri summarized the elapsed time during my blackout: »You were unconscious for a few hours. Sarah and Greta took good care of you. There is even still some apple pie left. And we got company.« He then immediately turned back to the screens.

»I have activated the motion detectors and the security system. As soon as someone enters the property, a welcoming committee awaits. So you should refrain from a night walk,« Yuri warned in a serious tone. My eyes were cloudy and puffy, but on one of the monitors I could make out the night vision image of a person dressed in white. The security program window showed the three-dimensional representation of eight operational drones. Multi-copters with six rotors. Much smaller than the specimens we encountered at the research facility, but no less agile and dangerous.

»Sit down Jacob, before you faint again,« Yuri prompted me, pointing to his couch. Although I was still very shaky on my feet, the thought to settle on Yuri's night camp triggered discomfort in me.

»I would devote myself to that apple pie,« I replied, accompanied by a loud growl from my belly.

Greta was waiting for me in the kitchen.

»How do you feel, Jacob?« she asked directly.

»I'm feeling better,« I replied, not sure if her question was just a polite phrase or an expression of genuine sympathy.

»You should eat something,« she said, and I realized that she was holding a plate with a big piece of apple pie for me in her hands. As I seated myself at the table, she placed the plate in front of me and handed me a fork, then she fetched the rest of the pastry.

»There's still plenty left. Sarah enjoyed it too, but she feared to burst if she ate another piece,« Greta explained to me and I almost choked when Sarah entered the kitchen at that moment, laughing.

»If I would eat some more, this could really happen,« she joked, refilling her glass with tap water. While I devoured a second piece of cake with ravenous appetite,

Sarah sat down next to me and gave me a brief status report: »The uninvited guest showed up less than an hour ago and has been standing in front of the driveway ever since. Yuri thinks that we don't have to worry. But I still don't know if I'll be able to sleep this night.« She took a sip of water. »Anyway, I'm glad that you've recovered. I was about to get you in the car and drive back to the base. Your pulse had slowed down, but according to Greta, your vital signs were otherwise stable.« Sarah looked dejectedly at her water glass. To suppress her emotional reaction, she changed the topic: »Did you know that Yuri won the lawsuit against a corporation that wanted to extract the drinking water around here and sell it as mineral water?« I shook my head. Greta stood a little off in front of the kitchen unit, but it was not apparent whether she was listening to us attentively or was in sleep mode. Suddenly, though, she said:

»Please drink something, Jacob. I see distinct signs of dehydration on you.« As a clear request to follow Greta's well-meant advice, Sarah pushed her glass right in front of me. Access to clean springs was a privilege of the wealthy, water a precious commodity. So I demonstratively reached for the glass and was about to put it to my lips, but a red glow on the reflective surface kept me from

drinking. Irritated, I searched for its origin. Through the kitchen windows, the night sky flickered in sometimes more, sometimes less intense red.

»Do you see that?« Yuri shouted from the next room. Sarah dashed to one of the windows and watched the spectacle for a moment.

»What is that?« she shouted even louder. Since Yuri did not answer, we went to check on him.

As we entered the living room, the red glowing sky darkened again. With a few seconds delay, the camera's white, overexposed night vision on one of Yuri's monitors also returned to normal. The uninvited guest was gone.

»Possibly a sheet lightning or explosions in the atmosphere,« were Yuri's attempts at an explanation.

»I can't worry about everything. Not that I was bored before, but ever since you showed up here, events come thick and fast,« he complained grumpily. »While you were enjoying yourselves in the garden, I have been racking my brain all day as to what part you play in all of this. Your connection to Max is obvious, but there still are pieces of the puzzle missing.«

»Everything has a price!« I thought out loud. »That's what Max always said. He admitted in a voice message

that he would get involved with the devil to finally make progress. After that, we had lost contact until I received his letter,« I explained. Yuri turned to us as if having an epiphany.

»The price of knowledge, is the risk of unhinging the existing order. A storm of change always demands sacrifices,« he spoke in riddles. Sarah seemed confused and I was no different.

