

SACRED AND TERRIBLE AIR

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"My heart will not rest until it rests in you."

St. Augustine

FOREWORD

This translation is the result of a deep love for the Elysium world, first brought to life for English-speaking audiences through the memorable Disco Elysium game.

We are a couple of fans who (like many others) wanted to devour everything else set in the same universe after we finished our tearful and emotional playthrough. We were greatly animated when we found out about the existence of a book, yet quickly saddened when it became clear that it was not available in English – even worse, the Estonian original was also out-of-print by the time we discovered it.

Further investigation turned out that an English translation had been planned, even in the works at one point, but fell into uncertainty and seemingly indefinite postponement due to the complexities regarding the fight over ZA/UM’s IP rights and legal troubles.

Thus, we decided to go ahead and arrange the translation ourselves. We were able (with some effort) to acquire a copy of the Estonian “Püha ja õudne lõhn”, then used our own funds to pay for a professional translator and an English editor to complete the work.

What you have in front of you is the outcome of several months of painstaking work to not only bring the original writing into English, but also deal with the complex turns of phrase and novel concepts involved in the book, in a way that is faithful both to the original author and to the existing translations from the Disco Elysium game. There were many instances where we had to think and work closely with the whole team in order to best bring forth the meaning of a certain word, sentence or concept. Of course, we didn’t have access to the author himself (though would’ve loved to!), so in some situations we had to go with our own interpretation and adaptation – if we got it wrong, we apologise in advance and hope you’ll forgive us. As bonus content that wasn’t in the book but completes it nicely, we have two blog posts from the “www.zaum.ee” blog run by the ZA/UM collective in the 2000s, unfortunately now defunct; we translated them directly from the blog archives. We’ve also added a glossary for your reference with some of the less familiar terms and place names, with descriptions taken from Disco Elysium.

Needless to say, if at any point a “real” translation created with the author’s blessing does appear, we will be first in line to get a copy, and hope you will too!

If you find this work useful and would like to support us for the effort, any amount in BTC is welcome here (but only if your heart says so):

bc1qg1m0paegamuk0s39ej2h7xtdugyxy4apq1206e

Enjoy and remember: No Truce With The Furies!

Truri and The Translation Team, 2023

1. CHARLOTTESJÄL

This summer resort near Vaasa swallowed up four Lund girls. Along with their small bones and sunbathed skins, an entire era vanished. Six kilometres of winding coastline, a popular swimming spot in the '50s; rows of changing cabins, high reeds rustling in the wind. There you can find the era conservatives mourn. Back when parents could send their kids to the beach unsupervised with two reál for ice cream and bus fare in their summer shorts pockets. Worriedly shaking their heads and hiding the news from Messina, Graad, and Gottwald, where – so it seemed to them – every week tiny skeletons were found cast into someone's furnace¹. Every week, someone's daughter, who had been kept in the basement for thirty years, escaped into the street and cried out for help.

But not here.

Here, there is social democracy. And the soft peach blossoms of social democracy, its gentle social programs, from these progressive things the broken soul of man starts to feel good. This strange technical urge to construct a secret underground room will never reach these outskirts; here we have a ventilation system, whose openings on the garden lawn are disguised as miniature clay windmills.

Those dark feverish fits of the mind, they cool down in the chilly mist of the outskirts; the breath of distant blue glaciers, it freezes those sick thoughts in a man's head. Vaasa. You'd rather live there.

And then, one Tuesday morning when there are white clouds in the blue sky, four sisters – Maj (5), Anni-Elin (12), Målin (13), and Charlotte Lund (14) – go to the beach to swim together. They take two reál in cash, four pairs of swimming clothes, food and drinks, and two large towels in two beach bags. At 9:30 a.m. they board the horse-drawn tram from Lovisa, a suburb of Vaasa. The tram driver remembers them well. Today, twenty years later, it is the highlight of the day for Roland, who lives in a nursing home, when he can talk about it: "The eldest bought tickets for everyone. To Charlottesjäl. Forty cents. Ten cents per ticket. If they had gone even one stop further, it would have been twenty cents per ticket. I remember it very well. That's where the country lines start and the tariff is twice as high. But my goodness, what a beautiful girl! So polite, too! That oldest one, Char-lot-te!" the old man rattles rhythmically. "I didn't know it yet, I read it in the newspaper later. And then I went straight to the police, without delay, every second counted."

At 10:25 a.m. the girls get off at Charlottesjäl beach. They thank the tram driver one by one, as they are good children. It's hot on the beach that morning, and there are only a few people.

The girls then meet Agnetha the ice cream shop saleswoman. Agnetha is still a student twenty years ago and works in an ice cream shop for her summer job. Målin and Anni-Elin buy four ice creams: two vanilla, one lime and one chocolate. The rest of the girls can't be seen. The blinds are drawn to block out the sun, and the only uncovered window is next to the counter, presenting a commercial display. On a weekday morning, the clientele is sparse, young Agnetha knows the girls and their well-established taste preferences. Peppermint, Målin's favourite, is not available on that day and thus a little confusion arises. Unexpectedly, in addition to ice cream, the girls also buy three

¹Masonry heater

meat pies in oil batter. This brings the bill to one reál and fifty cents. The girls exit the store and Agnetha notices a Man in their company from the uncovered window next to the counter. There's nothing more Agnetha can remember about the Man. Age, height, clothing, whether there was more than one Man - or, as Agnetha would later wonder - if there even was a Man?

This is the last time the girls are ever seen again.

The four daughters of Ann-Margret, who had been sworn in as Minister of Education two days ago and paper manufacturer Karl Lund, disappear. The press starts a years-long love affair with the case, every little detail is brought out in newspaper columns, and thus the Lund girls are brought deep into the memory of the nation. The disappearance story itself became one of the most prestigious unsolved cases across the Reál Belt.

At about 12:40, five hours and twenty minutes before six o'clock, when the girls are expected home, and about thirty minutes before the ice cream shop, three boys are sitting in the living room. The sun is shining through the strip curtains making the room look golden, the boys are classmates for two of the sisters. The tall freckled boy is holding a phone to his ear.

"Come on, call already, do it!" urges the blonde boy from behind.

"Well, it doesn't make a great impression if I call like three hours before we agreed..."

The fat Iilmara immigrant pulls on the sleeve of the tall boy: "Really, Tereesz, call. Something's wrong!"

"I know, I know," says Tereesz, and the steel dial rings under his finger.

The terrible noise of time approaches, the most violent sound in the world. There is no longer a golden light that falls on the room, but a very deep Pale. All the distances there are insurmountable, there is a *horror vacui* between every object and the next.

2. CLASS REUNION

Inayat Khan pours himself a glass of mors². A drop of pink liquid drips from his chin onto his tie. The suit fits poorly and the buttons tear. It gives off the impression that he's an idiot.

"A fat idiot with a bright blue tie," he thinks. "I shouldn't have come."

"Go on, see your friends! Who were they again? That von Fersen, he was a nice guy and..."

"He wasn't my friend, he was a psycho-terrorist. I despised him, that arrogant little upstart."

"... he's grown up to be an esteemed man now..."

"He's grown up to be a *ruthless* careerist, a vile guy, a racist too. I remember what he called me. Do you want me to tell you what he called me, mother?"

"... and Tereesz and Jesper! Jesper is also well known now..."

"Camel shit. Mum, he called me camel shit."

Khan watches the magnetic tape slide across the reader. The plastic discs rotate in the machine in a mesmerising way, the magnet becomes music, a slow song, and for a moment it seems as if those dots of light are creeping across the walls and floor of the auditorium again. Like stars in the sky, or a swarm of jellyfish deep underwater. The dots of light dance on Målin Lund's white dress, and his hand starts to feel sweaty on the girl's waist. What do you say? Time stands still, the music fades and Målin Lund's dark green eyes are reflected in Khan's thick-framed dialectical materialist glasses.

Hålla mig här...

"Uh..." A woman, probably from a parallel class, stops next to the man. She starts to say something but then pretends to reach for a snack. Neither of them came. Khan is alone, and the woman in a pantsuit is in a pantsuit. Can't just stand around, either, have to manage somehow.

He pulls a magic pen out of his pocket. There, beneath the glass, Sapurmat Knežinski, Chairman of the Presidium of the People's Republic of Samara, smiles his hearty historical black and white smile straight into the camera. To his left, a man with a rat's face is leaning on the railing of the boat, wearing a black leather coat from the secret police force. "Behold, the elusive commissar!" Khan says and flips the pen. The man with the rat's face disappears under the glass. Only the chairman of the Presidium, Sapurmat Knezhinsky himself, together with Uhotomsky, a groveller, who is exceptionally adept at giving embarrassing criticisms, remains. Where there used to be a commissar, there is now an empty reeling. You can now see the part of the bridge that was behind the commissar before.

"Very interesting," says the woman in a pantsuit and looks searchingly over her shoulder. Khan wipes away a piece of hair stuck to his forehead. In his other hand, he still holds

²A fruit drink popular in Russia and other Slavic countries, made from berries, particularly lingonberry and cranberry, or sometimes bilberries, strawberries, raspberries, etc. It is non-carbonated and made by mixing the berries with sugar and lemon juice then boiling the mixture; it can also be made by combining pure juice with sweetened water.

a pen, which he now looks at with an oblivious smile, muttering to himself, "There is a commissar, there is no commissar."

The smile flickers for a moment and then disappears from the man's double-chinned face. Khan's big, sad eyes watch the hustle and bustle of grown-ups in the lobby. The promotion of '56 is calling out for each other. Handshakes are exchanged, and children's pictures in wallets are shown.

There is a commissar, there is no commissar.

A man in his thirties sits on the parquet floor in a spacious room. The parquet is freshly varnished, the interior designer's blonde hair falling over his brow. He sits with his legs crossed, and his fine white hands clasped. When the man looks up, the room's interior is reflected back at him from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Behind him, in the dim light - the skeletal minimalism of the designer furniture, the stone countertop kitchenette, and two analogue speakers stood out like dark obelisks. A solitary spirit looms over the room. A beige Perseus Black overcoat hangs on its stand and a shoe rack holds white suede shoes worth three thousand reál.

His hand is on the *dimmer switch*, and the light fades. The room's reflection disappears and outside the floor-to-ceiling window, a sea of ferns begins. The dark green glow fades into the darkness beneath the fir trees. Usually, he sits here listening to music, but tonight it's so quiet you can hear the rain pattering on the ferns.

Jesper de la Guardie also did a lot of nose candy in his twenties, when he and his fellow thinkers developed the world-famous *Illdad minimal* design language. Then they scurried together between the cafe of the Union of Architects and the restrooms of a prestigious interior design office, congratulated each other on inventing the future and sipped on bottled water: "This project we are making, *it rules*, through its language of images we will define human visual cognition for the next century" and "One day I will write *a book* about it!. Tasteless people are wicked people, evil is tasteless. Is it really so inconceivable, then, that simple, clean interior design will make the world a better place?"

Then nose candy went out of fashion, but bottled water stayed. Jesper takes a sip and stands up, adjusts the tie of his V-neck sweater, lifts the phone from the hook and calls a taxi.

The lights of the concrete cube beneath the fir trees go out as the machine takes off with Jesper into the dark woods, leaving behind a cloud of burnt fuel. In the empty house, a telephone rings between the glass walls - a white device on a wooden cube table with an exceptionally beautiful appearance.

It's dark.

International Collaboration Police agent Tereesz Machejek steps off a train in Magnesium Hall. The steadily intensifying rain makes the steel monoliths of the carriages shine. There they tower, suspended by a rope railing in the sky above the platform. Steam rises from underneath the wagons, from hot magnets and drifts in billowing clouds on the asphalt of the platform. Machejek takes his suitcases from the conductor and moves with the crowd into the train station building.



Figure 1: Magnet Train (by Aleksander Rostov)

A coin drops into the metal slot of the pay phone. The ringback tone calls and the International Collaboration Police agent practises saying “hello” normally and relaxed while holding the phone. The freckles on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose have faded completely with time, his face a permanent frown. No one answers, the man takes the address from his briefcase along with directions and decides on the tram.

The dark shape of the Magnesium Hall towers over the city. Luminous elevator cabins descend from its belly to Vaasa like dandelion umbrellas. In one of them, Agent Machejek watches as the only metropolis of the Nordic countries glows beneath his feet. The elevator window is dripping with rain, and in the distance, the low, flat city in the North Sea dissolves into an archipelago of light. Telefunken’s slender mast alone rises from the saturnine green mass of buildings. Motorcycles meander there, glowing golden, and traffic on cycles is as smooth as a dream. There is Königsmalm – a commercial centre – and directly below lies Saalem, where the colourful lights of the immigrant district flow on the asphalt. Horse-drawn trams emerge from under the canopy of the manège, climb the slopes, and disappear with a clatter under shiny green chestnuts. The tracks scatter among Lovisa’s tens and hundreds of parks, leading to university islands and social housing estates where the city quietly gives way to coniferous forests. Far away in the suburbs, the lights go out, and Machejek feels the summer resorts, empty beaches, and pine forests shivering in the rain. From there, the real Katla begins, and over its dark ridges, clear-cuts, and valleys, the frozen winds approach from behind winter’s orbit³ already by the end of September.

³“Winter’s orbit” is a reference to a cut-off similar to the Arctic Circle in our world.

Chestnut leaves swirl under the canopy of the manège building into the waiting pavilion, where a girl with a baby voice announces route numbers and delays through a loud-speaker. The structure's framework echoes back at her, leaves are sticking to the glass of the pavilion and the windows of the horse-drawn trams, and the air is filled with the smell of their manure. A Collaboration Police agent steps into the crowded carriage with a briefcase in hand. On top of the briefcase, the contours of the isolas, the emblem of the Collaboration Police, take flight like a soaring bird of prey.

"Private detective," lies Khan. He is not a private detective. A private detective is a fantastic fusion. It borrows the obesity and oily hair from his own career as a collector of disappearance memorabilia in his parents' basement and mixes in his more successful classmate, Tereesz Machejek, an agent in the Missing Persons Division of the International Collaboration Police. The fantastic fusion has served Khan faithfully on several occasions. This is not one of those times.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." A woman in a pantsuit is distracted.

"Private detective. More specifically - I'm looking for missing people. Then, when the police and law enforcement have given up, friends or families, mostly families, come to me. And then I... I do my best." In the background, Sven von Fersen presents a former class teacher with a collection of his witty management articles, looking very cosmopolitan. You wouldn't think that people with yellow skin and exotic names would be referred to as camel shit in his vocabulary.

"Oh..." he turns to Khan. "So you're looking for them. Still."

"Yeah, okay, that was it, at first. True. But I've learned that too and... one thing led to another." The man in the bright blue tie is sweating. He's losing patience. "And besides - so what, listen! Half the conversations around here are on that subject. Now tell me you're not interested."

"First of all, half the conversations here aren't on *that* subject. You think they are, but they're not. And secondly, of course, I do, but I think the whole thing is, well, sad."

"What's sad?"

"This subject. The people who still talk about it. They still write in the newspaper that they saw some woman somewhere and it looked like Målin or what Anni would look like now and so on."

"Go fuck yourself!"

The people around the snack table fall silent and look in the direction of Khan and von Fersen. The woman in the pantsuit is getting uncomfortable. She looks away. The sweaty man with the dialectical materialist glasses shoves the remaining half of the pretzel in his mouth and makes his way into the dressing room.

Chestnut trees in front of the gymnasium sway in the wind. Leaves fly onto the stairs, sidewalks and mud puddles. The surface of the water shimmers, as the car comes to a screeching halt. The taxi door closes and then a pair of white suede shoes worth three thousand real step into the puddle. The interior designer curses as he takes three long steps away from the puddle. Angrily accepting the splashes of mud on his shoes, he puts the briefcase under his arm and walks up the stairs to the lobby.

It's warm inside, it smells like glue. Jesper walks through the lobby, the worn parquet floor creaking under his shoes. He takes the name tag from the smiling volunteer and puts it in the back pocket of his trousers.

"You should put it on your chest, they are there for everyone to recognise each other."

"Yes," says Jesper. And leaves the label in his pocket.

Portraits from the yearbook and class photos are lined up on the stand. VIII B. A short blonde boy with a head too big for his shoulders and a lock of hair combed behind his ear. To the left is an overweight Iilmaraa immigrant child wearing an ill-fitting tie. Little Khan stares blurrily past the camera. The tall freckled kojko in the back row of "lanklets" suggested he take off his glasses. So as to look less lame.

Slowly, the man's gaze moves along the VIII B rows, anxiety growing in his heart. His imagination precedes him. Somewhere in the middle of the girls' row, a massive cluster of hydrogen fusion reactions, a distant constellation of matter, shines.

It was eight years ago when Jesper's sharp sketch first appeared on the glossy paper cover of a design booklet. Admittedly, the spotlight still had to be shared with two other coked-up visionaries. There they were, the three of them on a *photoshoot*, sitting on their flagship sofa. The *Softbox* was diffusing, Fakkengaff was playing, and underneath it all was written "pioneers", "the future", "sophisticated" and much more, all of which he remembers very well. Two hours later, Jesper sat alone in his glowing cube, scrunchie in hand, on a morbidly large stack of classroom photos and newspaper cuttings. One glance at the spruce trees swaying in the wind and the temptation to take another look to see if the smell had worn off was overcome. The scrunchie was sorted into the "household waste" box and the girls' folder into "packaging". Jesper stood in the middle of the room and exhaled deeply. Enough. It's over now.

But where are they? Why aren't they here? Why are neither of them here? Disappointed, Jesper is already taking a step back to look over all the pictures properly when suddenly a thirty-four-year-old man stops in the middle of the lobby.

This man still lives with his mother.

Early spring, twenty years ago.

Little Inayat Khan falls headfirst into a mud puddle covered with a thin layer of ice. His woollen reindeer sweater is muddy, and dark red blood drips from his nose. Despite the many warnings and worried suggestions to stay on the ground, the boy manages to get up, slowly and unsteadily, falling down once again. Finally, he stands face to face with Sven von Fersen, just a few metres away. The mud dries on little Khan's face, his hands rise in an awkward battle stance. His fists shake with anger and humiliation.

"Hey, do you know what he said?" von Fersen starts again.

The despicable little lackey knows what Khan said, but still asks, "Tell me, what did he say, Sven?"

Sven is not stingy with his answer: "He walked Målin home and kissed her. Can you believe it, Khan the Leech took her home, Leechy Khan kissed her!"

Laughter echoes, and the lackey quickly chimes in: "Why do you have to talk such hurtful nonsense? It's your own fault! If you talk such hurtful nonsense, it's your own fault. Do you think it's nice for Målin to hear such hurtful nonsense? Huh? Is it?"

Tears of anger draw lines on the cheeks of the boy with a reindeer sweater. Yesterday after school, Khan let his imagination run wild. It was a terrible mistake. The sun comes out from behind a cloud, and he already sees, from the spectators' circle some tens of meters away, how Målin Lund's blonde hair shines like a halo. The girl blushes with shame. Charlotte, the oldest of the sisters, puts her hand on Målin's shoulder, and they turn their spring jacketed backs.

"Don't you think your sweater should have some, I don't know, *camels* on it?" a shout rings out like a curved sword through the schoolyard as Khan lunges desperately towards von Fersen. Though he slips a bit, in his mind he still sees how the sharp spear of Amistad's epic hero, Ramout Karzai, pierces the enemy's chest.

The distance shrinks, and an animalistic collision seems inevitable. But suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he sees an unknown factor that stops him, the other hand held up like a stop sign against von Fersen's stiff chest.

With outstretched arms, Jesper, a blonde lock on his forehead, spits out his gum and unleashes a barrage of "Who cares, Sven, don't start fucking around" arguments. Khan tries to break free from his deskmate's grip, his scratched cheek and bloody nose smearing Jesper's shoulder.

So they stand. The bell rings, and the lunch break is over. The courtyard empties of children, and Jesper wipes his shoulder with a napkin. "So did you kiss Målin?" he asks.

"No. But I did walk her home. And it went well. Very well."

"Except that it didn't go *that* well."

"Yeah."

"That's the same shirt! Tell me, Khan, that it's not the same shirt!"

"Jesper!"

Two adults stand in a cloakroom and shake hands for the first time in years. Jesper's flickering smile carries a hint of warmth. He begins: "I think I behaved a little rudely the last time we saw each other. I understand now - it was a mistake."

Khan simply laughs in response. His two-day-old stubble wobbles along with his friendly double chin.

"I left an ignorant impression on you." Having said that, Jesper pauses for a moment to think about what he has planned next. "I have *news*. Something new." He points to his folder and looks at Khan questioningly. "Or have you, I don't know, become a chef in the meantime?"

"You know, I'm always *hardcore*."

Without even a hint of a class reunion, Khan takes his jacket from the dressing room and they head towards the door.

"Look, a disappearing commissioner!"

"It's not so bad."

"I made one for Tereesz too. It's a special version. The same picture, but guess what happens if you turn it a little further?"

"What happens?"

“Uhotomski disappears *too!* One pigeon too. It’s partly behind Uhotomski.”

“Otherwise, half a pigeon would be left hanging in the air.”

“Exactly.”

Drops of rain fall from Agent Machejek’s umbrella, and a puff of smoke floats in the shadow of the umbrella and then disappears into the wind. With his “Astra” in mouth, the man folds the map and puts it in his briefcase. In front of him is the high school lawn, where two men run through a silver rain curtain towards him. The kojko takes a step back in his grey fishbone-patterned coat. He makes room under the umbrella, it’s enormous. It’s standard issue for the Collaboration Police.

“Did he apologise?”

“He apologised,” Khan replies for Jesper.

“Is it... *nice* there?” Machejek points towards the school building.

Khan shakes his head and Jesper elaborates: “Let’s go to the city instead. There’s one place. One new place.”

The three men under the large umbrella walk until they can’t be seen anymore. The distant chiming of bells draws closer as the silver curtains are pulled together behind the friends’ backs...

Eight years ago.

... until the Stereo 8 format tape clicks against the magnetic reader, needles under little lamps hitting twelve decibels. The beat is unbearably smooth, even more modern than nose candy. Or who knows, it’s hard to say. The beat comes from here, from the world-famous Vaasa recording studios. The beat was made by someone semi-mythical, Fakkengaff, who may be an Oranjese immigrant, a DJ, and a music producer, but is rather a group of people or a machine in the sky. The nose candy, however, came from a pirate ship through the uncharted Pale. The nose candy was made by a slave dreaming of a revolution and an overseer guarding the fields with a rifle. Fakkengaff made the beat so that the girls would start dancing and the boys would have a good view. The slave with machetes made the nose candy so that *La Puta Madre* wouldn’t send his family to the firing squad. For six months, the nose candy matured on the Irmala high mountain plateau, in the golden rays of the sun. The world eagle, with its thousand-kilometre wings, kept the sun from falling from the turquoise blue sky. The place where the beat seems to go underwater for half a minute and then comes back – even more amazing than it sounds! – Fakkengaff whispered to the spirit of debauchery. He had angelic white wings, but his breath next to the ear of the DJ crouched behind the mixing console was hot, smelling of cinnamon and primal malice.

My God, what a lovely numbness in the nose. My God, how good is that place where the beat comes out of the water. So sad. Even fiercer than before. How cool am I?! I’m on the cover there, I’m so cool on the cover there. I’m a pillar of light, vertical, and there’s a dark room around me. And that’s it, that’s all there is, you see?

The guests on Jesper’s white cube sofa and behind the multifunctional table exchange impressions of the world exhibition. Champagne-socialist goblets are also clinked. Jesper alone, dancing like a rare albino rooster. From the water bottle in his right hand, pearly drops fly to the windows.

Like times that have already been and gone, the streets of Vaasa drift by the taxi window. A large black horse clenches its teeth, its breath rising from its nostrils. Something sweet seeps into the shattered heart of the Collaboration Police agent. The rain subsides, and young people slowly fold their umbrellas in the darkness. Metro entrances, familiar place names. A girl on a bicycle turns towards a side street where the yellow streetlights are steaming. Traffic reflects from the windows of buildings and closed shops until a motorway rises above the sidewalks. The passing city flashes through the cracks of the stone edges, and a little boy waves to Machejek from the window of a passing car.

On Königsalm Bridge, the passing streetlights become a dotted line. The grey silhouette of the prestigious residential area towers over the water, where Tereesz's home was when he lived in Vaasa as a child. Ahead, behind the windshield of the carriage, begins the island district that had a dubious reputation twenty years ago. As Jesper explains now, careful development work and some groundbreaking galleries have made it the next "trend area" after Östermalm.

"Bourgeois-bohemian, you mean?"

The taximeter ticks, it's warm and dark inside. Jesper doesn't even acknowledge Tereesz's witty comment.

"Hey, talk then," Khan changes the mixed topic of urban development and class reunion suddenly.

"I need a projector. There's also a tape, I'll talk when we arrive at café 'Cinema'."

"But show us the *scrunchie*," Tereesz joins in with the begging.

"Come on, don't start. I don't carry it with me, I threw it away. It was a very weird time altogether..."

A cunning smile appears on Khan's face: "Jesper, don't be a spoil-sport!"

"Yeah, don't be a spoil-sport, show it to the class."

Jesper looks out the window: "No."

A silent moment passes. The hum of wheels on the road, the clicking of a turn signal. Khan and Tereesz look at each other, chuckling, and Jesper pretends to be indifferent, looking out the window. Only a little later does he feel the obligation to pick up the conversation again.

"What did you tell Fersen? The detective story?"

"Scrunchie! Jesper, the scrunchie! Show it!"

In a resigned manner, the interior designer reaches into his Perseus Black overcoat and takes out a ring box.

Everything was so good and now it's so sad. Talking about **funk!** aesthetics and futurism with a young real estate developer's photographer wife under the window, there was a feeling that everything was going to be like this from now on, that normalcy would never return. But now, the woman singing through the monolith loudspeakers says ten thousand times in a row that she's in love, in love, in love... Outside the window, the morning grey sinks through the ferns, cold and damp. It doesn't feel like that anymore. That the song is about Jesper. Now it's just some singer in a studio. Maybe I should do it again. I just did it, and it didn't feel any better. I don't know, maybe I should still do it.

A minute later, in the milky grey light in the centre of the room, stands a newly twenty-six-year-old version of Jesper de la Guardie who has just stepped up to a higher league. His coffee-coloured shirt is unbuttoned, his nostrils are red, and his mouth is set in an angry sneer.

“So. The party’s over. Go home.”

No one hears him, Fakkengaff is too loud. With the stop button of the stereo 8-format tape player under his finger, the pillar suddenly falls silent in the middle of the light. Heads turn.

“Party’s over. Back home, you filth.”

Jesper’s glassy eyes and monstrously disdainful mouth droop as clothes and handbags are awkwardly searched for. A pat on the shoulder from a fellow visionary earns him a look that can forever ruin human relationships.

The real estate developer’s photographer wife falls slightly behind the group in front of the house and then returns to the concrete cube. “Anklet!” she lies. Long legs in strapped sandals, a silver chain around her ankle frame the next sad sight. Jesper sits amidst the scattered garbage sorting bags in the kitchen corner. He looks up at the kind face of the real estate developer’s wife amidst the apple cores, empty water bottles, and handmade paper bags of pasta. The foggy September beach reflected in his eyes indicates that Jesper is not interested. Your condolences - no thank you. The high reeds rustle in the wind, and the silhouettes of changing cabins stand in line under the grey-white sky. Four girls run across the sand and disappear into thin air.

In his right hand, the interior designer holds a light pink scrunchie. Khan looks up at Jesper, a ring box in his hand under his nose. His eyebrows are furrowed, he is worried. The car jolts when it stops. The taxi driver sticks his head into the cabin but quickly turns away after seeing the expressions on the faces of the men.

“The smell is gone,” Khan says.

“I know.”

“There’s something very wrong with it.”

“I know.”

3. NON-ENTITY

The Romangorod Conference distinguishes between ten different types of missing people. The ninth of them, non-entity, is a flagrant violation of the International Bill of Human Rights. Such a person has not only been eliminated by a state's organ of violence but the documentation of his or her former existence has also been lost. This particular case of political fading, the cursing of memory, has been inflicted on a number of historical figures with varying degrees of success. In the case of Mesque, for example, a loss of as much as ten per cent of the historical scale of the entire culture can be statistically established. We can't dwell on the successful examples - it would be impossible to talk about a day that did not happen. But small signs are left behind of all of us, and the censor is also human.

Thus, it may happen that the citizen erased is, thanks to their non-entity, a considerably more recognised historical figure than their colleague who was simply shot in the head behind a dumpster. What other prominent narrative could have saved the Samara Communist Party's cut-throat Julius Kuznitsky from the obscurity of history if not for this funny photo? As the recording techniques develop, even more complicated processes have been added to the former craft of filing the emperor's head off coins. For a well-oiled degenerate-bureaucratic country of workers, a little spring-cleaning of their punched cards is not much of a challenge. But in the photographic age, and in some particularly curious examples in the film age, cleaning takes on a certain technical subtlety. One that we can already admire in the case of the aforementioned disappearing commissar Julius Kuznitsky who was made to disappear by the photo retoucher's magic wand on board the steamboat "Mazov" on that gloomy Sunday morning.

Julius was a disgusting man, an uneducated hick. His young eyes did not see the world revolution - the commissar's stellar flight began later, in Samara. Without having the slightest imagination of Mazov's idea, however, he did not think much of giving the victims titles with politically incriminating connotations. This was his undoing in the end. Apparently, one day, the Chairman of the Bureau, Mr. Knežinski, simply could not bear the embarrassment any longer. "Tell me, Kusnja, how can it be that comrade Zdorov is a counter-revolutionary when the revolution was fifty years ago? And why are comrade Bronski's Landzovlik-Knezhinskyist beliefs 'irreversibly narrow-minded'? I am Knežinsky, Sapurmat Knežinsky, that is my name!"

In some circles, the two images - the original and the retouching - have become a popular cultural phenomenon. The rat's smile that Kuznitsky wore on his face that day adds spiritual value to the curiosity. Just look at him! Who wouldn't want to wipe this foul weasel from the existence of history?

Much sadder is the story of the third figure in that same fateful photo. Aram Uhotomski, Mazov's loyal revolutionary friend from the Eleven-Day Government, an outstandingly talented agronomist, geneticist, and one of the three breeders of the Ulan yellow potato.

An extraordinarily apolitical figure, whose unpretentious behaviour and indispensable contribution to the diet of the world's working classes saved him from a total of three dismissals. That is until Uhotomski's scientific impartiality at the XXI Geneticists' Plenum offended someone's feelings. It turns out that modern genetics is simply not compatible with the *tabula rasa* philosophy of Kneshinskyism, in which, in a revolutionary state of mind, even the seeds of gooseberry can be converted into figs.

With horror, Uhotomski discovered he was titling himself a small clay worm when speak-

ing in front of the presidium. Never having written criticisms about himself before, the poor scholar overstrained so blatantly, that even in the then-lush atmosphere of self-deprecation, it was difficult for those present to listen to his words. Since this memorable performance, Uhotomski's name has been associated specifically with the epithet of grovelling. Completely compromised as a historical figure, the merciful chairman Knežinski decided to spare the memory of an older and once much more dignified comrade and sent him behind a dumpster during the Nine Process, then later had all notes of Uhotomski's existence removed. However, the historical forgery failed, as the retoucher absent-mindedly left one remarkable photo unprocessed, where Uhotomski was still present. The same one where commissar Julius Kuznitski had previously disappeared into obscurity.

Technically the most impressive, however, is the story of the fall from grace of Ignus Nielsen - a prophet and Mazov's schoolteacher. Despite being a noteworthy figure in the history of the communist movement, he became a disembodied spirit in the hands of the Vaasa censors. Mazov's apocalyptic bloodthirsty character suddenly became somehow burdensome for the image of the social democratic Nordic countries. So they concocted Nielsen's disappearance with Graad, following the newly defeated revolution. To the dismay of the censors, dozens of hours of film material were shot of Mazov during the technically advanced Eleven-Day Government, where the revolutionary icon was almost always accompanied by his best friend and comrade-in-arms, Nielsen. Destroying all the material would have raised suspicions. And so it was that an elliptical grey cytoplasm hovers permanently to Mazov's right. It took historians decades to solve this eerie mystery.

Even today, many believe that the cytoplasm is Communism itself.

4. VIDKUN HIRD

A 12-millimeter film is running in the projector. Khan is sitting on a sofa with Machejek, looking suspiciously at his square coffee cup on a square plate. He takes a spoon to stir the sugar, approaching the cup cautiously. The café named “Cinema” is all glass and white. Jesper, who is sitting on a white chair and adjusting the projector, is surrounded by glass soundproof walls. The white canvas falls onto the glass plaque, and the sofa where Khan and Machejek are sitting is also white. In the middle of the café’s glass vitrine is a statue of an albino tiger. Just be careful not to break anything – it’ll cost you dearly.

“Let me guess,” the agent twirls his “Astra” in his fingers, making it as soft as he likes. “Your design?”

“One of my students’. This place is like a cinema screen, a blank white sheet, and we are *projected* here, you know? How is it? It’s not comfortable, the screen, you know?”

“It’s a bit uncomfortable.”

“Well, he’s a bit nervous, yes, but the boy is talented. He needed a high-visibility project, and this is the only place where he can get behind the projector quickly. So let’s try to keep an open mind, you know,” Jesper and the tiger look at Khan. The glass eyes of the tiger are brighter than the interior designer’s.

“Hey, man, I am!”

Machejek takes a pencil and a notebook out of his jacket pocket.

“So,” Jesper starts, “One of my colleagues’ relatives works as an operator. Makes documentaries. Last fall, he told me about his new project. With Gessle. Do you know Konrad Gessle?”

“He mainly does crime stuff, right?”

“Not just that. Gösta, that’s my operator’s name, tells me how scared he is to do it and asks me if he should do it. He has a child now, and so on. The thing is, the film is about – and then I became interested – Vidkun Hird.”

“Oh my God!”

“I don’t want Vidkun Hird!”

“Wait, wait! Same here, that’s been done, he was in Arda, couldn’t be in Vaasa and so on. But I still decided to keep an eye on him, you know? And then, two weeks ago, Gösta came to talk to me. They’re on the verge of a breakthrough. Vidkun Hird has been in Kronstadt with them for six months...”

“No way!”

“... and they have a strategy there: to impress Hird. Gessle likes Hird, Gessle is Nordic, white as snow, well-read, and a good debater. So, Hird wants to impress the interviewer, starts to chat, to brag. Gessle gives the impression that there have been plenty of those wildly imaginative rapists, and what can’t Vidkun Hird do?”

“Uh-huh...”

“The first three months, Vidkun just hints, piques curiosity, drops suspicious dates, talks about going to the beach. Gessle doesn’t notice, discusses philosophy with Vidkun, over-

coming good and evil, I have it all written down here," Jesper pats the folder on the glass cube table. "Then one day, Hird has had enough."

The man flicks a switch and a small bulb in the projector's heart lights up. "I must warn you now," he looks towards Khan. "Those of us whose profession doesn't involve ditches and missing children may take some of what Vidkun says to heart."

Tereesz puts a sixth spoonful of sugar into his black coffee and pauses for a moment. After a very obvious pause, he plunges his needle-sharp pencil into the pencil sharpener and pretends to busy himself, a bitter grin on his face.

"Dude, when are you going to get it? Ditches and missing children - that's your subject too."

"Okay, Khan," sighs Jesper, "ditches and missing children. That's my subject."

"Ditches and missing children?" Tereesz abruptly and gleefully raises his sugar-stretched coffee cup in the air and waits.

"Skål!" exclaims Khan.

"Skål," says Jesper and scoops a slice of lime out of the water glass. His eyebrow furrowed thoughtfully at the sour taste, he chews on it.

"The tape, Jesper?"

"Ohh..."

A superhuman, rapist, child molester and former member of the NFD fascist party "Hjelmdall", Vidkun Hird appears on the white screen. With one hand cuffed to a chair, the other placed gentlemanly on his cheek, the futuristic philosopher is aware of the camera's presence. With this in mind, he raises his Nordic bulldog chin to a certain noble angle; there he glances up and down from his eye sockets. His hair carefully combed to one side in a thirty-year-old manner, and his leg over his knee. You can say that Vidkun is a vain man. Refusing to go down in history in his code-coloured prison jumpsuit, he now talks to Konrad Gessle wearing a blackshirts uniform. This was just one of his many conditions.

"Some people are born posthumously," he brags in the ancient Arda dialect. The archaic verbiage injects plenty of rural charm into his modernly subtle sentiment. The six-digit clock on the table indicates that the third hour of the interview on the 12th of August is underway.

"Did you know, Vidkun, that I've done a master's thesis on the old Ardic languages? I can smuggle in some literature for you."

"Oh, that would be most kind of you, Konrad, you know how I feel about the selection in this library." They both murmur as if in understanding.

"Arda is the inherent language of our tribe," continues Vidkun in a declarative tone, "Its vocabulary was adapted and developed by the ancient mammoth hunters who settled Katla plains thousands of years ago. Arda has certain semantic advantages in basic matters of wisdom, advantages that continental peoples lack. Arda is our nature, modern-day Vaasa - a metropolitan bastard. Regressed to continental, infiltrated by Graad. This watered-down language is incapable of expressing the truth. All the sentences in this dysgenic compote end up expressing the same thing: international stigma. The next century will see our tribe return to its original language. It will be the birth of a new era in terms of wisdom!"

"You've talked about it quite a lot. I also read your notes on the subject. It's all very interesting, but don't you think that your own historical character is sabotaging the finer points of your doctrine?"

"What?" Hird's eyes suddenly light up. The deep grooves in his cheeks lengthen and his mouth hardens contemptuously.

Konrad pretends not to notice Vidkun's moodiness and continues: "While I see the logic in your observations, don't you think it's hard for people to see the scientific validity of it coming from the mouth of a convicted child molester?"

"Mating is an entirely different tradition for our tribe than what modern-day social-porn propaganda serves us with its romanticism and I don't know what else. You know this, Konrad. One day, when their impotent morals have led continental peoples to extinction, then you will still see what I'm telling you."

"Well, let's look at it from an ordinary citizen's perspective..."

"An ordinary citizen lets his daughter go to school with blacks and gypsies, from childhood, in the racial melting pot. An ordinary citizen lets his child be raped there. You understand that this is what happens when four girls are put in such a school."

Konrad notices what the philosopher muttered under his breath, but he ignores it. "The ordinary citizen is the one you will consider your reader in the future. The ordinary citizen chooses whether your vision will be put into practice or not. You're talking about the nation! And do you really think he won't notice? The author is a fascist..."

"Nationalist."

"A fascist and methodical rapist, with a life sentence in Kronstadt for at least four murders, and a book that is a mixture of philosophy of history, eugenics and rape!"

"History. History, Konrad. You're a clever man, but your gay education is showing. You still think that history is made with master's theses and I don't know with what..."

"Well, what is it made with?" the well-seasoned interviewer doesn't lose his nerve. "By raping?"

Vidkun grabs a sheet of paper from Gessle's notebook from under his nose. A navy-blue uniformed soldier jumps into the frame after the sudden movement and strikes the tribesman's wrist with a rubber truncheon. Hird winces in pain, and the sheet flies into the air. The world-famous documentarian Konrad Gessle, a three-time Oskar Zorn nominee, raises his hand toward the soldier. Although he lowers his truncheon, the soldier stays vigilant beside the man, stroking his wrist.

"A pen," Vidkun glares angrily at Gessle.

With a clenched fist around his writing pen, the detainee throws triumphant glances at the soldier, "You! Please give me back my sheet now." The rubber truncheon has already risen menacingly into the air when Gessle quickly tears a new sheet and places it on the steel table in front of Hird.

"Do you see now? The crusade," Vidkun's carefully combed hair is in disarray, and a single light-brown lock dangles in front of his eyes. With his elbow holding the sheet in place, Hird tries to put the pen on paper, it seems sharp and dangerous in his hand. The man suddenly gets angry: "Please release my other hand. I can't do it like this."

Upon Gessle's pleading gaze, the soldier takes a keychain from his belt. Now, Hird addresses the viewer directly: "Thousands of years ago, our ancestors came here, to the

edge of the world, to this land. They came here with dog sleds, through the tremendous Pale. Only the strictest-willed creatures maintained their mental integrity during this heroic transition. The weak-minded continental creatures were left there, in the gray void. Our disciplined ancestors simply separated them from the herd. Those who lost their minds. And so, only the purified, unwaveringly determined Haakons, Gudruns, and other primogenitors stepped onto the Katla soil from the gray crater. Within fifty years, these primogenitors hunted down all the mammoths in Katla. They flourished." Vidkun Hird stretches his liberated hand victoriously and begins drawing small dots on the sheet of paper.

"This is a fundamental eugenic law, Konrad, fundamental. The more challenging the environment, the further the human being evolves beyond the steppe wall. Here, in this dark, snowy expanse... Man was not meant to live here. Just to survive, a superhuman tendency must emerge."

Gessle shrugs with anticipation, not interrupting and nodding understandingly. "A superhuman tendency is not limited by moral constraints. A superhuman tendency is a deliberate desire. Everything is possible for it, nothing is forbidden. Through blood, in the darkness of night, from one winter to another, it is passed down from generation to generation. Even in you, Konrad, there is a superhuman tendency."

Konrad nods. Vidkun Hird's face turns an unhealthy red. The redness is somewhere between fever and an allergic rash. "All of us, including you, are obligated to amplify this primordial entity within ourselves. Like the jaws of a predator grow tougher from eating meat. Obligation... obligation to your pack. So that they too may have big jaws, the kind that can hold a lot of meat."

Vidkun admires the artwork with a proud smile that doesn't seem to fit his face. The camera hasn't yet shown exactly what's happening on the page, but Gessle leans in closer to the picture.

"A rare creature. The middle one. A unique treasure."

The projector hums, Jesper takes a laminated copy of Vidkun's paper from the folder and places it on the table. The page carefully maps out an unfamiliar constellation, an elegant constellation of dozens of dots. Khan's mouth drops open in horror. Collaboration Police agent Tereesz Machejek calmly makes a note in his notebook.

"You have no idea, Konrad, how hard I fucked her. You can't imagine..." Hird is still speaking when Jesper hurriedly switches off the projector.

June, twenty years ago.

It's dusky and chilly on a cliff in the pine forest by the shore. The scorching sun hangs over the tops of the pine trees, but only a few patches of light make it through the interlaced sand and root tangle to reach the forest floor, like golden spots on the ocean floor. For a moment, there is complete silence beneath the trees. From a hundred meters away, you can hear the heather crunching under the approaching boys' sneakers until the sea breeze makes the pine needles rustle again. The trunks of the trees sway gently, a tangle of dark orange pillars with golden stripes on the sides from the sun. The sweet smell of resin floats in the forest. The dusty taste of chamomile, a sweet and bitter bouquet, lingers in Tereesz's nostrils. A match is struck, and thick puffs from the stolen "Astra" cigarette sweep all the smells away, a trail of smoke clearly outlined in a single beam of light. Tereesz relaxes, his windbreaker over his head. He practices making smoke rings in the light. Just a few kilometres away in the town is his father's

diplomatic villa. The house, so close to the popular summer beach, made Tereesz a popular boy three weeks ago at the beginning of summer vacation. Just as footsteps from the others can be clearly heard from behind the hill, Tereesz blows a small ring through the larger smoke ring.

“Oh! I did it...” he exclaims, ruining his masterpiece.

“What?” Jesper, in shorts and a sailor’s shirt, asks as he reaches the hill. “What did you do?”

“The smoke ring went through the other one.”

“You’re smoking now?!” asks Jesper, startled.

“Want some? ‘Astra’. It’s the strongest.”

“Give me, Tereesz, I’ll have one.” Khan, who is panting, comes up beside Jesper. A binocular with a leather strap hangs around Khan’s neck.

“Here,” Tereesz throws the packet towards Khan, who spills some as he fumbles with his hands. In his exhaustion, the boy still manages not to drop it and lifts it under his glasses.

“Cool,” Khan gives the carton a professional assessment. The white stars run there on the blue cardboard.

“Pointless,” Jesper says out of the corner of his mouth, and steps walks away from Tereesz, to the top of another hill to survey the land.

“That shirt of yours, well that’s pointless,” Tereesz lazily stands up and offers Khan a match out of the matchbox.

Jesper squints his eyes and raises his hand like a captain, surveying the forest floor before him.

“Pointless, yes? Anni didn’t think so. You know, she *complimented* me on it. Last day.”

“Did she now?”

Jesper turns to Khan. The boy takes a tentative puff of smoke.

“Hey, Khan, remember in the dressing room, Anni said that was a nice shirt?”

“She did. Tereesz, she did say that.”

“Fersen jumped in like a fool and told Anni she had a beautiful dress before I could. And something about her hair too. It was very funny.”

“An opportunity to be polite is never missed,” Khan announces with a smile, coughing up some smoke.

“Let’s go.”

Three boys move through the patches of light sliding under the trees towards the top of the slope. Khan throws away his cigarette with a failed flick and starts twirling his binoculars on a string. His backpack shakes as he accelerates downhill. Running down the slopes, the other boys jump over the heather bushes, only Jesper worries about his white pants and strolls dignifiedly with his hands in his pockets, like on an evening walk. The sound of the ocean in the trees grows louder as they approach their usual spot on the cliff.

The wooden fence has signs of danger of collapse, where a small piece of the slope is falling down. Crossing the pedestrian road and climbing into the bushes from under the sign, Khan explains to Tereesz: "Look, they call it the North Sea, but it's actually an ocean. Theoretically, it extends into your Igressi Sea through the Pale. It reaches Graad. This makes the North Sea inter-isolar. So it's actually an ocean. A question of classification."

Together for the third week, the three of them try to keep their conversation as academic as possible. To impress everyone with their intellectual character when they return in the fall. Jesper, slipping carefully through the bushes behind, continues: "We didn't have a word for the ocean in Katla, everything was just 'sea'."

A huge aquamarine body of water expands in front of the boys from the high cliff edge. The clouds tear apart in the pale blue sky, and the bright white sun reflects as a stripe on the water below. The ocean waves lazily and majestically wash along the long sandy strip. Charlottesjäl. The wind disappears for a moment, and a blast of heat hits the boys' faces. Insects emerge from the foliage of flowering wild primroses. The shore curves towards the sea under a rocky cliff, all the way to the tip of the peninsula where Havsänglari hotel is located. There are small human dots on the sand with red and white striped beach umbrellas. The boys sit on a patch of grass among thorns, where the steep sandy cliff disappears quickly from view. Tereesz has theorised several times about how one could theoretically jump down this soft rocky slope - he would land on a gently sloping sand dune from a height of three meters and then slide on his heels. Jesper worries about his clothes in such a case, and Khan is simply a coward. Even now, Tereesz sits closest to the edge, while Jesper begs Khan for the binoculars. The sun spots reflect on the curved insect eyes of the binoculars. In the dark, cool heart of the glasses, the picture of people down on the beach, northern summer tourists with their towels and umbrellas, is magnified. The image is even clearer for Khan, who adjusts his left: +7, right: +4 prescription lenses. Khan bought the binoculars with his own money from Vaasa, in a shop for hunters.

When Jesper has scanned the beach, it's Tereesz's turn. With rubber cushions pressed into his eye sockets and his cheeks increasingly freckled from the sun, he admits: "Not yet, it's only ten o'clock. They'll come."

While Khan and Tereesz compare cigarette brands - Vaasa crap is said to be mild, while the decent stuff from Graad is more potent - Khan nods eagerly at everything. Meanwhile, Jesper aims his sniper scope at the beach, refusing to give up. A small cross stops at a white beach umbrella, but does not find the red flowers it is looking for. Vertical lines move across young families, collapsing sandcastles, and brown-skinned sunbathers, stopping on two blonde girls for a moment before continuing - it's not them. Jesper adjusts his focus. From about two hundred meters away, a faint familiar feeling stirs in his heart, a distant constellation, a material communion. He waves his hand to signal to the boys that something is happening. Khan and Tereesz shield their eyes from the sun and look down at the beach."

Refining the focus of his Zeul-brand lenses, the pale pink veil sharpens into a stomach in Jesper's eyes. Breathing shakes the eyepieces from the girl's navel up to the solar plexus, where the curves of her chest gather in a ring holding her tanning top. White ribbons cut into her shoulders, and her breasts rise and fall under the fabric as she breathes. The wheel in the center of the binoculars clicks twice, and the expanded field of view settles on the beige beach towel as the girl turns onto her stomach. A flash of ash-blond hair and familiar round cheeks beneath sunglasses. Anni-Elin Lund lazily props herself up on her elbows and buries her head in a girl's magazine. Above her small backside, an

oddly delicate constellation of birthmarks runs down her spine, extending to the wings of her shoulder blades.

Cool horror seeps through the seals of the windows into the café "Cinema", where three minds try to maintain their surface tension of coping for the twentieth year. Khan shrugs his shoulders: "Who knows this? Who knows? I haven't read a single line about it all this time. It's said nowhere!"

Tereesz puts his pencil on the table.

"This is called a control fact. It is deliberately left out of personal descriptions. Even from official documentation. I have those thirty folders in my head and there isn't a single line about it. He knows it. Look at him!"

Jesper's face remains unchanged. He's already been through this. "That's why Gösta came to me. The officials just shrugged their shoulders. Maybe he heard at work that I knew the girls. They were all confused there. Hird didn't explain anything more either. And by the way, I don't believe that crap. Some boys were there for principle, but Hird actually likes big-breasted Gudruns."

"It doesn't fit the profile, it's not chronologically possible," Khan livens up, "He was six hundred kilometres away five hours earlier, buying crankshafts and gaskets for his damn rape machine... I don't know, some kind of gasket plugs."

Because of the noise of the infamous rape machine's construction, Vidkun Hird's neighbour finally called the police on him and that was the beginning of his end. Inayat Khan, however, looks seriously into the eyes of the Collaboration Police agent.

"Tereesz. You have to re-open the case now. Continue the investigation. Somehow he has to know and it's the only credible lead since the stuff with the letters. You have to do it."

"You can't imagine how bad things are right now. It's the worst time to dig old things up. There's no more support from the military, everything is in a semi-state of war. No one knows if Oranjenrijk still exists. They'll fire me if I start this mess again..."

"No, Tereesz, you still have to do something about it." Jesper, now slightly annoyed, isn't interested in a looming world war. "You're the one who does this, it's your job. Do it!"

"Wait now, wait! Of course, I'll take it on. I had a feeling about this from the beginning when you invited me to the class reunion. Did you think I thought you were nostalgic or something? My own case is always open, you know, that folder doesn't close. You just have to hope the locals will go along quietly. They all hate cooperating. Very rarely does anyone bother to check if any of the interrogation papers have been signed."

Khan smiles cunningly. "Interrogation papers? So you're still going to Kronstadt?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good to know you're still cool, Tereesz."

Jesper also smiles, a little uncomfortably due to his reddening cheeks and pressing tone. "But cool indeed! That's good then."

Tereesz agrees. "It's a very good thing. Twenty years. There shouldn't be any hope left by then."

"But there is hope?" Jesper intelligently tilts his still too large head for his shoulders.

“Yes. Very good, Jesper. You’ve been very good.”

“Check, please!” The interior designer, who has been out of the active business for the last two years, snaps his fingers at the waiter and points his index finger to the table. The evenings haven’t been easy for him. But today is different. Tonight Jesper can afford himself little treats. Little foolish treats. The night arrives outside the cube’s windows, in the dark, where anything is possible. It’s possible to find them somewhere inside a hidden corner of this world, from the eternal ice of Lake Vostok or from the Erg Desert, where Ramout Karzai disappeared without a trace, deep in the lungs of Graad... You can still find them. As they were then. Small. And through that, become small yourself. Above the clouds, at the foot of Corpus Mundi, you just have to lift the veil of raindrops a little and you can touch them... “You were so brave not to give up! Everyone else forgot about us, the night sky was dotted with cold stars, the dark blue dome of the sky spun above our heads, but we knew you were still looking for us.”

5. ZA/UM

Anni-Elin Lund takes off her sunglasses and is blinded by a sudden flash of light. A crimson-blue swirl of colour in the girl's irises splashes onto her pupils and the smoky eye makeup glints in the light. Anni's little head turns swiftly like a kitten's. A sun bunny hops from a girl's magazine to sand, from sand to sunshade, as the girl's eyes follow it.

"What's going on?" Tereesz asks, dangling his legs on the edge of the cliff.

"I don't know, Målin's there now too. She's standing..."

"That's what I can see from here, that she's standing," interrupts Khan impatiently.

"She stands there, and I have to admit, that red-dotted swimsuit doesn't look too bad on her. It's a two-piece, as it's a trend now, and oh! She's just... damn!" Målin's smile through the binoculars turns into a smirk, and there's a glint of malicious glee in her eyes. Her hand rises to wave demonstratively above her head. The picture disappears as Jesper hides the treacherous lenses under his belly.

