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Ivan Nemtsev

CONCRETE MOON



Ivan Nemtsev

Concrete moon. vol. 1

«Издательские решения»

Nemtsev I.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ
ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН
И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ

ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. “Have you ever wondered what life is made of? Have you ever caught yourself thinking about who truly deserves this gift — and who got it by mistake? I’m so tired... Murderers, addicts, thieves... you’re all already dead to me. I’m standing on the edge of human souls. Inside me — my enemy and my curse. Above my head — Love. Fate. Friendship. Power. The Universe. Life... This is my story of love and betrayal. Of crime and punishment. Time to go.” —Klos Heinemann, The Story of a Serial Killer.

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*TRANSPARENT WALLS,
A COLD THAT CALLS,
A DROWSY HAZE, A KNOT OF FEAR—
BLOOD ON MY HANDS...
IT WON'T WASH CLEAR...*

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FOREWORD

Welcome, dear reader.

Most books open with thank-yous and dedications. Some hit you with a disclaimer. Mine's the second kind.

I'd rather save the gratitude until after we've walked the streets of Rosenberg together — a city that used to be great, but you won't find it on any map. Yeah, we're stepping into a European metropolis that exists only here. Germany and I go way back. With my last name, what did you expect? German names, street signs, scraps of foreign speech — none of it's random. It's my love for the whole country shoved through the meat grinder of serial-killer psychology and my obsession with thrillers and dystopias.

If European settings rub you the wrong way, if German names and places grate on your nerves — close the book now. You won't like what's coming.

Same goes if you can't handle strong language. There's plenty of it here. Without the profanity, you don't get the full stink of Rosenberg. You don't get the world it lives in.

And finally: this book is brutal. It's not light reading. It's a dark, psychologically heavy thriller with elements of a detective story and drama. I'm digging into loneliness, love, human cruelty, and society's moral rot. I don't endorse violence. I don't justify murder. At its core, this series is about love — but the novel in your hands is about a killer. That means victims, blood, and more than a few ugly details.

Bottom line: this is for adults. If brutality and raw language make you flinch, this won't be your ride. Concrete Moon is for fans of dystopian fiction and anyone who likes staring into the darker corners of human nature. If you've ever wondered whether violence can be justified in the name of “cleansing” society, or how the hell you find meaning in a world where morality has turned to sludge — then this one's for you.

They say every story's already been told. Mine's no exception. I drew inspiration from Crime and Punishment, Saw, Dexter, The Dark Knight, Monster, The Silence of the Lambs, Squid Game, and Manhunt. If those titles mean something to you — if they didn't scare you off or turn your stomach — welcome to the streets of Rosenberg.

The commissioner's already been yanked awake by the call. He's gearing up to head to the crime scene.

Come on, reader — let's go. Before we miss everything.

See you on the last page.

PART I

FALL

I

Dilemma

Before us was a closed loop of twelve elements, like a long string of holiday lights. Eleven bulbs — dead and cold — and only one pulsed with a scarlet glow. There was nothing physical around us — only a cosmic emptiness filled with black as pitch¹.

A moment passed, and then — suddenly, as if out of nowhere — a figure strode toward the chain: a thin man with a thick beard, seemingly elderly and impossibly tall (compared to the bulbs). A long robe the color of old parchment swayed, though there was no wind here — couldn't be. His beard — ashen, almost white — spilled down his chest in heavy strands. And his face... slipped away. Blink, and all that remained in memory was a vague outline, as if someone were rubbing it out with an eraser right inside your mind.

You couldn't say anything definite about how he reached the chain of bulbs, either — there was no surface in a place like this.

The glowing bulb trembled almost imperceptibly, giving off a thin whistle like the moan of a wounded creature.

“Again...” the man said at last. “Well, then...”

Bony fingers closed around the hot glass. The bulb shuddered, hissed, and letters surfaced on its skin. He read the inscription several times, then carefully returned the element to its place.