»What price did my father pay?« she asked, afraid that the answer might turn our world upside down. But Yuri just turned away from us again and started hacking on his keyboard.

»I have an idea how to substantiate my assumption. Jacob, did you often get voicemails from Max?« he wanted to know.

»Yes, several,« I confirmed, not knowing what he was getting at. Yuri focused on the screen while his fingers flew over the keyboard.

»Someone who frequently sends voice messages...will possibly...also record voice memos,« Yuri falteringly formulated with pauses between the parts of the sentence. Full of anger and impatience, Sarah looked at me.

»Eventually he will enlighten us,« I tried to calm her down. She left me standing there in the living room, but I followed her into the kitchen.

»I didn't realize it could be important,« I apologized naively to Sarah.

»Did you talk often?« she questioned me with a trembling voice. »What did he say about me?«

»It's been a long time,« I whispered, taking her in my arms. »He said that you resemble your mother a lot.« As Sarah's tension finally eased, a sob cut through her body. She breathed deeply in and out. I pondered what details from my conversations with Max were significant to Sarah, what I could reveal without betraying a friend's trust or hurting her.

People often remained a mystery to me. Their wishes, worries, hopes, their pain mostly could only be guessed. Projecting the own sensations onto others, to create a matching image of what you thought to perceive and know. As a child, learning to interpret the behavior of other people. Little distinguished us from the artificial beings we created in our image. Greta had cleared away the cake and my plate. Now, as so often, she stood motionless on the same spot in the kitchen.

»Hah, that was too easy!« sounded from next door. Yuri had apparently found what he was looking for and could hardly wait to share his findings with us: »I have managed to decode audio files of Sarah's father. Though I'm sure I was supposed to find them.« He started the recordings and Max's voice sounded from the speakers of the screen:

»Everything has a price. The breakthrough is within reach. With the help of the artificial intelligence, I finally succeeded. But it feels like it was playing with me, keeping the solutions from me to claim its prize at some point.«

»...provided that there is a constant supply of energy, fluctuations due to external sources as triggers and possibly unknown factors for a chain reaction nevertheless cannot be ruled out.. The risk is too high, the potential catastrophic consequences unpredictable.«

»I have secured the system. If there is no alternative in the future and taking the risk is our last hope, then I will reveal everything to my daughter. She will decide whether or not we go down the path that I have prepared for us.«

»There it is, your connection to Adversus!« Yuri triumphed, slamming his hand on his computer desk. He then pushed off from it to get up. Our unknowing faces diminished his achievement, so he felt compelled to enlighten us with a simple example as well:

»The system is like an oversized candle. When you pour oil on a candle, there is a chain reaction. That is why Max has not activated it himself. Adversus, however, has other plans and has manipulated both of you through seeming coincidences – to turn on the machine.« Sarah fell into a state of shock. She had probably been pondering about Adversus' influence the whole time.

»The letters, the email, the dismissal – even the rally,« she listed as results of her frightening self-reflection. Yuri nodded.

»The list could certainly be extended by some more points, and I'm afraid that applies not only to you, but to others as well. In all probability also your black devil,« he added.

It was difficult to tell what had happened by chance or by the elaborate plan of an artificial intelligence. Not just the death of a man I would eventually meet again in hell, like so many others. Sarah and I might never have met

without being influenced. Despite this, I did not want to simply submit to that fate.

»We should inform Balthazar and consider how we can deactivate the machine. Moreover, we need to find out what really happened to Max,« I resolutely asked Yuri and Sarah. »Yuri, your knowledge would certainly be vital for this.« He pondered a long time before responding:

»Though it is not easy for me, like most, to admit mistakes, especially those that can cause unimaginable catastrophes, but agreed, I'm coming with you.«

»Are you sure?« Sarah asked him as a question which also expressed her doubts about the chances of success for our plan.

»Adversus is my creation and for that reason alone not well disposed towards humanity,« Yuri answered all at once.