"Down, everyone on the ground!"

Khan hears blood rushing in his ears and feels a throb in his arm, his body halfway inside a thorny rosehip bush. Tereesz, who simply threw himself quickly on his back, now looks up at the pale June sky. A solitary sea eagle glides high above. It seems as if the bird is just hanging in the air.

"Khan, look, an eagle!"

"What fucking eagle, ow!" The rosehip bush reminds Khan of its presence sharply.

"Don't wiggle, you're rustling the bush," Jesper grumbles from the middle, lying on his stomach with binoculars in hand.

"Well, if they've already seen us, then it doesn't make much difference whether I rustle the bush or not. Hey, look what they are doing!"

"Look for yourself," Jesper slides the binoculars to Khan.

The bush rustles again as Khan, wearing a loose summer shirt, crawls out of it with his binoculars in hand. He raises his head and tries to stay invisible behind the tall grass. Hurriedly, he moves the binoculars down the beach to the parasol with red flowers and stops on the beach towel. To his surprise, he only sees little Maj sitting and looking ahead. Sweat drops onto Khan's glasses as he starts to worry. Forebodingly, he moves his gaze closer to the rock at the bottom until the little opera glasses are only about a hundred meters away, staring straight into his lenses. Standing there with one hand on her hip is the slender Charlotte, eldest of the sisters with her auburn hair flowing in the wind. This beautiful and terrifying creature from the ninth grade is about as far away from Khan's immigrant grasp as a seat in the parliament. And now she's so close that even without Målin's opera glasses her gaze pierces Khan's miserable eyes. Eyes that he now hides rather than amplify with his binoculars.

"Good Lord, they've got some little binoculars with them," Khan informs the emergency meeting.

"That's what they were pointing at yesterday, I know, I should have told you..."

"What, Tereesz?" Jesper suddenly gets angry, "So they know, you let us walk straight into a trap just now!"

"I forgot, sorry. I thought they may be watching that eagle. You know, its nest is right here near the cliff too..."

"You can stick that eagle up your ass." Khan laughs hard at this and Jesper continues: "Now all we have to do is stand up and wave at them and that's it. I don't know what we're going to say about this shitshow with binoculars. I really don't know."

"I have an idea," Tereesz stands up determinedly, while Khan grabs him by the trousers. Soon, however, the three slender girls, huddled up on the beach below, see a scrawny blonde-haired boy and then, a moment later, the slightly overweight boy from Iilmaraa, awkwardly step up beside Tereesz.

"Hello, girls!" Tereesz exclaims. Målin gasps and covers her mouth as the tall, straight figure leaps down from the bank as high as a four-storey building.

Next morning, twenty years later.

The tired lines from the man's eyes curve around his cheekbones. Under his eyes are two sharp peaks like those of a bird of prey. Grooves on either side of his cheeks - wait, worry. The blinds in the Collaboration Police offices have long been drawn on his arbitrarily coloured eyes; no one can look into them and see what is happening behind the curtains. The Collaboration Police agent also has a freshly trimmed beard that extends slightly forward, a long grey neck, tired skin from smoking resting against a white dress shirt. A thin black tie hangs from the collar of his shirt. The overnight rain has stopped, but it is still cold and windy. With his left hand, he pulls his coat collar closer and smokes with his right.

Standing like this in the bow of a small border patrol ship, a young Vaasa officer next to Tereesz, steaming cup of coffee in hand, asks, "What's in Kronstadt?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot answer that question," mutters Tereesz mechanically, his eyes fixed on the autumn horizon. A flock of seagulls rises from the reeds of the harbour and screams over the cold water as the boat engine starts with a clatter. A whiff of fuel and a chemical rainbow in the water.

"Coffee?" the young man tries to pick up the conversation again.

"No, thank you."

Tereesz feels droplets of water on his face. Refreshing. The low grey sky has no sun to be seen this morning, only airship lights circling above the city, and the steel silhouette of the large Graad cruiser hangs in the bay like a ghost. *Järnspöken*, they call them, iron ghosts. Nobody likes those ominous ships here. Encounters with ghosts. On guard, yes, but against whom? Who has declared war on whom? Nobody. And Graad, with its steel umbrella, won't win any hearts here, and even Tereesz, who looks like an ordinary northerner but speaks and smokes like a Graad man, can't get far with his talk of motherland Zsiemsk, the hundred-year occupation, and the Yugo-Graad massacre. Yes... and also Frantiček the Brave.

Of course, he wanted to be like Frantiček the Brave. Still does. All the kojkos want to be like Frantiček the Brave. Occupy positions, rise up, hoist the flags of Sigismund the Great again. Boldness, joie de vivre like the thundering troika!

What happened?

A solitary border patrol boat is making its way across the North Sea. The waves rock the boat heavily, and soon Tereesz has to throw away his cigarette so as not to slip on the

deck. The poor smoking conditions make shivering outside pointless, so he goes to sit on a cabin bench. He tries not to look towards the city, down the winding coastline where Charlottesjäl is located. Oh, how he longs to go there! One time he came here, four thousand kilometres from Graad on the Pale magnet train, didn't even call Khan or Jesper, went straight to Charlottesjäl and just sat there like an idiot. Then he went back home. Another week through the Pale. He and Jesper were still fighting over the restaurant thing, and just hanging out with Khan seemed pointless too. That was his winter solstice holiday two years ago. That was his *vacation*. The department psychiatrist banned him from travelling for a year. It was deemed dangerous to go through the Pale so often.

With a tourniquet in his mouth, Machejek pierces the clearly visible vein on his wrist with a glass and metal syringe.

But he still wants to see how the reeds bend in the wind. It's so beautiful to watch the ocean gently and calmly washing up on the beach. Somewhere in the distant haze, there is the silhouette of a rocky cliff. And the water, cold water. Raindrops. It's beautiful to watch.

Tereesz's veiny hands lovingly stroke the black suitcase in his lap.

"*Haadramutkarsai!*" shouts little Inayat Khan from the edge of the cliff and jumps. The sun shines. His belly tingles as if he has a hundred metres to go, but the fall lasts only a moment. Suddenly, his feet hit the sand. For a few seconds, he kicks his heels into the sand and the slide slows. Little Khan feels the roots poke his buttocks and the rocks scrape his back, his shirt coming out of his trousers. His glasses bounce off his face and a cheering freckled Tereesz rushes to catch them underneath. The girls run towards his battered body.

"You're crazy!" exclaims Anni. There's a reason to cheer.

But not little Jesper. He's now alone up there and staring at the cliff, his white trousers, his sailor's shirt and then the cliff again.

"No," he purses his lips, packs the backpack left behind by Khan and takes the long way through the forest. He strides at the quickest pace possible, which is not yet an undignified trot. From the pine-clad footpath, the boy turns onto the suspension bridge between the two rises and then descends the steps to the boardwalk on the other side. The journey to the beach seems to go on forever. Already he thinks with horror of the nonsense that stupid Khan must be spouting. How is he supposed to play along with it uncoordinated now?

It's only half an hour before Jesper reaches the beach below and stands helplessly beside the girls' empty beach towels.

"Excuse me, didn't you happen to see where the boys who jumped down from there went?" he points to the cliff in the background. The old man was asked to watch the girls' things. Jesper decides that wherever they are, they can't take long. After a moment of basking in the hot sun, he sits down on the beach towel with flowers. After debating whether he should take his shirt off - it's getting hot - he decides to be tasteful and lays down on the towel as *cool* as possible. The coolness of it lies in the indifferent position in which his arms are crossed under his head. Jesper is more interested in the clouds now. He is deep in thought now. He's thinking.

And then his nose is hit with a minuscule, atomic unit of perfume. Lilies of the Valley, breath and human skin dissolve before his eyes. Jesper turns his head, and across the

beige plain of the beach, he sees it: a world of fragrant, alien, girly things. There are white and pale summer dresses with ties folded so terribly neatly, little belts and useless knickknacks, Anni's exquisite bracelet; and in the weaved baskets there is just the kind of food girls like. Jesper can't seem to remember any of it, but there certainly isn't much of it. Girls don't like to eat. That much Jesper knows.

In a foolish fascination, he raises his hand for the little bottle protruding from the small bag. The perfume bottle is shaped like a pomegranate. The golden liquid behind the raspberry-coloured glass flows and Jesper watches in fascination. The world disappears. Still holding the bottle, he doesn't even understand why, but his hand surreptitiously puts the little hair tie into the breast pocket of his sailor's shirt. He throws himself on his back again and looks at the sun through the glass of the bottle. For a brief moment, he is in the raspberry-red world of the pomegranate, when suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Charlotte's long legs loom over him. Little Maj looks him straight in the eye from Tereesz's shoulders: "What's he doing with your bottle, Anni?"

The fiery synapses in Jesper's head begin to make connections as soon as the spell is broken, and he doesn't let a casual surprise appear on his face.

"*Revacholiere*," he pronounces succulently, and then finishes like an old pro himself, "*Granate*, number three, very good choice, strong notes, natural, juniper gives a kind of airy go... No, very good choice, what can I say. Yours, Anni?"

Jesper sits up quietly and undisturbed. Khan and Tereesz look excitedly in the direction of the girls, especially Anni, who licks a lime ice cream with a smile.

"Mine, yes," she says, a little snippy at first, then becoming more polite: "Your mother's a perfumer, isn't she?"

"It's more like importing than producing. Lately. But she's got papers and stuff. You know, I've been to the Revachol perfume factory to see how *Granate* is distilled."

"You've been to Revachol?!" Even Charlotte is impressed. She's something of a goddess at school, a grade above with her expensive clothes and high school boys. And now the goddess's eyes go wide with surprise. Jesper's ears turn flaming red.

"Once, yes, my mother's colleagues invited her on a tour."

Tereesz, who had been holding the flag oh-so-high, thinks that now that the greater danger is over, Jesper should be brought back down to earth: "That's why you smell like a flower!"

Little Maj on Tereesz's shoulders laughs uproariously at everything the boy says. He was lucky. Tereesz would never have guessed he was some kind of child magnet, but that adventurous leap has already kept him afloat for three-quarters of an hour. Khan is completely useless. He manages to catch every third of Tereesz's bait but then he doesn't know what to do with it and just mumbles.

Anni sits next to flushed Jesper. "I think Jesper smells good. Not at all like socks or that dressing room."

"It's quite horrible," says Målin mildly.

"Honestly, it's all von Fersen," Khan now scores his first point, "F... Fersen has these PE socks. It's not normal the way they smell."

Tereesz breathes a sigh of relief. The queue for ice cream was already quite long. Neither Khan nor Tereesz are the best wordsmiths in an emergency and Tereesz's plan was to

avoid the topic at any cost until Jesper arrives. Luckily, Maj came to the rescue and demanded to be on Tereesz's shoulders and her constant chatter made everybody laugh.

Tereesz now feels that it's time to finally address the issue. He lifts Maj off his shoulders and glances suggestively towards Jesper, mentioning casually, "You took the things with you, right? Cigarettes? Binoculars?"

Anni-Elin doesn't fall for the "cigarettes": "What was that binoculars thing you had there? We already saw something flashing all the time yesterday. Like a little mirror. It was exciting!"

"Ah, just birdwatching, you know, there's a pair of sea eagles nesting there...", Tereesz barely manages to start, when even Målin grins maliciously: "*Birdwatching.*"

Anni giggles next to Jesper, and Charlotte, the wicked goddess, is even sharper: "Yes, birdwatching is indeed popular with gentlemen these days."

Jesper is bright red, but in a deep crevice of Machejek's freckled face, Franticek the Brave lifts his gallant head. It's about time! He rushes towards Tereesz, throwing caution into the wind, towards the brightest and most unlikely prize. As is customary for us, the filthy kojkos: all or nothing.

"*Golqbeczko moja,*" Tereesz Machejek says with a charming smile, "well, maybe we saw even rarer birds."

So often, all or nothing means nothing for us filthy kojkos. But not on that day. On that hot sunny day, twenty years ago. Char-lot-te! Her rounded shoulders move forward, her clavicles stand out. Under the arches of her eyebrows, cold green eyes light up with a smile, like the light of a distant star. For Tereesz.

It says: "Chance!"

Tereesz is so happy! Everything is going so well! Shadows grow, hours pass, and white sand turns yellow, then orange and striped with shadows. The girls take the beach towels on their shoulders, and little Maj yawns and falls asleep under a blanket. The wind dies down, it becomes quiet. A kingdom. Horse-drawn trams roll in the distance. Their tracks screech, distant music from someone's yard. The beach empties and the sky turns into a blue-violet gradient. Tereesz tells the girls about his father's diplomatic villa, plans for the summer, and about the next day. Dressing cabins stand upright and cast shadows on the beach like clock hands. Strips of clouds rise above the smooth water, their curdled lilac bellies, the cyan, magenta, and cooled deep orange of the horizon. Målin tries on Khan's glasses, Khan can't see anything behind Målin's large black sunglasses. Only the girls' shapes flicker like upside-down candle flames.

"Bring some apple cider!" Anni-Elin shouts as the tram door closes. Four pale horses jerk from their place, the cabin shines yellow in the evening twilight, and little Maj, with angel wings in a white dress, sleeps on Målin's lap. A fairy godmother's magic wand falls from her hand onto the cabin's sandy floor.

Three boys stand at the tram stop, making gasping faces at each other as the tram turns around the corner and disappears from sight.

The warm, sour breath makes the white hotel linen flutter against the linoleum salesman's mouth.

Linoleum salesman. Linoleum salesman. Linoleum salesman. With his left hand on his nape, he pulls the double loop of linen around his neck into a knot. The knot is intricate

and extremely well-tied. The eighth-floor balcony door is still cracked and cool air is seeping, into the Havsänglar room. From the balcony, there is a magnificent view down to the late evening beach. On the reed floor of the balcony, a telescope with a reflector box, mounted in protective paint, is dismantled from its base. Scout model. Behind the telescope is a modified camera. On the balcony, and only on this balcony, not in the adjoining room or the hallway, because that's not the way the linoleum salesman likes these things... So it's only on this balcony here that he hears the intense breathing of evil.

Twenty years later, in the evening.

Vidkun Hird stares at a distressed Collaboration Police agent in front of the barred window of the interrogation room. Despicable. Hird wears his grey prison jumpsuit. On the reflective strip is written "Vidkun Hird" and his number with an alphabetical abbreviation. The agent peels off his jacket and carelessly throws it down in front of the window. The shirt has sweat stains under the armpits. The agent's movements are uncoordinated. On the chest of the shirt is a freshly printed badge with the visitor's identification code. The fan hums.

"Hey, you're drunk!" Vidkun glances over his shoulder at the sergeant on guard at the door, "The smell of booze is getting to my head... Please get me out of here, I'm not in the mood."

Vidkun smirks as he listens to snippets of Machejek's conversation with the correctional officer.

"Five minutes... ten minutes... a child's life is at stake..."

The door closes behind the guard, and a key of dubious construction flashes briefly in Tereesz's hand.

"Ma-chee-jekk," Vidkun pronounces, "You're a kojko! You're like a Graadian mutt, some kind of two-tiered low-life form." Both Hird's arms and legs are cuffed this time, the massive irons bending his arms uncomfortably behind his back. But despite this, he somehow sits like a nobleman.

"You lied. Who did you get the drawing from?" Tereesz's eyes are bleary, the man blinks angrily.

"Listen, have you heard about that study on eugenics that praises the humble mind of the kojkos?"

"Who did you get the drawing from, pig?"

"A scholar, you know, recommends mating your kind with blacks. Superworkers."

"Shut up!" Tereesz pulls down the steel curtains on the interrogation room windows. Abruptly. The blind falls with a rattle, and immediately there's the sound of the correctional officer's nervous jingling of keys in the lock.

"Idiot, do you want to go to jail or something? We're following the *Declaration* here. We do not have some kind of Graad anarchy."

In the windowless room, in the clean iron light of the hall, Tereesz Machejek is standing next to a desk, unpacking his briefcase. The lining inside of it fits exactly one iron box and on the box in white letters is written "ZA/UM".

Hird's eyes widen in fear. There is pounding from behind the door.

"You don't have a permit for this! You must have a permit! Show me your permit!"

"What did you say? I can't hear you, some p i g is squealing all the time." Tereesz hits Hird in the face with the iron box. Blood pours on the grey prison jumpsuit.

Hird whines and a small speck of white bone is visible on his nose. The man faints. Muffled threats can be heard behind the door, but Tereesz's diamond key rattles in the lock.

"I am International Collaboration Police agent Tereesz Machejek, Mirova, Graad, I have the legal right to interrogate, and if you mess with that door again..." The knocking stops for a moment and ZA/UM clicks open. Everything happens quickly and skillfully, one could say. Tereesz pulls out the yellowed tubing with hanging cannulas from the foam cushion of the box, fastens the grotesque bellows-like device around his wrist with a belt, and pulls the rubber hose taut around Vidkun Hird's ironclad arm. Slightly swaying, he screws the hose onto the device and then sticks the needle into Vidkun's vein. A small red drop of Hird's superhuman tendency flows directly into the cannula.

Running steps can be heard from behind the steel curtain window, and heavy boots on the prison floor. Reinforcements. The lid of the device clicks open on Machejek's wrist. A row of vials appears, filled with yellow liquid, like dentures with cigarette smoke under the upper lip, a smile stretched without expression. A quiet hiss and the first vial clicks into place. The bellows on top of the lid tremble for a moment, and then the device on Machejek's wrist starts to breathe quietly like a pet. The yellow urine-coloured liquid pumps into Vidkun Hird's wrist. He opens his eyes and starts wheezing in panic.

"Do you know, what this is? Fucking hog!" Tereesz hisses between his teeth, right in front of Vidkun's swollen face.

A little blood and saliva splash from the man's mouth onto Machejek's face, as he rolls his eyes in fear and cries: "I lied. You are right. I... I have never seen them, my cellmate..."

"I don't care what you think."

"I don't think anything, I'm telling you, I had a cellmate, several years ago, Deerek..."

"I don't care what you think, I want your truth." Tereesz's eyes are bulging terribly. He snatches the gag from Vidkun's arm and the vein, swollen with mescaline and lysergic acid, visibly shrinks.

Suddenly, Vidkun clenches his teeth so tightly that they seem as if they will break at any moment. "You can't have anything from me. Now you can't get anything from me," he splutters madly, "I'm so strong!"

The battering ram can be heard from behind the door.

"I love that you think so. It's best if you think so," Tereesz pants, screwing another cannula onto the apparatus. It's for him. Eyes fixed on his wrist, he jabs the needle into his vein.

The first vial is empty, the next Tereesz shares with Vidkun, excitedly spluttering against his mouth: "It's a mincing machine. You can't imagine how hard I'm going to fuck you with it now." The piss-yellow liquid breaks through Vidkun's blood-brain barrier, and on his head, under his skull, a huge pressure builds like a bubble of air. The man's face clenched between his hands, Tereesz begins to scream. His voice reaches Hird's head like white noise, pure bellowing violence.

"I'll make a cretin of you, do you feel?"

Vidkun's scalp gives in to the pressure of the agent's hands and cracks open like a flower bloom. It feels like something is being born from it. Vidkun's handcuffs rattle helplessly, the man tries to hold the substance that is bursting out of his head with his hands. Pieces of his brain still fall from his fingers to the floor. He can't, it's too slippery, there's too much of it.

"I can see your cunt, you're open in front of me, I'm going to open you up," Tereesz pants, watching the whole of Vidkun Hird open up in front of him.

The man trembles under the sharp fingers of the agent and tries with all his might to say, to tell him what he is looking for, to say it in human language, but his mouth no longer works. And all this time, as Tereesz wades through his head like a tiger in water, Vidkun sees only one picture reflected back at him from Tereesz's mirror. On that cool surface, where Vidkun escapes from the devastating slaughter in his own head, Charlotte Lund's dark green eyes look at him. Deep inside the pupils, the chance given to Tereesz shimmers. It is so beautiful and infinitely sad that when Tereesz collapses from exhaustion behind the interrogation table, Vidkun begins to cry.

The Vaasa coastline sparkles before him, and the nightly waves break against the hull of the border guard ship at his feet. A yellowish dome of light shines above the city in the distance. It seems indescribably joyful, all those white and yellow lights in the city fit in Tereesz's hand. And even though it is cold outside, he is not wearing a coat. His jacket flaps open, and Vidkun Hird's blood splatters are still on his white dress shirt. The hands of the Collaboration Police agent are comfortably handcuffed, and a young officer helps him stand on the deck.

"What mischief did you do there?" asks the officer.

"*If I wrote you a symphony,*" sounds a crackling voice from the transistor radio.

"Hey, thanks for letting me out, it was a beautiful evening!"

"Okay..." the officer begins to laugh quietly.

"Could you turn up the volume on that song?"

"What?"

"I promise I won't jump overboard, turn it up!"

"I'm more worried you'll fall overboard, but okay then." The officer steps into the ship's cabin and onto the deck. Over the noise of the waves and the engine, a massive beat and the man's falsetto say, "*If I wrote you a symphony, to show how much you mean to me...*" Tereesz's foot starts tapping. With the same relief he only feels after using "ZA/UM," he sighs to the officer, "You know, I just solved the disappearance of the Lund children."

"What?"

"You don't know? It's very famous!"

"When was that?"

"Oh, a long time ago, you weren't even born yet. But it doesn't matter, I feel so good right now. I think I solved it!" Tereesz laughs. It's a dark laugh, but genuine, very genuine, and the night over the North Sea laughs back at him.

6. FRANTIČEK THE BRAVE

Sometimes, the saddest disappearance is the one that remains unresolved. Before it became a hydroelectric power station, the Peremennaya Veera was just the Veera River, into which the operetta star Nadja Harnankur threw herself at the height of her popularity. It could have stayed that way: Nadja simply vanished one autumn evening after a thrilling performance, her heavenly soprano still echoing in the opera house. Was the old man right, who claimed to have seen her walking across the bridge in her evening gown? Or was it the fanatical admirer who insisted he'd met her a year later in Revachol? Perhaps there is some truth in the paranoid pulp novelist's tale, in which Nadja is actually a Mesque spy, nihilist, and doomsday prophet. Who can say for certain?

But one thing is certain. No one needed to see Nadja's remains emerging from the mud of the reservoir in her evening gown. No one needed to see the colony of river mussels in her eye sockets, the dead grin of her golden teeth, or the shocked expressions of the hydroelectric power station construction crew.

Futility. Futility shapes the world. History is a story of futilities, progress is a sequence of futilities. "Development!" says the futurist. "Loss," says the rebel. "Hangover!" shouts the moralist from the back row. "Failure," says the angry rebel. "Time is grey," he says. The Creator's failure is an introduction to the era. Kras Mazov shoots himself in the head and Abadanaiz takes poison with Dobrev on the Ozonne islands. The wind blows sand over their bones under the palm trees. Who was supposed to know? Good people from all over the world came together. Teachers, writers, and migrant workers huddle in trenches... young soldiers desert their units. What beautiful songs they sing! Brave children are history's favourites, so it seems to them, and they wave white flags with silver horned crowns.

And they lose.

Coups are crushed. Anarchists are piled into mass graves on the Great Blue. Communists, beaten back from the isola of Graad, retreat to Samara and become a degenerate worker's state ruled by bureaucrats. The disappearance of revolutionary lovers is resolved thirty-five years later when the hugging skeletons of Abadanaiz and Dobrev are found on the shore of an unnamed Ozonne island by Riche LePomme's eight-year-old son Eugene during a Saturday evening outing. Wearing shorts and a butterfly net, he stands and looks perplexedly at the bones of his past as they cling together. Faded and smooth. Where does one begin and the other end? Time has mixed them up like a deck of cards. Afterwards, Riche erects a hotel there along with a now world-famous health centre.

But the greatest failure is not how Mazov's global revolution ended in bloodshed and then defeat, nor is it how the bones of revolutionary lovers are now displayed in an aromatherapy waiting room. With internal unrest suppressed, Graad becomes a world power, a giant nation, its cities thriving and the light of this growth shining like a sparkling network from orbit. Whole nations disappear from the map of the world. Nations where Mazov once had many supporters. Nations like Zsiemsk. Nations whose peoples are derogatorily referred to as "kojkos". And this goes on for so long that eventually they even begin to call themselves that.

Tereesz Machejek is seven years old. His father is a model kojko, a diplomat, and a usurper bootlicker who has not yet taken him to school in Vaasa. The city is a zone of ecological catastrophe, a post-megapolis and pre-necropolis human settlement, in the

penultimate stage of development. Polyfabricate spreads out at the border of Zsiemsk and Yugo. The monster engulfs Zsiemsk's historic centres - Ferdydurke's royal old town, and Lenka's pine parks. Summer begins, and in the dimness of the cellars, a name is whispered. Children shout it in the courtyards of the houses. The leaves of the trees rustle on the quiet street, and only the echo of that name resounds in the ear of the Graad militiaman.

"Frantiček the Brave..."

The bravest of the kojkos. A movie star, a revolutionary. It was just recently that the riots were brutally suppressed in the spring, and now nothing has been heard of him for two months. It is said that he lurks far away in the taiga, in the Yakut reserve, and acquires special abilities from the indigenous priests. Fantastic things! His steppe eagle cheekbones and yearning gaze, gentle smile, as if the sun were rising above the taiga. A smile he saves only for those rare occasions when his serious eyebrows are furrowed with worry... His daring face appears in forbidden films in the jersey factory, where women are brave, sewn onto white cloth from tank tops and panties. No, Frantiček the Brave is in Samara! Negotiating. He is coming with the forces of the People's Republic! Don't be naive, Frantiček is far away in the Kola, in winter orbit, in Ignus Nilsen's hut. They'll never find him! Quiet! Frantiček the Brave wouldn't hide! Just yesterday, he was seen in line to buy meat, he now has a false beard and a butcher's apron, he called himself Vozam Sark, read it backwards!

But the months pass and no news comes, and soon it's autumn. Industrial dust falls like a mourning veil on the golden and red leaves. In October, a completely different story begins to circulate in Zsiemsk. Quiet and timid. Frantiček the Brave was shot behind a dumpster.

7. THE WORLD IS GOING WRONG, TIME IS DISJOINTED

Inayat Khan turns restlessly in his bed, located below ground level, under a cellar window. Outside, it was getting dark and the pale light of street lamps seeped into the room. The cellar was filled with old junk, as if frozen in place, with dust particles sparkling in the greyish light coming through the window. Underneath draperies on the tables, there were dark shapes of evaporated memorabilia. The frames of pictures on the walls formed dark squares, with their shadows falling on the floor and fading away. In the centre of the cellar, there was a delicately shining glass case, calling out for attention. Tiny objects were waiting on many shelves. "Wake up, dear collector! How long will you sleep? We know you're not sleeping." Khan's fingers fumble around the headboard. Without any serious effort, he overturns things and looks for the button on the tape recorder. Suddenly, it seems more pleasant to curl up under the blanket instead. Pedestrians' shoes are clicking on the wet pavement outside as they return from work, and Khan makes a desperate effort to get a little more sleep. "Ah, come on!" say his exciting toys. "Let us listen to your fun wake-up song!" Khan's atrophied heart muscle begins to throb slightly from the little effort and there is no more sleep. His hand reaches for the headboard, his finger moving over the ivory keys of the tape recorder. Underneath the draperies, the objects are held in suspense. And then there's a click, and before the gentle arpeggios of a guitar and the soft sound of an old electric organ, the tape hisses empty for a few bars.

♪ *It's been a long, long,*

long time

How could I ever have lost you...

A loud, thumping drum beat with bass comes in from the left channel.

♪ *...when I loved you?*

In pyjama pants, Khan rises to a sitting position to the sound of rolling drums. Pushing aside the snake skins of the sheets, the man puts his feet into his sharp-tipped slippers. His unshaven chin shakes in one last yawn until he opens his big almond eyes wide and puts on his glasses. Khan ruffles his hair and begins to sing along lazily. He has a beautiful voice.

♪ *It took a long, long,*

long time

Now I'm so happy I found you

Hairy belly hanging slightly over his pyjama bottoms, he plays the next part on his personal air drums...

♪ *How I love you*

... and presses the switch with his foot. The old bulbs flick on and off, in sync with the drumbeat. The filament buzzes for a moment and then goes out. A dodecahedron autographed by the unknown dodecaphonic composer *comte* de Perouse-Mittrecie sinks back from the golden light into darkness. When the bulbs light up again, the title on the back of the book - "*Los Desaparecidos*" - emerges from the dimness.

♪ *So many tears,
I was searching
So many tears,
I was waiting*

This part is catchy, singing loudly and unashamedly, Khan moves through the basement like a performer. A row of ceiling lights reveals the carefully arranged stuff on the tables. Wooden file drawers rise in alphabetical order, on the wall is a portrait of Nadya Harnankur in an oval medallion, a map of the desert of Erg with Ramout Karzai's supposed route to the dunes, to plead an audience with God. And pins mark the places where he might have found his mysterious end on this journey. As he passes, Khan pulls the draperies from the boards and puzzle after puzzle unfolds before him. Twelve miniature golden and green ships with sericite dragon carvings, barely the size of a thumbnail, lined up. Rows of oars in a dark blue fake sea with white wavy crests; the papyrus-yellow sail lines of the little ships are proudly lowered. Men in reed armour stand on board, pennants flapping on their spears. It's the Gon-Tzu expedition of a thousand men. At the behest of the Safre emperor, they set sail from the coast of Samara eastwards, more than three thousand years ago. They are searching for peaches that can make the emperor immortal. Never to return. Two and a half millennia later, signs of their settlement are found to the east, in the Anise islands. The Gon-Tzu expedition could not return. The emperor was cruel and fierce, a tyrant, and there are no peaches that can make one immortal. All these beloved objects - trinkets, things left behind - somehow touch Khan. And how it stings! How odd... he has never fully understood what it is. And yet a smile appears on Khan's mouth, a smile of a fat cat who is getting its chin scratched. Above the desk on the stand, under the light of a green desk lamp is all about the girls. Newspaper clippings, scattered notes, and there in the middle, copies of "Målin's letters". The handwriting analysis is extraordinarily 95% accurate. The letters arrived a year and a half after the last day in Charlottesjäl. To the girls' parents. "Everything is fine. We're with a Man," says someone who says she's Målin, "we love you."

Khan puts the coffee pot on the burner and the song turns soft and quiet, like in the beginning. It's his favourite part. In the whole world. He could listen to it forever. He shakes his head with a bitter smile and puts his hands over his heart.

♪ *Now I can see you,
Feel you
How did I ever misplace you?*

Outside, you can hear the wheels turning as the machine stops in front of the house. It starts to drizzle and raindrops can be seen on the basement window. The tape recorder makes a "click" and the song ends. There is a calendar on the door where no one has bothered to turn the page for two months. It's still August, and under the twenty-eighth is written "International Day of the Missing". It is the twenty-eighth of August just in their honour. That's *the* day.

"Ini, your friend Jesper is here, brush your teeth first!" Khan's mother shouts from the kitchen upstairs. The man pulls on his top-stitched dressing gown and makes his way up the basement stairs.

In the middle of the room, in a glass case, stands "*Harnankur*".

Two years ago.

The crystal goblets are ringing. Saturday night bustle in the Telefunken Tower restaurant. Behind the panoramic windows, Vaasa spreads out. A slim ghost. Darkness, snow and lights. The prices are expensive here, but not like *tastelessly* expensive. This is not the way, the clientele has too much social nerve for that. The food is five-star, but the company? Higher class! Look, there's the president of the Communications Department with his wife. And the CEO of the Freibank with the charming singer Pernilla Lundqvist and a Vesper businessman having dinner. The charming singer is eating a salad, with olives, while the CEO recommends crawfish to a Vesper business partner. It's delicious here, you have to try it! And him there, next to the bearded professor, isn't he Konrad Gessle, four-time Oskar Zorn nominee? A very intelligent man... The CEO of Freibank is, of course, wearing P. Black. Out of his mind... And look! There's a thirty-year-old *loser!* The loser lives in his mother's basement. The loser is wearing the same light blue shirt he graduated from primary school in.

"We hate you, loser!"

"Who let him in?"

"It's so sad to watch, he's probably on a *date*. So pathetic! That woman hasn't said a word to him for ten minutes... Listen to that silence, I would hang myself!"

"How about if I give him some money? Just a little bit, like ten réal, maybe he'd feel better?"

"Disgusting loser, don't give him anything, I *hate* him!"

"He certainly can't pay his bill! He certainly won't - hysterical laughter - that wine alone is like forty réal, hahhah-haa!"

"I hate you, loser, die, I hate you so *terribly!*"

Khan is sweating again and tries to cover his ears with his hands... Shaking his head, blinking his eyes, anything to end this barrage of humiliation, until suddenly - silence! A brunette woman with a sharp face sitting opposite him twiddles with the wine glass. The boredom is suffocating. The woman glances at the panoramic ceiling, at the dark brown, beautifully shaped table under her arms. Then, suddenly, a flash of inspiration!

"It's a beautiful place. There's a new design here, I think. I remember... The last time I was here, everything was completely different."

Khan's face lights up. "Yeah-yeah! My friend made it! He likes this kind of stuff, minimal, and clean. I haven't quite figured out exactly what was up with it now, but I think he kind of... invented it. He's quite famous."

"De la Guardie?"

"Jesper. Yes."

"You know him? He's so talented."

"Oh, of course. Jesper and I have been friends for a long time. Before he became famous. To be perfectly honest..." Khan smiles nervously, "...I don't think I would have got reservations here. If, well..."

"Ah! I was wondering."

"What were you wondering?" Khan asks, but the brunette woman doesn't answer. It's silent again. Khan glances across the floor at the guests, who, for a moment, don't

seem to look back at him in contempt. Back at Konrad Gessle's table, he sees a woman introducing a skinny man with blond hair to the documentary filmmaker. The waiter, too, notices his presence and rushes to serve the gentleman a "regular". Ice water with a slice of lime. In a dark grey waist-cut suit and a lime wedge between his teeth, the gentleman looks very young and somehow elegantly sleepless. The chic way he shows off his plain T-shirt under his jacket is unmistakable. He can afford it. The shirt has the iconic album cover of a famous dance artist.

"Jesper!" Khan exclaims inappropriately loud across the tables. His date flinches a little and then looks questioningly towards Gessle and Jesper's table.

"There he is," Khan says cheerfully as if relieved, to the brunette across the table. He stands up so that his friend can better see where Khan is.

"Jesper, hey!"

Like this, with sweat stains on the armpits of his frilled shirt, he stands in the middle of Telefunken's panoramic restaurant and watches as Jesper furrows his eyebrows in annoyance, spreading his arms in the direction of Konrad Gessle. He pretends not to know him.

"Ow!"

It's a hot Saturday afternoon, eighteen years ago, and a rosehip bush has scratched Anni's leg under her short skirt. The girl steps angrily out of the bushes and Jesper, the doctor, trots to her side.

"What happened? Let me see!" Anni lifts her skirt just a bit and then gives up. "Ah, it's nothing, silly bushes... Oo!" she stops halfway through the word and her mouth looks like that vowel, "So beautiful!"

"Beautiful," says little Jesper, still seeing Anni's leg in his mind, the pleated edge of her tennis skirt curling up. Khan pushes the bushes aside and Charlotte and Målin step onto the edge of the cliff, mouths agape.

"Really, I can see why you're loitering here all the time. Such a nice wind..." The breeze blows Charlotte's auburn hair in her face. The girl squints her eyes, pushes her hair carelessly aside and goes: "Mmm..."

The wind tears white petals into the air. It seems as if little Maj in a winged dress is floating above the rustling bushes. She draws shapes in the air with a fairy godmother's wand and feels like the most important person in the world. She is on Tereesz's shoulders, who doesn't care one bit about the thorns of rose hips. He wades through them and sets Maj down on the grass. Tereesz is scratched up and smiling stupidly. The salty breeze dies down, the air is redolent with the syrupy scent of flowers. Insects buzz. The seven of them barely fit on the lawn of the boys' hideaway, and that was the plan. Anyway, Jesper is content. The boys couldn't sleep all night. Grinning, making plans for the next day, sneaking around. You can say that the mood flew. Tereesz was against coming to the rock because of the long journey and the thorns. Jesper, along with Khan, found that it was still the best place. And it was! The girls are impressed by the view, Khan introduces the classification, power to go through the Pale and capacity of the Graad antique cruiser glimmering on the horizon. Looks like Målin hasn't started yawning yet. And the best thing - it's windy, but the weather is so warm that Anni still wants to sunbathe. Målin unwraps her beach towel and ends up next to Khan with Maj, who is waddling along. Khan is straining his memory, but unfortunately, he can't say anything

more interesting about antique airships. Let Tereesz and Jesper carry the conversation. He lies on his back and closes his eyes.

The orange shimmer of the sun, the sound of water, and the clattering of tools, all cooling down quietly, and in the boy's popular-science dream, it's space autumn up above in orbit. And the vibration, as always. It's starting to get chilly. The faceless, bottomless epiphyseal membrane spreads beyond the giant ridges. Forgotten in the sky, these ancient communication satellites calibrate their rusty bellies towards the curvature of the earth. Articulated joints of catapults shift position, boulders screech at the edge of the stratosphere like a flock of cranes, and communication units crackle into the ether. A cluster of measuring device compound eyes looks down where the southern coast of Katla isola blooms briefly in a summer gust. Like a beautiful dream, a landmass dozes in the cool cradle of thousand-kilometre maps and cycloidal eddies. It's the past, approaching, all-consuming. The Pale is all around. But the dark green forests of matter and the white shoreline, the shimmering sun mirror of the North Sea, the Vaasa archipelago and the small Charlottesjäl still hold on. And the less matter remains, the smaller the area you compress it into, the more strangely it sparkles.

Seven of them lie in a half-circle on a green patch on the rocky peak, with the waves crashing below. Up above, there is a cotton ball-like cloud from a castle in the air, and the cloud cities reflect on Khan's curved glasses. He opens his eyes. Charlotte Lund, entirely made of scented matter, pulls her summer dress over her head with one swoop. Her rounded curves and smooth sun-kissed skin come into view. Tereesz feels her slender joints, it grazes him. It's hot. Anni is embarrassed about her birthmarks and lies on her back with sunglasses as a headband. Jesper doesn't dare say anything about it, even though he really wants to see them. And Målin, modestly, unties the bow on her dress belt to feel the wind blowing in from underneath her skirt. The dress fabric flutters like a sail. "Cider!" announces Tereesz, baring his upper body. And indeed, from the depths of his backpack emerges a three-litre container, acquired through an unprecedentedly complex operation last night. Drops of water sparkle on the glass, the hermetic cap hisses open, and a small, vaporous stream of carbon dioxide rise from the bottle's mouth. The apple cider foams and bubbles, the froth accumulating around the bubbles.

The girls' mouths water, but little Maj looks confused and sips her lemonade with bits of lemon floating in it. Tereesz carefully places the cold bottle against Charlotte's hot cheek. His father will find out next weekend that the cider is gone, just when he wants to offer it to the gallery owners and curators at the cultural cooperation garden party. But Tereesz doesn't care. Look how beautiful she is, Charlotte, and how happy it makes her. And his father is just an academic capitulator, a model kojko, and a bootlicker of usurpers. Frantiček the Brave would not think highly of him.

"Why are you so quiet?" asks Målin softly, so the others won't hear, and rolls over towards Khan.

Anni's ears perk up. "Strange that *you* should say that. Little sock!" she teases.

"Ah, be quiet," laughs Målin with a soft, warm chuckle that Khan can feel against his ear. "Speak... you always have such cool presentations. In history and natural science..."

Khan jumps up from his school desk and triumphantly pumps his fist in the air.

"Yeah! Yeah! That peach story was so sweet!"

"Anni, don't interrupt..." frowns Målin, "Wait, what peach story?"

"Tell us, Khan, it's really loud. That Ilmaraa, the fleet, and the emperor..."

Finally, Khan opens his mouth. "Wrong *isola*, dude. *Samara*."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it like that, you know, in a racist way."

"Very funny, Jesper. Anyway..." Now Khan also turns a little towards Målin, cautiously, to not touch her, "You were sick then, I remember." Khan remembers very well, he wanted to postpone the presentation so that the performance would not be wasted, but the teacher did not understand the subtleties of the situation. "In Samara - more precisely in Safre - there is such mythology where peaches play an important role. If the Anise Islands have cherries, then they have peaches. They grow there wild, you can pick peaches from the forest. Apricots, peaches, and nectarines, all come from Samara. Even now, a lot of fruit is brought to us from the SRV through the Pale." Målin nods dutifully. "Yes. Long, long ago, when Katla wasn't even populated yet, the emperor of Safre sent his most famous explorer, Gon-Tzu, to bring back peaches that would make him immortal..."

Twenty years later.

The city of Vaasa is blue. The ornate lanterns on Königsmalm's rush hour street gleam. The dark grey dome of the sky and the northern-clad crowd pass under it like a migration of ghosts from a fairy tale. Tereesz's head is spinning; he hasn't had a smoke in so long. His head is thick and throbbing, nicotine pressing on his eyes, sounds fading, becoming muffled. He sits down on the steps in front of the police station, his coat tail underneath him. A slight drizzle moistens his sleepy face.

Five minutes ago, clothes were thrown in his face and he was let go. The last remnants of the dream still linger. They echo in his mind, a monster sliding on the lapping waterline, right beneath his waking consciousness, giving him a throbbing headache. "Danger," he usually answers, he is made of violence, but sometimes he says he is the Man. He bends the rosehip bushes and looks at them on the rocky peak. He's always there, wanting to tear them apart, but waiting patiently. In the pine forest where he puffed cigarettes, Tereesz sees him sneaking from behind one tree trunk to another. He crouches on the edge of Khan's binoculars, down on the beach, holding little Maj who falls asleep and the doors of the horse-drawn tram close. He is swallowed, bottomless, nothing stands under him, and everything can collapse on him at any moment. A few days left. The rest of his life is coming soon. False and terrible. Then, when they go into the water on the last night on the secret beach for girls, he comes to their sheets and sniffs their things. The man chews on a meat pie in oil batter and watches him through the sun blinds. Tereesz is Agnetha, an ice cream shop worker, and the Man has a new face every time he passes by the window. From the corner of his eye. He wears Vidkun Hird like a costume, an adult Khan whom Tereesz now fears for some reason, and sometimes he is Tereesz's father. Tereesz feels ashamed later in the day when he sees his friends there, but there's nothing he can do about it.

Slowly, timidly, he makes his way through the crowd, fearing bumping into someone, angering someone. People in dark clothing flow through the streets, at a large intersection the traffic lights glow and motorised rickshaws come to a stop, smoke rises from their exhaust pipes, and engines throb. At the crossroads of beltways, he sways along with the crowd, and above him, dimly lit neon lights shine, and a giant lingerie model smiles high on the department store wall. The lights of a row of taxi phones. When Tereesz steps into the cab, it starts to rain outside for real. The cab windows are wet and somewhere in Vidkun Hird's memories - or in his own prison dream, Tereesz is not sure - a monster squats above them and puts the torn bodies of the girls back together

into a chimaera.

“You know...” The sleet sizzles under the taxi wheel, and the granite rubble rattles. Khan looks out the window. “There’s one thing... I didn’t tell you before... about me.” The car stops in front of his door, in Salem. A brunette woman holds a handbag in her lap, the man opens the door on his side. “This doesn’t usually come up. It just doesn’t. But you could know this about me. That actually...” He steps out, and leans into the cabin: “... I’m the world’s leading expert on disappearing.”

Khan slams the taxi door shut, takes three steps over the pedestrian road to the external stairs, inserts the key and enters the hallway of the wooden house. The sound of a motor can be heard from outside, and the machine starts. It’s dim and warm inside. Potatoes are boiling in the kitchen. “Mom, it was terrible!” Khan picks up the phone, the device hangs on the wall, and the numbers are on the keypad in the wallpaper. “Absolutely terrible, don’t even ask!” His yellow fingers jump on the keys, a sixteen-digit series. An interisolar connection, at the expense of the responder.

“Mr. Ambartsumian, I was given your number from an auction.”

“Mr. Ambartsumian is not available right now,” the male secretary’s voice replies, quietly and from a distance.

“No, you don’t understand, I’m calling about “Harnankur”. I was supposed to receive my airship manual. This is very important... sorry, can you hear me?” The line crackles and the call is fading into the Pale. The noise of time.

Two years later.

“Have you heard anything from Tereesz?” Jesper asks as soon as he enters Khan’s hallway. The sweet smell of poverty wafts into his nose. What is it? Cinnamon? Stale bread?

“No, I haven’t heard anything. I actually wanted to ask you about it. This whole thing, I have to say, it worries me,” Khan leads Jesper, his bathrobe fluttering, straight down to the cellar. “Clothes,” he points to a nail above the stairs.

Jesper feels uncomfortable. That same strange smell, just like before. How he dislikes it. He would rather live on the street, he would rather burn all this rubbish down than put up with that smell. Above all, he fears that Khan’s poor old mother will jump out from somewhere at any moment. But Khan insisted unyieldingly: we’ll do it at his place, he can’t be bothered to come to the city, we’ll do it at his place or not at all. Jesper, with his past mistakes, had no room to argue. With a heavy heart, he descends the last step into the cellar. But then, the boy in him takes over.

“Wow!”

“Yep. Not too shabby, you’d say.”

“*I would say,*” Jesper’s big head spins on his neck. “Oh!” he exclaims, “Gon-Tzu!” He taps on the little man standing in the bow of the first ship in the Safre fleet with his index finger. Tiny Gon-Tzu, barely the size of a fingertip and with long drooping moustaches like Samara’s dragon, holds a pennant with the emperor’s coat of arms. In the man’s other hand is the compass the size of a pinhead, a gadget that he claims to have invented himself.

"I put this together a year ago. Remember, last time I only had the ships ready, still unpainted."

Khan stands proudly in the middle of the room.

"Wait, what's *that*?" Jesper points to the shiny showcase behind him.

"That... that's my crown jewel! That's my precious! Jesper, that's the 'Harnankur'!"

"The original?!" Jesper approaches the showcase reverentially.

"Of course not, don't be naive. It costs more than *you*," Khan laughs with professional superiority. "It's a copy. One of two existing."



Figure 2: Harnankur (by Aleksander Rostov)

The fragile silhouette of the "Harnankur" spreads out behind the glass panel of the showcase. Jesper strokes the glass, which is taller than him, and looks for the switch to turn on the lights.

"Look, there, under the base, a big switch."

Jesper clicks on the lights and it's not the showcase, but the brilliant light of the antique airship itself with its ten floors that switches on. The model hangs in the middle of the showcase, suspended in the air by invisible wires, like a silver and varnished wooden swan. On the first-class deck, behind crystal glass walls, small chandeliers glitter through the four-story hall. Tiny people are frozen, trying to come down the spiral stairs. It seems so light! Fragile. Silver arches stretch like sails on the ship's hull and converge at the bow as the nickel-plated coat-of-arms swan of the Šest empress.

"It's amazing, isn't it, that they thought something like this could pass through the Pale. Look! Here there are blankets." Khan is so happy that he can finally show it to someone. "Blankets! These little baskets here have outdoor blankets! Ridiculous stuff. Sitting right in the Pale. With your girl. Honestly, I could stare at it all day!"

"I understand how. It's not, well, it's not too shabby..." Jesper circles around the display case and shares his discoveries with Khan, as if he hadn't been staring at it every day

for the past two years, sitting in an armchair next to the model.

"Sit there, it has a particularly good view," he points to the chair. Jesper has no time to sit in the chair: "Wait, the propellers, do they..."

"Now go back to that switch, and push it up one more notch," Khan says with a sly, cunning smile. Jesper puts his hands on his forehead, and his mouth falls open. The swan's large silver propellers, sharp as knives - six of them for manoeuvring on the sides, under the ship, pointed towards the ground at different angles, and two even larger ones at the stern - start rotating slowly and then with an increasingly loud hum. The individual blades disappear, leaving only glowing, hazy disks. The propellers are so large and dynamically directed that Jesper has the impression that the ship is about to take off from the display case and fly away, disappearing from the room and from history.

The hull of the ship bears the beautiful inscription "*Harnankur*" in the Graad script.

Jesper unscrews the cap of his water bottle, and Khan makes himself coffee. They sit at the edge of the display case, in armchairs. Looking at the ship, the interior designer now feels the same foolish hope that Khan can sometimes infect him with. Still wearing his morning robe and pyjama pants, that lazy cat sips his hot coffee, and Jesper looks at him in surprise. "It's seven o'clock, tell me you weren't *asleep*?"

"A little depressing, I know."

"That's what it is," Jesper laughs a dark laugh and then stares at "*Harnankur*" for a long time. "I wonder why he didn't call? Tereesz. Right away. I've been fidgeting for two nights. It's getting on my nerves."

"I'm not fidgeting. I'm just like this, with a nocturnal lifestyle all the time. Kind of an artist type," Khan smiles. "Maybe he found out something from Hird and started right away."

"So you don't think Hird himself might have done something..."

"... done something? Pfft! Hardly. Fantasy! You can't even imagine how much those guys can lie. I did ten! I did a hundred thousand, I did more than Ernő Pasternak! They have everything in numbers and fame. But that drawing was..."

"One-on-one! I know!"

"Exactly. Something should come out of it."

"Something, yeah." Jesper gets up and takes his bag from the coat hanger. "But I don't think Tereesz is fishing somewhere. As far as I know, we have, you know, an agreement. That when it comes to girls, we do it together."

"That's right..." agrees Khan, but out of the corner of his eye he still peers at "*Harnankur*" with a mysterious absent-mindedness. Until a soft black parcel lands on his lap.

"See! One... er... female acquaintance brought it for me. She must have thought I'd gained weight. Or something. Should be fine for you." Khan pulls out a brand new Perseus Black dress shirt from the package labelled "P.B."

"Thanks, man!" he's sincerely grateful.

"You can throw that rag with frills away now."

Tereesz's potato-coloured kojko hair is wet from the rain and appears almost black.

"Excuse me, do you happen to have change for ten réal?" he crouches down behind the entire kiosk counter in his long coat.

The teenage girl chews gum indifferently. "No, we don't."

"Very well, then I'll have the cheapest thing you have - a box of matches, for example - and please give me coins in return."

"Sorry, sir, we don't sell matches." Nothing is more unpleasant than a whining teenage girl. The girl stretches the toothpaste-blue gum between her mouth and fingers.

"Damn it, how about 'Astra'?"

"What?"

"'Astra.' "

"What is that?"

"... A lollipop. Give me that lollipop there, now!" A raspberry-flavoured lollipop with caramel swirls clicks against Machejek's crooked teeth. He piles coins clattering into the pay phone. The cabin has a sweet smell of rain, it's nice to watch how the water droplets flow down the glass. Tereesz likes the cabin. The lollipop is good too. Good thing there were no matches. The phone pressed between his shoulder and ear, he turns the numbers. His head has cleared up a lot. The caramel is sweet and the raspberry is sour, just like raspberries are. Damn, Jesper is never home! On the table, under the phone, the notebook with the Collaboration Police emblem is open for the phone numbers. Tereesz's wet fingers leave stains on it.

"K, K, Kabroleva, Khan." The wheel rattles again and outside the glass, dozens and dozens of people come out of the department store and go in. Freibank's sea eagle glides over the bank's sign, steaming and golden from the rain.

"Hello, I'd like to speak to Inayat Khan."

"Is this you, Tereesz?" Khan's mother's worried voice crackles in the receiver.

"Yes, ma'am, is Inayat home?"

"Listen, Tereesz, you still listen to me. Don't start tormenting yourself with that again. You know, I saw the girls' mother one day..."

"Yes, of course, listen, ma'am..."

"We happened to talk a little bit..."

Yeah, in one ear and out the other. Khan's mother's talk is a mood killer. "Ma'am! Please tell Inayat that I'll call, it's urgent. Sorry."

"Mom! Who's there?" Khan's shout echoes from afar, "Is it Tereesz?"

"No, it's Pernilla Lundqvist, one of your many admirers," the older lady says sarcastically. Footsteps are heard running down the cellar stairs and cars zoom past. A splash of water against the phone booth door.

"Tereesz!"

"Hi, Khan! Listen, where's Jesper, we're in a hurry."

"Here," Jesper's voice responds from afar. "Me here. Jesper." There's nothing more enjoyable than hearing the lively voices of your friends while hungover from ZA/UM.

"Listen, you need to get to Lovisa quickly. Nursing home 'Skymning'. Look somewhere, I don't know, in the phone book. Visiting hours end at eight o'clock."

"Okay, 'Skymning'. What's there?"

"Deerek Trentmøller. And, you know, I think... Kexholm's circle."

"Tereesz, Kexholm's circle is a horror story for women!"

"It'd be better if it were."

"Why do you think it isn't?" Jesper tries to squeeze himself behind the phone, "Khan, ask him why he thinks it isn't."

"Why do you think it isn't?"

"Listen, we'll talk about it on-site, okay."