**“Earth. Transatlantic Union of Nations. Saxony, German State.
October, 2067.”**

It was October — the month that turned one man's mind inside out.

* * *

Saturday, October 1

Night. Forest. A thick fog wraps itself around the trees along the roadside leading to a two-story mansion.

A white SUV idles at the wrought-iron gates. Only the headlights shine — and the lone moon overhead. The driver doesn't move: hands on the wheel, eyes forward. Inside the cabin — silence, and the heavy smell of leather, coffee, and cigarettes.

With a faint metallic scrape, the gates slide open. One second — and the SUV launches forward, hugging the curves. The winding road drops from a high hill, through the forest, into the city of Rosenberg, glittering with lights.

Senior Commissioner Engel Becker's weekend night began with an unsettling call from the police station dispatcher.

* * *

Rosenberg. A city on the Elbe. Four Horsemen rule here: corruption, drugs, murder, and robbery. It's a zoo without cages, where packs of psychopaths, rapists, prostitutes, thieves, and traitors roam. Everything the darkness can breed is here.

¹ Truth is, there's no such thing as black — only the absence of light. Which only confirms we're somewhere impossibly strange — far from the stars themselves, far from everything...

Day after day, merciless Death hangs over Rosenberg, cutting down sinful souls with its scythe. Most of them get picked up by a taxi, hauling a person's ghostly remains straight into the hottest pit of Hell.

A city where it feels like any moral boundary — any notion of decency — has been erased; where every commandment of every religion on earth is broken in plain sight. Where the handful of honest cops are forced to wear wolfskin, while their colleagues knock back drinks in seedy bars with the very people they'll be "looking for" tomorrow.

This city is a sinkhole in the body of the Earth... a sinkhole that drops all the way into Hell. A typical twenty-first-century city, drowning in the worst crisis since World War II.

This city is Rosenberg. Welcome.

* * *

The commissioner reached the crime scene quickly. It was an abandoned three-story warehouse that had once been used to store fuel and other flammables. The docks sat nearby, and that was probably how the district had gotten its name: "Rock-Port."

The grounds were ringed by a low fence topped with barbed wire. The first-floor windows were sealed shut with thick boards. The police had already cordoned off the perimeter. The strobing lights of patrol cars threw restless crimson-and-blue shadows across the building's facade, turning it into something like a gigantic, pulsing organ.

Engel Becker — Senior Commissioner, Rosenberg's chief of police — cut hard to the curb and killed the engine. The moment he stepped out, a cold, gusty wind off the river slapped him in the face, making him squint for a beat.

Engel was fifty-three, and he'd given almost his entire life to the job. Average height, a big belly, strong hands — gray had been creeping through his hair for years, and his face wore the same faint, gray stubble.

The commissioner's gaze took in the scene at once. Static. Officers hunkered behind their cars, barrels trained on the dark third-floor windows. Someone was barking into a radio; someone else was silently biting his lip, trying to keep the tension under control.

The moment Becker came into view, one of the men under him sprinted over. A tall, wiry kid — his face carried that combustible mix of adrenaline and fear that rookies always had.

"Thomas. Report," Engel said curtly.

"Herr Commissioner!" the rookie — Thomas — panted. "About an hour ago, on Graschtenstraße, an armed man was spotted — black athletic gear, around forty. He was walking along the shoulder with an assault rifle trained on a chain of eight bound hostages... He made them crawl on all fours, and then they disappeared into the abandoned building. We don't have an ID yet."

"Anyone tried to get inside?"

Thomas hesitated.

"Speak!" Engel snapped.

"My partner..." The officer swallowed. "Kuno tried. But when he got close to the window... well. He's been hit."

The commissioner spat at his own feet.

"Again with this goddamn hero sticking his nose where it doesn't belong!"

"There are two entrances, and both are blocked from the inside. Kuno tried to go in through a window — nearly tore a board off with his bare hands... The shot came from the third floor. Shoulder. Through-and-through."

"Why didn't you report right away that we've got wounded?" the commissioner demanded.