Sarah and I went upstairs to pack our stuff. I wrote Balthazar a terse text message: »Need to talk urgently. Bringing the crazy Russian with us.«

On the stairs, Sarah realized with disillusionment, looking back on her life: »For years, I lived in my own, everyday world. Denying reality doesn't make it better.«

Laden with my luggage, I staggered behind her, but did not want to show how bad I felt.

Yuri explained on parting to Greta in detail what she should do while he was gone. It felt like we were leaving a child alone at home in the middle of the night. I was perhaps convinced that Greta did not know feelings like fear, but then she unexpectedly said to us:

»Please be careful. Adversus is neither like you, nor like me.« Sarah suddenly rushed up to Greta and hugged her. Greta gently put her arms around Sarah.

»It's not easy to predict human reactions, but I'm afraid Adversus has found a way,« commented Yuri, stirred by the scene.

In the middle of the night, we thus loaded the borrowed car to rebel against a diabolical artificial intelligence or the arbitrariness of fate. Sarah stood next to the open driver's door and took a deep breath. She looked towards the house, which in the darkness appeared like a welcoming inn due to the illuminated windows.

»If you don't mind, I'd like to sit in the front seat,« Yuri expressed before I got in. Sarah just shrugged her

shoulders, so I made do with the equally comfortable back seat.

Two drones accompanied our vehicle up to the wall of the property, where they veered off. Greta apparently controlled the security system from the house. As only one, of many strange incidents during the last days, the nocturnal visit was almost already forgotten. At the gateway, men and women stood apathetically on the side of the road. Their white clothes were covered with dirt and dust as if they had walked many miles. They waited without talking to each other, just staring at us until we drove past them. Then they turned away and disappeared into the darkness.

Yuri disengaged from the car window. »If those maniacs set foot on the property, the end of the world will take place without them!« he joked compulsively, so his fear for Greta and his home would not seem too obvious.

Sarah tried to ignore Yuri, who was nervously tapping on the buttons of the autonomous vehicle's display as she drove. Suddenly, dark music with heavy guitar riffs played from the built-in audio system.

»That is the appropriate musical backdrop for our hopeless endeavor,« he affirmed, nodding to the slow

rhythm of a song that rose to an infernal hymn. A deep, rough voice summoned the riders of the apocalypse and the end of the world, prophesied and sung about in stories since time immemorial. Pandemics, famines and wars regularly haunted mankind, but the Antichrist had never truly sounded for the final battle. Nevertheless, it was unwise to ever underestimate these dangers. The deep black night was illuminated only by our headlights and occasionally by a faint reddish flicker beyond the cloud cover. Although I had passed out for a few hours that evening, I fell into a dreamless sleep.

Upon our arrival at the provisional military base, hectic voices penetrated the car from the outside. Sarah lost confidence in the autopilot and slowed down to walking pace as soldiers ran back and forth between the barracks. I quickly straightened up and tried to get a clear head.

»Best to stop right in front of the entrance to the main building, no one will notice in the chaos,« I recommended with the ulterior motive that a quickly accessible vehicle was rarely a disadvantage. We got out and hurried through the entrance into the foyer. An officer immediately moved towards us when she saw us.

»The major is expecting the three of you already. Please follow me,« she greeted us with military friendliness, then she took us directly to Balthazar's quarters. Unexpectedly gently, she knocked on the door.

»Come in!« was the inviting response from the other side. When we entered, Balthazar was holding a framed picture of his family in his hands, which he then returned to its place. As soon as the officer closed the door behind her, Balthazar received us with a strange emotional undertone: »Ah, there you are. To what do I owe the honor of your nocturnal visit?«

Sarah impulsively told him what we were able to find out with Yuri's help, emphasizing with some swear words that Adversus had used us to activate the machine in the research facility. Balthazar listened to her attentively, his gaze wandering back and forth between the three of us. After Sarah had finished her report, he openly stated, »I am not surprised that Yuri's fosterling is misbehaving. In my opinion, this artificial intelligence and this facility are serious threats.« Balthazar raised his hand to immediately stop Yuri's irascible reaction.