"Okay, we'll take a taxi. Jesper, do you have taxi money?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we'll take a taxi!"

What follows is just the weight and mass of time and space between places, the taxi ride: pedestrians in dark clothes, a grey sky, and puffs of smoke from the engine. Tereesz Machejek. Autumn moments like smooth traffic in a row. Yes, Khan's mother saw the girls' mother in the doctor's waiting room. So what if they're her four daughters? Who is she anyway? "Lose all your children in one day. Can you imagine how that feels?" But tell me, what has this woman done *to find* them? So what if she has "found her peace"? Khan's mother's voice crackled in the phone: "If the girls' mother can reconcile, can't you..." We can't. You see, we're *mnemotourists*. We love the girls - yes, I dare say it - we love them more. Even this moment, the evening city sliding past the taxi window, where the world is going wrong and time is disjointed, is a crime. It must be rectified. Solved. No peace. No truce with the furies.

And listen! Traffic glides by the side window, distant trumpet calls, long notes that shift out of place. Waiting. An hour, two hours, three hours, evening, the next morning, the next week, winter, spring, a year, the next year, ten, twenty years. Time-like crackling sounds from a cloudy sky. The summer rain wants to break loose! Boys, a little *mnemotour*? Why are you standing there, whining, you're such a *mnemotourist*?! Some are exploring the Pale between the isolas, they're called *entroponauts*, and some are discovering new lands, they're explorers, but you! *Mnemotourists*! When the sense of normality creeps up again, leave behind the burnt shells of your present and dwell again in the days of wonder!

The air is heavy with the impending rain. Swallows swoop over the water, catching insects. Jesper watches approvingly.

At first, only a few heavy drops fall, unnoticed. It is still so hot, the sun shining like a white blade between the clouds. And the Safre archaeologists are off to Anise Islands to search for traces of the Gon-Tzu expedition. But Jesper knows what's coming. These sudden downpours always lurk in the Katla summer clouds. And Jesper also knows what time to turn on the radio in the morning. "Today's weather," the announcer says. It's all part of the plan.

Khan shifts closer to Målin while telling a story. He can already feel the hem of her skirt tickling his shin. The others listen to Khan's story, but Jesper retrieves the beach

umbrellas from the bushes. He opens the girls' umbrella, just as thunder rolls through the sunlit cloud cover. Anni lifts her head and laughs. The sun-drenched rain curtain rattles over the beach and the cliff. At Jesper's signal, two more umbrellas open: Khan opens his without interrupting his story, and Tereesz covers both Charlotte, who listens with her chin in her hand and the showy little Maj. Maj has braided her grown-out boyish hair into small tufted ponytails. The manoeuvre is executed brilliantly. The knights just smirk at the girls' laughter.

"So warm! Feel it!" Anni sticks her hand out from under the umbrella into the rain. Her back arches in front of Jesper. The boy murmurs something in response and gazes spellbound at the birthmark bird path on Anni's arched back. His hand wants to reach out and count the stars. The dusty smell of rain permeates deep into his nostrils. How long is the memory's exposure time?

"Oh!" Anni extends her neck and shakes her head in the rain. "You're so different when you're not at school."

"Aha," nods Målin in agreement, "prepared!"

"Kind of like, *older*, would you say?" Tereesz raises an eyebrow inquiringly at Charlotte.

"Hey, I saw you once in line for lunch," the girl chuckles and chews on a straw in a glass of sparkling apple cider. "I really couldn't say."

"But back then Tereesz was still a boy," Jesper teases. "Now, though... a man."

Målin is getting closer. Under the third umbrella, there is just enough room for the girl to curl up. The golden wreath of hair falls to Khan's knees, and rain patters on the beach umbrella. The girl tucks her head down and looks up at Khan, long and foreign, with shimmering dark green eyes. Khan swallows. Målin is the only girl who doesn't want cider.

"How does the story end?" Her voice comes from some unfamiliar place: "Why didn't they come back?"

"Well, that's the question," Khan coughs, "Why didn't they come back then?"

Målin suddenly bursts into giggles, wicked dimples flashing in her delight: "They didn't want to give their immortal peaches to the stupid emperor!"

"Fool," Khan blurts out accidentally, "There's no such thing as immortal peaches!"

Charlotte sits up: "But maybe there is, how do you know? You think that's how it was, that Gon-Tzu and those thousand sailors didn't dare to come back, the emperor will kill them, right? But if I were Gon-Tzu," Charlotte looks over to little Maj and draws dragon whiskers with her fingers, "and I found the immortal peaches - I wouldn't tell anyone! I would share them secretly, only with my best friends. And then we would travel the world together for a thousand years. And see what wonders people come up with!"

"Would you give me immortal peaches too, Lotte?" Little Maj looks up at her oldest sister.

"Of course. When you grow up, I'll give you some."

"Why do I have to grow up?"

"So you can be a young lady forever, not like a little beetle," Charlotte teases.

"Not..." Tereesz shakes her head and watches as terrible Charlotte's hair brushes her shoulder like a paintbrush, chin proudly raised, "...not *as* pretty."

Khan and Jesper, startled by Tereesz's sudden change of strategy, don't know what to say. Charlotte exhales, and her chest slowly deflates. Capillary burst on her cheeks.

Tereesz stares at her: "But me? Could I also get your immortal peaches?"

"We'll see." The girl grins and gathers herself: "But first, *you* should bring me something."

"Just tell me what."

Khan sees Målin secretly exchanging glances with the girls out of the corner of his eye. Something is happening.

Anni pulls up her tennis skirt over her tanned legs. "Next time it's our turn, isn't it? And our place. Don't think we don't have our own secret spot," her eyes flash at Jesper, "What are you guys doing on Saturday?"

The boys aren't doing anything on Saturday: "Absolutely nothing, let me check my calendar - nothing!"

"We're going to the countryside for a week. Gardening," Anni's back arches, she rises on tiptoes and slips the waist of her skirt over her rear, "but we could meet up at the beach on Saturday evening?"

"Sure thing. No, sure thing. Absolutely," the boys mutter in unison.

Charlotte's purse jingles. The girls' gazes reflect back and forth between the boys like trigonometry. The rain stops, but a few drops still sparkle. The bright sun emerges from behind a cloud, and the goddess from ninth grade stretches in its rays, placing her hands over Maj's ears and squinting at the boys: "This is our half. Bring cherry speed."

"What?!" Jesper is dumbfounded, mouth agape.

"*Cher-ry spe-ed*," Anni enunciates. Her red tongue touches the roof of her mouth at the "d" sound.

"It's like amphetamine," Charlotte speaks matter-of-factly. Her breasts rise and fall as she breathes while speaking. "Just, you know... special. It's *really* good. And we want to do it with you guys."

Silence.

Rain-soaked rosehips steam in the sun.

A sea eagle hovers in the sky.

"Maj is staying home, right..." Tereesz is still thinking of those funny braids sticking up from her head. Khan and Jesper see him smoking his "Astra" next to Charlotte.

"Of course, silly!"

"Davai then," he shouts, "let's get it done!"

Målin smiles, infinite joy reflected in her eyes, facing Khan. As befits a teacher's daughter, she starts giving instructions: "Zigi's number is in the wallet. Call him then, okay? He'll have it."

8. LINOLEUM SALESMAN

The Linoleum Salesman travels from town to town. In Norrköping, he sold linoleum along the banks of a large frozen river. Small wooden churches and narrow streets. The Linoleum Salesman admired the wooden architecture and the frozen silence of the North. By nine o'clock at night, the streets were empty and the wind blew through the city. The wind blew, coat tails flapping, and thick snow fell on the roofs of the houses. Snow fell in the Linoleum Salesman's heart. Rows of orange streetlights. What images flickered in his mind that evening? In his rented room, under a blanket. What stories, what patience. In the neighbour's garden, the Linoleum Salesman admired two brothers: faces like gears, mouths pursed, and cheeks red from the cold. And in Arda, at the beginning of the mountains, where fjords cut into the valleys between the peaks. Houses the colour of red clay at the foot of a snowy giant. And at night, when the window panes blinked in the dark like small eyes and the mountains' blackened teeth were bared to the sky. But their smiles were nothing compared to the Linoleum Salesman's smile.

He practised. Lowering his chin like a caterpillar, raising his upper lip. The man in the hotel room mirror became sly. What if he were to enter like this? Into a low-ceiling, concrete-walled basement. What would it be like to see something like that? Look now, beauty, look at me now.

Then, when the linoleum factory closed down, times became hard. But the Linoleum Salesman got back on his feet. He made new contacts and met importers. A new linoleum factory opened. And wherever he went, whatever he looked at, he always wanted to see more. He sold linoleum but thought of himself as a day photographer. For him, the world has preserved its hidden landscapes and beauty furnaces that no other person can see.

Like a child with a kaleidoscope, he dismantled the shapes. In Graad, above winter's orbit, the Linoleum Salesman was selling linoleum. The magnet train was raging on the northern plateau. Outside the windows it was dark and the aurora was above the plain. In the toilet of the restaurant car, the dark mountain tunnel swallowed the train. And then, when the Linoleum Salesman came out, his hands were full of broken glass. Where did the charming flower mandala go? It beckons, hidden, it is interesting but then disappoints with its ugly structure, a show-off. The Linoleum Salesman lost his patience. His greedy nerves were raging. Jelinka. In Polarasul, a man rubbed snow on his face, but the snow only melted from his hot nerves.

Now he rests, trying to take care of himself. He works, selling linoleum to construction stores, interior design offices, and retailers. Brown linoleum. Linoleum with flowers. He comes down from the north to Vaasa. In Kexholm, selling linoleum in the elite garden suburb of Lovisa, he sees something new. Something he thought he would never see. He sees other Linoleum Salesmen. Only they're not really Linoleum Salesmen. In the gay park on a mattress, he talks to the Ticket Inspector about Vaasa, the feeling of safety, schools, and liberal education. The aspen grove rustles. And the rest too. They have new ideas and knowledge. They tell each other their stories. The Garden Equipment Renter, the Foot Doctor...

"Briefing." Tereesz looks at the silver watch that his colleagues from the Missing Persons Department gave him for his tenth anniversary. "Five minutes." He marches through the retirement home park with Khan and Jesper, the folds of his coat fluttering.

“Okay, okay, ‘briefing’, Khan falls behind the others.”I’m in pain, I need to rest.”

Jesper hurries. “Listen, you have a serious heart problem. I think we all agree – you should see a doctor.”

“I agree,” Tereesz agrees. The white window frames of the houses glow in the dim light behind the fence. The leaves rustle under Jesper’s suede shoes. He looks at the mud splatters on the shoe tip and then shrugs. The sweet smell of decay. He is nervous about waiting.

“Your local authority could be more accommodating,” Agent Machejek continues. “The collaboration initiative and international sentiment were lacking.”

Khan tries to keep up. “Did you get to interrogate?”

“I did, I did.”

“Yesterday?”

“No, this morning. They dragged it out. Nothing I could do. I was on the phone all day yesterday, I don’t know, like an acrobat. A hundred calls. Sorry.” Tereesz is a brilliant liar. Jesper doesn’t doubt for a second: “Whatever, hey, what did Hird say?”

“He didn’t see them.”

Jesper notices Khan’s sigh of relief and furrows his eyebrows suspiciously. He is honestly a little disappointed. All this preparation. For nothing. Ah, let the funeral party begin.

“Wait, wait, that’s not all,” Tereesz raises a finger. He wears black leather gloves and smiles at his gesture. “Hird was so kind and gave me a name. Deerek Trentmöller. That’s where he heard it from.”

Khan suddenly stops and looks angrily at Tereesz. “He just *gave* you that name and told you everything honestly? He *talked*?”

Jesper doesn’t understand why Khan doubts his friend’s interrogation skills: “Well, you were also hammering him with questions, right? In Graad style,” he looks approvingly at Tereesz and walks on. “So. Deerek, who? Trentmöller?”

“Exactly. I checked. It all fits. They shared a cell eighteen years ago. The last year of Deerek’s sentence. He was released early. There’s one more twist to this, remind me later. Anyway. Together they got each other riled up with their stories, and then, one day, Hird has a *really* juicy one. Deerek feels like he owes him. Anyway, he starts blabbing. He recognises a guy... wait-wait! From the Kexholm circle.

“Come on! Bullshit!” Khan is unimpressed. Tereesz is not bothered. “This guy is from that circle – let’s assume for a moment that there is some kind of circle, right – and he’s like... a leader. Seriously a bad person. And dangerous. A few years after the girls disappear, the leader comes to Deerek and starts talking about how he and his friends abducted the girls. They’re lovers, by the way, the leader and Deerek.”

“Nice.”

“And Deerek can’t tell anyone anything, otherwise they’ll kill him. So. Now Deerek tells Hird. And you can’t imagine the things that, in the format of Hird’s and Deerek’s conversation, are... errr... interesting. I also looked up Deerek a bit. As much as I could find in the Kronstadt papers. A paedophile. Molested his sister’s children, mainly the family. Nothing serious. The woman eventually turned him in. Deerek is a coward. Tells the pastor how much he regrets it and how it’s something that pushes him.” Tereesz

sceptically shakes his hands as he says this and then continues: "... and all the rest of the diabolical stuff that comes with it."

Under the trees is the back of the nursing home. The veranda has white painted wooden edges, the stone stairs lead to the back door. Time-appropriate red walls, and fragile wooden architecture. Just the kind of house from Vaasa's past that would remind its inhabitants of their youth. Chestnuts drop their last leaves on the roof of "Skymning".

"Now, of course, Deerek is seventy years old. Or seventy-five, you do the math. And do you know why he was let go earlier?"

Khan and Jesper don't know why Deerek Trentmüller, the homosexual lover of the leader of the Kexholm paedophile ring, was released from prison earlier.

"He became senile."

"What? So, in his sixties or something?" Jesper understands the complications that could arise.

"Something like that, yes."

"Totally senile?"

"I don't know. It wasn't written in there *how* senile. Anyway, the situation deteriorated. Quickly. We'll see."

Khan shuffles up the stairs of the retirement home after the others. The three of them stand in front of the arched wooden door. Tereesz rings the bell.

"Drawing..." Khan pants, hands on his knees. "Where did Hird get the drawing?"

"It's like a relic there. It goes from hand to hand. If we can find the man who had it originally, we'll have our funeral party. That I promise you. We can finally start *living*." Tereesz rings the bell again, this time a little angrily. "Only Hird finally put up. The leader of Kexholm..." At Khan's glance, Tereesz corrects himself, "The leader of the supposed Kexholm group gave it to Deerek, and Deerek showed it to Hird. It seems to me that Hird was just a bit curious. You know, to see what happens."

Tereesz smiles evilly.

Vaasa slumbers in the blissful peace of the '50s. Winter is ending. Icicles drip from the eaves onto the pavement, leaving holes in the ice. The days are getting longer, and somewhere far away, in the yard of a central school, Sven von Fersen is picking on an overweight immigrant. What did he think, that Målin would enjoy hearing such hurtful talk? Huh? Was it really so? Tereesz stands at the far end of the yard and doesn't dare to intervene. He hopes that Jesper will start to feel too much pain from watching. Reflection.

The Linoleum Salesman walks along the suburban sidewalks, his boots stained with salt from melting snow. He hasn't slept all night, the bright light and sun reflections on the ice are hurting his eyes. His hands shake from coffee, his head is throbbing. A tense, red, pulsating relay of nerves. Thousands of images from their nighttime conversation swirl in the Linoleum Salesman's mind. He puts his hand in his pocket, where there's a hole cut with scissors at the bottom. He takes the horse-drawn tram in circles and gets off at Fahlu stop every time, slips under the bridge, looks at the willow thicket, and gets back on the tram from the other side of the road. The Linoleum Salesman's head rests against the window. Sometimes he falls asleep, but even then his imagination

keeps going, taking increasingly strange poses, spreading his legs before him. Even when he sleeps, he wants. But the Linoleum Salesman trains his nerves. The tram clock strikes two outside the window, and the school day is over. The Linoleum Salesman's jaws tremble, he is awake. Children pour out of the tram cabin. In the garage at home, there are rolls of linoleum lined up. He lives here now. In Vaasa, Kexholm. He walks the streets of the Lovisa suburb. The Linoleum Salesman hangs onto the handrail. He wants to squirm. An old lady looks at him strangely. It's the same old lady. She was on the tram the day before yesterday. And yesterday. He can't take it anymore, he has to choose. Fahlu station comes, and the Linoleum Salesman gets off. He slips under the bridge and looks at his willow thicket of longings. He can't bear it anymore. Small ice mounds drip from the willow branches, and the Linoleum Salesman's breath warms them up. Drip, drip. The sun sparkles on a water drop, and the visions disappear on the other side of the willow thicket. Four in a row. The smallest one talks incessantly. Blah, blah, blah. This is the most beautiful moment in the Linoleum Salesman's life. He wants them. After that, it's over. He kills himself and frees the world from the Linoleum Salesman. But first, them.

The smell of heart medication makes one nauseous. Jesper wipes his neck and nervously adjusts the tie in his sweater collar. It seems like all those joint ointments have somehow made it onto his skin. He doesn't know why anyone would hold onto life so desperately. White lace curtains are tied on either side of the window, and something crawls on the walls of Deerek Trentmöller's room turned into a makeshift ward. Tree branch shadows on the floral wallpaper. Occasionally, when a motorised carriage passes by with a hiss, the shadows come to life from the headlights and slide in the dim light. The table lamp is yellow. Layers of flowers and tree branches slide over each other. Death - the word that rarely appears in the boys' conversations, as if it doesn't exist. Everything just disappears and goes away.

When the time comes, Jesper steps out into the December air. The light of the cube house stays behind him, and ski trails lead to the outskirts of town. Barren fields spread under the snow, and Jesper crosses over them, to where the wall of trees darkens. *Zigzag dröm*, the branches of spruces brush his white coat. Dark forest, eyes green with darkness. In the cold air, girls' voices ring out like jingle bells, they are waiting... under eternal ice, in a pristine environment untouched for millions of years; deep in the lungs of Graad, where no human is allowed to go. Jesper doesn't tell anyone about it.

Deerek's room, or rather, the ward, is cluttered with tubes. Family pictures stand in frames, on a small bookshelf. Glowing glass. Jesper doesn't dare to look at those photos. Children, nieces? Will these caretakers clean here someday too? Above the bed stands a silver icon of Dolores Dei, and below it sits Deerek Trentmöller, hands folded on his lap, a plaid bedspread on his shoulders. A tiny silver cross shines around his neck. The frame of the drip bag stands tall at the head of the bed.

"Boys, my memory is fading... Tomorrow I wouldn't recognise you. It's the best thing that ever happened to me. It's like a blessing, for someone like me. Some mornings I wake up and don't even remember my own name. I don't remember who I am. Let alone those things..."

Tereesz stands with his hands behind the curtains, examining the window frames. "You seem pretty good now," he turns around. "Who did you get *the drawing* from? Of Anni-Elin Lund's back. Who?"

"Oh, dear..." Mr. Trentmöller's liver-spotted face trembles and he looks tired, "I don't re-

member such things anymore. The things I want to remember, I don't. I don't remember my son. So then, those things..."

"Don't fool around with me, Deerek." Tereesz squats in front of the old man and puts his hands on his knees. Khan watches with fear as Agent Machejek pierces Deerek's clouded eyes. "Now focus, you talked to your cellmate, Vidkun Hird - you don't want to say you don't remember *Vidkun Hird*? Who could forget? You talked..." Tereesz puts his hand under the old man's chin and turns his face towards him again, "Do you hear me? I know you told *V i d k u n H i r d* in prison that you know someone who kidnapped four Lund girls from Charlottesjäl beach, twenty years ago. And you drew a sketch of one of the girl's birthmarks as proof. Deerek, the sketch matches!"

Tears flow down Mr. Trentmüller's flabby cheeks.

"Deerek! Hey! The sketch matches!"

"I did... I went to the gay park. I don't remember, I don't want to..." Deerek whines his old man's whine, but Tereesz gets angrier and angrier. His upper lip is starting to curl around his tobacco-stained teeth. Deerek pulls back as if he's seen a ghost, but Tereesz's hand is on the emergency button. "If you're not cooperative because of your *memory sickness*, then know this! We have a machine nowadays. It's like an ice cream scoop, Deerek. I'll scoop out whatever I need from your brain and then..."

"Tereesz!" Khan has got up from his chair and is holding his shoulder.

"... then comes the blessing!"

"Tereesz, don't start with that!" Jesper doesn't understand. He watches in confusion as the agent hovers over Deerek, his hand on the alarm button. Khan angrily pulls him by the shoulder, "You know how this will ruin you, Tereesz, you know. We need you in the CoPo. You must not get fired. I have ideas too, we don't need..."

Tereesz calms down. "Okay. Jesper, get the door." Jesper peers out into the empty corridor. The retirement home is quiet in the evening as if abandoned. He pulls the door shut. Heart pounding in his chest, the man rests his back against the doorknob and nervously ruffles his blonde hair. The air in the room is thick and Jesper can see the old man shivering on the bed. He hides his face from Tereesz with his hands.

"Linoleum Salesman," says the Collaboration Police agent in a single word.

The man's sad, wrinkled eyes grow wide, and his eyebrows rise. "Who?"

"The linoleum salesman. Your boyfriend. He made the drawing. He told you about the girls. Who is he? Who, Deerek?!"

"He's just... He was just." Deerek doesn't cry anymore. The tears dry on his cheeks. The old man slumps under the sun as if struck by lightning. "Just a linoleum salesman. They all were. That's what they called themselves, professions." A weary sigh rolls from his mouth, "Oh Lord, help me..."

It's quiet in the room, a lone motorbike whizzes by outside and the shadows of trees glide across Jesper, opposite the door. Khan quietly pushes Tereesz aside. "Very good, Deerek. See how good it is now," he looks at the old man under the blanket with his big almond eyes. "You're going to help us find these girls, aren't you."

"Two places," Tereesz whispers to Khan.

"Two places, Deerek. Tell us two places this man went. Where he lived, and in which district? Do you know that?"

"In Kexholm, they were all in Kexholm."

"Very good. Excellent. And now another one. Think, Deerek, think where else the Linoleum Salesman was inscribed. Help us find the girls. Where did he go?"

"He was looking at them... on the beach. At a hotel."

"Havsänglar?" Tereesz paces nervously under the window.

"I don't remember, please..."

"Got it," Tereesz nods and takes two steps towards the door, "Havsänglar. Let's go!"

Eighteen years ago. Vidkun Hird sits in the corner of a cubicle at a homemade desk, a single strand of old-fashioned combed-back hair clinging to his forehead - now you could still say "classic". Vidkun is young. Relatively. The forehead is not yet covered with curls, the cheeks are just beginning to sink into a Nordic bulldog look. There are heaps of manuscripts on the desk. Philosophy of the future, historicist, eugenicist universal theory. It explains all things in the world, it is his legacy to mankind.

"Vidkun Hird: 'Vidkun Hird'" is written on the cardboard cover, in bold letters. Two reform beds line the wall, and daylight seeps in through a small window in the ceiling.

Deerek Trentmöller lies on the bed. Old. And somehow distracted. He takes the silver cross from around his neck, looks at it for a moment and then starts to laugh. "Oh! You're going to love it! I think it even has a certain superhumanity about it. Adventure and science at times, and all that, no doubt, beyond good and evil."

What a spiritual honeymoon! Deerek talks and Vidkun takes notes. Nods knowingly. Asks to pause for a moment, then replaces the inkwell. The window's beam of light creeps across the floor and spreads on the steel door. It's getting dark, and Vidkun lights the table lamp. He lifts a sheet of paper into the air and blows on it.

Good times, good times.

Deerek stretches in the middle of the room and leans closer to Vidkun: "And you know what he said then? Linoleum salesman. I'll never forget it! He did 'brilliant surgery' on them. He 'joined them together'. The smallest one died. The others survived. You understand, like that."

Linoleum Salesman. Linoleum Salesman. The Linoleum Salesman reaches out his hand for toilet paper. The salty sea air seeps into the room from the balcony of Havsänglar, and there is a telescope on the reed mat. A special camera is connected to the telescope. Afterwards, he wanders around outside.

He reads the timetable in the waiting pavilion, but the last tram has already gone towards the city. Girls on board. The summer evening is warm and makes the man's heart tender. He takes off his sandals. He walks barefoot on the warm asphalt. The asphalt is light and crumbly. The tram rails are cool. Charlottesjäl in the evening. He loves it. He loves the girls. He loves the beach, where nothing means anything anymore. He is in love. "It will never happen to me," he thought as the aurora borealis curved over the polar ice cap. Couples under the cover of greenhouses. Snow was falling behind the glass. It never happens to Linoleum Salesman. But he loves the beach. And the girls. One in particular. Especially that one. And others too.

Sand under bare feet. Between his toes. Warm in the daytime. And then damp. He walks along the water's edge. Music can be heard from the gardens, and lights from the houses shine far away among the pine trees. Away, under the rocky cliff, where no one can see. The rocks are slippery from the water, cold under his bare feet. Where did his shoes go? He doesn't remember. He walks among the stones, under the rocky cliff, waves splashing onto his trousers. Gentle darkness, he sinks to his knees and laughs. The pine trees rustle. Swim! He goes into the water between the rocks, no one sees how happy he is. The trousers get wet, and he slips and hits his knee. So what! The water is dark and warm, and the stars are in the sky.

"To Telefunken!" Jesper snaps his fingers. "I know people there, it's close. You can make as many calls as you want from there, Tereesz. Work your magic." His hand is raised and the three of them try to hail a taxi on the only main road in the Lovisa suburb. Cars whiz past. On the other side of the road rises a wall of trees, and traffic is sparse in the evening. "It's half past nine, we'll make it."

Khan follows behind. "I don't know... what's the point of rushing. Let's talk."

"Nothing to talk about, we'll make some calls. We're flying in tonight." Besides Jesper, Tereesz is also eager, his hand is raised even for those taxis whose yellow lights are not on. "What are we waiting for? Aren't you tired of waiting?"

"Exactly. And I don't care," Jesper hops on one foot. A passing carriage splashes his clothes dirty. "If you think I desperately want to know what kind of awful, *ruinous* - very emotional, Khan - machine you, Tereesz, use, then I'm not interested. You do your job and you don't have time. Three days are the time in which the chances of finding someone, especially a child, alive, decrease by half every day. One hundred, fifty, twenty-five per cent, Khan. What would you do?"

"That doesn't matter! Damn it!" The rain above slowly turns into late autumn sleet. A splash from under the wheel sweeps over Khan. "You and your taxis, the stop is right ahead! Jesper, you don't understand, you don't understand how it affects us! Fucking mescaline... lysergic..."

"Here it is! Stop!" Jesper runs after the taxi stopping by the roadside and shouts back, "So you would use good cop tactics, right?"

"Seriously, enough..." Tereesz grumbles in the taxi, by the window.

Khan slides in sideways into the passenger compartment and pants, "You see, Jesper... you don't understand that this thing is... *illegal*. In all the countries that have signed the declaration... Which, incidentally, are precisely the countries where the Collaboration Police have, well..."

"Authority," Tereesz finishes Khan's sentence from the front and tells the driver, "Telefunken."

For a moment, the car is quiet. The engine starts. Sleet sizzles under the wheels. Jesper searches for an argument, but Tereesz beats him to it. "Yes. I used the machine on Hird. My decision. He would never - *never* - have told us anything. He would have sat there, he would have smirked. He would have talked to me for two hours about crossbreeding gypsies and blacks, and that's it."

"But Tereesz," Khan's voice takes on a whiny tone, "they will fire you!"

"It's under control. And you know what? I don't want to talk about it anymore."

The next day. The Linoleum Salesman's long gaze glistens in the warm summer rain. The image shakes as he adjusts the tripod, then becomes still - sharp, clear. The sound of rain rustles in the Linoleum Salesman's ears. The clouds brighten in the sun, and rain falls onto the hotel balcony. The wet edge of the beach extends over half of the reed covering. And the rain rustles down on the beach, but in his mind, he hears the joyful drumming of raindrops on the parasol. A small red-flowered parasol in the telescope's eye. It is almost a kilometre away, on a cliff, but the Linoleum Salesman stretches his hand out into the rain and touches it. "Get out of the way, fat boy," he says. The Linoleum Salesman bought a women's magazine from the city. On the cover was the fashionably dressed Ann-Margret Lund, a woman in politics. And there were pictures inside. Ann-Margret in her beautiful apartment. And there she was with her four daughters on a coffee-coloured couch. Under the picture were the names and ages in a row.

Anni-Elin...

What stories he came up with that day when he first saw them. Horrible things. How he takes them on. The Linoleum Salesman is a doctor, he is a doctor. Doctor Linoleum Salesman. And he sets them in motion like this. Walking towards him. And he still couldn't get enough of it. How his nerves hummed, hungry, they wanted to eat them alive, those nerves. And how it all receded. When he came here. What a place! They chatted, on two tram seats facing each other. He was behind them. And the Linoleum Salesman smelled the scent of their white, white hair. The tram rolled down the hill, and the horses trotted. The beach came to him, not the other way around. And the four of them led him there. Dust rose from the asphalt, reeds swayed, and the sun shone pale in the blue sky. It was not like those other beaches, in Arda and nearby in Vaasa, Östermalm, where the Linoleum Salesman sweated. He wriggled among disgusting, flabby bodies and chased after small wrinkled puppies with his eyes. This is not the Jelinka swimming pool, where the Linoleum Salesman's eyes were red from chlorine and he had to wait two hours before he could get out of the pool.

The wind ruffled his hair. And the vastness! The world could fit inside it. The wind blew; he took the highest hotel room so that the wind could blow in and cool down the Linoleum Salesman. He looked at them tenderly, not daring to go down to the beach. Near them. He would turn to ashes if he even touched them. He took pictures. The photons travelled, and the same light that sunburned the girl's back bounced off her tiny birthmarks and etched onto the pitch-black negative. White dots like stars in the night sky. The shutter speed of memory. He made a linen cord, and a noose, and masturbated. For the last time. His breath fluttered against the sheet and with the semen, the Linoleum Salesman came out of him. And vanished.

The memory of the Linoleum Salesman and everything the Linoleum Salesman saw is fading day by day. Drops drum against the umbrella and Anni reaches out her little hand into the piano tinkling of the rain. Today, when he woke up, he no longer remembered the Linoleum Salesman. At the photo store, when they took the family picture, a little morsel, the Linoleum Salesman came to mind. And later, only more rarely, the Linoleum Salesman comes to his mind. Anni shakes her white head in the rain, pigtails on her back. And only He looks tenderly through the telescope.

Thousands of kilometres and two months more than twenty years away, on the other side of winter's orbit, stands the meteorological research vessel "Rodionov" trapped in ice. It is half past twelve on a polar night. In front of the crew, the spotlight beams spread out

over the North Channel, a cold vision. Men in fur coats crowd the deck, their silver-grey collars lifted up to their fur hats. The crew is panicking. Where the darkness seems to thicken slightly, but the distance moves on endlessly without the slightest sense of horizon, that is where the Pale begins. The crew feels and fears, although no one can see beyond a hundred meters into the night. The research vessel's antenna unit broadcasts a desperate distress signal along with scientific readings. This radio transmission reaches the relay station in Katla Graad Oblast, distorted grotesquely like in a curved mirror: "*Sector-Orbit-Sector, Sector-Orbit-Sector...*".

There are crackling sounds as the ice edge curves into the sky under the Pale, wiping gusts like music played backwards and ten times slower. The Pale approaches - an avalanche of memories of the world - and buries matter with reckless speed. The expanse of the starry sky disappears one star at a time under its rolling brush.

In orbit, the communication satellite "Icon" sees how the Pale sweeps over the entire Katla North Channel with a single wave. It also engulfs Samarskilt, the stony desert spread in southern Samara, and half of Supramundus on Mundi. The Pale cycles, and curves, gathers in rebellion against the matter. The black holes swallow the eyes of the cycles. "Azimuth" calibrates at the stratospheric edge. The immediate zones of entropnetic catastrophe now include Lemminkäinen, Nad-Umai ecoregion in the north-east Samara taiga, Graad Yekokataa, and the network of irrigated plateaus in Severnaya Zemlya. The remote, life-abandoned corners of matter. It is September 29th, the early '70s. Two nights ago was the class reunion. Now it's the end of the world.

And Tereesz Machejek, at the Telefunken panoramic restaurant, put the phone on the table two hours ago and instructed the secretary of Havsänglar to read out the *whole* guest list for June *and* July of the fifty-second year. The table is loaded with food. The delicious crab claws are lying half on the phone. Khan loves delicious crab and Jesper explains how to suck the meat and juice out of the tube.

"Suck, suck," says Jesper, pointing to the waiter to take away the plates. Tonight, dinner is Jesper's way. Jesper's treat. And Jesper loves good food. He doesn't settle for rice and macaroni.

Khan sucks. "Well, I don't know, it's certainly better, but if you put *dumplings* in rice and macaroni..."

Jesper sips ice water. "Tereesz, listen, I can take Kexholm myself. I've designed a paediatrician's residence there and know one developer. I think he should have access to what he was..."

"The population register," says Tereesz. His shoulder throbs with pain. But the Yugo-Graad red wine here is so good that he wants to take a sip. And then he has to put the phone back on his shoulder. The secretary ended the call once already. Then Tereesz called the administration and asked to pass on: "The lives of four little girls will be on your conscience." That worked.

Beside his wine glass, Khan holds a notebook open and over two thousand names are written on the pages.

"Halfway there, ma'am, just two thousand more," his head throbs with Lars and Berg and Åke flashes in his eyes like train lights.

"Okay then," Jesper unfolds the napkin proudly and wipes his mouth, "it's half past eleven. An hour and a half to go. Then it closes. I can bargain for two and a half.

So. Let's start, I'll take the population register."

The waiter puts another phone on the table. The rest of the guests watch the trio's meal with restrained interest. A thin kojko has been reading names monotonously for two hours and writing them down in a notebook. A yellow-brown overweight man in Perseus Black's double-collar shirt lifts his glasses, breaks a crab claw and then waves to the aunt at the opposite table. Tereesz's notebook is messed up by that. "Khan, um, you don't exactly have the hardest of tasks. Just deal with it!"

"Tereesz, listen, for God's sake, let's take this notepad."

"No. It has to be in the notebook."

"What's with the notebook?"

"Deerek Trentmüller," says Tereesz in an accustomed, mechanical voice. And then looks at Khan with wide-open eyes: "Deerek Trentmüller! Hello! Are you sure? Did he mark anything there?"

"Vacation."

"What else?"

"Linoleum Salesman," says the secretary with a tired voice on the other end of the line. "Deerek fucking Trentmüller, June 17-24. Linoleum Salesman."

Jesper slams his fist against the table he had designed five years ago.

Khan puts the crab claw on the plate. "Now comes ZA/UM."

Deerek Trentmüller dreams of a Linoleum Salesman. All the things that the Linoleum Salesman sees rotate before his eyes like a uniform mass of flesh and darkness. Occasionally he wakes up. He cannot sleep. Then the whirl of flesh and darkness returns and Deerek falls asleep. In his dream, they are lovers with the Linoleum Salesman. He is someone else. Through a rising, shapeless memory, a clicking is heard. The wooden window creaks. The glasses rattle in their frames. Then a thud and Deerek wakes up.

Death. This must be death. Dark brown flowers on flowery wallpaper. Shadows of branches sway and curtains flutter in the wind. Yes, this is exactly as Deerek always imagined it. In front of the open window, a tall, thin figure in a fish-tailed coat appears. There are more of them! Fat Death falls from the windowsill with a thud and whispers, "Okay, inside. Keep watch."

Tall Death comes to the edge of the bed and disconnects the alarm button. Fat Death turns on the table lamp and steps over Deerek, placing a hand gently on his hair. Those big dark brown eyes look familiar. "Deerek. Don't struggle. We need something from you now. We need you to remember, and that's why we're giving you a little injection. It's not painful. It's like a dream."

Deerek hears the click of a suitcase and Tall Death presses his gloved hand to his mouth. Strange smells, everything fades, kind dark brown eyes look at him.

"But what if he really doesn't remember? How does it work then?"

"We'll see."

Deerek Trentmüller opens up in front of Tereesz. Now it is Tereesz who is by the water's edge. The tiger wades through the water. He is always there, lurking. And wherever

Deerek ends, the tiger prowls around, sniffs and finds the Linoleum Salesman. In Norrköping, in the Arda fjord town, in the magnet train, in the Jelinka polar settlement, he follows, his eyes phosphorescently glowing in those dark corners where the Linoleum Salesman goes. He is in a low-ceiling, concrete-walled basement when the Linoleum Salesman makes faces at his niece. When he finally arrives in Vaasa, the tiger waits at the station, sitting at the end of the platform and licking its paws; where the light of the lanterns does not reach. He rustles in the park's alder grove and the Linoleum Salesman is startled. Walking on Lovisa streets on a spring morning, with a hole cut in his pocket with scissors, one can see into the tiger's heart for a moment. The schoolyard is visible, and a fight, between small boys.

When the Linoleum Salesman comes to Charlottesjäli, Tereesz treads the wind there, he is a bird of prey, keeping watch. He has eagle eyes, he sees everything. Until one evening he sees the Linoleum Salesman disappear, on the top floor of the Havsänglar hotel. Half of the people have gone. Day by day, it is forgotten that the Linoleum Salesman ever existed. Until finally, there is only senile, old Deerek Trentmöller.

"Linoleum, linoleum, linoleum..." he hums, "is there such a word as 'linoleum' at all?" A strange, strange feeling of loss. But it is not linoleum that he longs for. The Linoleum Salesman mourns himself, sometimes remembers himself and imagines a life where he never disappeared. He spews out disgusting talk and reads Vidkun Hird's memoirs. Fantasises on his own. Deerek Trentmöller longs for something completely different.

It is August 29th, twenty years ago, and he feels bad. Something is wrong, he couldn't sleep all night. The morning newspaper lies on the bathroom floor. The education minister's four daughters are missing. Deerek Trentmöller cannot breathe, the world is going wrong, and time is disjointed. In the light of a red light bulb, a hobby photographer reveals pictures taken on the hotel balcony. His hands tremble, he is sure they were there. Sure. But the photos on the clothesline have clothespins lined up and they all have *horror vacui*. Nothingness.

The contours of a rocky cliff appear on the glossy paper floating in the developing tray. A pale summer sky. But not them.

Khan and Jesper carry the barely conscious Tereesz into a taxi. His shoes drag along the ground and the man trembles. Jesper's voice comes from the convex mirror. Jesper... Jesper is still a cool guy.

"Tereesz, Tereesz! Stay awake. What do we do with you?"

"He didn't do it. He didn't do it."

"Okay, but what do we do with you now, take you to the hospital? Tereesz!"

Tereesz's voice is barely audible: "What do we do now?"

"I don't know, you tell me! Do we take you to the hospital or let you sleep it off?"

Tereesz tries to get his bearings. "No, you don't understand. Dead end. I'm so sorry... I don't know what to do next."

Khan holds Tereesz's head down as they put him in the taxi. "Wait now, tiger. You'll sleep it off first. Then it's my turn. I have a plan."

Tereesz faints. Everything disappears.

9. SACRED AND TERRIBLE SMELL

What was that sacred and terrible, elusive smell in the air this time? My name is Ambrosius Saint-Miro, the locals call me “Ambrosius Pyhä-Mirä” and in Graad they call me “Svjata-Mira”. “*Diduska?*” they ask, their eyes wide with affection, but I answer them: “No. I am not your *diduska*.” I am Ambrosius Santa-Mira from Mesque, Ambrosio Haggiamira, I am ambrosia, the holy world. You chose me, authorised me with your life, your thoughts, your mind cabinet. At night, when you went to sleep and tomorrow morning, from the window of public transport. But what I do is no longer a conversation, there are no arguments here, no sides to choose. The time for doubt is over.

I come once in every era. It is a great fortune to live when I am in the world. I am innocent and now you are too. If you decided, then it was either right or wrong. If I decide, my decision is what is. When God still seemed like an interesting idea to you, I was Pius Pericarnassus; I was Ernö Pasternak - you wanted to be betrayed and slaughtered. I made you sing Pasternakian songs. That’s how fierce I am and my unnecessary war. You wanted to hate me then. I was Franconegro, you were nationalists, you wanted international, black-coloured banknotes and militarism. Wanted to work in the factory, serve God. And medieval-industrial architecture, wanted to live under a concrete arch. I was a woman, Dolores Dei when it seemed to you: I want a mother, a perfect mother. I had beautiful breasts, I was young and so were you, you wanted to fall in love and I let you. Humanism, and Renaissance, care for each other. I sent you to school and taught you languages. You got tired of me, and I died. You wanted a world where I didn’t exist. Then I was your innocent Sola, an indifferent girl, sitting with folded hands and watching you make coups. “Oh, do it yourself, make mistakes, don’t learn anything,” I thought.

I was a citizen. I went from country to country, from one *insel* to another, and introduced you to my thoughts. Everywhere I went, I infected you with my cynicism and nihilism. On the radio, I talked about how everything is wrong, how everything is *equal*, and *pohhui*, who cares? Presidents, kings, princes, and sheikhs - everyone was afraid of me, no one wanted to let me into their *suzerainty*. They didn’t want me in their publishing houses, on the big screen, or on their talk shows. But then, when I signed books in the bookstore, they saw! You broke down. And when I spoke on the radio, ratings went up. I was brilliantly popular. Thank you, you made me happy. They let me into their talk shows and there I showed what human thoughts are capable of. You may be right too. And how witty you are, you kept listening and laughing. You called your whole family to gather around the radio and together you listened, realising how special you actually are: “I could have a supermodel *girlfriend* too,” I said, “but I have chosen solitude. That would be bourgeois. Dear supermodel, of course, I could spend the night with you. We would have fun, you would be as high as a kite on cocaine, and I would stick a pipette full of milk up your ass and watch it squirt out. Of course, I have thought about it. But that wouldn’t be *me* anymore. That would be against everything I believe in.”

But that’s a show. That’s not why you chose me. I was the only one who asked: what was that sacred and terrible smell in the air this time? I don’t have such weakness and arrogance that I would *tell* you what it is. I don’t pretend to know what a terrible beauty is for you. In your heart’s secret. The end of the story - I’ll show you. I want to tear the world apart layer by layer. And this time it’s not a deception, a figure of speech, it’s realpolitik. I attack. First Revachol, then Graad, and then further. It never ends. I open one front after another. Then, when everyone who isn’t with me is dead and the Pale sweeps over the whole world, then, please! Here are terminals where you can fall dead by yourself. Go of your own free will, it doesn’t mean anything. I’m evacuating the

world. We'll go live in the past. In front of the polyclinic, on a park bench, you come back! You're all under the parade, the rain is pouring down, and you're talking. Your friends come across the square, in a snowy city, their collars raised. Only the memory remains of this world, an entropnetic catastrophe.

You could never quite say exactly what it is. Even when your eyes were turned inside out and staring straight into your head, you couldn't say. The ghost, slipped through all the lost places, irrevocability. I give it to you to take, it smells in the palm of your hands, the sacred and terrible smell, rub your face against it now. The Pale is ripe with colours, it seeps from the slimy cracks, I open the rib curtains, intermediate frequencies, and all the terrible lost colours of the past come out. Everything is new again.

This is where nihilism leads. This is no longer what *could* be or what might not be. This is it.

The whole world is in the immediate zone of an entropnetic catastrophe.

10. GOOD NIGHT, ANNI

When Jesper arrives at his suburban home, the lights are turned off. He walks around in the dark, his eyes adjusting as furniture gradually emerges from the darkness. He doesn't even take off his shoes. It's clean and quiet, and over half of the wide glass windows have been freshly cleaned. Someone has made Tereesz's bed. The vomit bucket of a Collaboration Police agent is gone, and the parquet floor shines. Mud from Jesper's winter boots soaks into the sheepskin rug. Bookshelves separate the sleeping area from the main room, and Jesper stops. He looks at shopping bags labelled "Ozonne," "En Provence," and "*Tea Shop*." There's a scent of green tea in the air. A tiny silver dress hangs on a hanger attached to the shelf. The fabric sparkles in the dark.

Slipping between the curtains, the man enters the bedroom with his hands outstretched. Moonlight falls on the bed from the corner window. Jesper's model *girlfriend* Anita sleeps in the bed with her blonde hair spread out on a black pillow. A shadow runs along the young girl's body, which is curved with protruding ribs and a single birthmark on her chest. Jesper watches as her chest rises. He tries to remember. Four years. They've been together for four years. What is she now, nineteen? Jesper is thirty-four.

"Psst, hey, wake up!" The girl hums in her sleep like a child. Jesper blows in her ear and a blonde strand of hair trembles in his breath. "Anni, wake up, it's Jesper here, hey!"

"Hmh... Jesper, come to bed," the girl pulls the edge of the blanket up to her chin. "It's so nice and cool here..."

"Listen, I can't, I have to go."

"Go... where again?"

"Wake up, let's talk for a bit. Do you want me to make you some tea or something?"

"I brought you tea, see?" The Vaasa-Oranje mixed-race model stretches, her joints popping, and black shadows move on the surface of the blanket. "Yes, I saw it, thank you very much, that was very considerate of you."

The girl begs, her drowsy vowels long like her legs: "Let's talk tomorrow, Jesper, let's go to bed..."

"I can't tomorrow, I said I'm leaving. Jesper looks at the girl's face. Silence. The clock with flipping numbers rustles briefly. The wind howls outside the window.

Then the girl suddenly snorts, "Mh, don't go to the woods with your friends again, I haven't seen you at all. Let's be together tomorrow. I came for you, remember?"

"No, you don't understand, I'm leaving *today*."

"Today? What time is it?" The white clock crackles. "Two in the morning! Where are you going like that? You've been acting really weird lately!" The girl props herself up on her elbows, her mouth drawn in a worried frown.

"I came here because of you, I wouldn't have come otherwise."

"I apologise. Really. And I apologise for what I'm about to ask, but please, come out of bed for a moment, I need to move it."

"What do you have there?"

"Things."

The girl stands on the cold floor, rubbing one foot against the other, looking puzzled as Jesper pulls the bed. The bed legs creak, the Vaasa-Oranje mixed-race model holding the blanket on her shoulders like a cloak. She is very beautiful, but it doesn't mean anything anymore.

"Where are you going?"

Jesper kneels and the floorboards creak in response. "Disappearing." The trapdoor opens and Jesper pulls out a snow-white, packed suitcase.

"And when will you be back from disappearing?"

"I feel like any clever answer I could give you would be too cold. So I better not say anything." The lock opens, and Jesper takes a package of papers out of the suitcase pocket. The girl is annoyed. She likes those Jespers - Jesper at home, making tea, Jesper being productive, Jesper being awkward when showing his support - but she doesn't like this Jesper. "Please don't treat me like an idiot. This is not a cultural interview you're having right now."

"Okay then," Jesper nervously rolls up the papers. "Do you remember when I told you about the Lund girls? That I knew them, they disappeared, and so on."

"At my parents' summer cottage?" The girl's eyebrows are still suspiciously furrowed, but her mouth softens at the memory. "You were so drunk!"

"See, that's why I don't drink," Jesper awkwardly laughs. "But you had to beg, right?"

"You were so funny then!"

"So funny," Jesper bitterly remarks, "back then. Okay. I was funny. But now, I'm going to look for them."

"Who?"

"Cornelius Gurdit, who do you think?"

The intricate bone structure creaks from the knees as the model sinks down against the wall. "But you said it was pointless! You said you were done with it. Maybe you don't remember what you said?" Jesper hits his palm with a rolled-up paper and takes a few thoughtful steps on the floor as if he needs to consult with another Jesper - the one who got drunk at Anita's parents' summer cottage. A very inappropriate incident. A very inappropriate Jesper. But still, he is a thousand times smarter, a thousand times better off than this helpless creature here. He tousles his blond head with the paper roll and says, "There is hope."

"Jesper..."

"You see, I *have* to."

Jesper places his real estate papers in the girl's hands. "Stay here, take my house, live here, please. Sell both apartments in the city centre as quickly as you can. Prices will start to fall tomorrow morning. First thing in the morning, go to my broker. Here's the number..." The girl's shoulders shake, but nothing is heard, only the wind whistles outside the window. Jesper squats down in front of his model, his winter coat hem touching the parquet floor. He puts his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Hey, I'm going to make some tea now, okay?"

The clock ticks: "02:30". The cups steam on the floor, brown sugar cubes in a square sugar bowl, and a special spoon for lifting sugar cubes. It's hard to pour, but there's no

fire to light either.

"02:45"

"I don't understand. What does this mean now?" The girl swallows at the end of a long silence.

"Well, what do you think it means?"

"And all this time, you had that suitcase," the girl points her index finger to the centre of the room, "like I didn't even exist."

"It was there long before you."

"What, I had to convince you then?"

"Well, come on, try to understand."

"Try to understand? You know what I think?" The model angrily puts her teacup on the floor. "I think this whole thing with the Lund girls is complete nonsense. You're just a paedophile."

Jesper's betrayed expression is unforgettable. The girl is even surprised by the power of her words. For that, and only for that moment, she regrets them.

"Okay then." The man stands up in the middle of a sentence. He picks up his suitcase and calmly steps out through the curtains. Then, Anita's frustration takes over again and the naked and angry model rushes into the large room after Jesper.

"You can shove your cube up your ass! I'm not staying in this godforsaken Katla hole!" Pieces of white paper fly out of her hand and scatter into the dark room, one by one the pages fall onto the exceptionally beautiful herringbone-patterned wooden table and onto the parquet floor. Jesper doesn't turn around yet, he stops and tilts his head. "And where do you think you're going if you're not staying here? Are you going to work at the Graad ammunition factory?"

"You're pathetic! You and your *girls*, it's just pathetic. Everyone warned me! And I already knew before the cottage too! Everyone knows! I was just fifteen then, I was so stupid..."

Anita pants, leaning against the kitchen counter with one hand. "Anni this and Anni that. My name is not Anni!" Jesper feels his hands growing cold. The word "morbid" comes back in a whirl. He remembers himself, an underage lingerie model cuddled up to him, saying "Good night, Anni. Good night, Anni. Good night." I'm so happy. She falls asleep, the branches of the trees rustling outside the window like a second chance. What's sad about that? It's so beautiful!

The model returns to the bedroom and shouts in an inexplicable fit of malice, "*Good night, Anni!*"

The human mind is naturally trusting. At first, he does not consider such a nightmare of coincidences possible. But the more the difference between Jesper's own thoughts and the mocking voice in the room becomes apparent, the slower the man's breathing becomes. As if the body were preparing to shut down from shame. He picks up the paper from the floor, one page at a time, and pats the pile on his lap evenly. He chooses his words and doesn't really know exactly who he wants to attack. The world, mostly. He walks back into the bedroom, places the papers on the bedside table and lays out his terrible trump card.

"What do you think, that you are going back to Revachol? Things are not *good* there anymore. Come, look at it."

The girl sits on the bed and angrily tries to put on her evening dress, not yet fully understanding what the fuss is about.

"That *city* doesn't exist anymore," Jesper repeats, and now the girl stands up in alarm.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, they haven't been able to make contact for five days now."

"I don't know! Contact with what?"

"Revachol. Explosion. Gone. You really should read more newspapers!"

"Are you j o k i n g?"

Jesper, blinded by revenge, is not yet sure exactly where his lie will take him. He has an idea, but now it's too late. The girl gasps for air, her hands trembling in panic. Her nails clatter on the buttons and the radio's yellow display lights up in the dark. The dial spins under her fingers, the hiss and squeals filling the speakers as the needle slips over the shortwave frequencies. The foreign news reports speak with nervous professionalism, everything mixed up. Her cosmopolitan mind only grasps horrible fragments: "Mesque aggressor," "Saint-Miro," "Revachol," "atomic weapon," and "half the population." The girl shakes so intensely that Jesper begins to fear for her health. At any moment, the fragile machine will just fall apart. Finally, a voiceover announces the death toll. The girl collapses wounded when the domestic passenger list from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scrolls through with a peculiarly detached announcer's voice: "...the famous singer Pernilla Lundqvist recording her third studio album..." Anita's big eyes are dark in the darkness, wide with terror. She screams, "God! My sister! My sister is there!"

"I'm so sorry," Jesper says.

"Are you sure? How can they be sure? Why aren't they d o i n g anything?"

"I don't know." Jesper grabs his suitcase.

The girl gasps like a horse, her mouth contorts into a huge, dark scream. That mouth threatens to swallow the world. And so it does because Jesper doesn't remember anything further. In the vacuum of the scream, white, white snow swirls, and the room echoes from the concrete walls: "Don't go!" Jesper has bruises on his wrist from her nails, he closes the door behind him and stands in front of the house. It's snowing in the courtyard. It's cold and the wind is whistling, his skin is hot with steam. He grabs a handful of snow and rubs it on his face. On the edge of the courtyard, at the mouth of the tunnel of fir trees, there is a black motor carriage. Tereesz Machejek steps out of the car in the glow of the salon and waves at him. Jesper, with his coat flapping in the wind and a white suitcase in hand, crosses the courtyard. The fir trees scatter snowdrifts in the distance, *zig zag dröm*. And then suddenly the world is so light, as if all meanings have been taken away from him. He is no longer worth anything. Jesper smiles.