"Sorry, Herr Becker. We managed to stop the bleeding. Herr Werner insisted he could keep going — "

“That asshole’s going to get us all buried one day,” Engel cut him off. “All right. To hell with it. Here’s what you do: send that idiot to the medics. Tell him it’s my order. Move!”

“Yes, Herr Commissioner!”

Thomas ran back toward the cars, while Engel Becker — already feeling the full weight of the paperwork this would turn into — moved slowly toward the cordon, letting his eyes tick from one vehicle to the next: four in front, one more behind the warehouse.

“Goddamn it all,” he muttered, flicking his cigarette butt to the ground. Something splashed on his bald scalp. Then again. He looked up at the night sky, choked with clouds. A light rain had started. What a night, the commissioner thought, irritated.

“Who are you, for fuck’s sake...” he added aloud, staring at the dark third-floor windows.

He pulled his cell phone from his coat pocket, selected a name from his contacts, and hit call. The line rang.

“Klos, drop everything and get your ass to Grascchtenstraße 17. Hostage situation. Possible casualties. And bring Bauer — we need at least one sniper. The morons staring at porn in the duty room right now are more likely to shoot each other by accident than hit what they’re aiming at.”

A short answer came through the receiver.

“Then Maurice!”

A pause. An unhappy exhale.

“Goddamn them all... Fine. Come alone — you’ll get comp time. Just hurry. I want you to talk to him.”

Without waiting for the reply, the commissioner ended the call and immediately dialed the precinct.

“Do you have the floor plan for Grascchtenstraße 17 ready? What do you mean ‘in progress’? ! Yes, of course it’s urgent. I need it now, not by Christmas!”

He shoved the phone back into his pocket and walked toward the group of officers.

“I hate negotiations.”

* * *

Time dragged like tar gone cold. The tension in the air kept climbing. Only the commissioner held on to that ice-cold calm. The other officers were visibly on edge — especially Thomas Meyer. The poor bastard was practically trembling. Maybe from the autumn rain that cut straight to the bone, maybe from the fear that shooting was about to start any second now. Either way, the kid was doing his best to hide the fact that his teeth were chattering.

His partner, Kuno Werner — a solidly built, average-height man — sat in a patrol car hazed up with bluish cigarette smoke and chain-smoked in silence. It was probably his fourth cigarette in the last half hour.

The scene came alive when headlights washed over the abandoned warehouse and the ground around it. Shadows broke into a frantic dance, leaping across the walls and the old, potholed asphalt. A black sedan rolled up, so meticulously washed it looked like it had just been driven off the lot.

The car stopped beside the commissioner’s vehicle. A young man stepped out — around five-eleven, light stubble, short-cropped black hair, blue eyes. He slammed the door and headed for the cordon without looking around. A long black coat streamed behind him in the wind as he walked with his eyes on the asphalt, as if the weight of the sky pressed down on the back of his neck.

At the cordon, his gaze caught on a reflection in a side mirror. In it — a tired face: Klos Heinemann, a homicide detective, with eyes long since accustomed to the night.

My eyes...

I spotted Commissioner Engel right away — his bulky figure stood out in the jittery chaos of the cops.

“Herr Becker.”

“Still alone?” he sighed, disappointed, instead of a greeting. “I’m gonna fire those clowns’ asses...”

“Easy. Diana said the guys have been tied up on a call in Karbon for an hour. The whole precinct’s empty — busy night.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the commissioner snorted and pulled a crumpled pack from his pocket. The lighter flicked three times before his hands finally obeyed. “Some asshole with hostages.” He jabbed with the cigarette toward the third floor. “Don’t know who yet. No demands. At least eight hostages in there, so we need to make contact ASAP. And since our only negotiator got cut in the layoffs, you’re going to have to handle this shit. You know what to do?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

“I’m trusting you. Move.”

At the nearest patrol car, I pulled an old bullhorn from the trunk — heavy, cold as a slab of ice.

“Hey, Kuno!”

He didn’t answer, absorbed in scrolling through something on his phone.