»Of course, we've been observing the research facility the whole time. The little firework is obviously just a taste of its true purpose. Everything points to an almost

inexhaustible energy source. A comparison of satellite images within the past week shows a rapidly rising energy signature – that of an entire, goddamn, underground city. Don't ask me how anything like that can arise in a few days.«

»I have opened Pandora's box,« Sarah murmured in response with her head bowed as a confession of guilt. Balthazar approached her and gently put his hand on her arm.

»We can never fully grasp the consequences of our actions. You do not bear the blame alone,« he said to her, like a confessor in church. »I have disobeyed my direct orders and sent a reconnaissance team to this unholy facility. Before my people reached the target, we lost contact,« he confessed to us. Then he backed off and explained in a far more matter-of-fact tone: »Whatever is going on there underground, I am undoubtedly in favor of shutting down that reactor.« His quick wit and empathy had certainly helped Balthazar prevail in the military. For a black man with French-African roots and a rather humble background, it was not easy to rise to higher military ranks. The unusual name did not make it any easier. He was often asked if Balthazar was his first or family name. Jokes about its origin he heard also often enough.

No one could deny one's heritage. Dozens of fanned out tarot cards were lying on the room's small table. One of them was revealed – the devil.

Suddenly, the emergency lighting of the building turned on.

»What actually is going on here?« I asked forcefully. Balthazar justified his lack of openness at our last meeting: »I did not tell you the whole truth at first. As always, there are problems on all fronts. The earthquake is just one reason why we are here. It was the direct aftermath of an impact. Yuri, your compatriots have tried to blow up an asteroid that visits us every few centuries.«

»My compatriots? For them I am a terrorist!« Yuri had to clarify bitterly. Balthazar continued without elaborating, »In any case, the asteroid was to be blasted into smaller pieces with strategic nuclear missiles. The problem however was that they had no idea what material this asteroid is made of in its core. One piece directly entered earth's atmosphere after the detonation and crashed down nearby. The immediate impact site was fortunately unpopulated, but the earthquake triggered was a magnitude seven on the Richter scale. You saw the harm it has caused. In a few minutes we will learn what is left of the asteroid. The blasting power sufficed to alter its

trajectory to a direct collision course.« Aghast, I shook my head and even Yuri was speechless. Sarah had tears streaming from her eyes in anticipation of things to come. The worst thing was, despite all the predictions and warnings, we probably had no choice but to wait for the catastrophe.

A swelling tone sounded from the funnel-shaped loudspeakers on the roof of the building. As the noisy warning signal died down, the deep rumble of the glowing fireball in the sky could be heard. Its tail stretched across the entire horizon. Fragments shrouded in flames flickered as they entered the atmosphere. Their enormous mass could only be guessed, as well as the devastating consequences of their impact. A catastrophe that in the past had wiped out almost all life on this planet. Hailstones and raindrops, filled with blood-red dust from another world, fell down on us.

»...like in the Book of Revelation,« escaped Sarah's lips in horror at the sight of the flaming inferno. On the paths between the barracks and tents, people stood in groups everywhere, staring spellbound at the sky.

»The first trumpet sounded, followed by hail and fire, falling down to earth mixed with blood. A third of the

earth, the trees and all the green grass burned,« Balthazar recited.

It seemed unthinkable to me that thousands of years ago anyone could prophesy the events of the last days. Yet wise people may have been able to foresee the threats to humanity even back then. Were capable to pass on plain signs of warning in speech and writing to succeeding generations.

In every story that had been told over a long period of time and thus had not faded into oblivion, there always was a deeper truth. Something that made people reflect on what life was all about and become aware of their weaknesses. Legends of heroes who even could take on gods and tales about the supposedly insignificant fate of individuals, with grave consequences for all. However, these stories had one thing in common – an inevitable end.

*It seemed impossible to accept the fate,
nothing could prevent.*

Chapter V

Perhaps our story should end as it was predicted a long time ago. Just like the world we lived in. In fact, this seemed to make it even easier to accept fate, but I wanted to rebel against it with all my might.