It's warm in the taxi. The machine sways as he sits across from Khan. Tereesz closes the door and slides inside.

"How did it go?"

"Well, let's just say it didn't go very well," answers Jesper and collects himself for a moment. "Drive."

The night before Monday, seven days earlier.

The city explodes in the taxi window like a disco, and Tereesz trembles, and loses his mind. Jesper holds him tightly: "Listen, he's having seizures or something. It's bad. We have to take him to the hospital."

"Tereesz, listen," Khan leans over his friend. "We'll take you to the hospital, okay?"

"No!" Tereesz grabs Khan's jacket. "Please!"

The boys look at each other quizzically and then shrug. Tereesz's face is dripping with sweat: "You have to promise me! Promise me you won't turn me in!" His chin trembles for a moment and then a vacant look comes into his eyes, his body stiffens like a log. "What the hell?" Jesper shakes Tereesz and puts his hand over his mouth.

"He's breathing, you know, I don't know, let's not take him, okay?"

"Yeah, let's not take him. To your place?"

Jesper sighs heavily. "Ohhh... okay, to my place then. There's just one problem. A girl from Revachol is coming here the day after tomorrow, what do you think, will he be okay by then?"

Khan shakes his head grumpily. "How would I know, do you know any private doctors?" "Private doctor, Khan! You can't get a license if you don't work in a hospital!"

"Well, yeah, but I thought maybe *you* know someone."

"I know one regular doctor, Khan. Will a regular do?"

"Regular will do, don't be angry."

The taxi rushes past Vaasa at night. Sometimes Tereesz is Linoleum Salesman, then Vidkun Hird, then Deerek Trentmöller, then Tereesz Machejek again. And sometimes he feels like he's not really there anymore. The explosion of Vaasa colours fills with black ink like a jellyfish, the aquarium goes dark. Tereesz's suit is the blackest of the black. It's made of leaves, slush on bike tires, and the sky above the city. He straightens his cuffs and adjusts his tie knot. He's formal, he's polite. The suit smells of dry cleaning, and then, like umbrellas under cemetery birches, a *funeral party* opens before him. Longed for, feared, all are there! At the funeral, there is the mother of the girls, with a black lace mourning veil and elegant wrinkles of concern beneath it. Paper manufacturer Karl Lund holds an umbrella over the woman's head. The birch leaves tremble, it's the end-of-summer rains.

Khan and Jesper are also at a funeral. Even Khan's mother has come, and the whole class too. They are all much older now. Tereesz doesn't recognise most of them, but that must be Sixten over there, and that's little Olle. Von Fersen is chatting with his lackey. And Zigi! The naughtiest boy in school is also there, still wearing his black leather jacket. And Jesper is the only one with a white umbrella. Tereesz walks through the funeral, everyone talking quietly, patting each other on the back. As he passes by, they nod respectfully to him. And the girls are there too, under piles of flowers, soft fluffy soil. They are rows of toe bones, rib knobs, and clavicles like relics. Nothing is lost, everything is preserved. The records are clear as a school paper, this is the *magnum opus* of identification, and they will teach it at the academy. And a handful of teeth too - Maj's baby teeth, pearls from Anni's jawbone, Målin's mean, mean canines - everything is there, everything fits: every little filling, the missing piece from Anni's molar, the bike accident. And Charlotte's movie star smile. Some would have liked to take some of

them from there! Just as a memory. How they would clink in their hands, those precious stones! But you mustn't do that. It would be unprofessional.

A doctor comes and injects saline, Monday night to Tuesday. Tereesz gradually regains consciousness, it's chilly and everything at the funeral is grey and silver-green. A grey tent over the black chokeberry bushes, an old-fashioned crystal on the table with fruit motifs. It's quiet. Something rustles in the bushes like a radio signal. When Tereesz wakes up, he realises what it was. News of the collapse of the Northern Highway has made the public space anxious, and he has no desire to play along. Tereesz asks Jesper to turn on the classical radio. Classical radio, they say, plays music by dead and white-skinned men in wigs, even when the world has long ended. Perouse-Mittrecie surges, it's beautiful to listen to, like the ocean, mm... grave. Everyone is dancing slowly, and the more Tereesz thinks about it, the clearer it becomes to him that the funeral party will never come. The investigation is exhausted. By Tuesday morning, he is ready to admit to himself that they will never know what happened to the Lund children.

The high heels leave imprints on the floor of the taxi. The girl crosses her legs, coral-painted toenails in a row, nude-coloured straps running over her Serj van Dijks. A cluster of gemstones sparkles at the convergence point of the straps. Elegant, you'd say? If there were some vulgar crystals on department store shoes, it would be a complete *faux pas*! But this Serj van Dijk here - what we're looking at now - costs 10,000 réal. The other one costs 500 réal more - maintenance. A single diamond jumped from the Revachol delta to a dump, what a dizzying night! Besides, Serj van Dijk himself said that there's a difference between elegance and snobbery. And since Serj designed these shoes... draw your own conclusions.

"I'm going to Körsfall, 130. It's a bit outside the city, isn't it?"

The shoe size is 37, and what an arch! Like the arches of the West... The Foot Doctor at Kexholm's circle would give them a nine and a half on the scale of locking them up in the cellar. Out of ten.

The suitcase phone rings, click, and the lid opens. But we're still looking at those ten thousand Serj van Dijks, how the gemstones sparkle as the foot sways to the rhythm of the taxi radio. Fakkengaff. We can't get enough of it. "Hello! Berenike, darling! Ozonne! So nice! I've always wanted to do something with them! No, I won't stay long. A couple of weeks."

The taxi door closes. The thirteen-centimetre heels tip on the sidewalk, it's getting darker; here it always gets darker or it's dark, where did the day go? White shins flash, and a view of a concrete cube opens up in the background under the fir trees. The lights are on inside. The moss sparkles, and there's a frost on the puddles before the October storms. The suitcase sinks to the ground next to the shoes in front of the door. The doorbell rings. Jesper's model *girlfriend*'s legs seem to last forever. We crawl past them and it seems that the edge of the bell-jingling cloak will never reach us. Before the butt-curve, Mesque's fleet of world-enders, black like a pot, appears on the horizon of Revachol. In the fashion capital, they're actually already putting their hands over their eyes at Anita's knee-bends and asking, what's that ominous chimney smoke over the ocean, like storm clouds?

"It's open!" Jesper exclaims. The girl enters and a large room opens up before her, smelling strongly of tobacco and sweat. Jesper crosses the room from the window. There is a guy on the mattress, his greasy potato-brown head visible from under the covers. The interior designer takes the girl's suitcase and introduces her to the sweaty, overweight

guy next to him. The immigrant smiles awkwardly, and when she shakes his hand, it too is warm and sweaty.

"My name is Anita," the girl introduces herself.

"I am Inayat, but everyone calls me Khan. You can call me Khan too. And this here," he points to the pile of blankets, "is my partner Tereesz Machejek. He's feeling unwell, as we can see." Khan thinks he did pretty well. It could have gone worse: "*What* the hell?! Jesper, why didn't you tell me you're dating a real model! Cool! If I had Anita Lundqvist, I'd be telling everyone. Hey, give me an autograph, hey, your sister is Pernilla Lundqvist, right, give me Pernilla's phone number, and show me your boobs! Jesper, tell her to show her boobs!"

Khan ruins his jovial introduction with his laughter over the "boobs". Now he's also looking at them, hidden under the girl's baggy fashion outfit. "Boobs, boobs, model boobs, famous model's boobs," he thinks and laughs more and more. Of course, he doesn't notice when the girl asks about Tereesz for the second time.

"Poor thing, what's wrong with him?"

"Food poisoning." Jesper takes the girl's arm and leads her to the bedroom to change. Khan uses tact and calls out from the doorway, "Hey, okay then, see you tomorrow, right!"

"Are you leaving already? Wait, I'll call you a taxi!"

"You and your taxi, I'll walk instead."

"Goodbye!" the girl calls out in a friendly voice. As Khan limps along the forest road to the bus stop, his feet crunching on the cold moss, the girl puts on her pants on the bed. On her loose, bohemian fashion top is the face of Serj van Dijk, in a revolutionary two-colour scheme, grey and turquoise, as if stencilled. What? It's not pretentious! Van Dijk is a kind of revolutionary, too. A *fashion* revolutionary. The Mazov of the fashion world. Only, he doesn't send the bourgeoisie to exile in the taiga of Northeast Graad, he sells them, you know, clothes.

"Jesper, who are they?"

"What do you mean?"

"You never told me about this Khan guy. And the other one?"

"Tereesz. They're just old classmates from high school. We just had a reunion. I didn't tell you about it?"

"No."

"We were just reminiscing about old times. Hey, Tereesz lives in Graad. He's staying here for a few more nights, I think. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," says the girl, but she senses trouble. She stares suspiciously at Jesper's back as he goes to make tea. The reception left something to be desired. A measly kiss. The girl paces angrily around the bedroom but then notices a ring box on the bedside table among the books. Oh, a surprise? Is it for tonight? The box is just far enough away that Jesper could reach it from the bed. Could it be? Don't think so, but it's still better to know what's coming. And besides - curiosity! The mood immediately improved. A black velvet box, a tiny box. The girl opens the box, click!

Night falls over Vaasa. In the city centre at Königsmalm, a fox cub runs across the intersection. Its breath colours the air blue, and it tucks its ears. The street is quiet and empty, the downtown buildings with balconies standing in a row, and yellow traffic lights flashing in window mirrors. The northern metropolis at night is a light installation – a beautiful modern thing, but visitors are scarce. The royal architectural museum in the Dideridaada style looms over the river, and the façade lighting makes the building glow golden. And below, in the dark, the river water drifts along, glossy like vodka taken out of a refrigerator. Bridges curve over it, with rows of lantern pearls on their backs. A lone cyclist rides home, with the sound of the bike rattling, and the scent of farewell lingers in the air. The advertising signs in the corners of the department store go into power-saving mode with a hum. A giant lingerie model above the payphone line smiles and disappears. Anita Lundqvist. “Child, cover yourself,” says the chairman of the presidium, Sapurmat Knežinski. “Aren’t you cold?” And two Collaboration agents run up the stairs of the police station. “Tereesz Machejek! Where is Tereesz Machejek? You arrested him four days ago!” This man is a Man from Internal Affairs. He is the angel of death. “Tereesz who? Machejek?” The security officer waits for an answer from the machine. “We haven’t had anyone by that name here.”

The asphalt glistens. There’s a night frost and frozen puddles on the ground in Saalem. Wooden houses squat on the sidewalks, and the sound of footsteps echoes from the street. And somewhere inside, in the basement, Inayat Khan toggles the lights of “Harnankur.” The only source of light is the airship model, which goes out every time it lights up, revealing Khan’s face. The rows of lights on the ship’s floors are reflected in his glasses. He has an idea, a flash of inspiration – one that can only be seen when all other lights go out. Khan has been waiting for this moment for two years. He cuts the threads, takes the airship like a baby from a cradle, and dances with it in his arms. An empty display case stands in the middle of the room. The incandescent filaments of the spotlight cool on the other side of the street, in the courtyard of the manège; the horse trams disappear into the darkness. Horses sleep in rows in the stables.

Passing through the streets of the suburb, there are white picket fences with gate latches. In the distance, the barking of dogs can be heard, window frames gleam in the dark, and wooden garden furniture stands empty on the veranda. Who rustled in the buckthorn bushes? The night smells of frost, and the fear of the future haunts the nuclear family’s dreams. And where Lovisa ends, the coniferous forest begins, and Jesper de la Guardie rolls out of bed. Anita went to sleep angrily, and Jesper is worried. But not because of that. Jesper can’t find his beloved scrunchie. He sneaks around in his underwear, looks on the bedside table and the bookshelf, then puts on his bathrobe and steps through the curtains into the living room. The end wall shimmers in the dark from the windows, and the floor is a minefield – milk cartons, socks, cup ashtrays – a hermit crab named Tereesz Machejek is settling into his new box.

The agent, with his nose against the glass, wakes up. Jesper puts a cup of tea in front of him. It smells like peppermint.

“Hey! Wake up! Let’s talk a little, I don’t know, chit-chat or something.”

“Okay, but I want to smoke inside.”

Mouths move, bursts of laughter are heard, and slowly but surely, the dawn starts to appear outside the window. The stockpile of cup-ashtrays and cups slowly peels out of the darkness.

Behind the glasses of the café “Cinema,” the morning light is seeping through. It’s

Wednesday. Early risers are bustling about on Östermalm, the street-cleaning machine is humming, and morning newspapers are falling into rows of mailboxes. Traffic is stirring, the machine operator is scraping frost from the windshield.

The copywriter in his late twenties with a moustache is drinking coffee and eating scrambled eggs. Suddenly, he chokes on the coffee and runs coughing to the toilet. The morning paper is left open on the table. In the announcement section, there is a copy in Målin Lund's handwriting that reads, "Everything is fine. We are with the Man, and we like it here. We love you." Below the copy is Inayat Khan's contact phone number, and the text says, "Good person, it's not too late yet. If you have information about this letter, if you sent this letter or if you know anything new about the disappearance of the Lund children - whatever it is - please contact us."

"I would like a box of 'Astra' with menthol, no, wait, has 'Radar' arrived yet?"

"No, sorry, Mr. Ulv, this evacuation stuff! No new goods are coming in at all anymore, I don't know how long I can keep this store open."

"Well, in that case, give me three boxes of 'Astra'," says a curly-headed, chestnut-haired young man. "That blackcurrant wine from there, how strong is it?"

"Let's see, let's see." The seller takes a dusty bottle from the alcohol shelf. "Huh. Twenty-three per cent. Pure spirit I think."

"Excellent. Do you have more of it?"

"There's two here."

"These and the vodka, 'Final Station'. It's been aged in the Pale, right?"

"Where else. If it wasn't, I'd take it to the Pale myself, it's right behind the meadow!"

"So, a pack of matches, a pack, not a box. And those candles, no more? Oh yes! I would also like to take this wild strawberry liqueur, I forgot to take it last time. Give the two you have there."

"This second one is raspberry, the wild strawberry one is gone."

"Well, I'll take it then. You know what? Better hand me all the alcohol if you're going to close the shop anyway. And some smoked sausage too."

"A l l the alcohol?"

"Yes, and half a bar of smoked sausage."

A curly-headed young man rides a bicycle through the town of Lohdu, in Lemminkäinen, in the immediate entropnetic disaster zone. Dusty bottles jingle in the trailer, mixed with boxes of cigarettes. And half a bar of "Doctor's" smoked sausage, wrapped in paper. On the village road, the street lamps shine like diamonds in the morning darkness.

11. SELF-CHILLER

In the early 50s, a young mother watches her four-year-old son Ulv on the Lovisa playground. It's mid-summer, the poplars drop grey flakes, and the sun sparkles in the sky, but the mother is worried. Other children run around the playhouse, and boys scream and pull girls' hair. The suspension bridge of the playhouse vibrates as toddlers run on its tables. Down below, girls and boys build a town on the wooden edge of a large sandbox. A girl spins a tiny airship model around a tower and two boys dig a tunnel, one on one side and the other on the other side of the hill. The tunnel meets in the middle and the boys laugh triumphantly. The girl is bored, she starts crying, and the other girls come to ask what's wrong.

Only little Ulv sits alone, far away, on the other side of the sandbox. And when someone asks him what the solitary house is that Ulv has built on his huge piece of cloth, Ulv doesn't say anything. The boy just looks vaguely into the distance and smiles his mysterious childlike smile. As if he's somehow... too *cool* for that. Too cool of a guy to talk about his house to the rest of the rascals. The others soon tire of Ulv's arrogant manner and leave him alone. The young mother doesn't understand why her child doesn't care about being in the company of others. Even with his own parents, Ulv has not exchanged more than ten words. He does speak, but only when he's alone with himself. Sometimes the mother listens to him from another room and doesn't understand what's wrong with her little boy.

A distant street parade is heard, and the bass drum thumps: nts-nts... Ulv sits in proud solitude in the corner of the sandbox, moving his curly head back and forth to the rhythm of the music. It almost seems as if he's... *self-chilling*.

It's Wednesday afternoon in the forest near Jesper's house. This time Khan is leading the way and the others try to keep up with him. He is heavily caffeinated and hasn't slept all night. Until the morning, he tapped on "Harnankur"'s buttons, made coffee and long-distance calls, and listened to sad songs until his mother asked him to turn the volume down. Khan waves his hands while speaking, his orange coat open and a turquoise-orange-violet striped scarf in Iilmaraa colours fluttering. His mother knitted it for him for the winter solstice and the tutu pom-pom hat for his previous birthday. It is also in Iilmaraa colours. They come as a set.

The forest path winds between hills, and tall pines on either side of the road. Three abreast - Jesper in the right tire track, Tereesz in the left and Khan straight in the middle of the grassy tuft - they come down the hill on the snowy sand of the road. The hay is patterned with grey, rustling underfoot. Single snowflakes are flying in the air, and the dried late autumn nature sparkles.

Khan takes a deep breath of fresh air. The moss decays. He claps his mittens together, which go over his back with a string. "I've never believed in a criminal solution, you know that. Every step forward is a step forward, and in that sense, it's of course great to chase linoleum salesmen, but Tereesz, sometimes I feel like you're collecting those guys like I collect memorabilia, you know what I mean? I don't mean it in a bad way, of course."

Tereesz blows big silver-grey smoke rings and makes "Astra" rings in the middle that the quiet wind carries away. "I don't mind, you're right too. You collect that stuff because

you think you'll find something about the girls there. I collect my monsters for the same reason."

"And what do you collect, Jesper?" Khan asks.

"I don't collect anything, you freaks. But it's still nice for a man to have a hobby. Hey, what's next?"

"Well, we have to search Trentmüller's property and interview relatives," Tereesz lists on his leather-gloved fingers.

"But you saw that he didn't do it, right?" The forest path turns, and light brown hay brushes over the rails like someone's hair and rustles under Jesper's feet. "Or are you not sure?"

"You can never be sure in Captain Pepi Popikarnassos's Psychedelic Cabinet," the hyper-active Khan cuts in and turns around. Walking backwards a few steps, he explains to Tereesz, "That's why the court doesn't count ZA/UM as evidence. It's psychedelia, you see, it's not enough on its own. Reality has to *correspond*. There have to be witnesses and things. It's all pointless anyway!"

"Well, I wouldn't say it's completely pointless," Tereesz throws his cigarette butt under the trees, and the orange spark bounces off. "But you were right about Pepi Popikarnassos, his test subject's fantasies and reality get mixed up. It seemed to me like it was more of an... aspect of him. One that ceased to exist or... if I have the time, I should let the local authorities investigate these things."

"But right now, as you say, it's *bastaa*?" Khan asks.

"Right now, it's *bastaa*, yes."

"Very good, because let's be honest! Which one of you wants to find them in some ditch? Seriously. It's not a goal in itself, it won't accomplish anything!" Khan smirks and waits for answers, seeing Tereesz raise his hand.

"I do. And it is a goal in itself. Have you heard of *closure*? That concept."

Jesper still thinks of Pepi Popikarnassos's synthesizer as overrated futurist self-gratification. "Do you have anything better to offer? *Tempus rev*? We do it right this time?"

"Not a bad idea. Honestly, I wouldn't say no."

"Now come on, Khan, be reasonable." Tereesz lights another cigarette, and there's a smell of sulfur in the cold air. "Time is running out, we've lost contact with Revachol and Occident as well. Half the world is on the back foot, if war breaks out, all investigations will be halted, and documents, papers, and people may disappear. We have to work quickly, tie up all loose ends before it's too late."

Three small silhouettes move through overgrown fields, balancing and shifting as they argue over a log fence. Ice drifts along with the stream underfoot; they jump over fallen trees in the dim forest tunnel and move in a line on the white meadows. Khan goes through the barbed wire, and Jesper jumps over like Tereeszki. Clearings fall behind, the forest thins and the sandy road lies below the tree roots like a tiny canal. Already the sea wind rustles above the treetops and the expanse of the water can be felt in the air.

"We've been doing your thing for so long, and nothing has come out of it. Give me a chance now," Khan explains with more gestures than words.

“Okay, you’re right that it’s a dead end,” Tereesz admits. “But just tell us the plan and let us think about it. If I think something might come out of it, then okay, we’ll do it, if not, then we have to take a break.”

“You don’t understand,” shrugs Khan. “If you say no, we’ll never know. There are no other options anymore. I can’t take the chance that you’ll say no. Let’s take a little trip before, huh? Let’s go talk to a professional. We should have contacted them long ago; it’s urgent now.”

“What do you mean there are no other options anymore?” Jesper doesn’t understand. “But what about Målin’s letters? Someone had to send them, the handwriting matched, at that age, there should be some development. If a thirteen-year-old writes, then their handwriting may not be 100% the same at fifteen, 95% is very promising; I’ve read about it. Right, Tereesz?”

“Yeah-yeah, that’s right,” Khan jumps in. “But you know what? I have an idea of how we can straighten this out. We just shouldn’t wait for it *now*. We have to act, right away!”

“What idea?”

“Well, I put an ad in the newspaper.”

Tereesz walks in his ’50s-style fish-tailed coat, he looks like a true kojko, and his mouth is slightly open in thought. “This may not be such a bad idea, when did you put the ad in?”

“I submitted it the day before yesterday; it should be out today. I put your number there too, Jesper, in case I’m not at home.”

“And what did you write there?”

“That if anyone has any information, come forward, nothing bad will happen, help us out, you know!”

“Such a thing can be more effective than you think,” Tereesz explains to Jesper. “Especially with old things like this. But you still have to fish in different columns for months and months. Where did you put it?”

“In Dagens and Kapitalist. I didn’t have more money. By the way, you both owe me fifty each. And for the advisor I’m recommending, he needs it too. And for the trip. You should take at least a thousand, he’s very expensive, very highly rated. I’ve been waiting so long for this, reading about him...”

Jesper becomes impatient. First, he definitely doesn’t want to go anywhere now, and second, he already senses whose money is at stake here. Khan lives off the solatium money from his father, who died on a fuel oil rig, and if Tereesz doesn’t start an investigation, he won’t be paid anything. “Listen, lay it out, which advisor are we talking about here?”

Three silhouettes reach the cliff edge. The expanse of the sea meets them, beyond the dried-out meadow. The hay is dotted with white snow, and a single group of pine trees quivers in the wind. The sky darkens as the men approach the cliff edge. Jesper pulls up his coat collar, the sound of the water growing louder in his ears. He often walks the six kilometres here alone. From this spot, they can see what they all long to see – the strip of Charlottesjäl beach shining blue on the other side of the bay, in the snowy distance.

Khan leans on the wooden fence and looks down. The crashing waves hit the rocky wall, the water curves and the white wave crest breaks into a million foam clusters. Drops on the man’s glasses blur his vision. Jesper appreciates the autumn waves, they come once

a year and now he has a clear plan. Let's go. He'll tell the girl he's going too, and he'll think of something else for the boys. He measures the wind.

"Self-chiller," Khan says, "it's the last chance to talk to him about girls."

Jesper starts laughing, but Tereesz is serious.

"Wait-wait! He confirmed Abadanaizi and Dobreva's skeletons within a kilometre accuracy," Khan explains. "What's more? Two years ago, they followed his hint to find Cornelius Gurdi in Corpus Mundi. The chain he brought out has now sunk into the Pale, but they found Gurdi's dishes and campsite nearby. After a hundred years of references! The Self-chiller, Jesper, lives in Lemminkäinen, a country house in the woods, and we're going there."

On the lead-grey sea it's snowing, and the temperature is at zero; the wind in the bay is less than ten meters per second, and the next two weeks will see storms in Western Cato, right on the edge of the Pale, causing the ocean to surge. A two-week window, perfect conditions. Jesper already feels how the water mass on Charlottesjäl beach, ten kilometres away from here, breaks into waves. Waves move before his eyes, long and stable like beautiful thoughts.

"Okay," Jesper says, "but I have a conference. Design stuff. From Thursday to Saturday. And by the way: going to Lemminkäinen is not a very good idea right now. Or maybe you don't know?"

Little Ulv is nine years old when modern dance music is born in Oranje. Johan Hauer, Rietveld, and Arno van Eyck spin records in university halls; at Vesper in Viderund, the world's first discotheque, "Das Baum," opens; on a summer evening in Messina's arcade square, after the most epic *set* in human history, the ecstatic crowd crowns Theo van Kok the innocence. Ulv comes home from school with a backpack on his back. He is in the fourth grade, sitting alone in the back of the class because Ulv doesn't care about what the teacher is saying. Mathematics and science do not interest Ulv. Stupid girls do not interest Ulv; only one thing in this world interests him. With his mouth open, he stands in front of Fonopoe's door on his way home in Västermalm, where music lovers come and go. Theo van Kok's coma remix plays from an old machine, and music lovers watch as little Ulv rocks and dances like he's possessed. Tears flow down Ulv's cheeks, and the whole world disappears. Everyone laughs and looks on in awe as the little boy bounces and flails, sways, puffs, waves, and roars, "Wow, isn't this something?!" He slams his hands and feet in the air, smacks the car hood with his palms, and just can't understand: "How can it be so good?! It can't be that good!!!" A salesman with a trendy sweatshirt comes out of the store; from the Pale of lost things, from the coma echoing across human history, Ulv steps up to the young man, and he hands Ulv a Stereo 8 tape. "Theo van Kok/" reads the cover, "Comte de Perouse-Mittrecie." This is the first and only time in Ulv's life that a living person has been valuable to him.

The grooved tire of the motor carriage is spinning and the snow is rustling under the wheels, but Inayat Khan is not there. He is thirteen years old and stepping out onto the veranda of Tereesz's father's villa into the apple orchard. It is dark, and crickets are chirping. The self-chiller puts a Stereo 8 tape into the player, and two plastic discs are spinning. The *sound check* is underway, but the June night is quiet, and the music does not carry far. This is twenty years later and far away from Inayat Khan. The air is filled with scents, and he approaches the boy like a spirit from under the trees, circles around

his knees, and smells of early-ripening apples. Khan steps barefoot on the dewy grass. The boys are sleeping inside on the second floor, but he can't sleep. They went to work together at half past seven in the morning. Khan's body is tired from construction, but his heart is restless. The money is not enough. Dealer Zigi was throwing astronomical amounts on the phone. 300 réal. Jesper took his collection of "Man from Hjelmdall" adventure novels to the antiquarian bookstore, after much persuasion. Khan sold his binoculars.

Sixteen-stroke combustion chambers are kicking in the heart of the machine; in far-off Lemminkäinen, the window panes of the farmhouse tremble in bass rhythm. *Check, check...* But Inayat Khan is not there. An apple falls to the ground in front of him. Little Inayat wipes the apple clean with his sleeve and sits down on the garden bench. He bites into the fruit and feels the sweet pain kicking in his heart, making it hard to breathe. It's the feeling of slipping possibility that grows all day and then makes itself felt in the evening. "Speak... you always have such cool presentations. In history and natural science..." Dark green eyes, incredibly kind and so very interested. Are you sure, Khan? Try to be reasonable now; there's no point in lowering yourself for nothing.

The hood is steaming, the engine belt is running, and the tape is sliding against the magnetic reader. But it's still quiet in the apple orchard. Inayat Khan doesn't believe in God, especially. God was supposedly invented by someone named Pius more than three thousand years ago in Iilmaraa. Maybe. But now Khan throws the apple core into the bushes, puts his hands together, and prays.

"Please make me likeable to Målin. God, please make me *really* likeable to her, not just... you know, you're God after all. I promise that then I won't think that some man - Pius, from Perikarnassus - invented you. I promise that I'll believe that you've existed since the beginning of time and drawn the sky and the earth with your... uh... golden compass or something. Sorry, God, for joking like this about you, but you see, it's really hard for me to believe that you exist if I'm not likeable to Målin Lund."

Khan looks up at the sky. In the darkness of his heart, love spins and spreads like stars. Love, like a smooth-haired cat, curls up inside his stomach. To him, love is also a fear of loss.

The red glow of the taillights stains the snow with blood, the engine muffler crackles. The chained tyres whizz on the snow and the engine roars for a moment. Gear change. The tone rises. Acceleration presses the daredevil driver into the seat. The young man's fingers are frozen to the levers and the racing goggles to his head, he's in a driving helmet. The unlit mountain road is reflected off the hard surface of the glasses and disappears under the wheels.

The atmosphere is swirling above the Lemminkäinen entropnetic catastrophe zone. Dark mountain ranges with snow-dappled peaks cut the horizon, their teeth bared like those of a Linoleum Salesman. In the valley below, clearings and spruce forests stretch out, while a black motor carriage speeds along the winding road at one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour.

"Damn, this is s i c k!" Khan exclaims. Tereesz nods, the fumes from the engine filling the cool air of the cabin, which is industrial and acidic. The agent looks out the window, watching the snow-covered roadside posts fly by in the blizzard. In the valley below, a white mass looms, dotted with clearings. Khan hops over to the opposite seat next to Tereesz and takes the last sip from the wine bottle. The strong drink jostles his senses, and he thuds against the cabin wall.

“Gone,” he shows Tereesz the empty bottle. Another bottle of flavoured berry wine appears in Khan’s hand. The twist-off cap pops off with a snap. “Sugar: 25%,” he grinds the sugar between his teeth. In the distance, on the opposite slope, flickering lights shine in the dark. All the other vehicles are still moving in the opposite direction, away from the entropnetic catastrophe, since Wednesday evening. That was when Khan, Agent Machejek, and the crazy rally driver Kenni – just Kenni – set off from Vaasa:

“What’s your name?”

“Kenni.”

“Kenni kuka?”

“Vain Kenni.”

“*Kattoo, entroponeetisen romahduksen vyöhyke! Ei voi olla, kuusetkin rupee taivaasen ajautumaan, saa-ta-na, ihan kuin ne sanoit, sen kyllä täytyy nähdää! Ja talot myös!*”⁴ shouts Kenni from the driver’s seat.

“How are you?” Khan shouts back. He, unlike Tereesz, is still a little worried when the machine shakes and in the darkness, in the yellowish glow of the speedometer, he sees the pointer shift to one hundred and seventy.

“*Hienosti menee, ihan hienosti, en huolehdi ollenkaan!*”⁵

“And the road, how is the road?”

“*Että mikä, tiekö? Ei, hyvin on, en huolehdi ollenkaan.*”⁶

Kenni doesn’t *huolehdi ollenkaan*⁷. Kenni wants flavoured berry wine instead, and when Khan thinks Kenni shouldn’t drive drunk, Kenni says: “*Älä huolehdi, alright? Mä oon puolet tiet juonu jo, muuten mä nukahtaisin. Se autta mua keskitymään, kato!*”⁸

The road continues winding through the slopes of the mountains, between the spruce trees. Kenni leans forward to stay on track in the curves. Khan only feels safe when the motor carriage plunges deep into the forest along with the village road. The sound of snow crunching under the wheels and the engine struggling to keep up, the windows covered in circles of snowflakes. The dark forest walls flutter behind the illuminators. Suddenly, Kenni pulls over to the left side of the road, and Khan jumps back to his own side. The car rushes past a red Graad Telecom van. The news crew waves to Khan from their own snow-covered illuminator, and Khan waves back.

For the past two days, Khan has been drinking with Tereesz in the cabin. The driver refuses to make stops. Kenni wants to break a record. He has a stopwatch in his hand. And all this time they see all the other traffic going in the opposite direction. Two hundred kilometres from Vaasa, and the traffic jam on the opposite side of the road still creeps along. People from the outskirts travel to cities and visit relatives. From the car radio, they learn that the same panic is happening all over Katla. Arda is the place that everyone goes to, with its magnet train station in Norrköping. Even Jelinkas, near the collapsed Northern Highway, has sold out tickets for the next two months. There’s no way out, might as well just walk across the boreal plateau.

⁴(Finnish orig.) “Kenni.” / “Kenni who?” / “Just Kenni.” / “Heavens, the entropnetic collapse zone! Can’t be, the fir trees are drifting skyward, saa-tan, just like they said, you’ll have to see! And the houses too!”

⁵(Finnish orig.) “It’s going great, it’s going great, I’m not worried at all!”

⁶(Finnish orig.) “What, the road? No, it’s fine, I’m not worried at all.”

⁷(Finnish orig.) “worry at all”

⁸(Finnish orig.) “Don’t worry, alright? I’m half way drunk already, otherwise I’d fall asleep. It helps me focus, man!”

Slowly, the side window turned into a domed landscape with hazy ridges slipping on the horizon, and spruce forests crouching. Late at night, the motor carriage took the highway, but the oncoming traffic didn't thin out; only the road came down from the pillars, in the middle of the fields where the snow thickened, and the fields shone with it. Khan fell into a deep sleep, his head resting against the side window, and in front of them, in the dark, a diamond sea of headlights shone on one side of the road, and on the other side, a cold, empty highway. Only one pair of red taillights sped towards Lemminkäinen. And they were accompanied only by military convoys and foreign news agency vehicles, with radio antenna units on the roofs.

In the morning, he opened his eyes and saw an abandoned village passing by outside the window. Electric wires waved between the poles, and on the empty village street, a country girl rode her bike. She wore a long skirt and a jacket. The country girl looked Khan straight in the eye, with reflectors on the bike wheels shining. They were 1500 kilometres from the Vaasa border, and another 1500 were ahead. Kenni drove slowly, and from the cabin, you could hear the ice breaking under the wheels in puddles. The girl waved and turned onto a side road on the outskirts of the settlement. The darkness of the forest swallowed her up, and the rear light of the bicycle flickered in rhythm with the dynamo. Snow was already falling heavily in the tunnel of trees ahead. So they went - Inayat Khan and Tereesz Machejek, with Kenni, simply Kenni, the toughest guy in the taxi park. For a few hours, the boys sat quietly and watched as Suru passed by in the dim light. The cold stars of streetlights lit up in the distance, and the corrugated iron on the roofs of houses crumbled into eternity. As the evening approached, the snow became thicker. The dark sawteeth of the mountains rose on the horizon, villages became increasingly rare, and Tereesz suggested opening a bottle of flavoured berry wine.

"Otherwise it'll get depressing."

In the darkening mountains ahead, they often saw military airships in the sky. Once, a metal bird whizzed right over the bridge, trying to catch them in its spotlight; the air cushion threatened to turn the car over. But then the bird was gone. Only its lights still glided over the darkness of the forest. This is called an evacuation.

The checkpoint stood abandoned by the roadside, the letters shining "LEMMINKÄINEN" above it. Across the road ran a military barrier made of concrete blocks. Kenni put snow chains on the wheels and drove around the barrier, uprooting half the field. Winter's orbit, always snowy from there on, remained behind with the checkpoint. The asphalt disappeared gradually, and so the families on sledges came towards them, along snowy gravel roads. To see the Pale rising behind them with their own eyes, from childhood, is their great privilege. Horses pulled the sledges, and passing families, with all their possessions, waved to the funny little fat man with dark yellow skin and thick glasses.

"So strange, they're always waving," Khan says, and the Graad Telecom van is far behind, under a snow cloud from Kenni's machine's wheels. No more headlights or sledge lanterns flicker in the dark forest. Only those who want to stay here are left in those farmyards, combine driveways, and closed village stores. In the dark, looms the Pale.

"*Kuuletko sen?*" asks Kenni, "*Harmaa... se on nyt varmasti harmaa! Mua vähän huolestuttaa.*"⁹

Tereesz and Khan are listening. And, indeed, there is a new sound growing beneath the wind, a sickening rumbling, low crackling noise. Like a wave breaking, slowly, slowly... To Khan, it sounds like the beginning of a song. He heard it in a dream.

⁹(Finnish orig.) "Can you hear it?" / "The Pale... it's definitely the Pale now! I'm a bit worried."

"I'm not in CoPo anymore, they let me go," Tereesz exclaims, drunk, his hands in front of his mouth acting as a megaphone.

"What?" Khan can't hear at first, the noise mesmerising. He feels the hairs on his body stand up and chills run down his spine as if he'd just pulled off his sweater in a cold room.

"They let me go from the Collaboration Police!"

"I know!" Khan exclaims, handing Tereesz a flavoured berry wine. "You've been flashing the badge of someone called Somerset Ulrich all the way!"

"How do you know?" The smell of alcohol rises from Tereesz's mouth into the cold air of the cabin.

"Because all the checkpoint guards call you Mr. Ulrich, and Agent Ulrich, and Somerset Ulrich."

"It's a missing agent whose papers I took. I have more." Tereesz takes a sip, his lips reddening and sticky liquid spilling from the neck of the bottle onto his shirt. "Papers, I mean. And missing agents. In Kronstadt I put "Machejek", otherwise, they won't pick up the trail. I thought I'd take Somerset Ulrich to Lemminkäinen and leave the track, come and get me if you can!"

"You're a wanted man, or...?"

"Yeah, yeah, didn't I tell you, huh? Some guy had a heart attack from that stuff!"

"ZA/UM, or...?"

"Yes, that," says Tereesz, and in front of him he sees the rally ace Kenni, a black mass of snow drifting slowly into the sky. The earth crunches and crackles as the spruce trees tear themselves up by their roots. The wood screams, and the soaked ore, like in a dentist's chair. The limestone boulder flies into the air, and far above, in the darkness, the first trees are wrapped in the Pale.

Two years ago.

Khan hears the phone ringing in his sleep. It's a cold and unfamiliar voice, a false awakening. He opens his eyes in his mother's basement and gets up, wearing only his pyjama pants and slippers. He feels that something is different, but goes anyway. The basement around him is strange from sleep, things are in the wrong places. Nadja Harnankur smiles horribly in her locket, Gon-Tzu holds an immortal peach instead of a compass, it's mouldy.

In the middle of the room, an empty glass display case gleams on the table. Khan doesn't dare to look in that direction, there's something he can't remember in its emptiness. Something wrong. The phone rings too - how it sounds through the darkness of the apartment, from the hallway upstairs.

He goes up the stairs, the hallway is asleep around him, and the phone rings on the wall. He stretches his hand, afraid. His palm becomes sweaty on the plastic of the receiver, something forbids him to answer. But he has to, it's important, every thread counts. So he picks up the phone from the cradle, and the hallway fills with static from the Pale. It hurts his ear next to the receiver.

"Hello?" Khan asks.

But no one answers.

“Hello, who is this? Please tell me who you are!” he repeats, and each time the man’s voice becomes more pleading, the static louder. Until it deafens him, the pressure in his inner ear goes awry, leaving only the vibration of unknown origin at its core. Silence passes through flesh and bone like waves. It’s cold.

“Please,” big tears flow from Khan’s eyes. “Tell me who you are...”

“You know who I am.” The vibration emits a child’s voice, saying terrible things. Khan begins to tremble and slumps into the corner of the hallway, the receiver in his hand.

“It’s not you, it’s not you!” he cries. The man’s real body shakes with his mind. He wakes up and cries in his bed. His ear hums and the dream continues in wakefulness, only the airship model is back in the display case, Nadja no longer smiles, and Gon-Tzu holds the compass.

On top of the display case are dried cheese sandwiches from his mother, and cold coffee. And an envelope - a morning magnet mail from Graad. “Sarjan Ambartsumjan” is written in the sender’s box, and inside is a single key, golden and immeasurably complex.

He has two years.

12. ZIGI

Nineteen years ago, in late autumn. It's 8:15 and Khan is running late for school. He hurries through the city centre in Königsalm. The white streaks of traffic glow in the morning darkness, and thick sleet falls heavily. The boy runs with his backpack on, across the pedestrian crossing, the horn blares and a car zooms past. He almost gets hit. Sleet droplets get in his eyes, and melt on his cheeks and woollen hat. Khan runs up the stairs to the front door, when something stops him in his tracks. The school's caretaker is scrubbing a big red letter "O" on the corner of the school façade, together with a cleaning lady. The letter is as big as the cleaning lady. A policeman shakes his head and looks up at the wall where a huge slogan reads: "THE WHOLE WORLD IS IN THE IMMEDIATE ZONE OF AN ENTROPONETIC CATASTROPHE".

Zigi is that kind of boy.

Zigi is the worst boy in school. Zigi is so bad that some would even say Zigi is *too* bad. "He's in tenth grade, but you know what? He came to us from another school, and Sixten knows someone there, and he told us that Zigi came to their school from another school too. Guess what year Zigi was in! Exactly! Tenth grade too. I swear. And you know what else? That school he went to before... he was in tenth grade there too!" Zigi's mother is a cheerful Vaasa woman, she works at the Ministry of Education and gets on well with the Lund girl's mother. That's why the boy is able to go to school in the city centre, even though he's been suspended twice. At home, he's got loads of notebooks full of all kinds of demarcation machines, city maps and trajectories, but Zigi doesn't want you to know that about him.

Zigi's father is a nihilist, a kojko and a drunk. Zigi is very proud of that: "My father? Oh, I don't know. Nihilist... kojko... a drunk... Zigi's real name is Zygismunt Berg. Tereesz once saw him in the boys' toilet, raised his left hand in his fist and said, "Frantiček the Brave!" Zigi said nothing. Zigi pissed. Then Zigi went to the door and stood for a moment. The locks on the leather jacket rattled.

"Hey, dude, listen!"

"Yes?"

"Shove your Frantiček the Brave up your ass."

Zigi is a nihilist and also a communist. If needed.

The word "bourgeois" rolls off his tongue like a butterfly knife: "bourgeois", "bourgeoisie", "bourgeois art", "petty-bourgeois opinion", "you are bourgeois", "your bourgeois parents", "your parents are bourgeoisie", "it's because your parents are bourgeoisie", "it's because you are a bourgeois, Ann (Zigi also calls teachers by their first names),"bourgeoisie larvae", "bourgeoisie puppy", "pederasty is a bourgeois illness, pederasts are bourgeoisie". Zigi has read books and is familiar with the most beautiful names of the bourgeoisie: "pursui", "*bourgeois*", "*petit-bourgeois*", "burgher", "kulak", "middle class", "rentier", "large landowner..."

His influence is huge. A girl in fourth grade with pigtails comes home and asks: "Dad, why is social democracy so weak?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Zigi said that social democracy is weak and communism is powerful. Why don't we have communism, dad?"

But above all, Zigi is a nihilist. He reads dialectical materialism, says that animals are automatons, is a fan of behaviourism, and worships the Pale and Mesque's nihilistic inspiration Ambrosius Saint-Miro. "If you had even a little bit of courage, you would go down to Saint-Miro as well," Zigi talks about his homeland in revolutionary fervour. This is no longer a part of Zigi. Zigi lacks a homeland. His geography teacher sent him to the principal's office, and Zigi stopped at the door, the locks on his leather jacket rattling: "We'll see you in the Pale," he said, and ran his index finger across his throat. Back when the school did not yet discuss entropnetics, many gathered around Zigi during recess, and the hallway echoed with his half-truths: "The Pale is made from the past," he said. "All lost things are mixed up there, sad and abandoned. The Pale is the world's memory of the world. It accumulates at the end of the matter and wipes everything off its path. This is called an entropnetic collapse."

"But when will it happen, Zigi?"

"Yes, Zigi, when?"

"During your lifetime, little Olle. Or at least I hope so. History swallows up the present, the world made of matter disappears, *desaparecido*... That's why there is no point for our generation to going to school, there will be no future. When you grow up, don't have children like your underdeveloped bourgeois parents. You'll end up seeing them die and that's all. Compared to the Pale, there is only a little bit of the world left! Eventually, the isolas will sink, tens and hundreds of square kilometres of land mass, you will understand. Like a ship sinking into the Pale. Vuhhhh..." Zigi makes a sinking ship with his hands, the leather jacket locks rattle and the children gasp. "Don't worry, Olle, it'll be the highlight of all mankind."

Zigi is smoking. In the school toilet, in the cloakroom corner. Zigi has a *sprechgesang* band, and the leader of the hobby group made a big mistake when he let Zigi perform during the winter solstice. Zigi *sprechgesang* like a machine gun. Four hundred bullets a minute...

Hook:

"Smoke cigarettes! In the school toilet, in the corner of the cloakroom,
abraq adabra, in the lobby (*oh yeah!*) in the lunch queue.

1st verse:

It's a nasty morning, it's dark, tired to be,

It's snowing, my spirits are low, and right on the corner of my house (*Mum can't see!*)

A cigarette in front of me, mmm... you get the idea, I'm getting kinda fancy.

A cigarette in front of me, it's warm inside, and everything disappears!

Hook:

Abraq adabra, school toilet, cloakroom corner,
abraq adabra, vanish like the world."

And so on. In January, Zigi was expelled from school. And mind you, it wasn't because of his obscure rhymes. In the tolerant educational environment of Vaasa in the fifties, such *sprechgesang* was seen more as a natural part of the process of coming of age. The

point was that Zigi was a drug dealer. That's why he came to the school in the first place. No one expected such a thing at the time and Zigi was more than aware of it. He acted fearlessly, right in the classroom, talking about his deals openly and loudly, handing out samples, reaping the rewards of Vaasa's naivety like Vidkun Hird or the Linoleum Salesman. He consumed himself too, came to class drugged, he was an anachronist, twenty years ahead of his time. Zygismunt Berg was a black bobbing stain.

Then, when the police finally caught up with him, Zygismunt emigrated to Graad, to his father. He disappeared off the radar. A few years later, his charred corpse was found in the furnace of a particularly depressing apartment block.

13. CHEMICAL MARRIAGE

With a blond strand of hair annoyingly in his eye, eyebrows crinkled from the sun, little Jesper de la Guardie stands in the transport hub of his timeless consciousness. Everything leads here and everything goes out from here. He wears a white sailor suit for the occasion, with a navy blue-striped sailor hat in his hand, nervously bending it. Jesper is thirteen years old, with a bottle opener in his pocket, a monogrammed handkerchief, twenty-four-speed pills, and a lily bouquet on the bench next to him. All previous time flows into this place, the Charlottesjäl horse tram stop, and everything that follows goes out from here. It is July 1st, year '52, and Jesper stands on the edge of a summer evening, under the white arch of the **funk!** waiting pavilion. He is afraid, while the rattling of the wagons is heard as the rollercoaster gradually lifts him to its acceleration ramp since last Sunday. And so it has been all week: the height, the feeling of dizziness laying ahead. And falling, he is indescribably excited. The first tram comes, but there are no girls on it. The boy feels a strange relief, like when he was too short for the Steel Mountains three years ago at the Revachol amusement park. The danger has passed. But still, even the next tram brings passengers to the stop, and there are no girls among them. The feeling turns his stomach upside down – disappointment. What if they don't come? It's half past eight, and they were supposed to be here an hour ago. "You have to be at least this tall to ride the Steel Mountains, little boy." Jesper rises on tiptoe and takes a sip of beer for courage. Beer is a terrible idea, he knows it. Beer makes you smell like hops.

"This is a terrible idea, Tereesz. Beer stinks, chicks hate beer!" But after a week of construction work, a three hundred réal payment to the school's worst boy Zigi to redeem the mystical pills... after buying batteries for the record player, flowers, and God knows what else, Tereesz was right. He said, "We don't have any more resources, Jesper, and we can't go there *dry*... we just can't." So they stood in front of the beer stand, a helpful boatman licked his lips and dreamed of his share. The seller looked at the three mischievous boys from under his brow and the boys watched as the foaming liquid flowed from the cistern into paper cups.

"Like piss," commented Jesper.

Khan took the half-litre bottle into his brown hands and watched as Jesper drummed his fingers against the edge of his sailor's cap. "Shut up and drink, your hands are shaking," Khan said.

"Mm... you've been drinking piss, if I'm not mistaken?" Jesper replied teasingly and sniffed his drink. "We thought we'd keep up the façade of virginity, but here you are, reeking so elegantly of p i s s!"

Khan, with a low tolerance for jokes, chuckled as he drank the foul-smelling beer. Now he nervously paces at the stop, kicking small stones across the road. Every so often, a beachgoer throws a nasty glance at him from across the street as a stone hits their leg. The boy apologises and tries to dry the front of his shirt in the sea breeze, where the beer stain is still drying.

"Does it stink? Jesper, tell me, is it noticeable?"

"It stinks, yeah, it stinks really bad, and it's noticeable too. Look, when's the next tram coming?"

"It's coming at nine, another twenty minutes."

“No, don’t *tell* me, go look!” Jesper frees himself from Khan and empties his cup. The paper cup flies toward the trash can and bounces narrowly past the edge. “Damn it!”

Tereesz, speckled with sunspots like a devil from the construction site, bends his knees and dances in his shoes that are tied at his ankles. He has a portable record player with leather straps on his back. The cream-coloured plastic embossing reads boldly “Mono.” The machine is huge and weighs more than a load of bricks. In his hands, Tereesz bounces heavy batteries.

“So, is it buzzing?” he asks Jesper. “It’s buzzing for me.”

Jesper is buzzing a little, but not much.

“It’s good, the point of courage is not to get hammered. Just the edges need to be sanded down,” Tereesz pontificates. He’s probably the only one who isn’t bothered by an hour-long delay off-track. We, the potato-coloured kojko-rabs who have survived through the genocide and the Yugo-Graad massacre on the buzz of alcohol... As long as we have the smell of hoppy beer or flavoured berry wine at hand, we’re not afraid of anything.

Khan takes the chrysanthemum bouquet from the bench and now they all sit in a row of three, tapping the asphalt and clapping their knees. Uncoordinated, arrhythmic. The sound of creaking rails comes from behind the slope and Tereesz nervously squeezes his bouquet of seven red roses. The sound of hooves gets closer, the horses are already on the slope and the coachman’s silver badge shines on his hat. The buzz seems to disappear as Tereesz nervously picks at the silver paper of his bouquet. He didn’t skimp. Seven red roses, a full hand. If only he had also bought a box of chocolates, such a fancy one, with gold embossed writing like in a Graad novel, if only he hadn’t run out of money. Something flashes from the tram cabin, out of the corner of his eye Tereesz sees Jesper stand up. Let Jesper take care of his lilies and Khan can fumble with his chrysanthemums! Roses, red, seven pieces - that’s chic! *Róże i bomboniera, bardzo wybornie, Tereesz Machejek!*

The tram doors fold open with a sharp metallic sound and the boy doesn’t even notice how the thorns penetrate his clenched hands. The anticipation is vividly remembered, but the event itself is too brutal, the moment is shrouded in a veil of suspense. Something happened, something he did. The girls, all three of them, stepped from the train onto the asphalt, their long legs in knee-high socks, oh my god, what cruelty, they’re dolled up! The hem of their skirts flutters, looking so casually chic as if nothing significant is happening. Charlotte puts her hand on her hip and stops in front of him, but Tereesz, unable to play along, makes a mistake and hugs the girl. His hands around her, a huge rose bouquet hanging from the back of her dress, oh joy, the flowers are covered in golden dust, can it be any more *wybornie*? He smells a strange scent from the girl’s neck. They look at each other - Tereesz and the goddess from the ninth grade - and Tereesz, with a brown and red face, a silly smile on his face, says: “Hi!”

“Well, hi to you too!” Charlotte replies with a boyish charm. As if nothing has happened. The girl takes the flowers and they walk together under the pines where the evening sun doesn’t reach. It’s dim and quiet and no one knows what to say.

Outside, in the yard of the Self-chiller’s country house, Kenni turns the motor carriage around into a ready-to-start position. The machine’s heavy gas bursts merge with the distant noise of the forest massif, on the edge of the Pale. The Pale can also be felt from behind the stone-lined walls of the large house. The machine’s lights cut through

the dusty window and into the cracked stone floor of the old manor house's foyer. The finger-drawn smiley face in the dust on the window sparkles.

No one came to the door when they knocked. The lock was invitingly open, and flashlights hung on nails in the foyer. Former Collaboration Police agent Tereesz Machejek and cellar-dwelling Inayat Khan now walk flashlights in hand, through the labyrinth of dark rooms. Garden tool racks, disassembled garden carts, and piles of old furniture pass by in the beams of their flashlights. Khan stumbles among stacks of roof tiles, while tall Tereesz walks ahead of him, practically stooped under the low ceiling. Another uninhabited room. A large, dark kitchen can be seen through a side door, smelling of chalk and mould. Piles of bottles and something that looks like half a bar of smoked sausage flicker there. Khan calls out the owner's name fruitlessly from time to time.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" asks Tereesz.