From another car, Thomas Meyer watched what I was doing. Inside the cabin it looked quiet and calm — a stark contrast to what was happening outside, where the air was practically soaked in fear.

I switched the bullhorn on, brought it to my mouth, and, forcing my voice to stay steady, said: “Rosenberg Police! The building is completely surrounded. Drop your weapon and come out with your hands up before anyone gets hurt. An attorney will be provided!”

Just as expected, a tense pause settled in. The perp was clearly stalling — playing with us, savoring the power. He was like a spider, calmly watching stupid flies caught in its web.

Everyone froze, eyes locked on the dark windows. Silence. Only the wind chased dry leaves down the alley, and they spun in time with the flashing police lights, scattering anxious glints across the asphalt.

Then something loud tore through the static from the direction of the warehouse. Glass rained down, and after it — a woman’s scream: “Help!”

“Hold your fire!” the commissioner ordered.

A few seconds later, a silhouette appeared in the broken third-floor window. The woman stepped slowly out of the darkness with her hands raised above her head and climbed onto the sill. She looked about twenty-five — beautiful, long blonde hair. And pregnant, it seemed — her belly rounded beneath thin clothing.

“I... I’ll relay his words,” she blurted in a shaking voice. “His name is Reinhold. He demands... he demands that you count yourselves.”

The pause hung in the air. For a moment, all I could hear was blood buzzing in my temples.

“Reinhold...” the commissioner grabbed his head, his face twisting. “Don’t tell me...”

But the woman went on, not giving us time to guess: “All officers... must gather in front of the main entrance... on the road. Otherwise he’ll... start shooting.”

Engel snatched up his radio.

“No tight clusters! Four to a car — stay in cover! Everyone in vests — move!”

Then he turned to me and added quietly, almost in a whisper: “I’ve got Oliver behind the warehouse, in cover. He’ll make sure that freak doesn’t try anything. Go on — tell her we’re ready.”

“Commissioner, is this the same Rein — ”

“I don’t know. Pray it isn’t.”

Cold ran down my spine.

I lifted the bullhorn again and rasped out: “We’re ready.”

She reacted instantly. I could feel fear twisting her up from the inside.

“Nineteen officers... and there are only nine of us in the building. He... he demands balance. Ten...” She glanced back over her shoulder, said something quickly into the darkness, then continued:

“Ten ‘stinking pigs’ must get the hell out of here immediately. But Werner and Meyer have to stay. For every minute you stall, he will... kill one hostage.”

She vanished so sharply it was like someone had yanked her by an invisible leash.

The commissioner quickly picked ten of the most useless cops on scene and ordered them to fall back to the intersections to the left and right of the warehouse. He spread the rest around the perimeter. My eyes stayed on the second hand as it raced across the dial. Exactly forty seconds passed.

“Why did he call for me?” Thomas asked in a nervous half-whisper. His voice — pure, animal panic — was more contagious than a scream.

At that moment the hostage appeared in the window again, but now a man’s figure surfaced behind her. He stepped out of the darkness into the circle of the spotlight, and it became clear to everyone who we were dealing with.

Reinhold Wulf.

One of Germany’s most infamous criminals — and the nightmare of every Rosenberg cop. The leader of The Golden Calf, a fanatic who’d declared war on the “rule of money.”

For four years he torched banks and pulled off brazen robberies, staged bombings in financial districts — calling it all “purification.” Once, on Unification Day, his people rounded up nearly a hundred ATMs and hauled them out beyond the city limits, where they simply... burned them, like pagan idols. But the worst part of his crimes wasn’t even that...

Reinhold almost always used hostages, and he played us like an instrument — taking pleasure in the sadistic mechanics of chaos, turning every “operation” into an elaborate game with death. A psychopath without empathy, rationalizing violence with mad slogans.

The last time the police faced Reinhold, it turned into a slaughter: dozens of hostages died during the takedown, several officers were seriously injured — one later died in the ICU. The price was monstrous, but that was when we finally caught him. We thought it was over, but the bastard avoided prison — the killer was involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital.