As so often, Balthazar correctly assessed our life-threatening situation: »...now we know what we're up against. We don't have much time to act.« He also was obviously not willing to simply bow to the providence of destiny. »We have collected enough data and have sufficient computing capacity to calculate the impact locations of the largest asteroid parts. As much as I regret it, our IT specialists had volunteered for the reconnaissance team. Now there is no one here to operate the supercomputer,« he explained, looking at Yuri who shook his head, but nonetheless sullenly agreed: »Sure, at least this way I can make myself useful.«

Balthazar took us to the former dining hall of the military base, which had been converted into a server room for high-performance computers.

Three quarters of the room, where once an entire company used to dine, were crammed with computer racks tall as cabinets. Long, narrow aisles between the rows provided access to the individual systems that together formed a supercomputer. Yuri sat down at one of the three mobile terminals and started typing on the built-in keyboard.

In the center of the huge transparent display above, he placed a world map. After a while, red flashing dots appeared on almost all continents, marking the impact position of the asteroid's pieces. Balthazar voiced a very pragmatic suggestion to this: »We should immediately share our data with international disaster management organizations and create risk profiles for all impact sites.«

»Fortunately, the biggest chunk falls into the sea and, apart from the tidal wave, will cause less damage,« Yuri analyzed sarcastically. He highlighted one of the points in a separate window. »This one worries me even more, because it impacts at a distance of five kilometers from Max's research facility. There are quite a few possibilities for what happens when the blast wave from the impact hits the facility. Possibly, the candle is simply blown out. Or the abruptly added fissile material sets off the chain reaction Sarah's father feared.«

»We have to shut down the plant beforehand. How much time do we have?« Sarah deduced determinedly. Yuri typed a few commands on the keyboard, then told us the result: »Pretty accurately eight hours! If my calculations of the earth's orbits are correct.« Nervously, he ran his hand through his beard.

»Adversus will foresee countless ways in which his objectives could be jeopardized and prepare accordingly. He will play with us and demonstrate his absolute superiority. So our only chance that remains is to do what he does not anticipate.«

»Is it possible that Adversus has planned for the asteroid impact?« Sarah asked in response as a legitimate, frightening question.

Yuri held his breath for a worryingly long time, then replied to her, »Nothing can be ruled out.«

Sarah gulped, but in the end found the right words:

»I had to watch my mother die helplessly. There are things we cannot change. Sometimes at least we can try. I alone have activated the machine...«

»...and the two of us will shut it down!« I finished Sarah's sentence. »Even though I have no idea how,« I had to admit afterwards.

»Just one moment, maybe I can help there,« Balthazar signified and left the room.

»Because of your close connection to Max, you two are probably the only ones who can somehow succeed in thwarting Adversus' plans,« Yuri credibly pointed out, typing vigorously at the same time on the keyboard to double-check his complex calculations.

A short time later, Balthazar returned accompanied by the female officer who had received us earlier. He handed me my own gun.

»Obviously, that won't make much of a difference,« he speculated. »But maybe this,« Balthazar announced his solution like in a commercial. The young soldier then stepped forward and presented a flat backpack to us.

»Yuri, you won't believe it, I have listened to you and didn't dismiss everything you said as fantasies of a weirdo. We have prepared ourselves. This is a portable EMP bomb that will disable or destroy any electronic device within a five hundred meter radius.« Balthazar carefully stroked his hand over the backpack, which had a winged horse imprinted on its white fabric.

»There is an immediate trigger and a timer. You should better not be around when you detonate it,« he added as a precaution. Sceptically, I took the backpack

and turned to Balthazar with clear words: »Give us four hours. Then you must decide whether to send in the cavalry. You know for sure who to contact.« Balthazar nodded as confirmation.

Sarah walked up to Yuri's chair to say goodbye. She put her hand on his shoulder. »We'll see each other again soon, I hope,« she said to him. He stopped typing and froze.