Khan is sure, and Tereesz feels like he hears distant, muffled chaos amid a catastrophe. The ringing approaches, and phases in and out like an illusion. But it doesn't come from outside, where the roots of trees rustle in the ground and electrical wires sizzle in the sky. It comes from inside the electricity-free house. Tereesz sits on a pile of old papers and observes the room around him in a beam of dust-filled light. He's still a little tipsy from the berry wine, but the darkness sobers him up. Doors surrounded by various debris lead in all four directions. He thinks he can hear the low hum of a generator in the distance, in the heart of the house, and he sets his sights on it. Struggling with a jammed door, he steps into a large, low-ceilinged hall.

Tereesz turns off his flashlight and steps carefully over the bent floorboards. It's cool inside. The smell of gasoline cuts through the mould. Black cable bundles twist like snakes under his shoes and continue into the dim corner of the hall, where green and yellow lights flicker rhythmically. The hall is barely illuminated by candles hanging from wagon wheels, casting yellowish rays on the floor, while darkness creeps in through the window panes. Tereesz stands in a ray of light and feels the sound waves of the clockwork around him, cold and unfamiliar. On the plastered walls, there is equipment piled up on decks. Khan stops by the door and runs his fingers over the embossed letters "Mono."

"Tereesz," he whispers, "'Mono'! And this one says 'Hertz.'" The high-frequency oscillations barely quiver under his fingers. "This is..."

"...a discotheque," nods Tereesz. "This is a discotheque."

Three-quarters of a century ago, the Ozonne islands were blanketed by a pitch-dark night. Everything is grey, dark grey, and under a cloudy sky, black waves lap against the sandy shore. The palm fronds sway over the heads of revolutionary lovers. The coups have failed, and everything has gone wrong. Dobreva opens her darkly made-up anarchist eyes. A dried-up line of poison bulges from the corner of her mouth. Abadanaizi crunches ampoule shards between his teeth as he strokes her hair. "Listen!" he says, and in the pitch-darkness above the water, the hypnotic rhythm of bells crackles. Slowly, the colour begins to seep into the black-and-white world.

"Dance!" shouts Dobreva like a little girl. She stands up and walks away. Abadanaiz follows her into the waves, the water splashing around their ankles.

"Do you hear it?" Tereesz asks Khan.

"Like a buzzing, right?"

"Exactly." Tereesz takes a candle from the end of a nail and points it towards the dim

distance of the room. They move discreetly across the floorboards to the back of the hall. Gradually, rows of sliders emerge from the darkness on the mixing console, monolithic speakers towering on either side of the desk and behind it, a young man with a trendy sweatshirt sits with headphones. The headband of the headphones crushes his curly hair against his head. Ulv nods his chin to the rhythm of the music, but his eyes are closed as if under high tension.

“Mr. Ulv,” Khan whispers. “I’m sorry, but...”

“*Shh...*” the young man puts a finger on his lips. His eyes still tightly closed, he furrows his brow so intensely that it seems like an explosion is about to burst behind his eyelids.

“*Please... don’t ruin... my intro,*” he pronounces like a vast river as if an incomprehensible cubic meter of superhuman partying presses against the dam of Self-chiller’s teeth. He points his finger at the mixing console where dozens and dozens of sliders slowly move up.

“*This is the most important... part.*”

Khan carefully places the envelope on the studio monitor, where Self-chiller points with his trembling hand. Like a bomb disposal expert, Tereesz takes a step back. He manages to read the names of the girls on the envelope. Still a well-trained agent, he doesn’t fail to notice that there are two – another envelope is hidden underneath the girls’ envelope. Tereesz can’t see what’s written on it. He keeps quiet, and as the man and Khan tiptoe through the house and the ringing of the bells around them swells louder than the entropic catastrophe outside, it seems to him that these two are somehow harmonising. They go through minefields of moving boxes. The sound rises behind them like a shock wave, a slow-motion gunshot, where everything is like it was eighty years ago. Kras Mazov rises from his desk, and the world is in black and white. Smoke from gunpowder rises from his mouth, and outside, in the courtyard of the parliament building, the sea of counter-revolutionaries roars. But Kras Mazov no longer hears the treacherous voice of this world; the *intro* is ringing in the mirrors of his office.

“Well, what was there at the design conference anyway? Åre Åkerlund talked about how he wouldn’t mind a war. Do you remember Åre? I made a mistake once and let him sit on the sofa with me for a design magazine cover. Now everyone thinks he did something there. Including Åre himself. He thinks war is more like a happening, a media experiment nowadays. And no, I can’t exclude that it could have happened. He *might* have used the word ‘paradigm shift’ for it.” Jesper circles the room on the top floor of Havsänglar and practices to himself: “After he left the office, you know... he’s completely gone off the rails. He writes record reviews for Dagens. And he’s deaf from nose candy! It can happen, his nasal septum has collapsed twice, you should see him! He looks just terrible. Like a pig. How does he still write record reviews when he’s deaf? He doesn’t write them, he just paraphrases foreign ones. He lowers the grade for *rock* by one star and gives ‘disco’, as you, Khan, would say, two on top.”

Jesper stops in front of the bed and nods approvingly at the beige cube table. “So, what happened in Lemminkäinen, you ask? Ah, nothing special, we just went with the boys, surreal stuff, it wasn’t bad, I quite liked it. Snow, spruces, apocalypse. What, dear? Why did we even go there? Well, look, there’s a specialist living there. His name is Ulv and he knows how to party alone. Few are born like that. Most people party with other people. Otherwise, it’s not interesting for them. But not Ulv. Ulv is the Self-chiller. Or so they say. The evening comes, you bring a little drink, put on a record, dance, and chat with yourself. Like I am now. Only louder. In the morning, when normal people go to work,

you're still *self-chilling*." Jesper opens the frilly curtains in front of the balcony window and outside is a dim, cloudy sky. The balcony seems damp from the rain.

"And what? Ah yes... You know, as usual. He talks to the dead. That's right, a talker to the dead. They come when he plays them Van Eyck and old Rietveld. That's why he's alone like this. No, dear, he doesn't tolerate Fakkengaff." Jesper steps onto the balcony and stands on the reed mat. "He communicates with the Pale, you know. Whatever that means. You understand how it could captivate us. That thought. Yes, because of those girls. That's right, ha-ha-ha!" Derek Trentmüller looked at them from here that day. Strange. He couldn't say that it was *eerie* here. Completely normal hotel room. A little less sea painting wouldn't hurt, the snobby decorations in the hallway are disgusting, and the wallpaper is, well, still just wallpaper. Otherwise, everything is top-notch, '50s elegance. Jesper looks down from the balcony. Charlottesjäl's soul soaks in the rain there, the autumn wave washes it to the beach. The balcony is high up in the sky, on the twelfth floor. Jesper stands there alone. He spreads his arms. "Don't be naive, of course not *really*. But the show was decent. The show is the most important thing in this field - psychics. Take them as entertainers. That's it. Where are we going for dinner? No, I don't *really* want to talk about it anymore."

Before leaving, Jesper stands for a moment in the middle of room number 1212 at Havsänglar. The moss-green cover of the sofa and the frilled curtains seem apricot cream in the soft light of the floor lamp. No, he doesn't have anything against it. Outside, the world is uniformly grey and the room's feminine chic sleeps in the centre. A true petit-bourgeois dream. Jesper spreads his arms as if waiting for something to happen. He also takes a few provocative steps and then stands with his arms hanging at his sides. The radio's number pad gleams on the bedside table, the clock ticks, and the curtains before the unopened balcony door billow like a sail.

"Please," says Jesper, looking at the room, its clean walls and high ceiling. But nothing happens. Before the interior designer goes down to the beach, he curses in disappointment to the room, "Bitch."

Jesper walks along the damp sand, with defiant steps. The reeds rustle in the cold of late autumn. The boys' rocky outcrop, now much smaller, is blue in the midst of water droplets in the background. A slender white surfboard cuts into the autumn sky like a sabre. Jesper lifts his prized surfboard above his head. He casts condescending glances at the windsurfers on the water. One can soak naked here for two hours, then climb onto the same faded wave with ten other shaky guys. No, Jesper goes to his place. He already feels, in the depth of his chest, how the waves there swell, waiting for him.

The skirt flutters and shines in the dimness of the pine forest, around the thin sun-tanned legs of the fourteen-year-old girl. The boys walk, led by the flag of Charlotte's skirt. How long has it been going on like this? On this side of the pine forest, where the mint disappears into the dark green of the blueberries, they have never been before. Familiar places were left behind long ago, suspension bridges and the road that led up to the rocky outcrop. Everything passes in the dimness of silence, with the occasional sound of broken conversation. Shadows grow on the dunes, and on the distant horizon, the curtains of trees are slowly pulled apart.

The opening field undulates in the salty sea wind. The blood-orange sun comes out low over it. The hair-like grass rustles as Charlotte's stockings-covered legs spread out towards the sea. Six long shadows slide over the field, and the girls run relieved, and the boys run after them. Is this still Charlottesjäl, this field, where the reeds rise on

the edges, swaying in the wind? Where the brownish-beige spread of hay turns into a fine white strip of sand, Målin stops and takes off her shoes. She breathes heavily from the sea expanse, with her chest pinched in her dress, next to Khan. On the horizon, the light blue mirror of the sea reflects another sun, scattered like an explosion. The ink blotches of the cloud ridges, black against the light, tear apart above the water. They stand there among the reeds, all of them, hands over their eyes, and the giant reeds bend respectfully on both sides.

Anni, wearing shorts, plops down on the sand and gloomy Tereesz puts his portable record player down beside her, on the reed grass. The boy pulls out the antenna and turns on the shortwave radio to a popular youth station. Guitar pop music comes out of the speakers, utterly contrary to Tereesz's mood. The girl didn't hug him back. How stiff she felt, Charlotte, how straight and tense in her sandals. He doesn't even dare to look at her now, feeling that something has been broken in the meantime. Such a thing brings to mind the massacre of Yugo-Graad. When the buzz is gone, you find out that our true heavy nature comes out. After all, we are just ordinary people with potato-coloured hair and eyes of random colours. But Målin, the Nordic cheerfulness, lets out a happy snap of her fingers and asks Khan, "Did you get it?"

"We got it!" Jesper jumps in. He looks at the girls as their faces light up when he pulls out a paper bag from the bottom of his pocket. Målin spreads the beach towel on the sand and Anni brings out six shimmering water bottles from the bag. The bottles stand in a row in the sand and Charlotte explains how this will lead to an immense thirst. How they will have to bring water back from the beach later. But that's okay, it will be quite an adventure for this daring couple who dares to go. The boys tremble with excitement at the word. A couple!

Only Tereesz was distracted. Tereesz was still thinking of the genocide.

Six of them in a circle, girls opposite the boys, sit on a beach towel and Charlotte pours pills from a paper bag into her hand. The bag rattles. Noses shift closer and everyone watches as twenty-four crimson diamonds sparkle there. The girl throws gems from one hand to the other, the tiny little wheels jump happily. One bounces off, the girl says "Oops!" and Målin picks it up from the sand like a trinket. She blows on it, painstakingly, gives her older sister a reproachful look, and then runs her finger over the surface of the pill like a ruby polisher. Khan sees how the girl's lips glow. They are the colour of cherry-speed.

"Listen, be a good guy, tell me what it is," Tereesz finally bursts out, in the evening twilight, at the playground where dealer Zigi's leather jacket locks rattle. It's yesterday evening and the boy with greasy black hair is walking on the swing. He places his hands on the swing's board on either side to balance himself, with his legs in front of each other in his jeans. And he begins: "You know how they say that drugs - they're a waste of health?" The other end of the swing snaps against the ground as the boy goes over the centre. "Escaping from *reality*, you know, pointless bullshit?" The question is rhetorical. Let Zigi answer himself: "They're right. Cocaine makes you a scumbag, heroin an idiot... Stay away from that crap, it dulls the mind and honestly, it's dangerous for a developing organism. It's not worth it." Zigi jumps off the swing, sand flying from under his sneakers. " But this, this specific drug! They make these generalisations just because they haven't yet..." he pulls a paper bag out of his back pocket and rattles it under Tereesz's nose, "...tried Samara amph! You can't even imagine how lucky you are right now! What a waste! I don't understand why I even sell this. Why don't I just do it all myself?" Zigi's black eyes shine in the dim light. "It's so new that it doesn't even

have a name yet! Girls call it cherry speed, boys call it 'Samara amph'. It comes from the Samara Republic, that's why. All good things in this world come from the Samara Republic. They bring it in through the Pale. The world's first street drug invented by communists! Entroponauts do it there, in the Pale to be fearless! But for partying? That's a very pioneering mindset, very progressive. 'Flying Communist!' That's what they call it in Graad. But me, personally, I say... You want to know what I call it?" Shadows fall from Zigi's cheekbones, and his black brows and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes form a cunning expression.

"Well?" asks Tereesz.

"*Chemical marriage,*" says Zigi. "I call it: chemical marriage."

Little Inayat Khan is sitting opposite Målin with his legs crossed and watches as the girl pops pills into her mouth without any warning, like candy. The twist-off cap snaps and Målin wipes her lips clean of water.

"So," she asks cheerfully, "what are we waiting for? Let's take them now. It'll be a good forty-five minutes before they start working anyway. Waiting is boring."

"You took two?!" Charlotte is alarmed. "Idiot!"

"So what?" mutters Tereesz, and Khan feels a sense of fear next to his friend, the freckled absurdist philosopher. Still thinking about the Yugo-Graad massacre, Tereesz crunches his pills. He doesn't drink water with them, the saccharin-sweetened, bittersweet chemical fizzing in his mouth, but Tereesz doesn't care. "I took two too. 'The Flying Communist'," he says, swallowing and stretching his arms out like aeroplane wings.

"Okay, stop!" Charlotte exclaims, and Anni adds, "Two is too much. Start with half. What are we going to do with you now? Should we call an ambulance?"

"No need," grins Målin. "Last time I took it all at once, and it was really good. I think it'll be twice as good now. What do you think, Tereesz?"

"I know of bank robberies for which less preparation has been done than for tonight," Khan suddenly bursts out, surprising even himself. "Look, gas lamps in case it gets dark," he pulls three lamps out of Tereesz's backpack, whose things he now confiscates, angrily. "And extra water!" A water-filled bladder hisses as it lands in the sand. "Because Zigi said that under that - honestly, I still don't understand what its name is - all tastes become disgusting under that *thing*. And everything's already... I don't know, strange."

"Exactly," Charlotte raises a lone raspberry-coloured pill between her fingers. She looks at Khan, whose emerging leadership qualities are confusing, and declares expectantly, "Skål?"

"Skål," replies Khan, and Jesper watches as his nerdy bench mate and Charlotte grab water bottles together. Only Anni is still rolling the pill in her hands. "Well?" The girl looks at Jesper with her hands under her chin. "Skål?" Jesper throws a careless glance over her: summer pants with rounded cuts on the buttocks, bent knees, and flip-flops hanging loosely on her feet. The girl chuckles, not swallowing immediately, letting the pill melt on her sharp tongue.

"It's sweet, disgustingly sweet, and I like it. I think I like it because I know what it does to me. You would like it too if you knew." The girl looks at Jesper and Jesper looks over her legs. A sun-cooled explosion over the water. A sudden gust of wind makes the reeds whisper around them, and everyone falls silent and listens. The boy puts the

little wheel in his mouth and feels the saccharin sparkle on his tongue. He hesitates for a moment and then swallows. A wave of fear rises again after swallowing, and the acidic environment reacts, unwittingly breaking down the raspberry-red brilliance in his abdomen. Colourants and dyes fizz. Waves wash up on the beach in front of his eyes, quietly like in a dream, seagulls screeching; in this dimming world, the boy with the white sailor hat is now just a traveller, at the mercy of semi-synthetics. Jesper himself surrendered, the last of all six, but voluntarily. Like everyone else. He doesn't know it yet, but even now, he carries microscopic flakes of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen in his undeveloped metabolism; the naturally non-existent combination of elementary particles settles inside him. Nothing here depends on him anymore, everything depends on them. They have their plan, and there are forty-five minutes left for it to work. They synchronise with him, form new patterns of behaviour, and take over like quiet weapons in a secret war.

But something in this psychopharmacology doesn't reach the snowstorm that ravages Målin Lund's thirteen-year-old body. Khan looks on, his head bowed, as the girl stands up in front of him and unties her ash-blonde braid. Her hair flutters in the wind. Like a pregnant woman, she places her hands on her belly. Her metabolism is working overtime beneath the white-speckled dress fabric. She already feels the morning sickness turning her digestive delicacy, phenethylamines rushing against the petal-veined pink skin. The final synthesis of amphetamine, the *non plus ultra!* Her body wants to rid itself of the intruder, but she is so brave, she holds it all inside. She is clever, she hasn't eaten all day, and she is also beautiful, very beautiful.

On the glossy cover of the girls' magazine, like on an abacus, twelve gems stand in a row. There were originally twenty-four. Charlotte took one, Anni took one, Jesper took one, and Khan took one more. Tereesz took two. Let's count. Meanwhile, as the wind tousles Målin's hair and she feels how it already floods her blood-brain barrier - her silent secret. A serotonin apocalypse whirlwind is rising. Well, what can she say, Målin Lund has a cute face, and soft curves, she only has the best grades on her eighth-grade diploma, and she really likes it when it feels good.

Six of them, sitting in a row with their hands on their knees, silent. Expectation, the edge of the horizon is a hazy gold, the sun sinks into the body of water, and above it in the sky dome is a dirty blue-green stripe. Målin measures the remaining time with her thumb like an hourglass. Behind the thumb, the sun sinks, and the sky dome above the child's head is darkening to a deeper blue with each passing moment. Stars light up there, one after another, and in silence, you can hear the sand on the water's edge sizzling under the receding wave like lemonade.

Jesper is standing on a beach where there is no one else. Twenty years stretch out behind him, and waves tower in front of him in the ocean. To his right hand in the sand, there is a white sword-like surfboard, and the other hand rests expectantly on his hip. Jesper wears a rubber black wetsuit, as always. He wears a full-body glove. His bright blue eyes look through the eye holes of the mask like a bank robber, and his mouth turns red from the cold in the middle of the mouth hole. The empty beach greets Jesper every year. The coastline has changed a lot, the sandbanks have crept over time like living sand, but the basic plan always remains the same. Jesper steps slowly into the ocean from between the reeds. The North Sea's ten-degree water sticks tightly to his wetsuit, step by step, becoming deeper and deeper. Even through the neoprene cold-resistant skin of the suit, body heat is lost to the water. It happens gradually, imperceptibly. Hypothermia starts after three-quarters of an hour.

The waves beat at his waist, and the waves swell in front of him, in the dark grey twilight. Jesper crawls onto the board and starts rowing. The water splashes against the board, and the waves break around him as he rises into them. The further he goes, the higher they rise, until the man can no longer row through the wave crests. Before he lifts the sail, Jesper presses the sharp nose of the board underwater and dives. Hypothermic icy water explodes against him, swirling around in underwater eddies. It burns in his eyes like molten metal. Jesper's coal-black silhouette slides towards the bottomless sea grave and pushes the bright white line of the surfboard into the darkness.

"What comes next? What does it feel like?" Tereesz finally asks, and then when Charlotte and Anni convey to the boys the heightened physical sensations and the ecstasy that is difficult to put into words, it all shifts above them like a high-pressure system in the darkening dome of the sky. Khan is overcome with a strange indifference to the situation. He blinks his eyes behind his dialectical materialist glasses, breathes calmly, and feels himself, his overweight body around him, the layer of fat and his heart beating with excitement, as if all of it is no longer a part of him. Målin apologetically moves next to Khan, and they separate from the group.

In Khan's peaceful world on the horizon, it's good to be calm. It seems like Iilmaraa's tricolour - the colour combination that comes to the girl's mind in connection with Khan - appears frozen into the evening sky. Målin says this to the boy and at the same time warns that there is still a lot of frankness to come today. Then, when *it* comes.

"Very good," nods Khan and moves ever closer to his new self, the one he has become with the help of the industrial empathogen. For the upcoming night and for the rest of his life. If he needs to, he will return to this place where everything is fine. Everything is under control. "And by the way, that's where it comes from, the colours of the evening sky. Turquoise, violet, and orange. They are so bright on the flag because Iilmaraa doesn't have the right pigments. They don't occur naturally there. That's their misfortune, that and the incredibly bleaching sun. That's why it seems like they have bad taste. Actually, it's because of the pigments and the sun. They would like to do calmer things, but they can't."

Målin nods. "You know, sometimes I just don't have anything to add. Especially about something like this. I don't know anything about colour pigments, but I like what you're saying. So don't mind me, okay?"

"No, you don't have to apologise. I know it's interesting - the situation with Iilmaraa's colour pigments, antique airships' ability to go through the Pale, even that bullshit I told you about when I walked you home - no one needs to tell me that," Khan says. They both laugh quietly as if hiding their joke from others. Khan falls silent and raises his chin towards the ocean again. "And what about you, what would you say about it? That feeling? When it comes."

"I don't know why, but I'm feeling a colour right now," Målin explains, and Khan nods calmly. "I would say it's black. Very dark. Very good darkness." Khan nods again. He's starting to enjoy this new way that Målin is opening up to him. He wishes the whole world would talk to him like this. About everything. And Khan would nod quietly in response, expressing his modest support. Inayat Khan's support. This is no joke. He feels his palms sweating, his hands going numb. Målin tells him that it's supposed to be like this. It's all completely normal. It means that it's coming soon. It's about to start.

Khan suddenly looks at the creature in front of him with burning care, and the creature looks back at Khan. He wants the best for her. The girl trembles slightly, grits

her teeth, and clutches her sweaty beach towel in her hands. Beautiful thoughts flash behind Målin Lund's dark green eyes, and her serotonergic neurons are reassembled in the intricate network of synapses. This law, this terrible thing called mood swings, original sin, and serotonin reuptake, is suppressed. This chemical cycle that torments Målin Lund with its meagre candy rations day in and day out – from school mornings to evenings when homework is done – now stops functioning. And not only that, but the neurons pump unnatural amounts of leftover pleasure into her. The girl is infused with the ink-black, overripe clusters of delightful juice, pure liquid ecstasy. '50s guitar pop plays from a portable record player in the background. Transport proteins keep pumping more pleasure, so much that neither body nor mind can react yet.

"I'm scared," Målin suddenly says. "It's different from last time. I hear you now, but everything else is just spinning. I don't know what... I don't know what I feel." The girl's breathing visibly quickens. She turns her back to her older sister and says quietly over her shoulder, "It's so hot, Lotte, please take my dress off over my head."

"What, already?!" Charlotte quickly looks at her watch and unzips Målin's dress. "There should still be fifteen minutes left. Of course, that time can be shorter, too."

Målin's voice is weak, like a broken string: "My head is spinning, I can't see anything..." The girl raises her hands up in the air.

"It's okay," Khan says calmly, not losing his nerve. The more complicated the situation becomes, the calmer Khan gets. He blinks his eyes quietly and breathes in and out. The coolness of the sea, the rippling ocean, stretches out before him, always so vast and indifferent. "If your head is spinning, then close your eyes," Khan says, and at least for now, he thinks it would be gentlemanly not to look in that direction. The crinkly white wrapping paper of the dress rustles in the air, and Charlotte lifts it over Målin's head.

The girl gasps for air: "Oh my God, I'm scared... Oh God..." She collapses into her sister's lap, her red lips moving in the dark: "It's coming..." Khan can't keep himself from looking any longer. Målin's hair is spread out on Charlotte's dress, her body in her swimsuit glows hot in her sister's arms, and her eyes are dilated to a mydriatic degree – enormous black discs, pupils without even a hint of green. The five of them sit in a circle around her, and Målin looks at Khan.

"How can you be so calm?" she asks.

Khan looks away from the girl's body movements, from her joints that twitch feverishly in front of his eyes. He looks at the cold North Sea where the sun has sunk. The dark shapes of the clouds are breaking apart. "I don't know," says Inayat Khan, taking off his wet glasses and habitually wiping them with a handkerchief. "I think it's working. I've been abnormally calm for a while now."

Charlotte strokes Målin's head. "Maybe so. My first time was quiet too. Are your palms sweaty?"

"Charlotte, my palms are always sweaty. But yes, I think they're sweaty now too."

Målin snuggles into her sister's dress like cool sheets. She rubs herself in, in a crib, in a kindergarten bed, the dress fabric rustling around her, smelling so pleasant and airy... Her body is only thirteen years old, but in the dim light of her central nervous system, oxytocin rivers are already flowing like postpartum bliss. Support and trust flow from her nascent breasts, the hormone of orgasm rises like yeast in warm adipose tissue, and the girl blushes in the waves of tenderness. She loves everyone. Anni watches her sister's euphoria with envy: "Ugh, you already have it so good!"

"Oh my god, it's so good," Målin sighs. "You can't even imagine how good it is. Say something beautiful, it's rustling so loudly. I'm afraid it will become really sad otherwise." "That could happen," Charlotte nods her magnificent head and presses her palm against Målin's chest but then recoils in shock like touching a hot stove. "Oh my god, your heart is beating so fast! Can you hear it? It's like hoofbeats!" Anni buries her ear on her sister's chest, listening to her heartbeat. "Målin, how many did you take, tell the truth!"

"Two pieces," Målin lies. She didn't take two, she took *six*. She strokes Anni's smooth hair with one hand and finds Khan's hand in the air with the other. She presses it to her chest, a need for closeness, and breathes: "Everything is fine, believe me, everything is exactly as it should be. Oh my god, it's so good..." She shakes her head slowly, cautiously, as if retreating from the waves of hot and cold; enraged, it flutters before her, horses' mouths foaming. The substance rages, ravages. "...I've never felt this good in my life. Everything is so soft, you try too..." The girl presses the boy's hand firmly against her ribs, and the circle closes in on Målin. Khan sits up straight above it all, lifting his plump chin towards the girl, proudly, indescribable peace reigning in his heart. It had already seeped into him before, but the feeling grows bigger and more confident with each passing moment. The dark-skinned boy looks at her from under lowered brows, his dialectical materialism glasses magnifying the blackening wheels of his eyes. He is a Serbian lion, a true khan of nations.

"Målin, listen, I think it hit me too. That magic." He squints his eyes.

"I infected you!" the girl exclaims and smiles lovingly at her firstborn. Khan exhales and feels how his breath is terribly warm against the girl, like a sword, and the world around them hums with dark joy. The atmosphere vibrates, everything is under a noise filter, and a swarm of grasshoppers chirps, rubbing their legs against the threads from which everything is made. This throbbing heart attack runs through everything, even the soil beneath Khan's hand, and in the warm darkness of Målin Lund's body, an emergency alarm sounds.

A crazy Suru rally driver is hitting the tire of his car in front of the house. It gets worse and worse, high frequencies swarm in his ears. Stop for a moment, let Kenni think why the third gear won't go in. It's worrying, really. He looks at the old crooked door of the wooden manor and the world stops there, suspended in snowflakes, for one clear moment. The gable of the house rises against the dark blue sky, everything is calm and quiet. A return to earth. Kenni's silver breath rises from his mouth into the winter silence.

Seventy years ago, Nadja Harnankur stepped off the bridge into the void, her proud ball gown turning inside out, the fabric flapping as she fell. She drops headfirst, straight as an arrow, and through the hovering white gauze of her petticoat, the operetta star bids farewell to the world. The Veera River flows beneath her fall, a mercury stream, frothy. And from far away, the sound of sleigh bells rings out, like a childhood memory.

Inayat Khan exits the farmhouse door with Tereesz Machejek. The tall ex-agent looks around in surprise in silence. It's so beautiful to watch the snow floating in the candlelight of the forgotten carriage room. And Kenni waves to them from beside the car, the other hand on his heart as if in relief.

They take two steps forward, and Tereesz still hears the crunch of snow under his shoe, when suddenly low frequencies explode. Kenni sees the two men turn abruptly towards

the manor house. A deafening beat resounds, and the windowpanes rattle with its bass rhythm.

Little Tereesz is dancing, self-indulgently like a shaman of a tribe. He shakes his fingers in the air, which are numb and pleasant, and the world whispers around him. A gust of wind makes the reeds rustle, cooling his sweaty forehead and bare upper body. The world's kindness is inexhaustible, the Yugo-Graad massacre has never happened there, Frantiček the Brave is coming and the SRV revolutionary army is behind him, waving white flags. Tereesz could ask for anything from that world, but he dare not even look at what moves directly in front of him. It is no longer part of this world. Only the bass drum's low sound from "Mono" echoes in his black mirrored hearing. They are six of them, hidden among the reeds. It seemed like such a good idea to all of them. "Let's go, let's go there, let's make a nest!" they exclaimed together.

Khan lights gas lamps in the dark. The gas has a nasty, slug-like smell. A spark from a match and the lamp ignites with a roar, blue flames dancing under the glass, casting delicate shadows around the children in the reed field. Khan looks at his handiwork and he likes it. He likes how the shadows flicker on Målin's cheeks. He's not afraid to tell her and the girl is grateful for it. Tucked into Charlotte's dress, wearing white swimwear, Målin Lund is saturated and overripe. Mentally, she can no longer reinterpret the flood of substances as well-being, but her tissues are still shredding. The substance is now beating the girl, brutally, and jealously. And nothing in this feverish night indicates that it will subside. It hits her again, Målin presses her hands to her sides, and her breathing stops for a second. The pleasure of the dress fabric grinds on her lymph nodes, her armpits smooth, her rosy nipples protruding against the spandex, but her nerve endings have long been numb; too numb to notice. The sensory units are scorched, and the physical apparatus can no longer receive pleasure. The bottle of water slips from the girl's hand onto the beach, no one notices, everyone just keeps chatting around her. A warm reddish glow sticks to Målin's inner thighs, she writhes, her pupils glowing at the same frequency - in burnout mode. And around her, bouquets of lilies, chrysanthemums, and red roses wilt in the sand.

The child shakes, and the body collapses under the strain. "Please comfort me, it's too good to be..." she mumbles, "It's too sad to be."

The operetta star opens her eyeballs' whites wide; and remorse, suffocating remorse of glands! What have I done, me, foolish, foolish woman! Ice-cold water gurgles in Nadja's lifeless lung tissues. All that Nadja has done remains in history as a shell, lifeless and distorted. She is a mannequin there, a delusion, almost nobody remembers who Nadja really was. They haven't even heard of her breakthrough in "The Officer's Wife", her scandalous hit "The Sailor's Mistress" is at best a historical curiosity. A ridiculous exaggeration of her time. She is forgotten, out of date, what use is a beautiful dress to her, there's nowhere to go! But above the shimmering surface of the water, chandeliers are still being lit. Everything is still ahead, piccolos, her favourite instruments, and lively fanfare, with their grandiose sound! Thunderous timpani roll, the sound of water rushing in Nadja's ears like a frenzy, life, ovations, burning, burning tributes. She resurfaces, and people, young and beautiful, are once again there with her. A real party is going on, it seems to Nadja. The world will probably end soon.

"No," says Frantiček the Brave, "there are still eight years left."

What a pleasant young man, what cheekbones, like a steppe eagle! "Eight years? But

then everything is still possible!”

“Yes, everything is possible for this world,” says Frantiček the Brave.

Anni, the younger sister, carefully gives Målin bottled water to drink like a nurse, and Khan pulls back the reeds like curtains. He starts talking. Against the backdrop of the dark, the lapping body of water, two silhouettes sway. They dance. One wildly, the other in the same rhythm, but three times slower. Anni wraps her burning sister in a cocoon of dress fabric. Charlotte herself hatched out of there a long time ago. It was forty minutes ago when she had the second one.

She comes out of the darkness to Tereesz and he opens his eyes to her voice. The half-naked girl puts the water bottle to the boy’s mouth and says, “Tereesz, hey! You need to drink, otherwise you’ll get heatstroke. You too,” she calls out behind her, “don’t forget to drink water!” The boy takes the bottle and gulps it down, his thirst unquenchable. Thus, with the cool water, his desire finally subsides. Blissful chemical peace crushes the boy under its weight. Thumbs the same colour as the waistband of her golden shorts, absentmindedly, Charlotte Lund moves her newly hatched body in front of him. Head slightly tilted back and eyes closed, the girl nods along to the bouncing rhythm of the bass drum. She smiles briefly, it’s ringing. Charlotte laughs at her own jokes. This breaks Tereesz down; this and the half he secretly took. He hears the tremor of laughter kicking in there, in the mystery of someone else’s cerebral cortex. How would it be to *laugh* that laugh? It’s not about anything, it’s not even made up of words anymore, it’s long gone, lost to Tereesz.

Machejek, in school uniform, came down the stairs. How was he supposed to know that only complete outcasts wear school uniforms in Vaasa? The guys who scrub the walls. He’d only just got here. The eldest Lund went down the stairs, her shoes clicking on the stepping stones and the girl’s tenth-grade friend, Handsome Alexander’s mouth kept going on beside her. Tereesz went after them to the dinner queue like a shadow. Charlotte Lund never goes to the school canteen, she doesn’t eat, and she doesn’t even have a metabolism in this world. But Handsome Alexander charmed her. Tereesz Machejek from the eighth stood behind Charlotte and poured himself some mors. The girl turned around and reached for the mors ladle. Tereesz handed her the ladle. And so it happened.

“You’re Charlotte Lund,” Tereesz muttered the girl’s semi-mythical name.

“And *you* are?”

“Tereesz Machejek,” said Tereesz Machejek. And that was that.

Charlotte’s auburn hair strokes her shoulders as the girl shakes her head to the rhythm of the music. She raises her hands above her head, fingertips touching in the air, and beneath her collarbones are small, bare breasts taut and tanning lines white. She laughs: “Got it, Tereesz Machejek!” and then shakes her head happily from side to side. “I got it. Just. Got it!” There in the sand where Tereesz Machejek kneels, the girl peels off one dark blue sock with her foot. And when the girl crouches in front of him, Tereesz Machejek says, “I got it too.” Warm and cold waves crash above them. Between two pale thighs, the gold of her panty sparkles, which Tereesz looks at. Selflessly, with the innocence of a child. Just, you know... it’s nice to look at. They collapse on top of each other like houses made of matches, free of desires. Just for the sake of playfulness.

Khan, Tereesz and the crazy Suru rally driver are looking out, with their heads up, as the Pale approaches from behind the house. Inside, the bass drum thumps heavily, and outside, behind the silhouette of the building, a blackish grove of alders rolls up to the sky across the entire visible horizon. Like a wave, the Pale rises vertically from the spruce forests and mountain ranges above the world's expanse. Its horror slowly shifts, thundering over the world, but the world is made of matter, and matter is evergreen, ancient; it must maintain its eerie dignity even at the moment of disappearance, smiling grandly, fondly, as Frantiček the Brave once smiled behind the dumpster. The peaks of the mountains darken silently, clearings expand, and their frosted spruce fields sparkle under the stars.

"I'm not K. Voronikin or anything, but..." Tereesz puffs in the cabin of the car. He rummages on the seat there. Khan stands outside, leaning on the car, taking a snuff from Kenni.

"But?"

Tereesz crawls out of the machine backwards, with a bottle of flavoured berry wine in his hand. "But it seems to me that in half an hour, it will all be under the Pale, Khan."

*"Että mitä? Mitä se sanoi?"*¹⁰

"Nothing, Kenni. I wouldn't listen to him. He's not K. Voronikin or anything."

Tereesz twists the cork off the flavoured berry wine with a snap and brings the bottle to his mouth. He'd better not say anything more.

"This is an oceanographic myth. The killer wave," points little Khan towards the body of water. All four of them look, safely wrapped in a beach blanket. In the darkness, insects buzz around the gas lanterns. "For a long time, it was just that - a myth, a seafarer's tale. Arda even has a mythological name for it: *'halderdingr'*. But now they are scientifically documented phenomena, they really exist, you know? It explains the tens, hundreds of ships that have disappeared without a trace. They're also called 'rogue waves', 'Draupner waves', and my favourite - 'freak waves'. They seem to come out of nowhere and are significantly higher than the rest of the waves. So a killer wave can also be relatively small. But, for example, when there's a ten-meter wave, they're the highest scientifically measured wave in the world. Oh, I've seen documentary footage of them!" Khan shakes his chin, demonstrating the exciting incredulity of the footage. "Footage was even taken from a Mesque ocean drilling rig. You can't imagine what a monster it is!" Khan feels his tongue and mind working in perfect unison. Everything comes out perfectly. His tongue was once incompetent, his mind disjointed, but not now! If only it would remain so forever. He has forgotten his hand in mid-air. It still shows the awe-inspiring height of a killer wave that forms from a ten-meter wave.

Målin watches it hanging in the sky. A sudden surge of interest saves her from the grip of her own body. She now knows what she needs. She needs to take more. Just a little bit, and then everything will start again. But stronger. The girl's mouth opens slightly, as she eagerly gulps water from the bottle. The water sparkles on her lips. "Where do they come from?"

"It's maths, right?" Jesper sits with his hand on his cheek. "Some sort of mathematical formula explains it, right?"

¹⁰(*Finnish orig.*) "That what? What did he say?"

“Exactly!” answers Khan. “Nonlinear effect. I’m not even going to pretend I know what it is, but anyway! It turns out that a killer wave can form from any number of smaller waves, based on a certain formula. If they move on a large body of water, like the ocean, there’s a chance that at some point an almost vertical, extremely unstable monster wave will be born from them. It *sucks* in the movement energy of the other waves, the water becomes calmer around it. Regular waves turn into ripples, and the killer wave collapses under its abnormal weight. But before that, it can, I don’t know, *sow* enormous destruction if you’ll allow me...” Khan finishes with a grand gesture: “And you know where they occur most frequently in the world? *Here*. The phenomenon is called the North Sea Autumn Wave.”

“Holy shit,” Anni bursts out laughing, her foul mouth showing. The girl’s pupils have long since turned black with mydriasis. She looks out at the water through the reeds, where – to little Anni’s mind – a totally screwed up killer wave could rise at any moment. But then Tereesz comes, with Charlotte.

“And you know what’s most screwed up about it?” Khan asks slyly. He wipes his glasses and then puts them back on. His almond-shaped eyes are squinting in the magnifying glass, up to the point of pop-science mystery: “The same effect – don’t ask me how, I don’t know – but the same nonlinear effect explains the *Pale*. They use it in entropnetics. This is how the Pale behaves when it sweeps over the world.”

“Like carriage wheels,” says Charlotte, looking into the boy’s eyes. “You’ve got it. By the way, Khan, if I may say?”

“Yes, you may say,” nods young Inayat.

“You’re *extremely* smart for your age.” Charlotte’s voice is genuinely sincere. Khan feels crowned by her compliment.

“And you have a very, very good posture,” he replies and she laughs heartily.

The crossfire of respect and affection roars like an ocean, everything wavers, and flickers like a flame, and in the middle of it, Anni suddenly raises her head. Nimble like an otter, she moves, neck craned, as if searching for something. “Wait, wait,” she says, “is there no more water?” Jesper doesn’t notice how Anni’s gaze hints at him, and how everyone waits for him. He is still staring out at the sea, enchanted, his white sailor’s hat on his head. He doesn’t feel anything special, he’s relatively sober, just hot. It’s all a slight disappointment for Jesper. Didn’t even get to make out. But killer waves – not too shabby.

A man in a wetsuit gasps for breath as he surfaces. He spits out the icy water from his mouth and rolls onto his stomach on the surfboard. A solitary black dot named Jesper bobs half a kilometre from the shore, at the mercy of the waves. He checks the stopwatch on his wrist. Another fifteen minutes and he will reach his critical body temperature. He needs to rest. Jesper tries to relax his muscles trembling from lactic acid. He looks behind him where the strip of pine trees marking Charlottesjäl is visible, and above, the giant clouds in the fading sky slowly converge. The board rises and falls with the rhythm of the water and his breath. Everything suddenly becomes so quiet. Where have all my waves gone?

“Still and always those five famous, terrible, last words:

Why did you leave me here?

I’ll stick to myself, I’ll cry, to every god like a wave:

Will you stay this time? Will you stay this time?

Will you stay this time, or what?"

A terrible roar is approaching. Jesper stands up on the surfboard, pulls the rubber mask to the back of his head, and looks with a blond strand of hair on his face. Against the backdrop of the tiny point of his surfboard, a huge wave rises, a dark grey frothy wall. Like a cell membrane. It rises vertically, the crest of foam obscuring the sky from Jesper's view, and droplets flying. The swelling cliff of the wave lifts the surfboard on its foam. The famous interior designer paddles with all his might on it. He tries to turn himself and go with the wave.

But the *halderdingr* moves at an enormous speed.

"Too bad," sighs Anni generously. "You deserve to feel good too." They stand on the asphalt road under a streetlamp, and from where the asphalt crumbles into the sand, the large Charlottesjäl beach begins. Forty-five minutes of forest darkness and eager chatter are behind them. It was so nice to talk, just the two of them.

Jesper holds a dark red water pump and pumps it. The water sings as the container fills. "Well, I don't feel bad, it's nice to talk to you, and the others look very happy too. And there's something there, I guess. But Khan talks like he's got some heavenly peace and Målin..."

"Målin is grilling," interrupts Anni.

"Right. That's probably the right word," Jesper puts a cork on the two water bottles. After putting them in his pocket, he looks at Anni questioningly. Bugs are desperately throwing themselves at the streetlight, and the girl's bare feet are rubbing together underneath it. She holds a gas lantern in her hand. The electric light makes the fine hairs on her bare legs shine. Jesper is prompted to ask by that smile, like an idea spreading across Anni's face.

"I know!" she says. "You're more like a nose boy anyway. With all your talk about perfumes."

Jesper squats in front of the girl on the asphalt, and a single tablet sparkles in the mirror of her wallet.

"We're going to need a mortar, some hard stuff," the girl says, and when Jesper returns excitedly with his stone, she already has an eyeshadow palette in her hand.

"Thank you so much anyway!" Anni carefully breaks the pill's powdery surface with a mirror and grinds the pieces into a soft raspberry-coloured powder. She licks the edge of the container with her tongue and then cautiously takes out a five-reál bill from her wallet. Jesper watches this ritual with fascination. He watches as Anni folds the black banknote in the middle and uses it to separate the powder into lines on the mirror. There they run, parallel like rails. The five-reál bill rolls into a small tube between the girl's fingers.

"Now, you close one nostril - like this - with your finger and put the other one in," she demonstrates the little tube to Jesper. "And then, take a deep breath and snort the entire line into your nose. Let me show you!" Anni-Elin Lund is kneeling in front of a water pump under a street lamp. The asphalt sparkles and the petite girl bends over the mirror. Jesper, dressed in a white sailor suit, watches as she snorts the line into her nostril with determination. The entire powder disappears into the paper roll in one quick moment.

It all seems absolutely magical to Jesper. Anni shakes her head, moaning, and hands him the banknote. "It stings a little, but it feels good. It kicks in faster too. But it lasts less. Do it!"

And Jesper does it. The drug powder rushes through the black tube of the banknote and curves. The crystals crush capillaries, and his nostrils itch and tingle. And then, when Jesper stands up, everything is so quiet and beautiful. They go down to the forest together, the gas lamp rustling in Anni's hand and casting long, moving shadows on the tree trunks in the dark of the dunes.

Jesper pushes himself up from his stomach onto the board with a fluid motion. The sound of water is roaring behind him and the interior designer kicks the board keel with his heel. In one moment, the obstacle becomes minimal, everything is perfect, and he glides through the water. The board no longer touches the water, it hovers on a vibrating air cushion. Zigzagging, Jesper surfs down and up the steep slope, back to the crest of the wave. Behind him, he can hear the wave breaking, collapsing under its own weight. A huge shimmering curtain of water falls and pulls him inside. Jesper allows it, falls behind, and enters the dimness of the tube, where the world, which exists only for a short period of time, achieves stability in its collapse. The wave collapse is a permanent environment, a murky almond-shaped cavity in the raging whirlpool of water. Inside, it is smooth and quiet. If only this could last forever, it would be the summer of fifty-two.

The summer of fifty-two is an object collapsing forever, eating him alive. Something is terribly wrong with this cluster of memories. Terribly wrong. It seems impossible to go on, the world does not support him. But here, for ten seconds, everything stabilises. Jesper strokes the wall of water and his mouth, red from the cold, always says, "Please!"

In the courtyard where the wheels of the car have drawn a loop in the snow, Inayat Khan looks back with his head up and the farmhouse hovers over him like a ghost. The entrails of electric wires hang out of the rotating object, black against the expanse of the starry sky. He drifts towards the Pale with a self-evident calmness. High above, the trail of furniture and fallen foundation remains behind him. In front of him in the courtyard, Khan sees Tereesz and Kenni stumbling after the object, heads down, until they reach the wooden fence.

In a strange panic-free worry, they all look towards Ulv's shack. It seems like any slight creak comes from there, from its limestone foundation. It's about to rise. But nothing happens. The Pale freezes in place far away behind the house, the sound of the forest subsides, and the music inside the farmhouse falls silent. Somewhere in the perceived distance, on the frozen edge of the Pale, the farmhouse falls apart and disappears. Ulv, sweating profusely, comes to the door and lights a menthol cigarette. He's taken off his sweatshirt. The young man stands there, framed by the doorway, in his sweatpants and silver tank top, exhaling steam and sweat droplets flying off him. Then, as Tereesz and Khan hurry towards him, the man suddenly looks back and startles.

"Take it!" Ulv shouts, running towards them with envelopes in his hand. He waves his hand in an approximate direction towards the Pale and hands the papers to Khan: "You have to go! *Now!*"

The sound of the engine starting can be heard and the wheels of the car spin in the snow. The massive structure can no longer bear its phantom weight. It breaks. The expanse of the logging area sinks beneath it in a moment, exploding in powder snow, and a landslide

as a shock wave passes over the world. Spruces bend under the impact, the Pale slams open the windows of the old dilapidated manor house. It curves around the edges of the house, as if hesitating for a moment, and then collapses around it. The Pale engulfs the manor in its bosom, and somewhere inside, in a low-ceilinged hall, a young man puts on his headphones. He reads the sweeping Pale like a magnetic tape in a Stereo 8. The only sign of life in the lifeless tableau of the Lund children is the eerie, impossible memory of someone named Jesper. The Pale sweeps over the fields on either side of the village road. Its avalanche crashes into the gravel, a bubbling wall approaching, turning raspberry-red in the glow of the motor car's taillights.

The chained wheels squeal on the gravel. "*Menee-menee-menee-menee!*"¹¹ screams the crazy rally driver to the machine as if commanding a horse. He already has his foot heavily on the gas pedal, as if the cart would go faster from it. And looking at the speedometer, it seems that it does! Tereesz watches the arrow in the yellowish light of the speedometer, which jumps to two hundred. Khan next to him sees the Pale. It moves slowly, but surely over the windows. The interior electric lighting dims because of it. The man's glasses get foggy, he has sunk deep into the leather seat from the speed and presses two envelopes against his heart. His eyes become moist with joy from behind his foggy glasses, but Tereesz cannot hear him over the loud engine roar.

"I was right, Tereesz, I was always right," he says, but Tereesz doesn't hear him. The engine is too loud.

Jesper and Anni are coming through the tall grass with a gas lantern. Jesper is holding both the lantern and a water bottle, while Anni is only holding her shirt. In the glow of the flickering flame, Jesper is examining the birthmarks on her back. Only the thin straps of Anni's bra still hide them. As the rustling grass brushes against their legs, Jesper enjoys the sensation on his bare skin. Thirsty, he takes a sip of water from the bottle and exclaims, "This is divine! Divine water! They should bottle it up and sell it!"

Joyful shouts from the beach greet them as they approach. Everyone embraces each other. Anni wipes off the lipstick from Jesper's lips under the light of the gas lantern and laughs. Khan is riding piggyback on Tereesz, pretending that Tereesz is a *robot*. He turns his friend's head, making robot noises and guiding him wherever he wants. Then, when robot-Tereesz has been led knee-deep into the water, Khan drops down. He lingers for a moment admiring the jellyfish, but the others have already started running towards the water in their swimsuits.

The little glowing bodies disappear into the darkness of the water. The sand shifts beneath their bare feet, while the soft water washes around their ankles. Their hypersensitive bodies react to every touch. Sand explosions burst between Anni's toes, making her curl them up in pleasure and step forward cautiously. They all move very slowly, their hands hovering over the cool surface of the water. They shriek occasionally, sparing every moment of their sneaking ecstasy. And the salve itself receives them, flowing around their hips and bellies. It is cool and perfectly viscous. Målin can't take it. When the water moistens her breasts and armpits, the girl sinks entirely into it. Only the hymn of surrender remains on the surface of the sea. She digs her nails into her palms, feeling how they snap immediately. It doesn't fit inside her. Hormones are already distorting her sliding body, the pelvic basin has expanded into a birth canal, and unbearable well-being throbs deep in her hips. In the grave of her body fluids, a tiny *homunculus* closes its needle-sized eyes. The creature curled up in a half-circle, opens its mouth to scream.

¹¹(*Finnish orig.*) "Go-go-go-go!"

But nothing is heard, not a single sound, it has never been here. Målin relaxes, everything is impossibly good, everything blackens and echoes there, in the depths of the water. Charlotte's glowing white shadow slides past her, she feels someone's soft hands on her shoulders. It's Khan. He lifts the girl to the surface. Målin inhales salty air and remains floating there. Water drips from her hair and above, in the black sky, stars shimmer infinitely detailed with milk splashes.

All six of them bow their heads and sway like that, in a semicircle. And in the black mirror of the water, stars shine back at them. They shimmer weakly, widely. Only Inayat Khan's glasses reflect all their brilliant sharpness.

"They're not there anymore," Khan hears the voice weakening in his hands. He looks down, the stars slip off his glasses. In the place of the stars, Målin Lund's eyes shift, and the darkness of her open mouth moves in every word: "But I still see them."

And then, when they woke up in the reeds in the morning, like kittens in a nest, they picked up the garbage properly. They put on the clothes that had dried in the sun, in its dazzling bright light. Their eyes hurt and the world around them seemed friendly yet strange. Everything had been said yesterday, in the darkness of the night, there was no need to repeat it in the daylight. They awkwardly smiled and exchanged tired bits of conversation as they walked to the tram stop. There, they agreed to meet in the last week of August when the girls would be back from their family trip to Graad. They couldn't specify the exact day, they would call and send postcards. At the end-of-August meeting, they planned to discuss what the changed situation at school would look like and generally about the real world.

They didn't kiss or anything like that at the stop. However, there were many looks loaded with farewell regret and physical secret messages exchanged. The girls got on the tram and the boys went to Tereesz's father's summer cottage. That was the last time they saw each other.

14. LIST OF ABSENTEES

Twenty years later, near Vaasa, a crowd of refugees stands in a traffic jam. The sixty million square kilometres of the land mass of Katla isola has just lost six per cent of its total area, a lit-up billboard above the motor carriage announces "All lines for entry". The red river of taillights shimmers in the autumn night, and somewhere in the middle of it, in a giant traffic jam, stands the machine in which Tereesz Machejek has long been sleeping. Steam rises from under the hood, and the radial splatters of mud curve around the car's body; the nickel tips of motor components gleam from under the black plates of the casing. Even Inayat Khan has curled up in the cabin, but he's not yet asleep. He savours every passing moment, precisely because he's dead tired. The seat's leather creaks under his weight and the sound of news-gathering airships can be heard in the sweet slumber. The rotors beat safely in the distance, and the dark vortex of sleep invites and swirls. Khan moves in and out of consciousness as he pleases. Sometimes the machine jolts and moves a few meters. Then he opens his eyes from his daze and sees Kenni passing by. The crazy Suru rally driver talks to other drivers and scrapes frost from the windshield. At this moment, Khan knows that he will miss it all. He already misses it - the headlights' diamonds, the taillights' bloody glow in the exhaust fumes, the knowledge that everything will be all right.

It was twenty years ago when he last felt like this. Full of possibilities. Back when they were waiting together for the girls to return from Graad. Outside in the world, behind his pinned-shut eyelids, the kingdom of God begins. He presses his hand to his chest and embraces his invisible partner. All those spaces, the expanses out there in the boggy fields and by the roadside, are possibilities. Opportunities for gatherings. Conversations branch out, as they always do, in the darkness of Khan's mind's office. Målin Lund walks there with him, nodding, listening, and asking questions. Laughs at his jokes, for the twentieth year. They sit down on the side of the highway, she doesn't mind. The girl's body is untouched by time, she still looks like a child, but her spirit has moved on with Khan. Grown-up, become an adult. She is poised now, mysterious and sad.

Two months went by, but the meeting at the end of August never happened. Even though the girls returned to Vaasa on the fifteenth of August, they never called. Why this was, and why they went to Charlottesjäl beach three times in that period, remains a mystery.

The afternoon sun painted the curtain's stripes on the walls. In the big room of Tereesz's father's cottage, the air was still, something was rising, stifling his breathing. The vacuum, it was a sense of loss, a terrible, terrible worry. After weeks of waiting by the phone, they finally decided to call the girls themselves. The three of them were standing in a large room. Tereesz put the phone down. Khan beside him was impervious: "What happened? They weren't at home or...?"

"The mother picked up," Tereesz slumps back in the armchair. "She said they were at the beach."