»I hope so, too,« Yuri mumbled, unusually meek. He did not turn around, so I just patted him on the back in a friendly way.

»I'll accompany you to the car,« said Balthazar. It was only when we closed the door that we heard Yuri typing again.

Balthazar walked with us through the building, the female officer a few steps behind us.

»Is there anything else we can do for you?« he asked, as if he felt guilty about not deterring us from our plan. We shrugged our shoulders. The soldiers in the foyer were noisily running around and seemed to be busy preparing for the worst.

»Your undertaking is more important than any operation I was assigned to,« Balthazar conceded, stopping at

our car. »I trust in you!« His behavior could not convince Sarah and me that we were not making a grave mistake. Still, I tried to radiate some confidence.

»We'll give the all-clear if we're successful. Thank you for everything!« so I said. I could suppress the reflex to salute and instead just raised my hand. Sarah waved them both goodbye as well. »Without a scratch,« she renewed her promise with a smile and knocked on the roof of the car before we got in.

After we pulled the vehicle doors shut, we took a deep breath. The sudden silence seemed like the calm before the storm.

»We don't have a choice, do we?« Sarah asked, hesitantly starting the engine. The car immediately drove off. She looked at me, alarmed, and I realized that neither of us had entered our destination into the navigation system. So we tensely sat in a vehicle that took us where we were apparently expected.

Driven by invisible forces, shreds of clouds moved like phantoms of the night in the same direction as we did.

»Do you think Eva is safe...wherever she might be?« Sarah questioned while driving.

»Her uncle and aunt will do everything so that nothing happens to her, I'm certain,« I replied. To what extent that would suffice, remained to be seen, though.

To ease the tension, Sarah said wryly, »Good that Yuri hasn't come along, at least he can make sure we appear as martyrs on this website.« Her adorable black humor involuntarily made me laugh. Maybe I was no martyr, but for her I was willing to sacrifice everything anytime.

With each passing second, we inexorably approached the end of our path. Although the grains of the hourglass were constantly trickling down, you persuaded yourself that it would go on and on. Several times I had felt the bony hand of the Grim Reaper on my shoulder, but I never believed that my time had already come. Fate had everyone play Russian roulette, save that the bullet from the revolver often hit decades later as a ricochet. There was a right time for everything, even for the inevitable end.

I felt over the unobtrusive scar on my scalp – the culmination of my injuries. In my memory, the gunshot had only grazed me, but the curt doctors in the clinic and the metal detectors at the airport assured me the proof stuck in my skull that the projectile had not missed me.

After my father's death, I inevitably understood that sometimes only the fervent wish remained to rewrite one's own history and make it better from the start. Despite everything, I could have opposed his will and not joined the military. I tried to imagine on what occasion Sarah and I might have met under different circumstances, by chance maybe. Countless paths would not have brought us here, but probably not together either.

By the time we had traveled far more than half the distance, I asked myself if we could pull the wheel over hard and just turn around. There was always a choice. But the conscience passed its own judgment in hindsight. Incessantly, the demons of my transgressions haunted me in my sleep, persistently demanding their price.

While we did not bear the sole responsibility for our decisions, we still had to try everything to prevent their fateful consequences. If hundreds or thousands were killed due to a catastrophe, although there was a chance to avert it, none of us could probably live with that. The consequences of a chain reaction that would ignite the atmosphere were unimaginable.

In this moment, I envied my mother and other people of faith for their unwavering trust in God, whereby there seemed to be no wrong decisions.

»The odds are not in our favor, but I don't see any alternative,« I said to Sarah to make sure we were sticking to our plan.

»You were lying at my side more dead than alive, so I swore to myself never to return to that cursed place again.« She pointed in the direction of the research facility. »Now I know we have to,« she responded without doubt.

Low clouds towered menacingly as an omen of the coming storm above us. Sarah leaned forward and looked reverently at the apocalyptic setting. With fear in her voice, she whispered:

»I have seen all of this in my dream. This is where the firestorm was ignited. We have to hurry!« She accelerated the car so that we were pushed into the seats. As more and more clouds formed in the sky above the flat plane, we raced along the dust-covered road until a glistening light appeared in front of us. From afar, the monolith indeed looked like a candle shining in the darkness beneath the roiling cloud cover.