"Where at the beach?"

"In Charlottesjäl."

"What? So why didn't they call?"

"I don't know, something's wrong..."

And that's when the argument happened. The one Tereesz fought Jesper for two days later. He wanted to run down to the beach, Khan already tied his shoelaces, but only Jesper still thought that this way wasn't *cool* enough. They should wait, let them call first. And so it was, and fifteen minutes later, at one o'clock, Agnetha, the ice cream saleswoman, was the last living person to see the Lund children. It was the twenty-eighth of August - International Day of the Missing.

Since that day, they weren't "cool" anymore. He tries not to use the word, it sounds like an accusation. Drenched and gasping for air, the interior designer sinks back into the sand. Hypothermia. It smells like rotting reeds; rushes and grass lie against the ground in the breeze. He is thirty-four years old. He hits the wet sand with his heels. How and why he endured, he does not know. If his joints were cramped from the cold, why didn't he roll himself off the board into the sea? Or when the wave crashed on itself, why didn't he stay?

Above, in the dark sky of an autumn night, masses of clouds sink into each other. Slowly. He grabs the top of his head with both hands and squeezes. The mouth, blue with cold, opens slowly, the airways shudder, and the stomach ripples in contractions. His heels dig into the sand and his fists twitch, but nothing changes. He remembers everything. A fifty-second year stands still inside his skull, a haunting, impossible museum exhibit, a replica of a lost world. The smell is ever sweeter and always the same, an irrefutable fact whose seriousness cannot be overstated: there is no going back.

In his dream, he hears the sound of hooves approaching, they are coming, on the black asphalt. Jesper! Khan wants to call him and tell him to get ready! This is the real deal. But there is no phone booth here, and in the kingdom of heaven it is dark, and mounted police are checking the rows between the machines. A nightmare silhouette stops behind the window glass. Khan opens his eyes. Steam rises from the horse's nostrils as it snorts, its wet black eyes gleaming in half-sleep against the man. An officer on horseback directs a beam of light through the frosty window glass into the cabin and then moves on. The sound of iron echoes on the asphalt, the horse recedes, and Khan closes his eyes and falls asleep again. His hands are frozen in an embrace on his chest.

When they finally fell asleep, Khan heard a terrible voice in his sleep. It was on the night of the twenty-eighth of August, the same day, and with that voice, terror descended upon the land. At first, he heard it in his dream, how it moved closer and closer and cried out, at regular intervals:

"Maj!

Anni!

Målin!

Charlotte!"

The boy woke up in the second-floor bedroom. He looked into Tereesz's eyes wide with fear, his friend standing over him and shaking him. Khan was fully awake now, but the world's most feared list of absentees was still being shouted. It continued outside, in Charlottesjäl. Not in his dream, but in the real world. The blood clotted in Khan's veins. "Can you hear it too?"

"Yes," Tereesz replied.

They woke Jesper up. They put on their jackets and ran outside. It was cold, and for the first time this year, the smell of autumn floated in the air. They stopped in the garden

and listened. The names echoed in the woods with the barking of the dogs. They ran through the apple orchard, past the gooseberry bushes, on into the darkness of the pines. Flashlights and flares flickered there.

They were search parties.

By the end of the fourth day, the volunteers were dispersed. Hundreds of people had come to help in some way, to share the concern. Thousands of calls came in to the special hotline. Appeals were made and programmes were initiated. The press and radio jumped into action, and the next morning the girls' pictures were on the front pages. Headlines used the most horrendous sentimentality: "Mother in distress: children, please come home!" Opinion columns discussed the possibility of restoring the death penalty, as paranoia mixed with the desire for revenge: "Who abducted the children from their mother?" This outpouring of compassion in which the boys' own loss was completely lost - all the wailing and gnashing of teeth - they felt powerless in the midst of it, it humiliated them. At first, it was just a hunch, now Jesper can put his indignation into words. *A tantalising curiosity*. Somewhere underneath all that frothing, the salacious bourgeois saw, with his own sweet horror, all the things that were done to the girls. Behind the blinds, where Per-Jonas dared not look directly, he peeped through a newspaper article. He saw himself there, he was the Man, he was eating a meat pie in oil batter and he liked what he saw. But then, as the pre-teen Jesper looked at his classmates, it was an indescribable mystery, an alien realm of bodies. The arch of the back, an exposed arm, the smallest bit was enough. To this day, he hates adult sexuality. For him, it is a debauched fastidiousness. Realistically, and paradoxically, it makes him a paedophile.

Just as the epitome of good taste enters the lobby of Havsänglar in a wetsuit, the receptionist puts the phone down. The renowned interior designer arrives in the middle of the night, dripping, leaving sandy footprints on the carpet. The gentleman looks so miserable, frozen half to death, that the woman forgets the phone call and rushes to wrap him in a towel.

"No, I don't need an ambulance," Jesper waves his hand and grits his teeth. "Don't want tea, don't want tea! I don't want the blackcurrant tea either!" He calls for the elevator and presses the button with a numb, frozen finger, even though it's long since on fire. "No, I don't want to, I'm going for a bath, a hot bath."

"Monsieur de la Guardie," the woman remembers at the last moment. She sticks a shoe between the closing elevator doors, "You had a phone call, someone called Olle..."

"At night? What about?"

"A newspaper ad."

Volunteers were sent home and, after the search parties, so went the rest. The pine forests remained quiet in autumn, the boys lumbered through them. The bloodhounds barked no more, and no border patrol boats wandered the bay. And everywhere they went, it was as if the void itself, its spirit, had been released. Everything hung still, useless: the changing cabins, the sparse half-empty beach. At the tram stop, the trams rolled empty, then half empty again, the doors slamming shut and opening. The last to go were the ill-fated divers, three weeks later. And so they saw the long surrender begin all around them. What it meant they knew very well, though they never dared to say

the word to each other. Together they thought up the most fantastic plans. Thrilling triumphs, comebacks together.

The school year had officially begun a month ago, and it was the parents' joint decision to send them back to school. There, waiting for them, were photos of the girls, flowers and storm lanterns on the stairs. In the school corridor, too, the fake sorrow waved. Everyone had somehow known them, everyone fought for attention and compared their losses. There, too, they disappeared. They didn't dare tell anyone what had happened over the summer. Finally, they poured their hearts out to the female officer when she was at school, and as a result, Zygismunt Berg - a boy who by then was a "well-known figure" to the youth police - was among the more than 200 people interrogated. The treachery bore no fruit and when the female officer went to talk to the headmaster at the end of November, the three of them broke out of class. The corridor echoed with the sound of their shoes. She was their only link to the *investigation*, that heartless instance. They stopped her at the door and begged until the poor woman had no choice.

"We have to get used to the idea that the girls are dead," she said.

Pictures and storm lanterns were collected from the school stairs, the death penalty was not reintroduced. Even Vidkun Hird was sentenced to life. A year after the disappearance, he was arrested on suspicion of similar crimes and the press rushed to link it all to the Lund children. The old master himself also dropped hints to that effect. About puppies who wandered too far from their mother and other such heraldic references. When the three of them got together, that was all they could talk about. That, or some other topic that the media had fed them; if not the Hird or the recently released list of sex offenders, then the letter sent to Karl and Ann-Margret Lund two years after their disappearance, the details of the handwriting analysis, or, for example, the psychic who claimed that the girls' bodies were buried under the foundations of the Ringhalle ice hockey stadium. As the articles became less frequent, the meetings became so hopeless that each of the boys tried to avoid them in his own way. Jesper secretly went surfing and played sports. In tenth grade, Khan failed for the first time and dropped out of school; at the beginning of eleventh, Tereesz went back to Graad.

The media had lost all interest in the Lund girls fifteen years later. The investigation had long since been stalled, and the lead inspectors had retired. There was no reason to meet again, they retreated to their personal lives. Jesper found himself an underage lingerie model and pretended not to recognise Khan, who was sitting behind a restaurant table wearing a bright blue tie. Tereesz visited Charlottesjäl alone every year. He didn't call anyone else. And Khan completely sunk into the world of disappearance cases, sitting in his mother's basement toggling on the lights of an airship that had gone missing a century and a half ago. Endlessly.

"Get used to your own fucking thoughts."

The End of the World. The dark arches of the mast stations loom over the city entrance. Barriers rise. Customs officers' vests and stripes glow lemon-yellow on the barriers. The motor carriage starts, and everything moves evenly, and smoothly. In the leather-seat-scented rustle of the radio, they talk about an atomic weapon that was dropped on Revachol three hours ago. Khan feels warm, and the female announcer's voice is calm and beautiful. The rows of streetlights rise above the road, crowned with frost, they glide under the dark blue sky of the morning. He drifts along with them to his hometown, where he will leave tomorrow night. One task remains. The lanterns fade. Khan watches as the ghosts of the buildings come out into the light of dawn.

The bedroom smells of lilies. Outside, beyond the window of the country house, the bare chestnut trees sway their bony branches in the breeze. She wakes up early in the morning and leaves her husband, who is wearing an eye mask, sleeping in bed. She is fifty-two years old, with fine facial features and laugh lines that look like tired chicken feet; her dark green eyes under her eyelids give no hint. She goes downstairs in her morning gown, holding onto the wooden handrail, and makes herself coffee. In the cool rooms of the wooden house, the lights are out in the spacious kitchen. She likes these blue hours, when the house is quiet, so you can hear the field mice scratching under the floor. Her delicate, sharp fingers push down on the button of the French press. Even the smell of mould rising from the floorboards has come to please her over time, although it scared her so much at first - seventeen years ago when she came to live here. And the silence! Everything is so quiet in the countryside, but over time, even the absence of noise became a kind of blessing. She crosses the large room, over the cold floorboards, and around it the furniture shines in the dim light; the elegance of the fifties, the colour peeling from the wood. Next to the door, she pulls her husband's coat over her shoulders and steps into his shoes. Like this, with her grey hair swept up in a simple manner, she comes out onto the porch.

The autumn chilly air makes the coffee cup steam in the woman's hand, she pauses for a moment, takes a breath, and then takes a seat on the wooden garden furniture she chose herself. And then, with her leg over her knee, Ann-Margret Lund smokes her first cigarette of the day. She watches the light, the sun rising through the morning mist. In the well-tended garden in front of her, details emerge from the mist, the glass of the greenhouse gleams, and the lawn needs tidying. This will be her first duty of the day. She extinguishes her cigarette in an upside-down flowerpot ashtray and heads back inside.

Children of beautiful parents are beautiful, children of ugly parents are ugly. In the shower downstairs, Ann-Margret moisturises her still-beautiful body. It wasn't always like this, at first she was thin and bony like a scarecrow. She was still a tomboy then, climbing over planks and up trees with the boys. Then the female sex hormones kicked in and wove a new body around her. An object of admiration of adipose tissue and curves. Slowly, she mastered its subtleties; graduated, taught, fell in love, and gave birth to three daughters. Three years in a row, one every year. They left her like beads on a string. And the body recovered, young as she was. It made her girlfriends envious, the way she slept in her husband's arms, unashamed. But later, when she joined the party, another came, the youngest. The man loved her, and so he was not dismayed when the last one permanently disfigured her. While the force of gravity prevailed in its domain, reason rose high - in the ministry, in the office. But now Ann-Margret Lund stands in front of the mirror, and although her skin has lost some of its elasticity and colour, her hips are narrow and her thighs slim once again. Everything has tightened up again, but this time she feels a sense of unease rather than relief in her body. Even though the feeling of absence, silence, peace, and the smell of mould in her new hideaway overcame her, it secretly became a part of her. She is emptiness. But then, when she faces it, Ann-Margret still feels afraid. As if all this womanhood has somehow disappeared. She tries not to think about it, quickly dries herself off, covers herself in beige day clothes, and goes.

The woman is raking dried leaves in the garden. When she came to school at the end of the first term, the boys watched her in secret. It was the first term without them and Ann-Margret came to empty her daughters' lockers. A circle of respect surrounded her, the children moved away. Only Tereesz, Jesper and little Inayat watched from around the corner as she loaded her daughters' trinkets from the previous year into cardboard boxes. She rolled up the pop star's poster and golden stars fell from her hands. None of

the boys told each other why they had come to spy. But secretly they wanted pats from her, to go home with her, and see the girls' rooms. And then make plans to find them. It was a childish longing. They wanted to be important in these matters, and if anyone had the power to sanctify them as such, it was the girls' beautiful mother. It didn't happen, but later they all came anyway, one by one, though they kept it a secret from each other. They scouted out the location of her country home and awkwardly expressed sympathy for the woman. Then they exchanged news, too, about the investigation, and slowly Ann-Margret remembered their names. Although the last time this happened was eight years ago. Later, when Tereesz and Khan confessed, Jesper still lied that he had done nothing of the sort.

"It's a shame," he said sarcastically.

Ann-Margret comes back from the bare gooseberry bushes, puts her gardening gloves on a nail in the shed and sends her husband to work. Karl Lund still toils away like a passionate industrial magnate, even though political instability and the resulting international economic crisis are devastating his business; never mind that he actually has enough money to retire to wherever he wants, even Stella Maris. The chauffeur picks him up at half past eleven, the luxury car wrapped in grey haze on the village road. In the yard, Ann-Margret watches the raspberry red of the taillights fade as the man moves away from her.

Along with her husband and the morning ritual, all signs that she once had four blonde, green-eyed daughters recede. One had auburn hair and the other rainbow eyes, but when she plays the music softly and moves her shoulders to the rhythm, she can't tell which. Then, as the guilt dissolves and daylight comes in through the white lace curtains, Ann-Margret Lund feels light, she floats. As if her whole life had been un-lived, and all the impressions, small dents that a person leaves in the world, had been tapped out to the rhythm of music. She moves modestly in the shade of her family tree, from which all of the leaves have fallen. She no longer knows that the way she places her upper lip on her lower lip, forgetting herself and laughing along with the music, is exactly how Charlotte did it. She sweeps the floors, straightens the tablecloths, and makes the rows of books on the shelf even. She doesn't listen to the radio, it means nothing to her. As far as Ann-Margret is concerned, the world ended a long time ago and left her here to do her domestic chores.

She sits at the kitchen table, hands in her lap, and watches as the house sparkles. It's half past four, the rooms are quiet and clean. She dozes off occasionally like a cat, her greying head nodding at the table. It happened overnight, like Dolores Dei. Twenty years ago, on the morning of August 29th, she woke up and turned silver. She hears music in her dream, light pouring onto her hair through the kitchen window, and in that surge of light, it seems golden again for a moment. There's a knock at the door. Maybe Karl left something behind or is coming home early... but then why knock? It just seems unlikely that someone would come to visit her. Almost no one comes here anymore and she likes it that way. Ann-Margret Lund adjusts her costume, smooths out the wrinkled skirt on her lap, puts on a smile, and opens the door.

"Hello, madam."

Three men are standing there, awkward smiles on their faces: one is wearing very expensive clothes and smells of a five hundred réal *aftershave*, unable to hide the fever that makes his forehead flush; another is standing next to him in a dark orange filmy robe, wearing a scarf with an Iilmara tricolour; and a third, tall and dashing, is hurrying to put out his cigarette. Though the connections are hard to make, she invites the men in and watches them standing there in their coats. It is only when he sees the boyish

timidity with which they stagger from one foot to the other and draw shapes on the floor with their shoe tips, that she remembers who they are. It reminds her of the behaviour of a young admirer.

"We've got news," says Inayat Khan. "I know, no need to get your hopes up, okay? But it's good news, madam."

And as the madam leads them into the kitchen, her heart feels pewter-heavy again, and her hair gleams in the dim half-light of the kitchen.

"Coffee? Tea?"

Five hours ago, Jesper was sitting in the café "Cinema". In the bright midday light, he feels slightly less *projected* into the space between the glass walls and cube furniture than usual. His head and his eyelids are strangely heavy. He wipes his sweating forehead with a handkerchief with initials. The interior designer looks worse than usual, pulling his sweater over his head. He begins to feel cold again in his dress shirt. Late autumn cold seeps through the floor-to-ceiling windows, and a crowd passes by outside. He orders himself a green tea with lemon and honey.

"I think I have a bit of a cold," he says across the table to a man a few years younger than himself. He remembers him well, it's little Olle. He was four grades below them. Jesper mainly remembers him for Olle's brilliant forging skills. The older boys used his golden hand for all sorts of signatures, and the little guy made good money that way. All those certificates filled with terrible grades and notebooks full of red marks that needed signatures. Now little Olle has grown a big brown moustache, and Jesper draws his own conclusions. Olle is a *copywriter*, and moustaches are back in style. In certain circles. Circles where the innocence of nihilism and Saint-Miro's exotic poetry is appreciated. Or at least it was two days ago when the land where both Saint-Miro and old-fashioned moustache madness come from had not yet used an atomic bomb on another land.

"I guess the nihilism trend is over now," Jesper mentions bluntly.

Olle agrees vehemently, "I should get rid of the moustache, I know, it came as a total bombshell to all of us. Sorry for the expression, we didn't..."

"Yeah, yeah, that's terrible," Jesper interrupts him halfway through the sentence. "A total tragedy. Why did you call me, Olle?"

"I read the ad and thought for a long time. It wasn't until the bang went off, you know, that I finally felt sorry."

"What's the fuck, Olle? What's going on? What are you *sorry* about?"

The moustached *copywriter* flinches in front of the suddenly beet-red Jesper. He stares him down across the table. As Olle tries to hide his gaze, an albino tiger in the distance takes over Jesper's role. Although the *copywriter* often comes here to make friends, he has never liked the ghastly taxidermy.

"Wait, I didn't kill them, I just wrote the letters."

"Why in the name of the Lord would you do something like that?"

"I don't know," Olle stutters. "I was young then, I really don't know why I did that. Everyone at school talked about them after it happened. Maybe I just wanted to see what would happen. Could they understand that it wasn't really Målin? One guy, this

Zigi, brought me Målin's old notebook and asked me if I could copy the handwriting. It looked easy enough and, well, I thought I'd give it a try."

"And did you send the letters or did someone else?"

"Zigi sent them, I just wrote. You know, I'm really embarrassed about it, you have to understand that I was young at the time and, well, I thought I was a bit of a nihilist..."

"And you have nothing else to tell me about it? You don't know anything about them? Even if, for example, I went to the police with this story, you'd have nothing more to say?"

"Unfortunately, no." It seems that Olle is genuinely sorry as he nervously smoothes his moustache, and Jesper stares out of the window to Östermalm, his eyes glazed with fever. A group of people in dark clothes stomps past the window. His mouth reddening, he pulls his sweater back on and grabs his coat.

"Idiot," he says and leaves. Olle stays behind to pay the bill. When the cheque is brought to the table, the albino tiger is still glaring at him.

"And this is *good* news?" asks Ann-Margret and shakes the ash off her cigarette, six hours later, outside. Plumes of smoke rise from her and Tereesz Machejek's mouths, and a steady light grey light seeps from the sky. She sits with three men on a veranda around a wooden table and the breeze blows dark brown leaves to the floor. Jesper, having finished his story, feels uncomfortable. But then Khan jumps in: "No, that's not all! But look, what's remarkable about this is that twenty years later, in the place where the world is now, something new is still coming out. Meaning - there's still time. And I have a feeling that right now, that's why everything is coming out. That something is in the air."

The former minister sits with her back arched, her leg femininely over her knee. She remains dismissively silent, which cools Khan's enthusiasm. The man takes a sip of his coffee. Or rather, pretends to. There's nothing in it but stretchy sugar.

Khan continues: "Now I don't know what you can make of this. I don't know what to make of it."

"I, for one, don't take it very seriously," Jesper interjects.

"Anyway," Khan continues, a little grumpily, "I'll say it myself right up front that I take it. Seriously, I mean. We've just come from Lemminkäinen, right, a private consultant. He's quite well known, although he keeps a low profile. *Self...*" Tereesz gives him a warning look and Khan continues: "Ulv is his name. Have you heard of him?"

"I don't think I have."

"People go to him with things they can't get information about anywhere else. Stuck things. He's been involved in at least twelve death investigations. And he's always helped in some way. Generally, the police don't exactly boast about it, but Tereesz can assure you it's true."

Former agent Machejek nods his head. He can feel her eyes on him, and though he tries to behave as one would on the job, trying to be rigidly respectful, and trustworthy, it doesn't work out well. *We love the girls, we love them more...* He's so embarrassed by his thoughts, before. At first, he tries not to look, then he looks up. For a moment, his eyes, of random colour, cross with Ann-Margret's tired emeralds. "His methods are the kind that will not be mentioned later in an official investigation," Tereesz begins. "It's a

tacit agreement. With the prosecutor's office. Such a thing would give the defence too much to grasp."

"It's a kind of para detective, I understand?" Under pressure from the media, the police, together with the municipality, finally excavated the entire west wing of Ringhalle. The psychic rolled his eyes and kept pointing, but all that came out of the concrete foundation was even more concrete foundation. And that's just one specific case. "I've seen my fair share of *necromancers*," she allows herself a trace of bitterness.

Tereesz signals Khan to wait. "When I do my job, I don't do it for the state. I do it for the victim." Talking like this, he forgets himself. His confidence returns, he is again an agent of the Collaboration Police, not the leaf in the wind he has made himself out to be. "And so, I don't care where and how the information comes from, as long as it's productive. Admittedly, I haven't been to this particular private consultant. Unfortunately, he only deals with cases where the victim is already dead. But he has an undeniable gift in this case. For example, Ulv himself has been a suspect. In eight different cases, he has advised. If that sounds authoritative to you - and it does to me, frankly. Completely unconnected cases and no evidence has ever been found against him. You understand?"

The woman thoughtfully puts on a cigarette and then, when Tereesz offers her a light, Khan takes the opportunity. He leans across the table and blurts out, "He doesn't know *anything* about the girls!"

"And what does that mean?" she's stumped.

Khan looks back at her with a broad smile, "He doesn't know anything about them. He has no information about them. A blank page: he doesn't know where they are, he knows nothing about their past, no secrets. But that's the point! He doesn't know anything because they're not dead."

The woman is secretly horrified, her ladylike posture unchanged. Tereesz notices something suspicious in her reaction, but out of great respect, he cannot yet tell what it is. "And the same consultant says that?" Ann-Margret looks at him questioningly. Khan places a pad of paper in front of her. "These are my notes. About the girls. This is the summary I gave him. His notes are at the end. You'll see that these are the exact words he uses: 'Not dead'."

Ann-Margret is browsing the papers. All the misery of the world flashes before her eyes again, photocopies and dates, a chronology of events. Khan continues: "It's customary to give another envelope for such an occasion. If the accuracy of the first can't be verified - at the moment it's the girls', we wouldn't have a clue on that alone - the accuracy of the second proves it. And guess who's not dead yet?" Khan pulls his second envelope out of his pocket and places it on the table. It was only when Tereesz finally saw it that he began to seriously consider Khan's strange experiment. "Zygismunt Berg" is written on it. Jesper doesn't know anything about it yet. He watches, his neck craning curiously.

"I gave him Zigi." Khan is on a roll, losing himself, speaking directly to Jesper. The connections he draws in the air become increasingly fantastical. How one assertion from a para-specialist proves another, dotted lines leading to chaos, a label proudly proclaiming, "Axiom!" And then the letters! How they absolutely must figure out what became of the slouch in the leather jacket, an arrow jumping to indicate what all could come out of it!

Only Tereesz, who has already heard it, is still watching Ann-Margret's reaction. There is none. The woman is just staring at a page in the girls' folder. Outside, it is slowly getting dark and it's cold. She has pulled up the collar of her coat and when Tereesz catches

her eye, she doesn't respond. She hasn't been reading for a while, just zoning out, her familiar dark green irises standing still. What is that barely perceptible feeling deep inside? Tereesz thinks he knows. How her eyes are slightly squinted, the unfamiliarity. She *remembers*. But what?

The evening is approaching, it's getting dark, and Khan is burning like a light bulb in the middle. All around, in the quiet village, the air is crystal cold. The man leans back on a folding chair and wipes his glasses with a triumphant expression. Beside him, Tereesz decides to go for the easiest solution, reaches out his hand and takes hold of the edge of the folder. She still holds it in her hand, not having managed to turn the page yet.

"May I?" he asks.

"Yes, of course," nods Ann-Margret. As if waking up, she adds, "It's all very confusing, I have to admit..." Meanwhile, as Khan explains how the mother of the children should now turn to the police, Tereesz looks at the four photos of the Lund children in the folder. Khan has arranged them in a row by age, like beads on a string.

Ann-Margret closes the garden gates after the departing guests. She waves gently at the back window. The taxi rolls along the gravel road, it's no longer Kenni at the wheel. Kenni has long gone to his own Kenni world, to do Kenni things. They're forty kilometres from Vaasa, and the white country house among the chestnut trees can't be left behind fast enough. Secretly, they all feel a sense of relief when they leave. Somehow embarrassed too. No one can say anything, the gravel crunches under the wheels. In the end, Khan tries anyway: "She, like... didn't seem very happy. Or so."

Jesper blows his nose: "I had this daft idea myself."

"So what do you think we should have done? Not tell her, let her figure it out for herself, like what was up with those letters?"

"Yeah, yeah! They're not dead, Mrs. Lund, your children are alive, alive children! You couldn't just let her guess at that, could you? She had to have the mystery solved."

For a little while longer, they sit quietly and stare out of the window. Village roads pass by, the machine rattles and Tereesz asks the driver if it's OK to smoke inside. The match flickers in the dim light and the cigarette paper crackles in the flame. "Astra" fumes waft around the cabin, it smells bitter. After so long in Kenni's machine, it somehow feels treacherous to sit here.

Khan's conscience begins to sting: "But maybe we really shouldn't have done it. What if she's reconciled, and we've just irritated her for nothing? What if nothing comes of it..."

"You think?" Jesper says sarcastically. "Maybe it was our duty! Rushing into a stranger's home and telling her about her children." He thinks for a moment, then starts again: "I don't really think so, Khan. I don't think she's reconciled or anything. Maybe she's just trying to get on with her life. I'm not a parent, of course."

Tereesz pulls an ashtray out of the door. He smokes, in silence. They avoid the network of motor carriages and the congestion there. That's why they drive along village lanes between evening fields and forest thickets. Halfway through, he's on his sixth smoke and the cabin is getting stuffy. The former agent is polite, he rolls down the window and fresh air comes in, along with a few snowflakes. They float to the edge of the ditch outside. The bare bushes whizz by and snow begins to fall over the fields in the distance.

"She has not reconciled," says Tereesz. "She has forgotten. I didn't see any pictures of them in that whole house. She was looking at them in that folder of yours, too, as if she

was trying to remember who they were.”

Khan shivers from the cold. No one says anything. That means acceptance. There is another long pause before Jesper flinches. This is how they let each other know how it makes them *feel*. Rarely do they talk to each other about what they really think. All because of the disappearance. It’s because they talked too much in the beginning. So much that talking no longer helped. Everything has been said, they have nothing to console each other with. That’s why it’s so strange for everyone to hear Jesper say: “Sometimes it seems to me that the whole world has forgotten them.”

“They have,” says Tereesz.

And Khan says: “Let’s go and find that cocksucker.”

“Let’s do it today,” says Tereesz.

Khan then asks, “Where do we go?”

“To Graad,” says Tereesz.

And they both look in Jesper’s direction.

“Davai,” says Jesper.

With darkness comes a snowstorm. They are driving through the streets of Saalem and the city around them freezes. It’s the first time this year. The cold, sweet smell of snow permeates the cabin with Khan as he enters with a large suitcase in each hand. Trails are left behind in front of the house. His old mother stands in the doorway, shouting something, but no one can hear what it is. The machine is already speeding and the snow is whirling in the street tunnel outside. It’s snowing the whole time they wait for Jesper in front of his house. Two hours. Already it looks as if they might not get on their nightly magnet train. White streaks drift into the wind from the fir trees, and a black motor carriage is buried under the snow. Finally, Jesper arrives, white suitcase in hand.

“How did it go?”

“Well, let’s just say it didn’t go very well,” he replies. “Drive.”

They drive. Fast. They ask the taxi driver to go faster, but that would be dangerous. The wind drives stripes into the headlights, its chaos flying everywhere, on the roads, in the orange halos of the streetlights. Tereesz throws money at the driver and leads the way, glancing at his watch. He runs across the snowy square, the sound of taxi doors being shut behind him. He doesn’t care that Jesper left his things behind at his house.

Jesper’s only regret is that he didn’t find his hair scrunchie when he left the lingerie model. He could have been better. That’s a pity too. He’s running, suitcase in hand, snow in his eyes, and all sorts of remarks come to mind: “This fashion thing, with this fashion thing, you see, it’s no *good* any more. This *model* thing has no future. You’re going to take my house, you’re going to live in Vaasa, it’s not safe to travel. It’s time to go to work for real.”

It’s night, but there’s a crowd in front of the elevators. They are shouting, Tereesz flashes his fake documents: “Collaboration Police, get out of here!” He’s no longer Somerset Ulrich, he’s now Kosmo Kontšalovsky. Kosmo is not a missing agent, he is Tereesz’s own brainchild. To confuse the trail – no one can follow it.

Only then, when the jam-packed elevator cabin lifts them up above the city, do the boys sit down on their suitcases and catch their breath. The city is buried in snow, and its

gleam seeps into the exhaust fumes of motor carriages, turning them saturnine green, golden, orange... until the darkness of the train station swallows them up. The elevator doors open, and they run under the high steel arches of the station building. There, too, a night-time crowd awaits them. It is packed everywhere, in the waiting room, in front of the ticket counters, even though the display boards show that there are no available seats, and the girl with a baby voice from a speaker confirms it. Even the flight to Samara, to the SRV, the day after tomorrow, is sold out. Yes! This is the degenerate bureaucratic worker state where you want to be. Not to mention that at that very moment, in Graad, the irrigation grid disappears, and a tidal wave rises threateningly over Yekokataa. Where are you running, stay home, join the army!

They squeeze themselves out onto the platform. It is snowing under the high night sky, and when the conductor stops them there in front of the five-fold slatted door of the magnet train carriage, Tereesz does something he never does. Kosmo Kontšalovsky's authoritative flashes no longer have any effect on the conductor, numbed by the frenzy of the people. The girl with the baby voice announces the imminent departure of the flight and asks everyone to step behind the yellow line. Already they can hear the hissing of the trains' hydraulics. Tereesz puts his hand under his jacket and reveals a pistol. The leather pouch of the holster hangs under his arm. Mahogany handle firmly in hand, he steps through the doors into the luxurious dimness of the train, gun barrel gleaming, and the conductor retreats before the service weapon. Behind Tereesz, Khan and Jesper slip through the doors. The doors slam shut, the magnets roar, and one of Khan's suitcases is left on the platform.

Tereesz puts the pistol back in its holster and apologises to the frightened conductor. They are not used to such things here in Katla. The ex-agent thanks the woman for her cooperation and returns to diplomacy. Outside on the platform, the huge buffers are detached from the train. The umbilical cord is cut and, released from the coupling links, the train sinks onto the magnets with all its weight. They hum at full power beneath the carriages. And then the flight begins.

The force of the magnet pad makes the North Sea beneath them split in two. It's quiet inside, the generators humming as the train rushes 50 meters above the water. They stand together, laughing. Tereesz extinguishes his cigarette in a bronze ashtray, and they turn their backs to the windows and leave. Ahead lies the Pale, and beyond that, the big world begins. Somewhere there, in its cities, on its streets, in its steppe expanses, is Zygismunt Berg, the only person in this world who knows what happened to the Lund children. In the windows behind them, in the city, only light pollution remains, a golden glow in the distance in the midst of the snowy stormy darkness.

15. MOULD

Deerek Trentmøller lies in a catatonic state. The retirement home around him is mute. He can't remember the name of any of the things and none of the connections means anything to him. Everything is forgotten. Everything is forgotten. He looks at the whole world with the blissful question mark of a child. After two months, a caretaker comes into his room and breathes a sigh of relief at the door. He unhooks the cannula from the old man's wrist. The lace from the tree branches slides on the walls, while a motor carriage rushes by on the snow-covered street outside.

The wheels crunch on the snow and inside the warm salon, a well-known minimalist and deaf music critic Åre Åkerlund, Jesper's colleague from the office days, is roving about. His prospects do not seem brilliant. It becomes almost impossible to copy record reviews from the West if no new records are made. But Åre Åkerlund does a lot of cocaine and that, as we know, makes you very intelligent. The social climate is different now, but consumption as such remains. It means there is still room for advertising. Åre Åkerlund lays the foundations for what later became the world-famous Ideas Lab in Vaasa, an advertising agency that produces *ideas* for advertisements instead of real advertising. Somebody else makes them later. After a few months, the Ideas Lab becomes a masterpiece of apocalyptic advertising. In the Nordic countries, too, transportation giant ZAMM launches an interisolar campaign with the slogan "Escape! It's not too late."

Around that time, or a little later, around the winter solstice, Konrad Gessle's new documentary will go unnoticed by the wider public. Winter is coming, dark and long, and the panic-stricken masses are demanding lighter entertainment. Never mind that the director is an eight-time Oscar Zorn nominee. But then, the ecumenical aggressor Mesque brings its fleet out of the Pale, manoeuvring far north over the boreal plateau. Black smoke rises from it to the sky, under the auroras, in the Graad Holodnaja Zemlja oblast. Arda, Vaasa and Suru join Graad, who had declared war on Mesque two months earlier. With that, Katla, the world's frontier land, is caught in the centrifuge.

The audience numbers for the movie "Vidkun Hird: 'Vidkun Hird'" are improving. To his great sadness, however, Konrad Gessle sees in the cinemas the exact kind of audience he feared the most when starting his controversial project. Bad times give a nationalistic colour to dissatisfaction, and there sit military youth, fascinated, together with senile Nazi grandfathers. None of them understands Gessle's delicate symbolism, his irony, his sense of absurdity. The stupid warriors admire Hird's blackshirt posing seriously, without a hint of irony. What impresses them the most is how the great figure eventually collapses under his own superhuman maxims. It seems poetic to them how he talks nonsense in his last interviews. The shots of the vegetable-like Hird in his cell move them to tears. Finally, it turns out that even his heroic mind could not live by these ancient truths. They were too honest, too genuine. As a warrior, Hird pushed himself to the limit, without succumbing to diluted cultural influences. That was his triumph, hubris, and downfall: truth - it's just too powerful.

This is just one of many end-of-the-world absurdities, but it's the one that makes Sven von Fersen think it's time to come out of the closet. Sven is slowly phasing out of the witty management articles, replacing them with "statements of support for the government and the armed forces". Then, as Graad and its Northern allies find themselves on the losing side of the world war, the only real confrontation is organised in Iilmaraa. Sven von Fersen doesn't want a helping hand from the camel shits: "Before you know it, they'll be stabbing you in the back with a scimitar."

But in the end, fascism remains where it always has been, on the margins of society, between cryptozoology and psionics. The predominant mass of public life is not like Sven von Fersen. Their Northern sense of style is too clearly established, and extremes do not find resonance. The editor's delicate hand roots out racially sensitive vocabulary from such writings. They cannot leave them unpublished – that would be against freedom of speech. And so, this patch of land in the Pale enters the stage of geopolitical apocalypse along with the rest of the world, but instead of collapsing, it just drifts apart. Still as social democrats. Still generously handing out aid to those who do nothing. Cruisers perish in the gunfire of the North Sea, but the unemployed artist is still offered retraining opportunities in their field by the state. Graad loses the Boreal Plateau up north, Jelinka burns in a three-month winter night and no one survives, but unemployed Per-Jonas is still talking about the book he's writing. Graad abandons the insignificant war theatre in Katla to concentrate forces on the defence of their home isola, the road to Arda is now open to the aggressor, and the front is shifting closer day by day, but there is still no word about Per-Jonas's book. Thus, despite the objections of extremists, Vaasa fades behind the curtains of history, along with its three-year paid paternity leave and impeccably functioning public transport.

Nothing seems to stop future projects with an ecological conscience there either. In the very last months, when the Pale creeps over the ocean towards Vaasa, the great dream of anti-light pollution lobbying groups comes true. Industrial and commercial buildings turn off their artificial lighting at the end of the working day, and street lamps are fitted with special filters. Vaasa, the first and last metropolis in world history, completely eliminates light pollution. This is not only a measure against bombing raids, but it also saves birds that might otherwise get lost in the city's maze of lights and seals whose mating rhythms are disrupted by a too long day. You may laugh at this, but in the evening, when the great world beyond becomes a bloody whirlpool, families come out into the streets in Vaasa and are together, insignificant. Only distant explosions disturb the deep peace of the winter night and its perfect starry sky. Everyone looks up, heads tilted back.

Khan's old mum is watching, too, in Saalem. Her eyes are coloured an iridescent dark as they do in Iilmaraa. A golden headscarf covers her hair. It is cold and the woman's breath steams through the streets of the wooden city. Aliyah Khan last saw her son that night, four years ago. It wasn't much later – no more than a month – when he called to say goodbye to his mother. Families are walking around, among them men of service age. Inayat said that he will not come back, but they, from the northern front, come all the time. Soldiers. Somehow, the war has been neglected too. It is all a kind of stagnation, a surrender, but it also reflects a deviance that is associated precisely with moralism, a movement that also has social democracy as a daughter cell. It reads like this: "For a moment, it seemed as if there was hope for humanity."

Then, as the stars curve overhead in descending devastation, many will no longer be able to take the slogan "end of the world" in all its seriousness. The panic has cooled down. In the strange indifference of the evacuation, whole families stay behind in Vaasa. There they play board games, in private houses, in spacious apartments. They love vitamin-rich food, and then, when the Pale is just days away, there's always a beautiful event to mark the occasion. Fruit goes mouldy. It thrives in them morbidly. Children listen to oranges crunching on the table. Spores sprout in the flesh of the fruit, the apples are hairy from them. If you try to touch them, they open with a crack. Nobody knows why it's like that. But few can start to feel scared by then, and that's why I say it's beautiful.

Khan's mother is one of those who decides to stay behind in Vaasa when the Pale comes. Many also flee. They head up to Arda, closer to the front, away from the Pale. Anita Lundqvist takes her fine hands there, in winter's orbit, and goes to the ammunition

factory to polish cartridges. In these last years, especially after the evacuation, the lingerie model seems extremely strong. All the frivolity and joie de vivre that made the girl a model in a functioning world is translated into something else entirely at the end of the world. These are leadership qualities and Anita Lundqvist is the queen of the refugee camp. When Åre Åkerlund meets her there, he doesn't recognise her at all. Who is this Valkyrie? But then Anita comes up to him, greets him by name and brings him some medicine to soothe Åkerlund's withdrawal symptoms. The well-known minimalist and deaf music critic is grateful. He tells her about an international drug business that no longer works. And about how the black banknote IIR - the interisolar réal - has been devalued and the world economy collapsed. Finally, Åkerlund tells her about the *un-world* - everything he experienced on his way to the refugee camp. He came to Arda on foot. Having missed the evacuation, the man trekked across frozen fjords for two months. He came through abandoned ghost towns, he was alone, and the Pale followed him. He crawled across the permafrost, where the wreckage of the downed airships sank into the mounds around him. Åkerlund also tells of the horse that pulled his sleigh and which he finally ate. And Anita tells him about Jesper. She only tells good things.

The factory where Anita works is a strategic resource. Although it is hidden deep in the fjords, the recently launched Mesque reconnaissance satellite "Mosaic" finds it there. The ecumenical aggressor wipes out the munitions factory with a hail of bombs, and the lingerie model is lost in the whirlwind of war. It is six years after the blizzard night when Khan, Jesper and Tereesz drove away.

Over the southern coast of Katla, the enemy of matter, the great transition buries the former isola. There was Vaasa and Charlottesjäl beach. Now, no one comes from there anymore, although those left behind - friends and family members - are constantly expected in the camps. Somewhere there, Ann-Margret Lund sits in her kitchen, amidst the Pale, her rooms quiet and clean. The former teacher wears a beige jacket and a knee-length skirt, watching the apricots mould. It would probably be too much to say that she hasn't called the police in the meantime. Like everyone else, she doesn't know what to do during this prolonged stay, where the feeling of the present slowly drifts away. But while others dissolve into their memories, she just disappears. Her life seems to have never existed. The past does not wait for her to come back. She wanders around the rooms, adjusting grandma's lace doilies and bedspreads, rearranging curtains on rails. And thus, tastefully, she refuses to succumb to the ecstasies that visit the human spirit as the world disintegrates. Nothing weakens from her grasp, nothing returns. When Katla isola finally sinks into the Pale, Ann-Margret Lund becomes a protein without the slightest pleasure.

16. ENTROPONAUT

Six years earlier, somewhere far away, on the edge of another isola, a man wakes up. The year is '72. He is alone. It's cold and dark in the tent and the man is curled up in his sleeping bag. He rubs his sides for warmth, his plaid sweater scratches his skin. It gets the blood pumping, and so the man finally ventures to put his hand out of the warmth of his sleeping bag. He wears woollen fingerless gloves in his sleep. It's a common thing in his line of work. He scrambles around the floor, finds a torch in the dark and fiddles with its frozen switch for half a minute. Finally, the bulb lights up, the electric light so poor it barely illuminates a single person. The man sits with his legs crossed in his sleeping bag and warms his hands. He breathes on his fingers, his toothless mouth agape. In the beam of the flashlight, on the inside of the tent, is a stamp with the manufacturer's name, "Cooperative 'Microcosmos'".

The man puts his hand against the tent, it's cold. The tent is sinking under the weight of the snow, insulated. There is not the slightest light from outside, nor can he hear the wind, the storm has died down during the night. The electron watch shows that today is his birthday, he is thirty-nine years old. It is 7:15 in the morning. Crouching in his microcosmos, he crawls out of his sleeping bag, pulls on his anorak jacket and tucks his feet into his drawstring boots. The lock chirps open and like that, bare-legged, he steps out of the tent straight into the Pale.

Twenty kilometres from the edge of the world, snow is falling softly. It's a dim morning and a shadow of a man trudges a few steps forward from the snow-covered tent, beneath a bare tree. Around him, the black-and-white dream of the taiga landscape emerges from the rocky teeth and ghostly robes of the fir trees. Through the snow and fog, barely perceptible blue seeps into the colourless world from where visibility doesn't extend. It's morning and it won't get any brighter here. And in the midst of it all, standing in front of the bare tree is a completely destroyed human being. He is an entroponaut. He is an ageing rock musician. His name is Zygismunt Berg and he is wearing dark blue underwear with a white stripe. He is pissing.

The camp is located on a mountain slope, on a terrace surrounded by fir trees. Even in the misty distance below the valley, the sound of a snow shovel can be heard as the entroponaut digs out his tent entrance. And then, the sound of an axe. Holding branches from the bare tree, Zygismunt Berg returns to his tent across the open field. Thick snowflakes float in the air, and the man has pulled on worn jeans. The flaps of his anorak jacket are undone and his hood is on his shoulders as he stands there. Something moves in the Pale directly in front of him.

Silence. This is the silence from which all other silences are derived. The entroponaut inhales sharply, his breathing loud enough to drown out the sound of his own blood rushing in his ears. The firewood creaks on his lap. He stands motionless, his back slightly hunched as always. The snowfall stops, and the Pale remains still with him. Minutes pass, and the electron watch on his wrist freezes at "07:48".

The footsteps of hooves on granite can be heard. Directly in front of him, on a rocky outcrop, a mountain goat steps out of the Pale. Zygismunt looks at him sharply and the mountain goat looks back at Zygismunt. They both have dark eyes, wet because of the cold. Zygismunt Berg has a receding hairline and the ponytail of an ageing rocker, and the alpha male has a huge crown of horns. Behind the beast, in the Pale, his herd glides by, painted silhouettes, straight legs flexing on hooves; they stamp uphill. The capricorns' horns are wrapped in the Pale like the spears of a passing army, and puffs

of steam rise from the lambs' nostrils. They walk with the females, and last goes the king himself. The mountain goat moves his crowned head and retreats into the Pale. He leaves the entroponaut there alone.

"Don't go," sounds Zygismunt's husky drunkard voice. "Please don't go!" He throws down the firewood and scrambles up the snowy stone wall. His fingerless gloves slide on the granite, his feet can't find a foothold. Groaning, he scrambles through the grey, dwarf fir trees. There's no one left, everyone's gone, what are you looking for, you fool?

"*Don't go, please don't go...* You're just like the old man! You know, the one who goes to the park looking for companionship in squirrels: 'Little Miki, come here Miki!' The need for closeness is just so deadly. He can't."

"But I'm so alone."

"You're never alone, Zigi. You have you!"

Twenty-one years ago, on a winter break evening, Zigi stands at the horse tram stop. In two days, the year will turn fifty-one from fifty. The Vaasa suburb sleeps around him, it's already late and it's dark outside, but he's not in a hurry to go anywhere. His mother is not waiting for him at home. The boy lounges back and forth on the wooden bench at the stop, the zippers on his leather jacket jingling. In the background is a high fence surrounding a plot of land, a constant reminder of private property. This annoys him.

He has just finished selling stuff to rich kids. And just before that, he performed his famous *sprechgesang* at the winter solstice party. The elementary school boys, in any case, laughed heartily, they loved it. Some of the high school boys thought, "Look at that idiot, he won't make it to twenty." But Zigi doesn't care about those high school kids anyway. They are established. "Little punks," as Zigi affectionately calls them - only they still have hope.

Zigi is also drunk and certainly in the mood for trouble. But at the Fahlu stop, there is no one at this time of day, so he has to settle for an inanimate object. Look at how he challenges the schedule, but the schedule is too stubborn. Disappointed with the schedule's lack of aggressiveness, the boy tries to pry it off the post, but the metal just bends on him. And since Zigi is the worst bastard in the whole country - the one who steals schedules so others don't know if the last tram has already left or not - he crumples up the necessary information into a ball and throws it away. The stop is still empty and Zigi is in a mood for mischief, the *weltanschauung* of the garbage can is no longer acceptable to him.

"What did you say?!" Zigi pushes the filthy garbage can with both hands, but it's too full and satisfied with itself to defend its honour. "I heard what you said there. '*Rioting mob,*' your tone was so condescending, '*daring to raise a hand against private property.*' You think you're a pretty cool guy, huh? '*Mob,*' '*daring to raise a hand.*' What's the problem, let's argue, we're all educated people... But you know what?"

The garbage can doesn't know what Zigi is talking about. It has a snow cap on its head, and cigarette butts have been put out in it - that's all. Wouldn't it still be possible to reach a peaceful agreement?

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Aah? You would, would you? Eat an egg, bourgeois!" Zigi slams his foot into the bin and almost loses his balance. The garbage can is finally subdued, and the silent force of nature turns his attention to the stop sign. Flapping in the wind, it reads "Fahlu". The sign begins to spin like a water mill as Zigi kicks it. But

when he lands, he slips and falls backwards. A cloud of snow rises into the air and for a moment as Zigi lies there, flakes of snow falling on his face, he laughs. Lanterns shine in the dark blue winter night sky above him, and snowflakes float. Somewhere up there, in the invisible blackness, orbits a forgotten communications satellite of a bygone age. Everything goes around so sweetly, a beautiful, dark world, wavering under the swings.

But Zigi hasn't partied enough. He pushes himself up. Since he dismantled the timetable, he now doesn't know whether the last tram has gone or not. Fortunately, the young man is still in the mood to change the world, and so we see him coming on foot, the knees of his jeans white with snow, his leather jacket front open and his pop idol hair flapping in the wind... He's coming down the suburb street, he's going home on foot. And on two sides of the road, behind the picket fences, the wooden houses huddle. He casts disdainful glances, the cosiness is bourgeois. He's looking for the right one, the dearest one of them all.

He has a brick in his hand.

He has a pimple on his forehead.

Karl Lund, a young paper manufacturer, reads a newspaper in the downstairs living room. The newspaper's headline features a silhouette of a centaur with a top hat, and in a dignified serif font, it reads "Kapitalist". This is not just some self-proclaimed speculator's journal, but rather a newspaper that was founded five hundred years ago during the dawn of the market economy and is one of the oldest in the world. It does not provide tips for quick enrichment; instead, Kapitalist examines the entire political reality through an economic prism. Just as it really is, on the other side of turn-of-the-century pipe dreams. Karl Lund is concerned about the world, he reads to understand, to help. Sincerely. You would read it yourself too, gladly - and would be a more substantial person for it - but unfortunately, you cannot understand Kapitalist.

Zigi can't understand it either. He has tried, but he can't. He didn't really make much of an effort either. The famine in Yeesut, the Tzaraath epidemic in Saramiriza - these things don't concern Zigi. He doesn't feel moved by them. To him, they are just criticism, and negativity. Zigi is not concerned about the world, he doesn't want to understand or help. He wants something completely different, and now he'll show you what it is. The boy tightens his shoelaces, thanks to the alcohol buzz he doesn't feel cold. He stands in front of the white wooden house holding a brick in his hand and takes aim.

The brick is released from his hand, and Zigi grins like a wild animal. The rock flies into the darkness of the winter night, at the end of which there is a caricature waiting to be smashed - the thing that is even a little bit normal in the life of young Zygismunt Berg: leather-bound books, the scent of mahogany. The window shatters into thousands of small pieces, and the paper manufacturer jumps up from his armchair. Upstairs, like a bad omen, dark green eyes open.

"I can't wait any longer!" Zigi bellows, his elbows bent at his sides and his back arched. "End, world, e n d!" Spit and vapour shoot out from his mouth. It's the liquor-scented flame of his breath, he's a dragon. Karl Lund is still a young man in '51, in his mid-thirties, he flies like a bullet from a rifle to the front door and pulls on his trainers. During the last month, he has found garbage bags in his garden with the label "BURGEOIS". In the morning, everything is full of trash, disgusting canned food boxes hang in the quince bushes. He rushes out, slams the garden gate open and stops for a moment. Barely fifty meters away, in the middle of the street, a figure in a black leather jacket dashes with all his might. The paper industrialist explodes from his place, racing after the boy.

Zigi's black pop star hair flutters in the wind, wavy and slightly greasy. The cold halos of

the lanterns behind him contract and unfold into auras as Zigi rushes past them. Snow flies from under his sneakers, the back flaps flutter in the wind. Here, fuelled by alcohol, Zigi runs through the best days of his life. But his sneakers slip on the snow, and he's been smoking since he was nine years old. And he doesn't like gym class.

Karl Lund often goes running with colleagues. And of course, he doesn't smoke. No, not even cigarettes. Although Zigi - with a garbage bag with the word "BURGEOIS" written on the side - thought he saw him smoking one big and penis-shaped just the other day. Somewhere there, behind the glass of a tasteful wooden house. By the way, he doesn't drink brandy out of carafes and he doesn't belong to Les Morts. Nor does he engage in sex tourism in developing countries.

A man speeds along, wearing a black high-necked jersey, the white leather of his trainers gleaming on the snow. The distance shrinks, Zigi slips on the corner, and he starts again on his hands. Thirty metres, he hears Karl Lund shouting behind him: "Stop, you bastard!" His palms sting and his lungs bleed, but Zigi's superhuman pain tolerance is back because of the alcohol. In fact, he's already torn his leg muscles to shreds, and after years of just hanging around, the sudden sprints come as a surprise. But Zigi feels nothing. He could run forever.

This is, of course, an illusion, the reality is that his body has its limits and after eight minutes of pushing it, it's making itself felt. At a railway crossing, two men run barely ten metres apart. Zigi makes a sharp turn and runs up the stairs to the platform. In the silence of the suburbs, the pounding of feet on concrete, and the increasingly gaspy breathing of the two can be heard far away. Two dark shapes move along the platform in the beams of lantern light, the distance shrinking. One glance behind and Zigi sees the bourgeois gentleman approaching with swift, controlled movements, like a *robot* sent from the future. At the end of the platform, the boy jumps off, heading for the railway-industrial paddocks of the suburbs - the place where he goes to loiter around. He maintains his balance as he lands and races on over the snow. In the darkness of the railway embankment, he thinks, he can finally shake off the robot. It doesn't give up! Normally, people like him don't dare come out of the house. They call their beloved police and then they huddle together there.

Along the snowy strip between the picket fence and the wall, and the railroad embankment, Zigi arrives first. The magic of the vodka is wearing off, he runs with small hops like a wounded animal. He feels his right leg cramping. Go on! But before that, he needs to make one last effort. Don't give up now, you leg-waster! He really wants a cigarette.

Behind him, Karl Lund feels the boy's sweat in his nostrils. He comes from the future where the world didn't end. Everyone there is a bourgeois and the working class is almost destroyed. One wild glance around and Karl Lund sees a dead end of garages waiting ahead. He squeezes out his last strength, and prepares for impact, with the intention of nailing Zigi against the wall. To hit full force. Just one look at that buffoon and he knows he can take him. The man reaches out and touches the boy's coat. Only a meter or so remains to the garage wall. Zigi pushes himself off from his right leg, directly against the brick wall, but his cramped other leg doesn't hook properly onto the crevice in the wall that he had in mind. The plan is executed halfway, he doesn't run up the wall like a seraphim's ensign. He slips but manages to grab the roof edge with both hands. Zigi flails up the wall, but Karl Lund grabs his leg.