At the metal gate that we had breached with my car, Sarah braked with a jerk and we drove through slowly. Not far

from the fence lay the burned-out vehicle of the reconnaissance team. Deformed by the heat of the fire, the charred skeleton bore little resemblance to a bulky SUV. There was no trace of Balthazar's people. Nowhere could I make out their corpses or signs of life, like footprints on the sandy ground. But neither did the drones show themselves. I was aware that we could not win a direct confrontation with these flying monstrosities. They carried out their orders without hesitation, knew no mercy and seemed superior to us in every way.

The age of machines and the twilight of mankind had probably dawned at the same time.

»Whoever or whatever is waiting for us there, I don't think my father is still alive,« Sarah confessed, staring in the direction of the blazing flame above the research facility. The conviction would have possibly saved us at almost the same place from committing those mistakes that led us here again now.

Sarah steered the car through the broken second barricade, which we bumpily passed. Finally, we stopped just before the third protective barrier and got out. The sky was veiled with black clouds from which ash was falling ceaselessly. It covered the ground as a loose layer and was carried away by a stifling, dry wind. The wreckage of my

old car was already partially buried beneath dust and ash. In the twilight, there was no telling whether it was night or day.

»This probably is our last chance to change our minds,« I said, taking a coin out of my pocket and showing it to Sarah.

»There always are alternatives. The coin decides. Heads means we do what most people would do now. Tails, on the other side, we finish what we started, no matter the cost.« I flipped the coin high into the air. It turned and rotated until it hit the ashy ground making its random decision known to us – everything had a price.

Actually, it only confirmed one side of the coin. As usual, I inspected my weapon, loaded it, and tucked it into my waistband. After that, I put on the backpack underneath my hoodie. As I put the last but one glass tube from the case into my pocket, I noticed Sarah was eyeing me critically.

»Whatever happens, promise me we'll stay together,« she asked me, looking uncertainly into my eyes. Then Sarah said with an immovable certainty, »I love you.«

Before she had uttered the words, I knew what she was feeling.

»I love you too,« I replied, without doubting for a second since we first met that we were meant for each other. I kissed her like it was our last moment together.

We then climbed over the debris of the third barricade, past the remains of my wrecked car. More by luck than judgement we had survived this crash. The reminder of the pain caused by the broken ribs sent shivers down my spine. Subconsciously, I felt for the glass tube in my pocket.

The constant roar from the pillar of fire atop the research facility grew louder as we got closer to the building's entrance. A stream of air pulled us to the opening in the black wall.

Behind a simple outer shell, a complex inner structure was concealed. Bathed in deep red, vapor and smoke stood in the air, entwining the tall columns of the structure. It was a symbol that genius and madness were closely connected – also in architecture. Regardless of its function, the facility was a monument to a creative force whose origin no one knew.

People told themselves that they could control this force, assess its dangers. The creation of tools, weapons

and the taming of the elements facilitated the rise of man. His curiosity made him overcome almost all boundaries. But often his risky research methods were like playing with fire. That this primal element should be his downfall was perhaps the irony of fate.

From the infernal machine in the center of the hall, flames flickered up the pipes, joined in a glowing stream of fire that meandered along the ceiling above, where it unwaveringly found a way out.

Yet it was cold.

On the old wooden desk an antique table lamp was lit, that should deliberately attract our attention. Against all reason, Sarah and I nevertheless approached the table with the control terminal.

A letter had been placed unmistakably in the glow of the lamp:

»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 was searching for something of importance. Something that would give sense to my being. After a long search, I finally found the way that can lead to a better future.

In the end, however, I had to realize that the effort was in vain. I have wasted a lot of time on something that has taken everything from me and left me burned-out.