"Damn it, boy, give up!"

But above him, on the garage roof, Zigi's friend towers over him and encourages him from behind. Zigi's friend is proud and powerful, although battered by time. He waves

in the dark like a grey flag and beckons.

A completely destroyed human being is smoking in the newly fallen taiga of Northeastern Samara, in the Nad-Umai eco-region. Twenty kilometres to the south, the world begins, with the People's Republic of Samara. Four thousand kilometres further, to the northeast, is Katla isola, and what lies between the two, no one knows.

"Don't be naive, of course, it's not some kind of afterlife," Zygismunt ends the pointless argument. He pulls tobacco rolls from an aluminium pickle jar and places them on paper. He stocked up on smoking material before leaving Sapurmat Ulan. Rations should be enough. At the central market, only dried-out jar bottoms were offered in exchange for buckwheat rolls, paper doesn't work, and glue tape doesn't stick properly. The paper sticks to the lips, and glowing tobacco falls from the cigarette onto the chest. The entroponaut pats his coat with his hand, and the glowing sparkles are the only colour around him in the Pale. He sits in the triangular entrance of the tent, his legs sticking out, and in front of him, in a hole dug into the snow, the fire smokes. On the other side of the fire, Ignus Nielsen, a friend from the Kras Mazov school and an apocalyptic blood-thirsty ghostly cytoplasm, crouches. The spooky defect of the film strip is framed by fir trees in the background in the mist, it is black and white and utterly unnatural.

"Happy birthday," says the ghostly cytoplasm.

"Thirty-nine," Zygismunt Berg replies. "Well, how did that happen?"

"You can easily round it up to forty now. There's no difference anymore. Get ready, tell yourself now that you're forty."

"I am forty."

"Forty! What happened? Wasn't it said that you couldn't live to be over twenty? You don't have a plan by now. What are you doing here?"

"You know, Ignus, I'd like to disappear..." the man dozes off and tidies the fire with a log. The dark orange flame in the heart of the fire comes to life.

"Again? Haven't we faded enough already?"

"You can always fade more, Ignus. You can leave less behind: scraps of paper, dentists..." Zigi puts the kettle on the fire, fresh snow melting there.

"They'll get you with that dentist thing! You should have done it yourself, back then in Graad, you should have used a screwdriver to pull out the scraps!"

"I tried, but it was too painful."

"I don't know what you're talking about, man, don't bother! And besides, if it's not a doctor, you're overestimating the bourgeois justice system. Discretionary leagues, like the hole, they only have *pakazuuha*. Remember Mazov?"

Zigi puts the prostheses in his mouth from the pocket of his anorak jacket. "You're always babbling. What Mazov? And besides - look where I am! Who's going to find me here anymore? Not even the Institute of Entroponautics can find me here."

"You think so?"

Zigi sticks his hand in an oven mitten and waits for the water to boil. "I think so. And what's more! This time I don't want to go just like that, out of the country."

"Well then, where from, Zigi? Countries are huge."

"From the world."

The Pale darkens, snowfields beneath it. The water in the kettle shivers. "My God..." sighs Ignus Nilsen, lumbered from the censor of time. The ghost leaves his backwards voice hollow, echoless. "Lord God, how sick I am of this fading nonsense."

Zigi manages to get his leg free of Karl Lund's grip after a big scramble. He steps on the family man's shoulder and kicks his way up to the garage roof. There he stands, triumphant under the winter sky, so young and so free. The bourgeois cowers in defeat before him.

"Hmm? What are you going to do now?" Zigi exclaims, gesticulating wildly with his hands as if to "put down" this industrialist. "What will you do, hm? Trying to climb up? I'll beat your fingers to shreds!" He stomps his foot on the edge of the garage roof to demonstrate what happens when you climb up after him. "You l o s e! I win! You just *fucking* lost!"

"Well done," whispers Ignus Nilsen from the shadows. "I did that to middle-class like that too. Together with Mazov, we killed them, you understand, in the hundreds of thousands. Almost a million bourgeois we killed, we would have killed more, but time ran out."

"I'll kill you!" Zigi roars. On the garage roof, the apocalypse blacksmith's *feeling* has come again, nothing is forbidden. "You hold the world together, I'll kill you. I'll kill your family."

"Boy, go to the doctor," Karl Lund gives up and turns to leave, but Zigi makes a snowball in his hands. When it hits Karl Lund in the back of his head, he turns around in a fiery rage and scurries back. "Fucker, I remember your face!"

"*I remember your face,*" Zigi says mockingly. "I remember your face too, I know where you live!" The snow floats around Zigi, snowflakes melting in his black hair.

"Come on down, you wanker, come on down if you're such a big man!"

"Oh, I'm coming!" Zigi throws a snowball down, but the man dodges it. "I'm coming down with the angels of death, they're wearing leather coats, your family is dead! Homo!"

"Very classy," praises Ignus Nilsen from the shadows behind him, "well done for putting that clue in the Special Committee. You are a poet. But a poet of deeds, not words!"

"I'll rape your wife!"

"You're on fire, boy, you're on fire! Go on!"

"You're going to settle in Yekokataa, I'll nationalise your companies!"

"Now it's getting too theoretical, don't go there, it's slippery ice. You know you don't really know anything about this stuff. Tell him he's a fag!"

"Faggot!"

An enraged Karl Lund tries to climb up, but Zigi hits him in the face with more snow and is ready to jump on his fingers when he falls back down.

"Okay, now's a good time to get lost, but before you do, say something fierce to him!"

"Faggot!"

"That'll do," says Ignus Nilsen, and Zigi's leather-clad figure disappears into the darkness of the garage.

A silhouette emerges from the blue-grey, snow-covered hillside, next to the big wheels of a tipped lorry. Nad-Umai is still half-light and grey. Zygismunt Berg comes alone along the road on the mountainside, with a huge backpack on his back, and an ageing rocker's ponytail hidden deep under his hood. The furry-edged hood of his anorak jacket smokes like a chimney. The man trudges with two ski poles in hand and a cigarette in his mouth, through the entropnetic catastrophe.

"When Mazov couldn't wait for the world revolution anymore..."

"You mean when he shot himself in the head because he had turned into a monster? Or because he was losing?"

"It's not like that," Ignus Nilsen waves like a grey flag on his left. "Mazov had a tender soul, reaction was rampant everywhere, no matter how many we killed, there were always more. And then those setbacks, everything collapsed in Revachol. He was just sad, he didn't think he was a monster."

Zygismunt's footprints run on the road between the fir trees, next to the ski pole punctures. "Tell me - how much did it cost for you to take power? How many comrades did it cost? Tell me, how it really was this time. 'I knew that Mazov's idea was working again when other communists came to kill me!' Was it so? Or wasn't it?"

"Of course not, you want to assume the worst of us, Zygismunt. So that you don't have to believe in anything anymore. So that you can do what you came here to do. Tell me, when can we expect a purge of the cadre? Both of us. When are you going alone?"

"Honestly, I've thought about it, Ignus."

"Think about it then, but know that it wasn't all murder and mayhem. When I took over, when it was all finally in my hands, it was a heady feeling. Can you imagine, the whole country is yours? It was just out of kindness, that feeling. I held Graad gently, like an architect holding a panel line..." The grey boxes glint in Ignus's chest, a window into history, "like a matchstick in hand. And I promised that now, given the chance - I would do anything for men. And you know, I didn't disappoint myself."

"It all slipped away, only one extraisolar colony remained, some kind of mountain goat shit!"

"Don't be so petty. Be sceptical, but don't underestimate Samara. My heart is buried in Samara. When we retreated here..."

"That's right, you *retreated*! Why did you retreat again? Why do my guys always retreat?"

"It was inevitable. And I wasn't going to become a fatalist. Giving up. I gave it all for this colony. My Revolutionary Republic of Samara!"

"Right, yes, 'People's Republic' is senile."

"I will never forgive them for what they did. After they messed it all up for me. What senility! I will never forgive it!" the ghostly grey cytoplasm is indignant.

The entroponaut crosses a mountain bridge with open barriers. The guard shacks doze in the snow, empty on both sides of the road. At the end of the bridge, a sign reads "Nemengi Uul - 36 kilometres." And further on, through the snowy Pale, is the taiga

of the Umai Mountains. Just two weeks ago, some of the world's largest reserves of fluorite, tungsten, zinc, and rare samarskite were extracted from the ground here... the smelters were smouldering, and industrial waste turned the crisp silver streams of the eco-region into rusty foam. But not anymore, now there is silence and peace. And along the inclined lorry road, the entroponaut goes down into the dark crevice of the valley, where the fir forest darkens around him. And in front of him, on the snowy road, a trail of hoof prints runs amok.

"It was magnificent! It was self-sacrifice, complete dedication to the people. I was a ruling machine on amphetamines, and I never slept. None of us slept. We built everything from scratch. With the help of the Yakuts, it was a brotherhood among nations. They respected our weapons, and we respected their happy spirit and dance. In six years, a country rose from nothing. The workers worked themselves to death, literally dying on the construction site, working on the fifth day in a row, heart attacks, exhaustion..."

"With a gun to their head?"

"You think so, but you're wrong. That would be the case now, of course, but not then. You can't imagine what happened here, how it was. It went through the world like a euphoria!"

"Euphoria? Amphetamine was widespread then, still medically untested."

But Ignus is not listening. "I said terrible things, yes! I stood on a white horse, in a snow tower, and made speeches. In the hills, on the building site... I swung my sword, the sword had silver sunbeams on the hilt. And all around me waved white flags, crown-horned banners, silvered, pentacles between the horned arms, the branches to the sky. All who came with me here were happy, Zigi! Communism is mighty! Believe in communism, it's a blast! I promise! It's beautiful if you believe in men, but without it...!"

"Without it, there is nothing."

"Nothing. There was a snowstorm, but it was white, it was morning. Communism is white, it's glistening! Communism is the morning, it's jubilation!"

The Pale begins to recede dangerously around the entroponaut. The world whitens, and ray wreaths seep from Ignus's chest into the twilight of the fir trees. Falling snow sparkles in their hands like silver confetti, the colour creeping into the world as a threat. Zygismunt stomps the ground with his foot. He covers his ears with his hands and screams: "Enough! Stop it!"

"Enough, stop it..." rolls across the forest like a sword sliced through the air.

"I'm really sorry, Zygismunt, my friend," the distortion's voice sounds. The man is panting in the middle of the forest road, it's dusk and half-light again. The Pale returns and the entroponaut breathes a sigh of relief. "You want me... to lose my mind?"

"No, I just wanted you to realise how good everything was then. What a time it was. What a beautiful time! I'm sorry..."

"That time is over. It's buried in your punched cards and your shit. Nobody can tell you what was there anymore. Nobody knows what it really was. It's shifted out of place. What really was, is gone, only the Pale remains. It's a mirage. You know that. I know it."

"It's your girls who talk like that," the cytoplasm whispers softly in Zygismunt's ear. The fir trees sway, and the Pale is dim but seductively soft. "These are your girls, girls don't believe in anything, all girls are bourgeois, Zigi."

"They weren't bourgeois."

"They were bourgeois, every last one of them. They read their girls' magazines. Revachol's fashions and perfumes, tales of the loss of virginity. It's all bourgeoisie. Every girl is, in fact, a weapon of the bourgeoisie."

"You didn't know them, you don't know what they were thinking. Nobody knows what they were thinking. I don't know either, but it wasn't bourgeoisie, Ignus. It was something else."

"If that's the way you want it, please. But you'd better believe in men, not in them, believe in communism."

"I tried, but I can't! It doesn't work for me... I'm not the communist type."

"Then why are you talking to me? I'm communism itself, the phantom that walks the earth. So why have you been with me all these years if you don't believe in communism?"

"Out of hatred for those who are better off in life, Ignus. And besides - you're a monster, grotesque. Who wouldn't love the company of monsters?"

"I'm not a monster."

"You're a monster, they call you the 'Apocalyptic Shrike'. Who else do you know who is called that? Nobody! All this carnage in Graad was by your hands, your signature is everywhere. And when you retreated, even when Mazov was no longer giving orders, you had the enemy soldiers impaled on poles. Twelve thousand of them. You cut down the fir trees for poles, you made a pole forest, it was gross, Ignus!"

"It was so they would let me build my country! My future country. You see, they would never have left us alone... They would have hunted us to death like game!"

"That may be so, but still: a bit excessive. 'The Shrike' - look what you've become!"

Human speech sounds out of place in the silence of the Pale. It echoes in the twilight of the trees as Zygismunt comes through the snow. It's a trick of K. Voronikin, an old entroponaut, that in the Pale you must be loud. Otherwise, it gets dull and the past comes up. But Zygismunt need not fear it. Even when he first came to the Pale, he discovered to his great dismay that he couldn't disappear like everyone else. Or rather, he can, but not to where he really wants to be. This makes him need Mazov's idea. The disappearance of the Lund children has literally given Zigi special entropnetic powers.

The morning is over, it's getting dark. A few dozen kilometres further on, the deep Pale begins, and the times of day no longer register there at all. Batteries must be conserved by then. He thinks for a second but then turns on the torch anyway. The snow shimmers in the beam of the torch, and Zygismunt directs it at his poor friend. Ignus' defect shines through.

"Look at yourself! You're pathetic. Everyone would be better off if they had done a clean job. Just a bunch of amateurs! I would have burned all your film rolls. It's so cruel, hanging here..."

"But then you wouldn't have known me, Zigi. Think about all the times we've spent together. It hasn't all been bad."

"What about me? I'm talking about you. Wouldn't it have been better if you weren't here? No pole forest and no amphetamines, cytoplasmic stumps. Who needed that?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Ignus drawls. "You know that. It doesn't matter how much we killed. The world is ending. Soon no one will remember me. Not to mention you. Even the mighty of this world will not be remembered."

"That's better. That's right. And the *mighty of this world*? You're a disgusting monster, rampaging around in this world!"

"You were rampaging too! Look at your hand, Zigi! Let's not forget..."

"One more word! Say it and you're gone!" the entroponaut yells. "Compared to you, I haven't done anything! And anyway! Which one of us is the Revolutionary Commissar? Is it you?"

"No!" Ignus trembles, he is afraid. "Forgive me, friend, ten thousand apologies! You alone are the Revolutionary Commissar - Zygismunt Berg - the pinnacle of your Party of Reason. I have no authority. All I have is the humble critique that I have written of myself. Take it. But don't kill me. On the other side of me is nothingness. I will do anything to stay. Anything. I am hope."

"You know what I want. This is the last thing. Start talking!"

But Ignus is unable to speak. He has no mouth. The film strip defect crackles in the darkness, illuminated by a flashlight beam, it is the height of cruelty. The impossible is demanded. Uncomfortable silence surrounds him in the forest air. Everyone is embarrassed. "Why, Ignus?" the entroponaut repeats, leaning in closer with his flashlight to peer into the heart of history. "Why did you do it, it didn't cost anything. I understand you emptied the banks, that was necessary. You even took the symphony orchestra with you on your retreat. By force. People like music, after all. But why *this*? Who did it bring joy to? Why 'Harnankur', that model didn't cost anything! Tell me that and you can stay."

"But I don't know," the backwards voice responds sadly, the audio track slowing down. "I don't know anything that you don't know."

Nothing else is said. The entroponaut shakes himself. Snow falls from his shoulders, from his anorak jacket. He continues alone. Frozen machine tracks run there, hoof prints in the snow, in the beam of his flashlight. And then, when the herd of mountain goats finally emerges from the darkness, they freeze in place in the middle of the road. Like a natural history museum exhibit. Occasionally, a female goat shifts in place and snorts; it's a nerve impulse, a muscle spasm. The tops of their backs are already covered in snow, but their nostrils still steam; they are still breathing - some for a few days, some for a few weeks. The figure in the anorak jacket moves through the herd with the indifference of a professional, until the flashlight beam casts the alpha male's horns as a shadow on the wall of fir trees. Zygismunt looks into the animal's glassy eyes. Time has disintegrated there. The primitive brainstems of the automatons fall into the Pale before humans do. This is how the hunters of the outback hunt their entrecôte. Of course, they eventually go insane themselves and never come back. But not Zigi, he has special powers. He takes the switchblade from his belt and slits the throat of the protein.

17. HARNANKUR

One hundred and fifty years ago, it is snowing on another isola, the isola of Graad, in the town of Mirova. It's a mid-winter evening, but thousands of people have gathered in the harbour. The pier bustles with them, the imperial Graad sprawling in the background - church towers and chimneys. The crowds wave goodbye to the airship rising into the sky. From its balcony baskets, a wooden and nickel swan greets the world's first interisolar flight passengers, dressed in splendid attire, embarking on an unprecedented adventure. It is a grey, frightening, but at the same time, cheerful and unforgettable experience. Today's technology, in the form of a luxuriously upholstered airship, makes it possible for an ordinary citizen, if perhaps a slightly better-off one, to experience it. And on the other side of the Pale - oh, mystical Pale! - awaits Katla and its royal capital Vaasa.

It's a monumental moment, journalists flock and camera flashes flicker. The small light bulbs in the cameras burn out, and their light makes the snowflakes freeze in the air. This is how the shutter speed captures Nadja Harnankur as well. The operetta star is captured in a photo with the chief engineer, her long, beautiful neck stretched out and a fur hat on her head. She smiles and waves her handkerchief to her namesake in the sky. The old Graad script spells "*Harnankur*" on the departing airship. This is the height of Nadja's fame.

Two days later, the interisolar flight enters the Pale, and then, barely six hours later, there is a deviation in the airship's course. "*Harnankur*" is lost without a trace, with one thousand five hundred passengers on board. It is believed that the flight veered into an uncharted entropometical mass, the ultra-deep Pale.

But *who* believes this? Para-historians. Dissenters and a couple of crazy SRV Pale fanatics. Men like K. Voronikin, an entroponaut who has lost his mind and a communist from the People's Republic of Samara, and Inayat Khan, an internationally unrecognised authority in the field of history, who probably no longer lives in his mother's basement. Nevertheless, this part of historical science, which men like Khan and Voronikin dismissively call *mainstream*, does not acknowledge the existence of an airship named "*Harnankur*." The first interisolar civil flight was "*Anastasia Lux*," and that was in the next decade.

Seventy-five years later, with the revolution of the turn of the century subsiding, "*Harnankur*" had been mostly forgotten. Documentation in newspaper archives may have been lost, for example in the fires of the Graadian Revolution, but still - the event was too massive for that. If the historical memory proves itself, albeit retroactively, even for a disappearing commissar like Julius Kuznitski, then where did the world's first interisolar flight with 1,500 people on board disappear? In the post-revolutionary century, "*Harnankur*" finally sank into historical obscurity. Until the '50s, when interest in disappearance cases suddenly took on subcultural dimensions in the developed world's middle class - certainly not a less inexplicable phenomenon. These men, mostly young, with little success with the opposite sex, were named *desaparecidos* after the genre's best-seller "*Los Desaparecidos*", and they became interested in one photo: someone named Nadja Harnankur, a marginally interesting disappearance case, standing in a port. She waves, wearing a fur hat, at the arm of a chief engineer. In the background, there are unearthly crowds of people and they all wave at something in the sky. But there's a mysterious emptiness in the sky.

That emptiness is the holy grail of the *desaparecidos*. According to them, the most convincing evidence for their cause is the industrial presentation model of the airship

with the same name that the Communists took with them from Graad to Samara when they retreated from their then-Revolutionary, now People's Republic. The original is on display at the Sapurmat Ulan Entroponetics Museum and the Communists take it very seriously. Unfortunately, nobody takes the Communists seriously. SRV entroponaut K. Saronovich Voronikin argues in his memoirs that the ship must exist because the model is technically feasible. In other words, over a thousand people could have been taken on a commercial trip through the Pale in all comfort with this industrial project. Making such a project would have been a splendid scientific achievement of its time. Why leave all this work unfulfilled as a commercially attractive venture? This is not at all dialectical materialism.

Critics say that over two hundred field trips to the Pale have left their mark. According to Voronikin, - again, in his own words - this project was forever lost on its maiden voyage. So would the model actually work? Could "Harnankur" be some sort of failed prototype for "Anastasia Lux"? Why is there no documentation?

K. Voronikin, however, claims that the model was made into a ship, the ship veered off course and encountered an unknown phenomenon in the Pale.

18. THREE MEAT PIES IN OIL BATTER

From the windows of the high-rise building, the glow of Mirova, the capital of Graad, can be seen on the wall, one hundred and forty-eight years later. During the feverish nights of history, all of the imperial architecture was destroyed. The revolutionaries were driven out, and now the city has been recreated by democracy as a glowing spirit of light. It is a terrifying, out-of-control environment, in constant motion on the surface of skyscraper glass reflections. Even Mirova can only be viewed in a mirror, like some mythological horror. Its movement is the unstoppable economic growth of Graad, now made physical; a true thermodynamic impossibility establishes itself in this way. The metros glide, and traffic streams swirl day and night. From this sixtieth floor, the nerve centre Noo comes into view. Noo is the pinnacle of one nation's arrogance - the financial peninsula of Graad. Local scientists claim that the earth was once covered by the geosphere, then by the biosphere, and now it is the era of the noosphere. The mind covers the earth, and the skyscrapers of Noo are the throne of this network. The throne of the mind. Here, it carries out its operations through long-distance calls and invisible transmissions. Its thoughts are incomprehensible financial instruments. No one knows what they are or how much they cost. The glass mirror is black - an interisolar réal - but what is man? Man is light.

The scientific community of the republic, the third generation of expelled revolutionaries, laughs at this. In Samara, a fourth term has been introduced: the entroposphere. The wave equations and Samara's calculations are promising. This beautiful thing could sweep away Graad at any moment. In that barely perceptible place where communism becomes nihilism (certainly a finer transition than from a child's friend to a child's abuser), the party's top leaders seem to think: why not? Our idea no longer wins hearts among you - and let's be honest - it never will. We like this idea, but the world no longer does. Let it disappear if it's already like this.

So when Sarjan Ambartsumjan turns his back to the window on the top floor of his Noo house, there are only two years left until that day. The class reunion is coming, and when it collapses on the North Road, it will become apparent in the chain of events that what is shining behind Ambartsumjan's back is nothing less than the final stage of the element.

All the light comes from outside. Snow floats outside the window, evaporating long before it reaches the street level sixty floors below, amidst Noo's thoughts. In Mirova, it's never winter again. Only here under the sky, it lasts. The room is cold, and the support columns emerge from the darkness. The phone rings. Ambartsumjan walks barefoot, in his suit. Around him, the shadows of snowflakes dance on glass display cases, where the world's largest collection of disappearing memorabilia rests. Before Ambartsumjan became a fifty-year-old mazut¹² billionaire, he was an unsuccessful young man among the opposite sex. One of the first. The ringing of the phone breaks the dignified silence of the room. The man takes a seat behind the desk and toggles on the speaker. He places his free hand on Ramout Karzai's skull on the desk. It is authentic.

"I'm listening."

"A man from Katla, with Vaasa area code," reports the faithful secretary. "He says he got the number from a private collection auction, but I think he probably wants a loan."

"Why?"

¹²Mazut is a Russian term for low-quality, heavy fuel oil, used in power plants and similar applications.

“Well, it’s a long-distance call, at the receiver’s expense.”

Ambartsumjan chuckles. “At the receiver’s expense! Well, all right, connect him. But a loan...” the man waits, one hand on Ramout Karzai’s skull, the other on his grey beard. He is of gigantic stature.

“You won’t give a loan,” says the secretary.

“Exactly. In principle, I won’t. Connect him.”

The speaker switches to the long-distance call, and the Pale seeping through the cloth of the receiver fills the room air. The signal runs through the Great Unknown, from Katla to Graad. Relay stations cleanse the call of historical noise on its way, but something always creeps and sneaks into the wires – a ghost radio station. Its silent voice in an incomprehensible language reminds why it is here. To end life. “*Azimuth-Boreas-Sector...*” runs through the hidden radio frequency and disappears. Ambartsumjan is used to it. In the middle of it all, a distorted human voice from three thousand kilometres away can be heard. It says, “Hello, my name is Inayat Khan.”

“Who?”

“Inayat Khan.”

“Okay, Yat Khan, how did you get my number?”

“Ina-yat Khan. Norrköping fair, from an auction. Asked to call about your... hobby. Are you Mr...” the man pauses, “Mr. Ambartsumjan?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“And you collect things of people who have disappeared?”

“*Disappeared*,” whispers the Pale on the speaker.

“Yes, I collect them,” replies Ambartsumjan, “and no, that’s not my *hobby*. I put my heart into what I do. I take it seriously.”

“I do too. You can be sure of that.”

“Can I? ‘The things of disappeared people’ – what are we talking about! The correct term is ‘disappearance memorabilia’.

Ambartsumjan sinks contentedly into an armchair, in the dimness of the hall. Well said. The armchair is made of expensive leather.

“Look, I know what the correct term is, okay.” Khan is starting to get anxious. Meetings between desaparecidos are seldom cordial, tending towards a scuffle. “This isn’t exactly the first purchase I’ve called about. And no, I didn’t buy it for myself as a paperweight. If that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“So you have a professional collection?”

“You wouldn’t ask me that if you’d give me a chance to tell about you the *thing* I just bought!”

“How *extensive* is your collection?”

“Well, you see! You won’t let me!”

“I will let you. I’d like to know who I’m talking to first.” Ambartsumjan doesn’t raise his voice, only a faint shudder remains of the nerd’s whining. After years of training. The

pimples are also rather psychological. His grey beard is authoritative. The man strokes Ramout Karzai's skull like a pet.

"I consider the technical model of 'Harnankur' to be my crown jewel," Khan blurts out, a whining tone in his voice.

"Who are you talking to there?" A woman's voice in the background ruins the drama of the moment. "Come and eat, the food's getting cold!" Even though Khan mutes the phone with his hand, the air in the room still resounds, "Mother, let me talk! Don't interrupt!"

"Mum," the Pale echoes back, "*it's my mum.*"

Ambartsumjan shakes his head. He moves closer to the table. "And *you* have 'Harnankur'?"

"Yes, I have it," Khan announces.

"A copy?"

"No, I went and stole it there in Sapurmat Ulan. Of course I don't have the original. And neither do you!" Khan collects himself for a moment. "I understand you have another copy in your possession then, yes? That's what I'm calling for. It's in the contract, the owner's responsibility. I was supposed to get a maintenance manual from you."

"Do you know what it is?" Ambartsumjan is deadly serious. "Do you know how *important* it is?"

"There's nothing left except that."

Ambartsumjan nods slowly. "Right, you have to... devote time to it. Hold it. You have to think about it, like a girl, you understand? Like a beautiful girl. Have you ever seen one? You have to be responsible, it's not a toy."

"*Think* about it in what way?"

"That's the care instructions. You didn't think I was going to tell you about the switch, did you? For example - did you know there was a third copy?"

"A third copy?" Khan doesn't understand.

"Of course you didn't know..." Ambartsumjan folds his arms across his chest. "So now you know - there was a third copy. All that was left of it was an empty showcase. You must look at it. All the time. Don't let it out of your sight. Don't leave it alone. And if you do, think about it. Do you think it's a coincidence that they keep the original in a museum? Think about it, hundreds of people pass by, every day. They look at it. And then, when the museum is closed, the night watchmen look."

Khan says nothing, a ghost-like hum of the Pale echoes on the phone.

"It's an impossible object," summarises Ambartsumjan. "The world no longer supports it."

The Pale is frozen in the valley two years later. There is not a soul on the forest road. A trail of blood droplets runs in the snow, racing with the footprints along the dark tunnel of the road. It goes past the giant fir trees, crouching under the snow until it reaches the intersection with the main road. There is a red puddle on the ground at the intersection, and an abandoned fire smoulders next to it. A homemade frame is set up on the fire. Two

branches hold the third one horizontally above the extinguished flames. Bones gnawed completely clean lie on the snow.

And on it goes! Along the road where machines no longer drive. Frozen electric wires twist in the darkness. Drops of water fall one by one onto the snow, alongside the footprints. With a terrible determination. The wreckage of crawler machines sleeps in the ditch by the side of the road, and the dark shape of a petrol station squats in the distance where the road bends.

“Orbit-Laudanum-Ultra-Tricolor-Ellipsis...”

Something rises. There is a screech of metal.

“Tell me you understand what I’m talking about and start doing it!” commands Ambartsumjan.

“I think I do. I’ll try.”

“Don’t try, do it! You’ll eventually understand. After the third one disappeared, I became, to put it mildly, paranoid. To this day, when I step into a room and turn on the lights, I’m afraid it will happen again. That there is an empty showcase in the middle of the room. Or that there is nothing in that room at all. You’ll be the same way. Then you’ll understand what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean you’re afraid it will happen *again*?” Khan doesn’t miss this detail. Ambartsumjan is silent. He is drumming with his fingers on the skull.

“What do you mean again?” repeats Khan.

“I lost it. That’s what happened. It was also mine, the third one. But you know, it wasn’t like usual when something disappears. Keys, for example, or something expensive. Have you felt that? Have you come across this phenomenon? A feeling like that?”

The professional arrogance in Khan’s voice is as if swept away. “I have,” he says.

“Then you know what I’m talking about.” The man’s hand slips from Ramout Karzai’s skull. Projector beams from a long airship glide outside the hall window, and shadows of pillars creep across the floor. “When did it start for you?” Ambartsumjan asks.

“Eighteen years ago. That was the first time. From then on...” Khan remains silent.

“From then on it comes more and more often, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” replies Khan. “And other things too.”

“What things?” Ambartsumjan’s ear is now pressed against the speaker, chest up on the table. “*All* things?”

“Yes. Back alleys, a girl riding a bike, and the light, or when some horse is looking. Especially animals...”

“The whole world?”

“Yes. The whole world.”

On either side of the road rise crawler machines, iron relics in shades of the Pale. They spin, helpless bodies, snow falling from rusted frames. The material degrades, drop by drop, like an analogue rhythm running red through a colourless world. The international

alphabet is hidden in low frequencies "...*Nadir-Ellipsis-Gamut-Azimuth...*" and so on until the edge of the settlement.

Nemengi Uul is a ghost town. The streets are empty, with triple concrete buildings rising on either side of the valley. A lone bicycle hangs in the air next to a swing, otherwise, everything is completely normal. The windows of the grocery store pass by, followed by the community centre. Footprints run up the stairs to the hospital entrance, where the lock has been broken. He will escape... he will get away! In the dark corridor, rustling can be heard. "...*Tricolor-Icon-Orbit-Nadir.*"

End of transmission.

"And that's how it's been for you for eighteen years? Twelve for me." Ambartsumjan sinks back in his chair, deep into the leather.

"Then it gets worse. But in the end..." Khan's voice crackles in the curve of the Pale, "In the end, it somehow becomes... it's somehow good, this feeling."

"Good?"

"Yeah. Like everything is going to be alright."

"Like everything's going to be alright," sighs Ambartsumjan. "I don't have it anymore. And that's better. I sold mine. The remaining model. It's gone. The endless looking, the obligation..." the man collects himself, "it wore me out."

"So you sold it?"

"Yes, I did, cheaply too, to the first bidder. The man seemed right. That's what he wanted too, it was important. That's the kind of man you'd have to be to take care of things. Someone who'd look after it a lot and not let it disappear. Like me. Still a thousand and five hundred people..."

"But the register still says it's yours!"

"What register?"

"The auction register," comes Khan's increasingly sharp voice. "Otherwise I wouldn't be talking to you! I'd be talking to the new owner."

"No, I don't understand, the man had to register it himself. Are you sure?" Ambartsumjan gets up and walks around on the table, skull still in hand, "Maybe..."

"Who did you sell it to? If you still remember."

"Of course, I remember, okay," Ambartsumjan mutters, "Berg was his name. A private collector."

"*Zygismunt Berg?*" blares from the speaker. "Black hair, skinny?"

"About like that yes. It was... what was it? Ten years ago, but yes. *Zygismunt Berg.*"

"Are you absolutely sure? Did he have a potty mouth? No, better tell me, did he speak with an accent? Like he had lived in Vaasa?"

"God, I don't remember such details... It could have been an accent. Why is that so important?"

"And you said ten years ago? What year was that e x a c t l y?"

"'59. Or '60. Why?"

“And in any case, it was after ‘57?”

“Absolutely sure, listen, I’ve got the papers here! But, please,” Ambartsumjan commands with the skull in the direction of the speaker, “why is it so important all of a sudden?”

“Because...” the voice in the ziggurat might explode with excitement at any moment, “because in ‘57 this man died!”

The giant mazut billionaire stoops over the table: “Say again, w h a t?”

But Khan on the other side of the phone is no longer listening. “A lead!” he blurts out. And the last thing Ambartsumjan hears is the man’s receding voice in the ever-growing din: “Mother, mother!” he says. I’ve found a lead!”

Two years later.

The Mirova sky station platform is empty for the night. The remaining passengers have long gone home. A buffeted magnet train rests above the city on the side of the platform. The five-story carriages tower, and through the snowstorm, a robot steps forward.

A voice approaches. “Tzuut-tzuut-tzuut,” says the robot with each step. The large, thick pilot on its back, in the cockpit, turns the robot’s head. “Ti-diri-diit,” replies the control system. The machinery corrects its course and the fish-tailed patterned coat flutters in the wind.

“Hey, seriously! Maybe that’s enough already,” grumbles a skinny blond man next to the robot. His head is pounding. Behind him lies a six-day train journey, full of the incessant disappearance talk of Ambartsumjan and Zigi, Ramout Karzai’s skull, and an airship that had “qualities” that reminded Khan of the girls. But this hobby-entropnetics had become so morbid that no one wanted to know much about it. And then they were already on stage at the “Panorama” bar singing karaoke. All three of them: “*Now I’m so happy I found you!*”

“Tzut-tzut-tzut,” the robot accelerates instead. The pilot has pulled his head back, so it means acceleration. The robot approaches, and the fat man squeals on its back, his turquoise-orange-violet scarf fluttering in the wind.

“*Hydrauliczny operatywny, rozpoczynają: diagnostyków,*”¹³ says the robot in a robot voice and staggers.

“Weapon systems, check!” commands the pilot and snaps his fingers at the skinny one.

“*Systemy broni operatywny,*”¹⁴ replies the robot. The skinny blonde reluctantly hands the pilot a bottle. He pours fuel in the machine’s mouth. The machine gobbles it down and red liquid drips onto the snow: “*Paliwo rezerwuje przy: jedzicie setka procent.*”¹⁵

“Go on!” the fat man points to the blizzard.

“Wait!” The robot says and adjusts his load.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready. *Rozpoczynają: szukają i ratunkowe protokoły!*”¹⁶ says the robot. But he only manages to take three steps – “tzuut-tzuuttzuut...” – when, far away on the other side

¹³(*Polish orig.*) Hydraulics operational, start: diagnostics.

¹⁴(*Polish orig.*) Weapon systems operational.

¹⁵(*Polish orig.*) Reserve fuel at: hundred percent.

¹⁶(*Polish orig.*) Initialising: search and rescue protocols!

of the platform, someone steps out of the blizzard. The robot startles, the fat man falls off its back, and the blonde instinctively jumps to the side. The wanted agent, Tereesz Machejek, pulls a pistol from his pocket, and the man from Internal Affairs on the other side of the platform does the same. From behind him, two more Collaboration agents emerge from the bushes, pistols cocked. They take aim, and the wanted agent Machejek takes aim at them.

"It's sad to see," says the Man from Internal Affairs, "how far he has fallen. Just think, twenty-two solved cases. But now - a compulsive desaparecido."

The sky station hangs in the air like a black ghost above Mirova's glow. There on the platform, in the icy street under the sky, stands former agent Tereesz Machejek. The man from Internal Affairs can still see his unshaven beard, the tie thrown over his shoulder and the face of a drunkard. Flavoured berry wine freezes on his chin, and tobacco-capped teeth contort into a grinning expression. Two friends gesticulate at someone crouching in the snow. They're panicking.

The man from Internal Affairs wears a neat black coat and a black suit. "Did you think you could just disappear from *CoPo*?!" he shouts into the wind. "You put the gun down, come in calmly and nobody gets hurt. There are twenty men down there. There's no way out!"

The mad agent shouts something back, but it can't be heard in the rising wind. The bloodhound of Internal Affairs perks up his ears: "What?!"

"Frantiček the Brave!!!" comes from the other side of the platform, with a pistol shot.

"No!" yells Khan.

Zigi kicks the door open with his foot. In slow motion. Splinters fly, and the lock's spine gives up with a crack. The door comes off its hinges and hangs there, miserable. A bare-chested boy, a wine bottle in his right hand, hangs between the frames. He's high on amphetamines, longing for caresses and beauty. He is seventeen years old, three years left until his expiration date. The boy slides his left hand into his trousers.

"Which one of you bourgeois bimbos wants to fuck?"

A neatly decorated living room opens in front of Zigi. About twenty middle-class youths are sitting there, it's a house party. Half of them are girls, but none of them wants to sleep with Zigi. It's the next day's evening - New Year's Eve. In two hours, '51 will be '52, and these young people are Zigi's new schoolmates. It's about now when they think that maybe they shouldn't have invited Zigi. "Enough!" Handsome Alexander jumps up from the sofa. But he never gets to say the words: "Get out, you wanker!" He doesn't have time to betray his friend Zigi, because to be honest - Zigi doesn't have any friends. Zigi is a flaming deterrent, he screams: "Zigi, strike first!!!"

And then a bottle of red wine flies into the face of Handsome Alexander. The young man, beautiful as Absalom, puts his hands to his face. "My God, my face!" he looks at the wine in his hands and thinks it's blood pouring.

"His face!" yells Alexander's girl, one of many, jumping behind the sofa.

"Broke Alex's face..." is heard in the room full of people. Handsome Alexander himself is blinded by grief. His wine-stained face contorts into an impossibly beautiful war cry. "Aaahhh..." escapes his lips. The boy leaps to Zigi's feet: "My face! I'll kill you!"

The sweaty junkie and the male beauty in a skimpy shirt are on the floor. Zigi tries to get up, but Handsome Alexander won't let him. He beats him as hard as he can with his fists. And it's very hard. It seems that a miscalculation has taken place. Zigi forgot that Handsome Alexander goes to the gym after class, giving equal attention to all muscle groups. Zigi is in pain. The floor lamp falls. And somebody's drinking cup. Middle-class youth hovers in the shallow underwater hits of punches inside Zigi's skull. There are voices, girls' voices. They say: "Junkie, *loser!*"

The boy's hand digs around, but no weapon falls between his fingers. Ah, if only there were a sword, a beautiful sword! A backwards pentacle in the hilt. Like the rays of the sun.

"Damn it, let's go help Alex..." the brave boys approach. And leg hooks straight to the belly. Zigi writhes, in the grip of tough muscle.

"Beast. Always a beast," whispers the cytoplasm.

The coattail of the Internal Affairs Investigator is fluttering. There is a tiny bullet hole in the black fabric - useless, foolish resistance. Three gunpowder bursts fly in response to the blizzard. The former Collaboration Police agent's knee pad explodes from the hit. The first shot knocks Tereesz off his feet, the second hit his shoulder. A mess of tendons and blood clots in the snowstorm.

"Ffran...ti..." Khan hears his friend groaning. He lifts his head from the snow. Tereesz's potato-coloured hair is waving in the wind, stained with blood. His eyes of random colours are moist in the blizzard. So the kojko raises himself on his knees. The pistol trembles and gunpowder falls into the barrel. Ammunition bearings fall from his coat pocket, but Tereesz cannot find them in the snowy puddle of blood. His wounded hand cannot handle the delicate work of reloading. Everything gets messed up.

Three figures in coats approach the platform. Carefully, hunched backs like jackals. Tereesz falls on his back, retreating by crawling. He drags the wet rag of his clothes into the snow, leaving a trail of blood. The pistol and gunpowder are left behind in a steaming pool in front of Khan. Coattails fluttering like wings, three Collaboration Police agents brush past Khan. The Internal Affairs Investigator kneels. He gains momentum, pistol in hand. Khan looks stupidly as Tereesz takes a pistol handle blow from the angel of death and twitches.

So, no one notices Jesper reaching for his friend's service weapon. He doesn't know why, but he hides it in his pocket. Like memorabilia.

Zigi flies out of the garden gate. Two boys throw him like a potato sack by his arms and legs. The boy lands on a street, curled into a ball. A white picket fence glows beside him, in the dark. The gate stays ajar, and the boys go. Before the door of the house is pulled shut, music can be heard from inside. The party is back on. But then - silence.

Snowflakes sparkle. The winter night in Katla is icy clear, and Zigi is lying down underneath it. His body does not obey his commands. Still bare-chested, he plods through the snow. The dear world, doomed to perish, circles around. In his black eyes, as big as carriage wheels, the street-lamps' rushing beams gleam. The boy starts to laugh, and the dogs bark. And their barking makes all the dogs in the neighbourhood bark.

"Beautiful beast," whispers the cytoplasm, "communism loves you. Get yourself up on your lump, go back and slaughter the whole house!"

Zigi grabs a handful of cold snow and rubs it on his face. The snow turns into a red berry biscuit on his nose. He smacks the snowball into his swollen eye socket. In the darkness, a dog's bark echoes in the curve of his ears.

"Throw it in a window then! Tell them they're bourgeois!"

"They don't understand!" Zigi yells. "They don't know what a bourgeois is! Don't you understand that it doesn't offend them any more? They don't know what it means!"

"What do you mean they don't know what 'bourgeois' means?"

"Exactly that," Zigi grunts and whacks his hand in the snow. "It's a random historical word, romantic even. Like 'cuirass' or 'coquette'..." He tries to push himself up on his elbows, but can't, he collapses. The crunch of snow under someone's shoe can be heard from the garden.

"It's coming to kill you! Run, beast!"

"Shut up!" Zigi whispers.

All the dogs fall silent at once. Somewhere a light coat rustles. The smell of winter wafts up his nose, so sweet that the boy dares not breathe. He holds his breath, and in the darkness far away the snow crunches. He knows what those footsteps are. Those steps are destruction. His destruction and Iilmaraa's. It is where the original civilisation gathered, fifteen hundred years ago, where it faded from history, with all its pillars and ancient stringed instruments. So no one really knows where these nations came from. All these people. The garden gate slides open with a crunch. Sounds like a memory, gone now, as it happens. Zigi can't understand why it's such a terrible feeling. It must be the Samara amph. The boy can't take it anymore, he breathes out. Silvery breath rises from his smashed mouth.

Doom stands over him and breathes.

Twenty-one years later, an entroponaut paces the empty hospital corridors of Nemengi Uul. Two freshly skinned goat hooves on his back drip blood onto the linoleum, and he has a fuel canister in each hand. The man kicks open the door with his foot. He strides up the fire escape stairs to a large steel door. There he stops at last and puts the canisters down. The mazut rattles in them.

The entroponaut pulls out the cutting tongs like a sword from his backpack. The iron snaps. The sound of steel echoes in the abandoned hospital staircase. And back through the deep Pale, abandoned ghost town areas, to the road, to the gas stations, to the intersection it echoes. Along the blood trail to the bonfire site. And into the dark forest, the natural history museum, where mouldy fungi grow on the antlers of males and steam no longer rises from the nostrils of the calves. They still breathe, but not oxygen, instead pure Pale.

The door flies open and the entroponaut steps onto the hospital roof. Pale swirls into a vortex there. A man in an anorak jacket steps through it, with cans in hand and goat legs on his back. He throws the containers down and kicks them forward, the cans slide on the roof, on the snow. Mazut splashes. The entroponaut runs his hand through his receding hairline and ageing rockstar ponytail. In front of him, on the landing platform, under the tarpaulin, floats a shape the size of a small house.

The backpack falls into the snow. He grabs the cable holding the cover taut. The thin steel slips between his gloves. The man tightens the cable and the mass wobbles in the

Pale. The carabiner clicks loose from its mooring and Zygismunt lets the cable go with a grin. The dark tarpaulin rises like a bird up into the Pale, and from beneath it a small airship comes into view; the sturdy iron lump floats like an armoured apricot pit and cables keep it attached to the ground. Stencil lettering runs along the ship's armour plates: "Roo 501", the Samara small airship brand.

The tarpaulin cover flag flutters high above the hospital. Zygismunt Berg watches from the landing platform as it is wrapped up in Pale. He starts climbing up the cable.

Only in about half an hour, a hermetic door opens inward. With a hiss. Oxygen flows out of the cockpit, and the illuminator and instrument panels become hazy from the change in atmosphere. Sweaty Zygismunt Berg climbs in through the door. The room, about the size of a small bedroom, trembles from his effort, and the ship sways. He angrily throws his anorak jacket to the floor and never puts it on again. It's practical, sure. And even a uniform for an entroponaut. But to him, the jacket is associated with a fashion craze he should never have seen - disco. The man starts winding the ropes around his waist. He still doesn't say anything, not a word, even though he's covered in bruises from falls. He doesn't even curse. First comes the backpack, then the goat legs. And lastly, the two mazut canisters clatter against the ship's hull.

He collapses against the wall, exhausted, and rests for a moment. He prepares a cigarette behind his ear and pulls out the rolled-up maps. With a matchbox in his teeth, the man lines up the maps on a wall lined with cockpit instruments. Aerial photos are displayed in a row: the dark green taiga of Nad-Umai, and the cluster of concrete boxes of Nemengi Uul. And on the edge of this, the former border of the world, drawn with grey watercolours. A vast blank space full of azimuths, ellipses, and sine waves begins where the world ends. And far away from this geometric maze, in the loneliest of solitudes, in the centre of a cycle where no destination leads, a line of tiny dots runs, a distant constellation, a superposition. This is the end.

The Rodionov Deep is located in the heart of the Pale, four thousand kilometres from the edge of the world. The flight there could take years. The man looks at his hand, and on each of his white knuckles there's a tattoo, numbers like beads on a string together: "5; 12; 13; 14."

Zygismunt Berg turns the ignition key. The lights come on in the cockpit, golden fog lamps in the middle of the Pale. The electric hum runs through the airship like a purr, and the little arrows jump behind the indicator glass. Welcome, entroponaut.

The man presses the START button on the ship's Stereo 8 player. The tape is labelled with a girl's cursive handwriting: "Zigi's Drive to the End of the World Mix-tape." When the disc starts spinning, the little heart over on the last "i" of the name "Zigi" stays in the middle of everything. The speakers play *rock* music from the '50s, by a band of now-dead drunks from the north. It's a beautiful song that the bourgeoisie, unfortunately, couldn't understand. Track #1 - "*Helvetti*" - was too complex, too dark, and too edgy in its established womb-shaped musical taste. Let them rot in hell. By the time the Pale infiltrates their kitchen corners and turns them into proteins, the members of the band, who had been without a larger audience despite their best efforts, will have already drunk themselves to death in front of the Lemminkäinen village store.

Zigi lights a cigarette. He nods his head to the beat, wearing a rugged sweater in the middle of the cockpit. This music is real. It says it like it is. But something is still missing.

"You forgot your leather jacket, Zigi!" Doom says in the dark, with a girl's voice. But Zigi doesn't dare open his swollen eyes. He knows what's really waiting out there. The snow smells all around him, in his broken capillaries. O, bourgeois perfume!

"Uuu-uu!" sings Doom, "thy jacket."

"Tell me... Doom..." croaks Zigi in the darkroom of winter, "is it a *cool* leather jacket?"

"Pretty cool leather jacket, yeah."

Locks ring above him. Blood rushes to his mouth, a snowball melts in his eye socket. He coughs: "Doom... so you... like leather jackets?"

"I do."

"And you know who I am?"

"Of course!" Doom exclaims happily. "You're Zigi - the worst boy in school."

Twenty-one years later, Zygismunt Berg opens the ship's toolbox. There, on top of the wrenches, is a black leather jacket. It's his leather jacket. He pulls it on. His shoulders no longer fit properly, and his back is hunched. The lock won't fasten around his beer belly, but never mind. That's the way it is. He leaves the front open. There are seven white stripes running down his back, still looking heavily evil. Like this, the entroponaut stands at the cockpit door of his small airship and throws his ponytail over his shoulder.

Suru *rock* can be heard in the frozen Pale. The harmonica howls. You could say Zigi is *self-chilling* there at the door.

♪ *Mutta mikä on maa?*

*Se on Helvetti*¹⁷

... he sings along and smacks the emergency button with his palm. Thus, the clatter of the iron contraption booms into the beginning of the beat, and the propeller bogies fall down. The ship begins to sway to the music, its wings unfolding inside the Pale like lush steel petals, blades hanging down. And what approaches is the song's most fierce lyric:

♪ *Se ei ole mikään kauhupaikka...*¹⁸

... he sings and is joined by a familiar upturned choir. Together they are mighty for the last time:

♪ *Enneminkin siinnä on surullista*¹⁹

Ignus Nilsen's ghostly grey cytoplasm stands below on the landing platform, between unfolding wings.

Zygismunt stays looking at him, and Ignus looks back at Zygismunt. The Pale flows in and out of the cytoplasm's bubbling heart. Only a slightly lighter clump is in Ignus' heart. The enemy of matter drifts through him, like wings.

"Communism forgives you," he says, "Communism understands."

"Ignus," mumbles the entroponaut, "forgive me."

¹⁷(*Finnish orig.*) But what is a country? / It's Hell

¹⁸(*Finnish orig.*) It's not a place of horror...

¹⁹(*Finnish orig.*) That's what's sad about it

"Already forgiven. We had a man like you in Graad too. Ion Rodionov was his *nom de guerre*. I also considered him a friend. You know that name, don't you?"

"Only the name."

"But you don't know who he was? He was a mathematician of the Revolution, at the top of the party, with me and Mazov. Nobody knows that. Nor why he took the model of the 'Harnankur' from Graad."

"But *I* don't know that!" Zygismunt drops a cigarette from his mouth.

"Of course you don't. Only the Commissar of the Revolution and a handful of close relatives know. The man is a real non-entity. His whole life's work is like that. If they already couldn't accept dialectical materialism, how could we have explained the *nihilmat* to them?"

Zygismunt is silent. The song ends.

"He wanted to use it as a weapon of mass rejection. Against bourgeoisie. It would have been our answer to an atomic weapon. You know there is no uranium in Samara. But he couldn't find the place."

"We did," says the SRV entroponaut. The cables holding the airship to the ground snap loose like whips.

"Too bad. I've never minded this wing of materialism. Terrible if they should be right. I love the world, every last atom of it. But if the world stops loving our ideas, you and Rodionov are second best. After all, my name is also a war name," says Ignus Nilsen, "and at least this way we are no longer beasts." From the speakers comes the world's saddest screech, track #2: "*Grave*", from the disappeared dodecaphonic composer, *comte de Perouse-Mittrecie*.

"Farewell, Zygismunt."

"Farewell, Ignus," says the entroponaut, pulling the airship door shut behind him. Ignus is left alone on the roof of the hospital. "*Enneminkin siinnä on surullista*," the ghost is still muttering, as the wings begin to twirl silently through his cytoplasm. But the blades are moving faster and faster.

Zygismunt Berg stands in front of the illuminated panel, his hands on levers. Cranks rise from the floor, from the gearboxes, like two horns. The man turns on the transistor radio. He cranks the gadget to the hidden radio station, the computer half the size of the wall calculating the ship's course from its transmission. The signal comes from countless points, from a constellation of superpositions four thousand kilometres away. The vibration of the strings echoes its speech. The girl with a baby voice repeats there in an infinite circle, through all time, which for her - looking from the depths of Rodionov Deep - is one and the same, a simultaneous and immeasurably complex event. A perfect closed system. "*Azimuth-Boreas-Sector-Orbit-Laudanum-Ultra-Tricolor-Ellipsis-Nadir-Ellipsis-Gamut-Azimuth-Tricolor-Icon-Orbit-Nadir*".

The entroponaut pulls the levers down and back. His eyes are red. The small airship takes off from the hospital roof's landing platform. The Pale is pulled into spirals and the blades sweep Ignus Nilsen apart.

Two men wave in the blizzard, coloured blue and red from the lights of the ambulance. They slowly move further, and the sky station platform is left behind in a snowstorm. Tereesz opens his eyes in the sky, he can't feel his legs. Everything is whirling, and the

noise of the ambulance airship's wings bounces around. Above him stands a man in a black suit, illuminated by a cardiac monitor screen. This man is the Man from Internal Affairs. He is the Angel of Death.

"I can't feel my legs," Tereesz coughs.

"That's what happens when you open fire on CoPo."

"You!" Tereesz tries to sit up, but he's got his wrists stuck to the first aid frame: "How?"

"Unfortunately, I can't answer that question."

"Kontšalovski..." The former agent sinks back into the frame. "Ulrich I gave you, but... There's no such thing as a Kontšalovski, how did you... who gave you..." He starts to pull his right wrist free from the bandage.

"You're a junkie, Machejek, that's why. People like you are always careless. How many years had you been doing it before that man had a heart attack? Two, five?" The investigator rises up from above Tereesz, but the bandage snaps loose and the man's cannulated hand grabs his tie.

"You," Tereesz coughs in his face, fist clenched, "you have to help me!" The partner is already approaching with a pistol, but the agent signals to him with his hand: "Wait!"

"I found things! In Vaasa! About a closed investigation. His name is Deerek Trentmüller, he has killed children, twenty, maybe more, and maybe the Lund children too, please..."

"Let go!" The fallen agent releases his grip and collapses: "I have a notebook, everything is there, promise me! I wouldn't have run otherwise, you have to check them out..." The Angel of Death stands over him, wiping his lip clean of blood. The kojko flails below, searching for the notebook: "You can get a medal for this! Definitely a promotion..." The Internal Affairs man turns his back on him, and the partner rushes to tie Tereesz's hand back to the frame. "Please," the broken voice says amid the roar of the engine. With his tie flapping in the wind, the Internal Affairs investigator looks down from the belly of the airship at the lights of the city. "Forget it, Machejek. Deerek Trentmüller has nothing to do with this, no disappearances have been reported." A hint of humanity shades his voice: "It's the only good thing about this story."

Ahead, the flashing lights of the hospital's landing platform rush towards them, while in the distance, the spiky throne made of Noo skyscrapers rises above the city's lights.

There, the mazut billionaire watches as the tiny dot of the ambulance airship disappears into the storm on the other side of the Veera River. Noo's thoughts cool before him, the courses drop, and Graad goes to war. General mobilisation begins tomorrow. Not much remains. Over three thousand pieces of disappearance memorabilia lie behind the man, but Sarjan Ambartsumjan now considers this view here the jewel in his collection. Under his arm rests a magnetic mail dispatch, a glass case that arrived on the evening train from Vaasa. It is empty.

19. I AM NOT A JOKE

Forty-six hours later, sixty floors below. The hotel lobby is empty at night, gleaming like a tomb of black marble. A radio plays in the reception area, the girl listens anxiously as Mesque's atomic crusaders spy from the deep Pale, while industrial espionage creeps in here. They're everywhere. So the war news echoes back from the hall, as a man in a plastic jacket comes through the automatic doors. A cloud of snow accompanies him, he rushes in and the glowing white lettering "HOTEL INTERGRAAD" runs in the background. The girl doesn't notice him, the security guard is also gripped by fear, and so the guest steps right past them, into the residents' private elevator. The doors close behind him. Left alone in the golden light of the elevator, he turns his backpack over his chest, the loops still on his shoulders, as he was taught to do in sixth grade.

"Do it like this, Khan, it's really cool."

Khan rummages through the side pockets of his bag. A metallic sound and a bunch of keys come into view. There hangs the key of his Saalem wooden house, a rusty hammer from the hallway, and an aluminium monster for locking the cellar floor, all useless, turned into scrap metal; all but one - a golden key, whose teeth seem so technologically sophisticated, as if turning such keys simultaneously would trigger a self-destruct protocol, a dead-hand type of perimeter defence, ensuring a counterstrike even in the event of the destruction of the high command in a preemptive nuclear attack.

Khan sticks his Doomsday key in the lock and turns as instructed: twice left, then right, then left again. "*Ambartsumjan, Sarjan Asaturovits*" is engraved on the copper plate, next to the keyhole. The hiss of the loudspeaker cuts through the silence of the elevator: "Mr. Ambartsumjan, I was worried..."

"I am not Mr. Ambartsumjan. I am Inayat Khan." The man demonstrates the key, unable to decide where to point it. Only he looks back at himself in the mirror, his tutu hat askew on his head and the snow melting on the shoulders of his jacket. He's bearded, he looks terrible. "I was given this, in case of emergency. Which is now. Why don't you answer my calls?"

"You sound like Ishmael."

"Sorry, what?"

"You're talking exactly like Ishmael."

"Oh yes... do you remember Ishmael?"

"I *am* Ishmael," replies the faithful secretary, and the lift lurches out of its place. The acceleration passes through Khan.

"You were worried? Why? Why didn't you pick up?"

"I..." the secretary hesitates. "I haven't been in touch with Mister for two days. The last instructions were to stop all calls and to not let anyone in."

"That was the day before yesterday?"

"Yes, when Mister received your dispatch, Inayat Khan."

"Fine." Khan nods in the mirror, sleet melting on the glasses. He takes his glasses off his head and wipes them on the sleeve of his plastic jacket. "And nothing else has come? Meanwhile? From the Collaboration Police?"

"As I said, I haven't heard from Mister."

"Right, yes..." The elevator cube slides on silently, up towards the sky. Khan's ears want to lock from the pressure change. Khan swallows, gives the lift a once-over and then stands facing the door, backpack still on his chest.

"Mr. Khan," the speaker suddenly hisses.

"Yes?"

"Please see that everything is in order with Mister. Tell him I asked to be contacted."

"Why shouldn't it be?" The elevator slows, hands rising from the sides as if in a weightless state. "Why wouldn't everything be fine with him?" he asks. But the secretary doesn't answer. The elevator doors open in front of Khan: "Ding..." A beam of light cuts through the hall to the dark, sixtieth floor. The wind howls there, its gusts blowing shrouds from the display cases like ghosts. And the snow is falling. And so, the world's largest private collection of disappearance memorabilia is slowly buried in piles of snow.

The sound of shoes tapping on linoleum can be heard. A Man from Internal Affairs comes along a hospital corridor at night, a suitcase phone hanging from his hand, locked to his wrist with a chain. A tiny reminder shines on his lapel, a light blue enamel badge. Two policemen guard the doors of the intensive care unit. One of them is sleeping.

"Why are you sleeping?" The investigator leans over him. "I am an infiltrator from Mesque and there is a five-ton explosive device in this suitcase." The officer opens his eyes and rubs them in bewilderment, his partner watches in horror. "We have just lost an irreplaceable strategic resource in the Mirova Central Hospital. Three thousand Graad citizens have perished. Because you didn't fulfil your duties!"

The officer jumps up and straightens his shirt, his gaze still sleepy. The investigator is unforgiving. "What are you standing here for? Does it make it better if you sleep standing up? Who am I? Where is my work ID? Why haven't I submitted my guest name tag?"

Double-sided metal doors swing behind the investigator, he goes into the dark room and the officers breathe a sigh of relief in the corridor. Cubicles separated by plastic curtains pass on both sides of him, and the last one on the window side glows with medical equipment. The man turns on his heel, and pulls the plastic curtains open: "Machejek, I need you to call your friends. I need you to call them back. Now."

There is a morphine drip on the bedhead, dripping morphine. That's not a good sign, it should have been cut off long ago. The broken agent looks out of the window, thick snow is falling: "You have nothing to give me."

"I don't have to have anything to give you."

"I know your story." "It's not reported..." You don't know anything about the investigation. You're a *duch, sjawa*²⁰. People like you can only haunt."

Duch, sjawa. Usually, it's the unemployed citizens who entertain their minds with all sorts of ghosts and goblins that slither into the state apparatus and weave a web of lies against them. "*The likes of us*, Machejek. The likes of us are the agents of the Collaboration Police. The purpose of the Collaboration Police is not to investigate. The Collaboration Police aims to keep the world as it is."

²⁰(Polish orig.) Ghost, apparition

Machejek glances away from the window: "This world of yours as it is now is a real shithole."

"Oh!" The Internal Affairs investigator feigns surprise. "Such philosophy. So you like Saint-Miro's plan for humanity?"

"The only nihilist here is you, *duch*."

"So you don't like Saint-Miro and his plan for humanity?" The internal investigator's features sharpen, and he steps to the side of the bed, into the green glow of the heart monitor. "But you like even *more* abnormal things? Or don't you know what company your friend keeps? Your abnormal friend. I didn't know either. What is this *hobby* of theirs, what do they do..."

Machejek sits up, his shoulder bandage turning red with defiance. "Khan? Khan is a genius. You can't stop him."

"Yes," the internal investigator shrugs, "he knows what he's doing. Unlike you. Let's call him back now."

This concession to the likes of Machejek is enough. "You know what, no, old man. Stop asking. Better increase the *morph*. I can't reach." He sinks into the hospital bed, luckily the laughing spasms hurt him and the whistle stops.

"I think you've had enough drugs."

"*Drugs...*" mocks Machejek.

The internal investigator looks at him with resentment. Down on the hospital bed, a sweaty man's body lays, his bare torso bleeding, oozing sweat. "So you like it here, do you? Are you happy with your lot, Kontšalovski?"

Tereesz is swimming in morphine solution. Dark waves wash over him, and snowflakes fall into the water. He burns cold. Chance! The child's hands hold him afloat, by his shoulders. Tiny strong hands... he is a soldier of love. "Yes," he replies, watching the green speck on the heart monitor bounce. Soothingly, rhythmically. "It's okay here. They say I can't walk normally anymore, but you know what? I wasn't going anywhere. I hate this country. I hate Graad. I hate the Collaboration Police and I hate the Moralintern. It's just a tool to me, I'm just a tool myself. I know that... why I'm here. Who gave me up. Don't waste your breath, I'm not an idiot. I know my job is done."

The bright green light lingers in the darkness.

"What did he get for me? Khan? What did you give him?"

The howling of the wind can be heard, and the vapour trail runs through the snowdrifts on the rooftop. The world's leading expert in disappearing cautiously steps forward as snowflakes dance in and out of focus. And there behind them, his dialectical materialist glasses. His sharp, dark eyes watch as the snowflakes stick to the glass. The man slowly crouches down, and the rustling of his plastic jacket can be heard. His hand reaches out and picks something up from the snowdrift.

The wind dies down around him, and the curtains fall lifelessly. The dark cloth takes on the form of the display case again, and Inayat Khan is there in the middle, on one knee, holding a human skull in his hand. He gazes deeply into the blackness of the eye sockets. Sixty thousand reals are scattered around here - far away in the Erg desert, where the epic hero went to seek an audience with the gods. Sixty thousand deep holes

have been dug. In vain. Khan blows, and the snow flies from Ramout Karzai's eyes, his jaw locked with clasps, and his mouth silent. The spear is broken, and the banner is a funeral shroud.

"Mr. Ambartsumjan!" Khan stands up. A tattered flag waves on the wall, taut with ropes. It is enormous, in the colours of the Iilmaraa tricolour. A gust of wind rises, and a scarf of the same colour flutters around the man's neck, and he wears a hat of the same colour. "Ambartsumjan!" Khan goes over and runs his hand over the glass display case. From under the snowdrift, the shaft of a spear can be seen, an antique head with a rusted tip. "We need to talk!"

The ominous shadow of the tutu hat shifts onto the desk, papers fluttering around, the speaker pyramid buried in snow. A hand stretched out into the light of the elevator, suddenly trembles like a ghost. There is a strained groan, then whoosh! The skull shatters into a thousand pieces against the speaker.

"Where are my things?! Where are they?!"

The man approaches, turning around the display cases. Glass shatters. "I don't like it when my things are missing! I don't like it *one bit!*" He stops, both hands on the mahogany, sweeping the desk clean of papers and writing supplies with a single motion. "How am I supposed to know where you put it now?" He looks around. "There was talk, *wasn't there?* You get the ship, you facilitate, and everyone gets their things. Where are *my things?!*" he yells, looking from the corner of his eye at a row of windows from floor to ceiling. The middle, the largest of the windows, has been shattered from the inside, with triangular shards of glass pointing outwards and snow blowing in. And Mirova's glowing gold light. In front of the window, a large display case sparkles upside-down. Bare wires, a switch.

Khan turns his head and rushes from his position, leaving the paper painting behind. Onto the wall, above the desk. The snow-damp paper undulates there, the watercolour Gon-Tzu slowly spilling out: the black millipede of dragon veins into striped sacks, the reeded turquoise into a rainbow. Soon he will be gone, but you can still see how Gon-Tzu distributes - one for you, one for you, and one for you - immortal peaches to his men. But Khan has no eyes for that.

He digs, the wind whistling in his ears. He has put on his mittens. The display case emerges from the snow, and the man turns it right-side up, pulling out papers. Expensive papers. A Collaboration Police folder with X-ray pictures of someone's bared teeth, an identity photo flies out of the folder into the wind. A silvery tattoo, an impossible memory on finger knuckles: 5, 12, 13, 14. Khan catches the photo, and stuffs it into the backpack on his chest, along with the rest. Along with the transit permit to Kukushkin, in the Graad Samara Oblast, along with fake papers for the People's Republic. These are on top, the upside-down pentagram printed in white on the passport cover.

At the bottom of the display case gleams the grand prize, Rodionov's Deep. Khan's mouth opens, and he reaches out his hand. The perforated dark blue metal sheet sings like a saw blade between his fingers, the city's light shining through thousands of dots. After the dots, there is the map legend, in Voronikin's handwriting. He reads, and the starry sky shines on his dark face.

Machejek smiles sadly. "Was it good?"

No answer from the investigator, and the suitcase phone opens on Tereesz's lap. The lights come on inside, and his notebook with a dove on it slides off the keys, photo paper

shining in between. A stranger.

"This was supposed to be something very good." The man thinks for a moment. "Now you have a Vaasa citizen whose comings and goings you can't control, right? You can't do anything to him, he's a collaborator... but he played you. You didn't even know what things you gave him!"

"They weren't *good*, Machejek," the investigator snaps, "I was wrong! I was wrong much more than you think and you won't like it. Your suspect is a victim." He picks up the notebook. "What do you think, why haven't your cases been reported? You saw them, Machejek! Let's talk about it. Or don't you want to anymore? Don't you want to talk about Deerek Trentmüller? It's not funny anymore?"

The investigator puts his hand on the man's steaming forehead. "These things happened, you saw them with your own eyes. And now they haven't happened. How is that possible?"

"That has nothing to do with it," Tereesz gasps, pupils covering his randomly coloured irises. "You said so yourself. Only Khan's plan is important now."

"Khan's plan is the height of abnormality. Rodionov's Deep! The mentally ill communists, damn them, are dying and you all live in such a world. You think about such things, you deal with them... You like all kinds of objects, yes? I have one. It came to me today, from Vaasa. I had it re-telefaxed to me five times." The man shakes his head angrily. "Didn't come in any other way, only this one all the time. Let me show you one of the photos, Machejek, because you can't behave like a grown-up otherwise, and you obviously don't care about your friends after your great sacrifice." He takes the photographic paper from his notebook. "This here is the only artefact from Deerek Trentmüller's assets that corroborates your story. He developed it himself in his private chambers. You saw it too, with your machine. The date of development is August 29th, '52. Two days later, he sent it, with the negative, to the photo lab in Vaasa." "The negative is not spoiled, the development is the same". A month later, the Central Photographic Laboratory confirms this after a follow-up enquiry: "The negative is not spoiled, the print is the same". Zeul confirms that there are no defects in the lens and Trigat takes three hundred test shots with the camera equipment. No anomalies appear. This man studied the apparatus for six years until memory disease set in. I think he would have studied it for life. Like you."

Tereesz holds a piece of photographic paper with unevenly cut edges, dates and stamps on the back. 29 August. Year 52.

"Turn it over!"

Sweat leaves a stain on the paper. Photographic lab stamps. "Zeul". "Trigat".

"You don't dare look at it, do you? You shouldn't dare. No one should, you shouldn't be doing this sort of thing. They must be forgotten. But Machejek - I'm sorry. I *need* you to call back your friends. You have to do it."

Light slides across the surface of the photo in a glossy sheen as Tereesz turns it. It's a yellow-hour summer day, frozen in place. The rain is pouring down on the hillside, and the three of them, small, in front of the rose hip bushes, smiling triumphantly. Khan is explaining about peaches and Gon-Tzu, he and Jesper look ahead, beach umbrella in hand. The three boys hold them above nothing.

"*What is it?*" The dot on the heart monitor pauses.

"That's where your friends are going. It's your Rodionov's Deep."

"You've retouched this..." Tereesz turns the photo, panicked as if he's searching for them on the other side. "Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to me?!"

"We do nothing. There are no such things as *duch's* and *sjawa's*, junkie. We are friends of humanity. When will you understand? It's not a person who retouched it. You just don't want to think about it. Nobody else wants to. That's right. Let's leave it." The man from Internal Affairs lifts the phone from the hook and presses the redial key. Call tone. Tereesz turns his head away, but the Man from Internal Affairs takes him by the chin: "Don't stop now! You've done more than harm. You did them both in: Hird and Trentmüller. You cleaned the horror from their heads. We're almost there." A woman's voice comes over the phone: "Hotel 'Intergraad'..."

A photo falls from Tereesz's fingers: "But that's not *possible!*"

"That's not possible," sighs the Angel of Death, "only the world as it is is possible. We don't study these things, we don't poke at them. We are at peace. We forget. We wait and we are protected."

"Hotel 'Intergraad', I'm listening."

"Please connect me to suite number 4001."

"Ishmael."

"Can you hear me?"

Khan's voice comes from the switchboard. The loyal secretary stands in front of a wire bundle, thousands of metal plugs running into the analogue sockets. A light bulb flashes. He wears a pink shirt, click-click, the young man switches wires on the desk, with his usual agility, "I hear you."

"Mister has jumped to his death. I hope you realise I could have left that unsaid. I could have just left the building. I hope that you will understand and that you will not call the authorities for ten minutes. Mister would have wanted it that way. That I would not be stopped, that the investigation would not waste my time." So dictates Khan, to the howling of the wind. "Time I don't have. Do you understand? Say you understand me and you will do so."

From the speaker behind his back comes a broken rasp, like a cry.

"Do you understand me?" he repeats, and the speaker hisses: "... ten minutes..."

"Fine."

Khan turns his head and looks. An expanse shimmers beneath his feet. A man who feared the world was fading threw himself there, but he no longer fears anything. Noo stands before him and behind his glasses and irises, thoughts race. Ordered, strategic thoughts. It's a wide-ranging rescue operation, and he's now fully made up of it, not a single thought left. They still call him Khan, but in fact, he's a tactical leader who's perfected himself in a twenty-year positional war, an adaptable manoeuvre whose author and executor is himself - a tyrant of love, a total worldview in the service of a single person. There are others, but he can't be stopped. Horrors visit him, and lately, he no longer even remembers their names, their ages are mixed up. Before going to bed, his beloved looks at him with a tired face instead of her eyes. A *horror-mnemotour*. And something even more ugly, late-night calls from the abyss: "You know who I am. Fat man, I'm not your plaything. Leave us!" How he cried when he woke up, but it doesn't

happen anymore. Countermeasures have been deployed; he knows what happened. And he remembers. Forever.

So the man stands at the broken window of the building's sixtieth floor, a turquoise-orange-violet shroud fluttering over his shoulders. He's a superhero. Girls - he's coming to save you.

He walks over the snowy floor with his backpack and down the fire escape. There, he takes the guests' elevator instead of the residents' private one. He descends nineteen floors with a Vesper businessman and his escorts, conjures up a smile, steps off on the fortieth, and wipes it from his face. Thirty minutes before the electronics technician would break the elevator doors on the lower floor - and forty-five minutes before Khan emerges from the snowy parking lot onto the street - he enters a suite rented under his friend's name without taking off his shoes.

The hallway is dim, Khan doesn't turn on the lights. He knows what that means. On the shoe rack, there are three-thousand-reál-worth smooth, worn leather shoes and a beige Perseus Black overcoat stained with blood hangs on a hook - it has become too morbid for Jesper. The phone rings in the empty rooms. Khan walks to the bedroom to answer it. The bed is made, the air is fresh, and in the middle of the room on a white cube-shaped table, there is a black pyramid made of stacks of coal-black banknotes. Khan opens his backpack, puts the shroud in a sports bag, and begins to stack the banknotes into his wallet with a cold ring. One hundred, one thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand, five hundred thousand reál. Eight hundred thousand reál. At the very bottom, like in a tomb, rests Tereesz's service weapon. The nickel gleams in the dim light, and Khan places it on top of everything, then rises.

Khan looks at the phone on the empty table. The red light goes out and comes back on with a ring. It stops for a moment, half a minute passes, and then it starts again. He puts his hand on the receiver and thinks. His fingers become sweaty. He picks up the phone and puts it back on the *cradle*. Then he picks it up again, this time to his ear. Dark yellow fingers move over the buttons. When the sixteen-digit series is over, there is silence on the line, then an intermittent calling tone, a signal to the other world. And when the phone is finally picked up on the other end, the Pale fills the whole room. Connection. Like a distant ocean. A barely audible voice in the breaking waves: "Hello?"

"Mum, I'm not coming home anymore."

Two months later, four thousand kilometres to the north, on the other side of the Yakut Reserve. The former taiga of Northeast Graad spreads out to the curve of the horizon, and the Pale shimmers in the immeasurable distance. And before him, eight hundred million hectares of forest undulate in the wind. The world. A snow-starred expanse exhales oxygen into the winter evening atmosphere. Even the indigenous people are forbidden to enter here. These icy cubic tons are breathed in by all of Graad, they are its lungs - Graad's lungs. A hydrometeorological protected area, an oxygen park. A storm-grey motor carriage stands on a forest path, at the edge of a large field, with its salon lights fading. The lead-acid battery is slowly running out. The glass domes of the headlights go out into the dimness of late December. A pump hose winds out of the machine's fuel tank, and a thirty-four-year-old man holds an empty canister in his hands. The snow-white interior in front of him smells of fuel, the white seats drip with it, and so does the white leather steering wheel and dashboard.

He strikes a match, it goes out in his cold, red fingers, and the wind blows. The man shields the matchbox with his palm and strikes another match, the first one does nothing.

The second one ignites the motor carriage in flames. A single candle is lit in the midst of a darkening world. The white leather crackles and turns black, and flakes of soot peel off and rise up. A white suitcase in the back seat catches fire. There, his passport crumples up like a dying spider, and Målin's letters float up as pale ash. And all the rest of the memorabilia that hasn't already disappeared. A drawing appears before his eyes, and the birthmarks on Anni's back disappear. Heat rises on the man's face, he closes his eyes. Dots dance there for a moment; and the eyes, the exact colour of which he can no longer recall; a face that he can no longer remember. A kiss with the teacher's daughter, in the dim forest, which the tongue doesn't remember, but without which he himself would be inconceivable. All of it fades away.

A former interior designer opens his mouth, rubs his bleeding gums with powder, and throws the rest of the nose candy into the burning motor carriage. It sparkles when it ignites. Then he gathers momentum and jumps over a frozen river. Cattail tufts protrude from the ice below, and a forest road winds in the distance. In front of him lies a meadow of hay, snow falling above it. And beyond the zigzagging trees, a sawtooth wall of firs, a dreamlike sight. Snowflakes flutter from the branches like wedding ribbons.

He goes, a blonde lock of hair trembling on his forehead, his eyes moist and light blue from the wind. He wears a snow-white cloak, with white suede shoes on his feet; the corners of the mantle's collar are adorned with silver anchors, a nautical motif. His silhouette glows in the dim light, slender like a surfboard, water bottles clinking in his shoulder bag. No one knows where he is going. No one knows where he is - a tiny shimmering dot on a vast frosty field. And on the other side of the field, the forest beckons, darkness under the trees filled with oxygen, calling out to his entire conscious life. He enters, the ground softening beneath his feet, prickly with pine needles, the wind subsiding, and not a single bell ringing there. No one's voice. This way, it's better, it's right.

The charred motor carriage remains on the roadside.

A month later, six thousand kilometres south. A metro train speeds underground in a tunnel. The carriages are empty at night and the steel creaks. Khan leans against the door, backpack on his back. He gazes down the swaying carriage track, the steel worm belly of the metro. A few lonely people sit there, lights on in economy mode. Graad is at war, and going out at night without a special permit is forbidden. One night, when officers came to poke him with rubber truncheons at the train station, Khan bought one for himself. He now sleeps on station benches and behind the tables of open cafes, avoiding hotels. People have a habit of getting lost there. The yellow light of industry shines in window after window, the metro train exits the tunnel and climbs up to the bridge. Below, the downstream of the Peremennaja Veera blackens, rainbow-coloured ice layer on it and in front, giant cylinders of gas storage tanks rise on the river banks, a row of cucumber plantation floodlights. And the hydroelectric power station. This is the Polyfactory, the *tyrannopolis*, the post-megapolis, the penultimate development of the human settlement. The part of the city Khan has come to was once Lenka, the capital of Ziemsk. Here Frantiček the Brave was born. And Tereesz Machejek, but by then the tumour had long since engulfed Lenka. Graad scientists predict that within the next ten years, the Polyfactory Mirova will grow together with its suburbs to form the last of the human settlement's developmental peaks, an uninhabitable part of the geosphere, an ecological disaster zone - a necropolis. It won't, because, before that, the Pale will have swept over this bit of land.

On the horizon, over the bay, a black swarm of Grad's cruisers drifts northwestward,

swarms of fighters dropping from their bellies like seeds. These are reserve troops. Tonight, the Mesque navy raided Graad's isola, the home isola. There is no good news coming from Katla or the Holodnaya Zemlya region. The vanguard is approaching across the boreal plateau. Thirty-five million people listen to war news through the radio, behind train windows at the Polyfactory. They are all slaves. Only one does not listen, he already knows what will happen. This man is a nihilist and Khan has come here for him.

He steps out of the door at the station, zipping up his jacket. The platform is empty and quiet, the cool of late southern winter. Poplars rustle in the wind, and industrial ash falls from the trees. He descends the echoing stairs down to street level, walking between partially collapsed huts. The landfill looms above them, an invincible monument, silver cylinders shining from five thousand-watt projectors. The street is poorly lit, with wooden houses squatting on either side of the road, the ice cracking beneath his feet in mud puddles. The road is not paved.

Khan stops in front of a particularly dilapidated double-story apartment building. The wooden façade creaks in the wind, threatening to collapse on him at any moment. He checks the address written on the back of his hand with a pen, then goes upstairs through the dark, ammonia-smelling hallway. He lights a match and two flames dance in the lenses of Khan's glasses as he searches for apartment number three.

An old man in his underwear comes to the door, with his skin hanging over his chest and looking like he's been embalmed. He used to be young and charming with his extreme worldview, mocking everyone and everything and calmly taking those little things that lead ordinary people astray. This clownery, along with the social conscience typical of northern women, earned this kojko the biggest win in his life - Zigi's mother. However, the marriage turned out to be a farce for him. Besides, the woman did not allow herself to be disciplined by Zigi's nihilistic father. Zigi's father didn't discipline Zigi, he cared about him, cared about him enough to leave the boy in Vaasa. The nihilist himself went back to Polyfactory, went to the gym there, and stayed healthy to live like a true nihilist until he was a hundred years old, nibbling on every vile hour, knowing that there were many more ahead.

All of this is clear to Khan, and it's in his backpack in a folder. He wants to know what happened when Zigi came to Graad to see his father three years after the girls disappeared. What happened between Zigi and the girls, what he missed. The kojko leads him to the kitchen, in the middle of unwashed dishes. Khan slams the bottle of vodka with a hundred réal on the table, and the kojko unscrews the cap, pouring a shot and holding the shot glass on the tips of his middle and index fingers.

"Not that I'm going to cause him any trouble, don't get me wrong," Khan looks at the filled shot glass in front of him. "It's all as I said on the phone, but..." He thinks for a moment, then slams the vodka down his throat.

"The boy knows who I am. I'm a nihilist." The old man slams the shot glass on the table: "Come and see the mighty nihilist face death, tonight at eight o'clock, at the community centre. Death is great and terrible, but... but the nihilist is not... what was he now?" He puts his finger to his mouth and tries to remember. But he can't, his mood is ruined and his body slumps over his shoulders. "It'll soon be over, what's the difference." The old man nods towards the door, "Everything is as he left it."

The notebooks rise like towers along the walls of the hut. Khan's shadow stands in front of the door, between the stacks, the kitchen light shining in from behind. Then, as the man reaches for one of the notebooks, the rest of the stack begins to collapse on him. He looks to Zigi's father for help, holding the swaying tower against the wall with his

shoulder. "Never mind," he coughs, "it's all the same. The same story."

"What do you mean?" Khan takes a step back, notebooks spilling onto the floor, each cover has the ages of the girls in Zigi's sloppy handwriting. Five, twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

"The same story!" Kojko turns his back on Khan and sits down at the kitchen table. "Strange story. Isn't it a rather strange story for all of us, and whether it has a happy ending..."

Khan starts packing the notebooks into his sports bag. Then, as he stands in front of the door, a bulging bag hanging over his shoulder, the kojko is still looking out of the small kitchen window. "They want to drown this world in the Pale, you know. Mesques. They're on the radio saying they'll take us to our cradle. That we'll all be sitting there, mouths agape. And they'll make sure we don't choke on our tongues and they'll feed us. Failure is not nihilism any more, it's a farce, I've seen it, it's the quarantine of the proteins of Lomonossov's Land! The whole earth wants to become Lomonossov's Land."

Khan taps on the doormat with his shoe tip. "Well then, I don't know, I should go..."

"He's a disappointment, this Saint-Miro, but you know, boy?" The old man looks at Khan, his eyes glossy with vodka, black as a horse's, "I think there's more to come..."

The carriages disappear in front of Khan, one by one, the tunnel swallowing the train. He sits by the window in dim silence, his ears blocked from the pressure change. Green lights mark the exits; otherwise, it is dark in the carriages, with only the sound of screeching metal. He takes out a flashlight, fills it with batteries, and the world appears from darkness on a square piece of paper in his lap. Khan sits with piles of notebooks to his right and reads.

Page by page, it unfolds in front of him under the beam of his flashlight. Every detail is captured there with autistic attention to detail, every word and movement is recorded. It's not so much a story as a technical drawing, a model of memory. Instructions for a future benevolent force to put Zygmunt Berg's lost world back together. Cut, fold, and paste. The trajectory of a brick in the winter night, the coordinates of a living room window. A familiar address, the girls' house in Vaasa, at the Fahlu stop. The maze of the suburbs is revealed on an unfolded map, a dotted line marking the boy's escape.

And meteorological details in the corner of the page. Air pressure and humidity. Eighteen degrees below zero. The next evening at Handsome Alexander's: sofas against the wall, a six-phase battle of dancing steps on the floor. And then - darkness. A single voice ringing above him, above the boy, with locks jingling. "You're Zigi - the worst boy in school." Khan senses something bad, he wipes his glasses with a handkerchief, and acid swirls in his stomach. This is an impending jealousy attack.

"And you, my darling Doom, are the most beautiful girl in school."

However, the girl's name with the familiar "å" in the middle does not wait for him on the other side of the page. Its absence is what awaits him there. He and the world around him are no more, as the dates under the pages move forward from New Year's, once or twice every week, less and less often. Until the twenty-eighth of August. But on the pages themselves just an empty grid. Khan grabs the next notebook and flips through it, then the next one, he pulls out the rest of the notebooks from his backpack, and they all have the same story. A strange story.

The light from the platform shoots a sieve into the carriages. It radiates in through the rows of windows, one window at a time. Khan raises his head and his glasses light

up. Two bright illuminators, the final stop - he doesn't understand. A fat idiot with a bright blue tie, somewhere there is Zygmunt Berg, who knows that only shells remain of his story. The magnetic tape hisses, and the heart alone rotates on a plastic disc. And the numbers, he has those too, inseparable from the world until the end. He catapults himself through the ultra-deep Pale, towards it in his steel apricot pit. But Khan's own memory distorts in his mind. The backups have been extinguished, one after another, leaving him alone. He can't bear it like this, but he can't live without it.

Tonight he falls asleep in the station toilet, in a cube with paper-thin walls. He has curled up against the wall, the door is locked. His body is covered with a tricolour shroud, ragged from time. Strands sweep the floor as the man tosses and turns. He can't sleep, something is wrong. Something is very wrong. "*Speak, you always have such cool presentations. In history and natural science...*" The man opens his eyes and looks into a blank face, smooth blonde hair falling onto the tile floor. The child lies asleep in front of him. Doesn't breathe, doesn't smell.

"Where are you?" A low vibration, the invisible companion doesn't answer. Khan curls up as tightly as he can, but the cold doesn't leave his bones. He repeats: "I'm at the end of the world. I'm at the end of the world."

Twenty-one years ago, small bare feet step down the stairs of a suburban house. It is the night of the winter solstice, and veins run under her translucent skin. Each nail is a raspberry-red gemstone, toes curling up on the cold stair steps. Dark green eyes. The hem of the nightgown flutters around her ankles in a draft.

Thus Målin Lund steps onto the ground floor, on the carpet. In the dark room, a shattered window glows. The curtain swells like a sail, a brick lies on the floor, and the entrance door is open. She herself is a mirror, mirror! - a perfect copy of the world. But something is wrong. It always has been. Her surface is flawless, like that of an adolescent, radiantly pure. It is the light that is mistaken. It is the world itself.

Two young girls step to the side of the third in the dark. The eldest is holding the hand of the little one, who points towards the window with a fairy godmother's magic wand. The window hangs like a cracked smile in the frame.

"Look!" she says, "It's going wrong."

20. EPILOGUE - LIGHT SHINES THROUGH EVERYTHING²¹

Revachol, 75 years ago, two years before the Turn-of-the-Century Revolution.

From afar, applause can be heard from behind the stage of the symphony hall. The ovations for the premiere are meagre, and there won't be a second encore. The clappers organised the first one. The string section is already changing their evening dresses for street clothes on silver chaise lounges. The end-of-January sky is blue outside the window. And in front of it stands *comte* Émile de Pérouse-Mittrecie - in a black frock coat, with a dodecahedron in his hand and his hair tousled from waving his hands while conducting.

Émile is a controversial figure. He is an aristocrat, the *comte* of the Pérouse and Mittrecie counties, but his hatred for the bourgeoisie, who he believes has usurped the higher class, makes him a supporter of the proletariat and therefore the revolution. Living off his inheritance, Émile has come to consider himself a composer. He is feverishly thirsty for fame, but he has decided to win the people's hearts with his dodecaphonic compositions. The *comte's* musical style is based on a dazzlingly modern geometric-symbolic system of harmonies, which has nothing to do with the music of the rest of the civilised world. To the human ear, it sounds like unbearable noise. Émile regards tonal, traditional music as embryonic, mind-numbing lullabies, or music for amoebas. He conducts his own works - no one else can or wants to - using a cardboard dodecahedron instead of a conventional baton. His cheeks flush with excitement, and the dodecahedron trembles in his hand. "Shall I go back?" he shouts, "I'll go back!"

He rushes through the room like he's driven by a fever. The symphony orchestra director stops the *comte* discreetly at the door: "I don't know, perhaps it's not necessary to go..."

"Why not?" the man doesn't understand. A whiny smile appears on his face. "They're calling for me! It was *enormous!*"

"It was enormous..." the director scratches his head. "Well, it was something, but you've already been there once and... it's not good manners to put the audience's politeness to the test." The hall has gone quiet. The wind blows outside the window.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it," says a fat colleague, patting the *comte's* shoulder. "The idea was good. The execution needed a little polishing. But you know, in the end, everything fell nicely into place. And so what if it's not played again? You'll polish the next one nicely, and it will come!" This is said by a man who writes mostly flute concertos and solo pieces for the flute.

"Hmm... the next one," the director still scratches his head. "Maybe it would be better if you didn't write about it..." the *comte* hears him whisper to the critic gentleman. "The Pérouse-Mittrecies have been generous to our institution over the years..."

The flushing of *comte's* face turns into a malign tremor. The smile still lingers. Unnoticed, he returns to the windowsill, passing by the bustling women. The sound of the director's attempt to cover up can still be heard, and the critic talks too. *Complicated...* one cannot become famous with such a thing, it is disturbing to listen. Behind the glass, the branches of trees sway in the dark blue evening.

²¹This epilogue is not part of the original print of the book, instead it was written and posted by Robert Kurvitz on the now defunct blog "www.zaum.ee" in 2014, some time after the book was published.

"Disturbing to listen..." the *comte* whispers. A metronome stands on the windowsill. He lets the pointer tick. The tempo is *grave*, the slowest possible. "Cannot become famous..."

"Well, come on!" the concertmaster exclaims. "In my opinion, every person has their own language of sound!" A plump lady looks towards the *comte*. "I sincerely hope there will be another time. Only perhaps not *as* complicated."

Laughter echoes. A sigh of relief passes through the dressing room.

"At the end... everything came together nicely..." the man mumbles. He slowly turns around and looks at the roomful of people from under his bangs. "So, am I the only one who thought it was enormous, huh?"

"Tick," the metronome replies, the branches of trees swaying behind the man's back.

"I thought it was unconventional," says the concertmaster. "And really, there were good moments."

"Good moments..." says the *comte*.

"Tick," says the metronome.

A man is juggling a dodecahedron from hand to hand. "But... which moments did you like the most?"

"Well, the beginning of the second part was beautiful..." the woman fiddles with her violin case. "And..."

"Tick."

"Tick."

"Tick."

"Azimuth!" someone claps their hands in the silence.

"Tick."

"Boreas! Sector!" With eyes shining like lightning, a tiny man enters the room. He claps his hands on every beat and says one word with each step.

"Nadir!" the little man finishes and bows before the *comte*. "Every single part was absolute, mathematical perfection. Don't even make the next one, don't ruin it. Disappear, it doesn't need any more." The man clenches his tiny hands into fists, his velvet suit jacket has elbow patches. "I'm going back to Graad," he turns to the room. "In two years, the Mirova revolution will start, sweeping over the earth like a thunderstorm. And its failure will usher in the entire next century. The century of the decline of human reason, where every following year is darker than the previous one."

He moves around the room like a ball of lightning, threatening to pounce on someone's face at any moment. "From that end, through the polar night, comes that music. It plays on the carriers of the future. Magnets! Yet still - it doesn't come from there. You will become famous, Monsieur Mittrecie and your music will reach us from the true end, even further where all matter is a memory. That's how white light sounds, shining into every darkroom, reversing all revelations." He rises on his toes, under the critic's nose: "All revelations - I said - *reversed!*"

"Tick."

The little man turns his head back like an owl. His gaze searches for a lightning rod and finds it in the form of a *comte*. The latter's face spreads into a smile. The man gasps, "So, do I become famous after all? Do you really think it'll happen like this?"

"I am certain of it. Because beyond the light..."

"Ion!" interrupts a child's voice, "Ion, let's go already..." A little boy stands at the door, dressed in festive attire.

"You must excuse me," the man presses the *comte*'s hand, "it was an honour to meet a person whose mind is receptive to such brilliant sounds that they reveal the world's memorable essence in their light."

"Wait!" the author stammers. He searches his coat pocket for a pencil and signs the dodecahedron with it. He has been practising it for a long time. "To whom should I make it out?"

"Ion Rodionov," the man smiles. He is excited.

"You're not, by any chance, a writer?"

"Oh no, I'm a math teacher," the man takes the polyhedron, his eyes sparkling with admiration.

"Of course!" the bloated critic snaps next to the door.

But the teacher walks past him, paying no attention. He takes the hand of the little student at the door. "Come, Ambrosius!" he says. "Isn't it a beautiful polyhedron?"

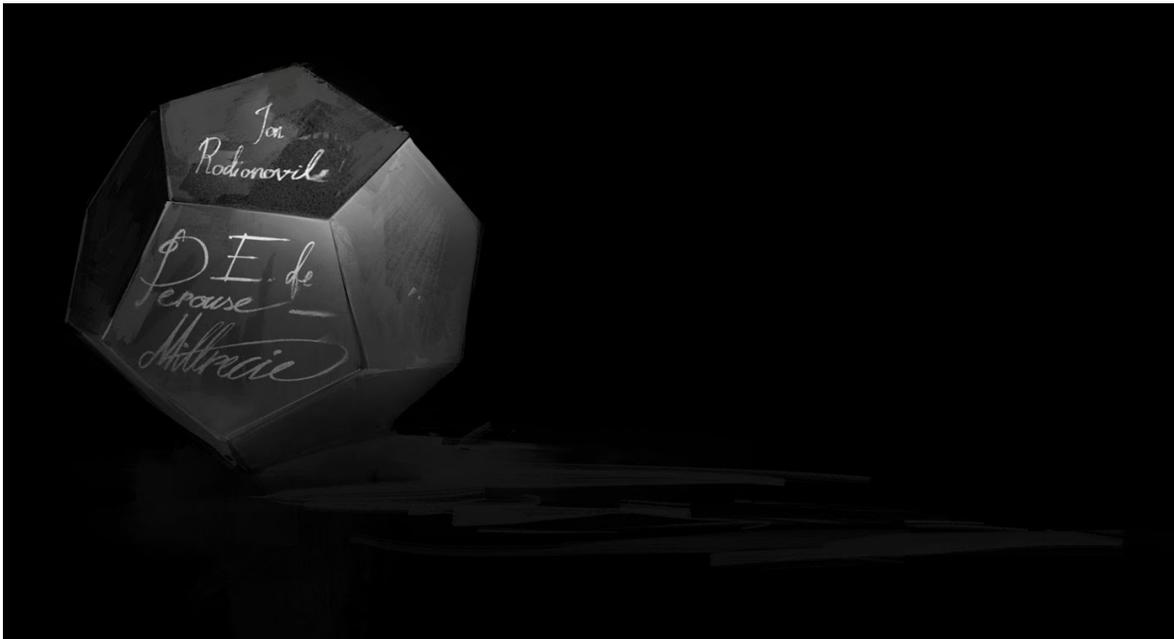


Figure 3: Dodecahedron (by Robert Kurvitz)

A month later, eight hundred kilometres from Revachol, on the edge of the Great Blue, on the shores of Insulinde.

The sail of the yacht catches the wind fiercely. The canvas flaps and the wind howls deafeningly. It's a night at the end of February and the last, dark blue hour before sunrise. The ocean shimmers under the dark blue expanse, and a single yacht manoeuvres through the cracked ice crust. An iceberg passes by the railing, steaming in the darkness. On the deck stands *comte* Émile de Pérouse-Mittrecie. He is still in his black frock coat, which is tattered and unwashed. The man's hair blows in the wind, his hands are red from the cold. They are frozen to the wheel.

"Set yourself on fire, Revachol! Set yourself on fire!" he screams into the wind. "I know it's huge, and the world knows it's huge! Who are you, anyway?"

The ship cracks against the ice edge. A deafening scraping against the wooden hull. With his teeth, the *comte* pulls the cork from a bottle of spirits. "Complicated?!" he screams and takes a sip. "I bring you the music of the spheres, and it's too complicated?! You're the complicated one, you cow!"

Before him, the sun rises through the vast, frosty world. It is a vision. A pale grey light radiates as wreaths of hatred and cold. The sun rises from the Pale. The *comte* raises his hands to the sky, and the incomparable noise engulfs him. It's louder than the wind, louder than the grinding ice masses. Spit sprays from the man's mouth, and he howls his favourite cadence. It's his own composition. And the Pale's voice in front of him sounds like applause, standing ovations, tens of thousands of feet stamping and whistles, ear-splitting whistles like fireworks, an atom that will one day be detonated in Revachol. The only thing in this world that is more beautiful than his own music is applause.

"I'm famous!" the *comte* screams. "I am the most famous musician of all time! All other musicians are nothing compared to me! Nobody - nobody! - knows them, but e v e r y o n e knows me!"

He sips the spirits drop by drop and smashes the bottle on the deck. "Millions love me!" he cries, delirious, and throws his hands in the air, towards the Pale. "Millions and billions, hundreds of thousands of billions of young, lovesick girls love me and my twelve-tone sound! Love is everything! Love is light! Light and beyond - nothing!"

BONUS - DELETED SCENE - KHAN'S MOTHER²²

"Please," big tears flow from Inayat Khan's eyes. "Tell me who you are..."

"You know who I am." The vibration emits a child's voice, saying terrible things. Khan begins to tremble and slumps into the corner of the hallway, the receiver in his hand.

"It's not you, it's not you!" he cries. The man's real body shakes with his mind. He wakes up and cries in his bed. His ear hums and the dream continues in wakefulness, only the airship model is back in the display case, Nadja no longer smiles, and Gon-Tzu holds the compass.

Five minutes later, Aliyah Khan wakes up to the sound of clanging dishes in the kitchen. She fumbles for her bedpost, and the night light with fringes illuminates. The woman goes to the kitchen in her nightgown. There, in the dark, facing the door, stands her son in his thirties, sobbing. The hulking man washes his coffee cup, his back shaking.

"Bad dream?"

Khan doesn't answer, drops the cup into the sink and the handle falls off.

"Sit down now, let me do it." The mother leads the man to the table. "Do you want me to make you some tea?"

"Coffee," the man wipes his cheeks, "make coffee."

The old woman turns on the lights in the kitchen, water gurgles in the sink, she washes her son's favourite cup. There, Ramout Karzai's last journey winds through the dunes. Then the woman puts water on the stove and sits down next to Khan.

"I asked..." he pants, "for her to tell me where they are, but she didn't."

"And she is..."

"Mâlin." Khan swallows. "She called, and the others were there too. They said I should leave them alone. That I'm torturing them."

It's quiet, the kettle starts to whistle. Khan's mother gets up from the table, and searches for powdered coffee in the cupboard. "You know what that means, don't you?"

Khan is no longer sobbing. He looks at his fingers on the table with a blank expression and says, "Everyone else would have gotten what they wanted. Only I wouldn't..."

"No, darling," Aliyah puts a cup of coffee in front of her son on top of a newspaper. "It's you who gives yourself this kind of advice. You know what you need to do. You don't have to chase after the Zigi guy, and you don't have to go to the person who talks to the dead. You need to go to work."

"But I'm already working!" Khan takes a sip. "I'm a leading specialist in my field, I tell you."

"Maybe so, but that's not a normal field. I mean a real job. When you start taking care of yourself, women will come to you. I have an idea, listen! Go to the job market agency tomorrow morning..."

"Mom, didn't I just tell you?!"

²²This deleted scene was posted in 2013, after the book's publication, on the now defunct blog at "www.zaum.ee". It continues the end of chapter 11.

“Listen to me until I finish! Go there tomorrow morning and ask for retraining and take it! They offer it for free. You’ll gain confidence, make a daily schedule for yourself...”

“Sure,” Khan laughs hollowly, “*a daily schedule.*”

“... and on Friday, go out with that girl. Don’t resist, she’s very nice. Agne is a very pleasant woman, I don’t think her daughter will eat you up.”

“What daughter?”

“Why don’t you ever listen to me? I’ve been telling you for a month now that my colleague’s daughter is your age and also single. She really wants to meet you! Put on a nice suit and shirt and take her to a nice place to eat.”

Khan lowers his head between his hands. “What place, Mum... to Abu-Babu’s kebab place so we can eat börek? Same place I’ll be taking that retraining?”

“You know what we’ll do? I’ll give you some pocket money. An advance. You’ll reserve the table right after the job market agency and go to Telefunken!” Khan’s mother looks at him with a cunning expression.

The man raises his head from his hands and wipes his nose with a handkerchief. “And how should I do that?”

Mum opens the newspaper on the table: “Through contacts.”

A young man in a t-shirt and a slim-fit suit poses next to an interview in the arts section. The shirt has the iconic album cover of a famous dance artist, and the interior design of the renovated panoramic floor shines in the background.

GLOSSARY

Term	Explanation
Antecentennial	Something that happened before the turn of the century.
Antecentennial Revolution	The Antecentennial Revolution, also known as the Turn-Of-The-Century Revolution or World Revolution, was a conflict that spanned isolas started by the Communists on one side (also known as the Communards) and the Moralintern and royalty on the other. It started in Graad in '02, partly due to an outbreak of a prion disease called "tzaraath" and a political leader named Kraz Mazov (a figure somewhat comparable to Karl Marx).
Dolores Dei	An "innocence" (see <i>The Innocences</i>) representing humanism and internationalism. She oversaw three scientific revolutions and put the basis of the welfare state. Parliamentary democracy and essential institutions such as Moralist International (known as the Moralintern) were also founded during her reign.
Elysium	The name of this parallel world we're exploring. In the year '51, around when the story first starts, the population is/was an estimated 4.6 billion. Elysium is special in that it is composed of two major geographic features: Isolas, acting as separate continents, and the Pale surrounding them. There are seven known isolas: Graad, Iilmaraa, Insulinde, Katla, Mundi, Samara, Seol.
Entroponetics	This is the study of the Pale (see <i>The Pale</i>). The name comes from the scientific term of entropy, or chaos.
Entroponaut	A scientist/adventurer who studies the Pale.
Franconegro	Innocence Franconegro is linked to a lineage of organised philosophical militarism in Elysium. He affirmed a notion of hereditary rule and conflict between the aristocrats and bourgeoisie. He reigned during what amounts to medieval times in our world.
The Innocences	The known history of Elysium is largely focused around its innocences, who are entities similar to popes in Catholicism, but also archetypes representing entire ideas. There have been six elected innocences, although only four legitimate ones are currently known: Pius, the First Innocence; Franconegro, the innocence of militarism; Dolores Dei, the innocence of interisolar travel; and Sola, the anti-innocence.
Isola	Generic term for Continent/Island (separated by water and Pale)

Term	Explanation
Moralintern	Moralintern combines the terms of “moralist” and “international,” an organisation going back to the days of Dolores Dei. Members of the organisation adhere to the principles of humanism and moralism.
The Pale	The world of Elysium is unique in that it’s not one continuous landmass, but rather an assortment of vast continents or isolas separated from each other by a barrier or “separative tissue” called the Pale. This tissue is the most prominent geographical feature of the world, accounting for 72% of its known surface area and outweighing reality 2:1, which makes it impossible to orbit around without special equipment. It can be seen as a grey haze stretching across the sky, with occasional flares and prominences arcing between the isolas. Scientific experiments have described it as a dark grey corona surrounding the globe (although it’s unclear if the planet still is a globe). If anything, the main characteristic of the Pale is that it’s the suspension of all properties - physical, epistemological, linguistic - which makes it hard to describe or to measure. It has been called “the transition state of being into nothingness”, and as one ventures deeper into the Pale, the degree of suspension becomes more pronounced until eventually even mathematics becomes unreliable. Nobody has been able to pass this point since the discovery of the Pale and it might just be impossible.
Perikarnassis	Perikarnassis is considered the oldest known ancient civilisation in the world of Elysium, having been located on the “super-isola” of Perikarnassis. The fall of this civilisation took place 8,000 years in the past and it is called the <i>Perikarnassis Incident</i> . While nobody knows exactly what caused the incident, many believe that the Pale was somehow involved.
Tzaraath	An exceptionally virulent prion disease.

Country/Region in Elysium	Correspondent in Our World
Arda	Arda is a sub-continent on the Katla isola
Coalition of Nations	Military and political alliance between the nations of Graad, Sur-la-Clef, Messina and Oranjerijk, established to fight against the Communists in Revachol.
EPIS	European Union, a NATO/EU-like coalition
Graad	Entire isola/continent, similar to Northern Asia; also, Russia/Poland blend, a country on the isola with the same name
Gottwald	Germany
Igaunija	Estonia (it's the name of the country in the Latvian language)
Iilmaraa	Entire isola/continent, similar to South America
Insulinde	Entire isola/continent, the bluest of them all (has an ocean), similar to Oceania
Katla	Entire isola/continent, the coldest of them all, similar to Scandinavia
Kedra	Turkey
Mesque	Spain/Portugal and Mexico blend
Messina	Italy
Mundi	Entire isola/continent, the largest and oldest of them all, similar to Europe
Occident	Sub-continent on the Mundi isola, located to the south of Kedra; it is the home of EPIS countries, of which Sur-la-Clef is considered the "executive heart"
Oranjerijk	Version Netherlands that is larger/stronger/militarised
Ozonne	Luxembourg/rich small country
Revachol	A decayed Manhattan-like city on the Insulinde insola, founded 380 years in the past as a colony of what is modern Sur-la-Clef (then the Kingdom of Suresne); it rose to prominence during its heyday under the monarchy and became the "capital of the world", only to be ravaged by the Antecentennial Revolution during the fight between Communists and the Coalition of Nations.
Samara	Entire isola/continent
Samara, People's Republic of (SRV)	China/India blend

Country/Region in Elysium	Correspondent in Our World
Semenese	French Ivory Coast/Congo
Seol	Japan/South Korea blend
Sur-la-Clef	A France/Belgium blend and the seat for EPIS
Suru	The Suru are an indigenous ethnic minority in Vaasa, on the Katla isola; similar to the Sámi
Tien-en	Vietnam
Vaasa	Sweden/Finland blend
Vesper	Czech Republic
Yugo	The Balkans, former Yugoslavia
Yekokataa	Similar to Syberia, "Yekokataa" is an abbreviation of the Graadian term "Zone of Ecological Catastrophe," an agricultural mega-project in the extreme south east of the Graad isola. It involved cutting-edge approaches to irrigation and a completely new type of fertiliser.
Zsiemsk	Poland