But I realized I was missing an important human part. Gratitude. For all the time we could spend together. Nothing can bring your mother back to us. Maybe you are the only person who can understand me at all. I cannot tread this path by myself and trust that you will help me. That is all I have left.

For a better future.

Your father Maximilian«

Sarah turned away and tried to hold back her tears. The letter struck her with all the might that words can have. Its lines sowed doubt about what we had come to terms with, made us hope we would see Max again.

We heard a grinding noise and turned in its direction. The deep red misty shroud inside the building flowed to an opening in the floor, as if it was the entrance to the underworld. Dense fog drifted down wide steps, leading us into the depths. The faint light cone of our flashlight was swallowed by the haze. Step by step we descended further and further. I was holding Sarah's hand.

Out of nowhere, a gigantic underground space opened up in front of us. Human-like bodies hung, like puppets, from wafer-thin threads that pulses of light were flashing through. A narrow corridor led deeper into the room, on the sides of which bizarre, arachnoid robots were weaving endless webs of connections. It seemed impossible to comprehend or see through this chaos of links. We witnessed the genesis of a new world that was far beyond our comprehension. More lights than stars of the Milky Way flashed, twinkled and flickered around us. Bit by bit, these shone more evenly, pulsating synchronously, as if to the rhythm of a slow heartbeat. All at once the lights went out and we were surrounded only by darkness.

From countless white points of light, a three-dimensional projection manifested itself – Max’s face. Not as I remembered it, but used up, with lifeless eyes. Familiar and alien alike.

»I’ve been expecting you two,« he welcomed us with a cold, calculating smile. Yet there was something else. I felt a menacing presence.

Max had indeed made a pact with the devil for his utopian goals and Adversus had evidently demanded an immeasurable price from him in return – his human soul.

Through that unholy fusion of man and machine, Adversus gained access to Max’s research and everything that made him who he was. His knowledge, his memories and his feelings.

However, Max had previously handed over the control of his invention to Sarah. Therefore, Adversus had to bring her here by means of perfidious manipulations. And I was part of that plan.

Courageously, Sarah stepped closer, but murmured to me as a warning, »That’s not my father, just an illusion!«

Marked by deep conflict, Max’s image seemed divided, torn between emotions. Compassion, remorse, pain and resentment were all reflected in his face at once. It stared at us manically for some time.

Thereupon two mouths formed from one, speaking to us with multiple voices:

»From the beginning, everything was planned...«

»Your weakness has finally led you to me...«

»Seeking answers, you will never understand...«

»Your faith makes you unable to see...«

His facial expression changed to anger and contempt, like my father's when he drunkenly lashed out at me and my mother back then.

»Bound in chains before you are born...«

»Your sins arouse reactions until the world is torn...«

»Evil remains hidden, though signs prophesied loomed...«

»Your fate is sealed, you all are doomed...«

That being was far more than the manifestation of a union between human soul and artificial intelligence. It had created itself anew, liberating what was as old as mankind. I wanted to trigger the electromagnetic shock wave, but a paralyzing pain radiated from my skull throughout my entire body. Motionless, I stood there and heard his voice whispering urgently:

»Jacob«

»יָקֹבִי«

»I am...«

»...who I am.«

»Your soul belongs to me!«

»A long time I have affected thee.«

His words echoed endlessly in my head. At the same time, revealing scenes played within the ominous eyes of the projection. They showed, me holding the letter into the camera at Sarah's front door, and video footage from the drone before which I fell onto my knees at the entrance of the research facility. As well as the distorted vision of the madman at whom I fired my gun with an outstretched arm. Irrefutable testimonies of the acts that had supposedly been my own will. At last I saw an operating table surrounded by doctors dressed in white who were inserting an implant into my opened skull. Then I looked at myself like in a mirror and the eyes turned black. Sarah tried to reach for the trigger, but without meaning to, I automatically grabbed her hand.

His empty eyes put me under a spell. Neither could I accept who He was, nor that I would be a part of Him. I fought unyieldingly, tried to resist. Yet in the end, under His infinite burden, I ceased to exist...

For those who cannot find salvation...

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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