And then he escaped — two years ago. Since then, nothing. Not a word.

“We’re screwed,” the commissioner exhaled softly.

“Well, pigs...” came the voice you couldn’t forget — low, rasping, soaked in contempt. “Been a while.”

He took another step, and we got a better look at him. Average height, heavysset, with a thick, toad-like face — puffy, sagging cheeks, tiny deep-set eyes. Reinhold wore a sun-faded hooded jacket. He wore plastic safety goggles on an elastic strap, making him look like a giant fly. Using the pregnant woman as a human shield, he pressed the muzzle of a pistol tight to her temple.

Wulf let his gaze drift slowly over the street, savoring our helplessness.

“Listen carefully and don’t interrupt! I have eight hostages! Use your heads and don’t do anything stupid. First — put your weapons on the asphalt, or one of the hostages dies. Eight seconds. Seven. Six...”

“Do it,” Becker barked, and there was real alarm in his voice.

The officers exchanged looks and slowly laid their pistols on the asphalt. A few only pretended to comply, catching the commissioner’s barely noticeable gesture.

“Good piggies,” Wulf snorted, pleased. “Fair warning — this little shed is packed to the rafters with explosives. If it even crosses your mind that you can take the warehouse by storm...” He paused, as if checking whether it had sunk in.

“Diana — bomb squad. Now,” Engel muttered into his phone.

“Today you’ll learn that not even death can stop my cause. I’m eternal. For years they tried to turn me into a monster... and all I ever wanted was to rid your cursed society of the rule of money. It’s time to open your eyes — not only to what I am, but to what you really are. Don’t be naïve enough to think I’m the only bastard here. This entire warehouse is full of bastards. At least one more...” — his voice dipped, almost savoring it — “is standing right among you. My accomplice.”

Silence went absolute.

“I don’t care how you figure it out, but you have eight minutes — not one second more — to find out who he is. Give me his name — loud and clear. Get it wrong... or keep quiet — and one hostage dies. Time starts now.”

With that, Reinhold snapped back into the darkness, dragging the woman with him.

“Sick freak!” Engel slammed his fist down on the car roof so hard the metal buckled. “I knew this scum would pull some bullshit again!”

“We taking him alive?” I asked tensely, even though I already knew the answer from the commissioner’s face. “He’ll just escape again. Maybe we should — ”

“And what do you think?” Engel muttered, irritated. “If it weren’t for the hostages... Damn it!”

His phone started vibrating like crazy in his pocket, and the commissioner quickly stepped aside.

I turned away and slowly swept my eyes over everyone present, looking each of them in the face. In the depths of their pupils, the same fear was hiding.

The fear of death.

Closest to me, crouched behind a patrol car, was Thomas Meyer. His lips were clamped tight, like a kid at the blackboard after being caught doing something wrong. First year on the job, first real test... and it showed: he wasn’t ready. Not at all. There were rumors Tom had ended up in the police against his will — his parents had come from Old America, and the children of Americans were allowed to work in the System. So they’d slotted him in here, naturally, “for his own good.”

Beside him, leaning against the car, Kuno smoked. His face wore its usual mask of angry cynicism, but the traitorous tremor in his fingers gave him away: the cigarette smoke danced in uneven rings, betraying the shaking.

A little farther off, Hans from day shift, his phone clenched in sweaty hands, typed fast. His fair hair was plastered to his forehead like wet straw. He looked wrung out to the limit — probably already imagining himself turning in his weapon, getting in his car, opening his front door... and then this damn call, and here he was, and now he might not make it home. At last his bright blue eyes lifted from the phone. His pupils wandered, refusing to lock on anything. He was thinking — hard, feverishly.

Then my attention settled on Korbl, a young officer hunched under the weight of his vest. Long greasy hair, like raven feathers, hung down, half covering his face. Fingers with bitten nails traced circles on his belt buckle. Hypnotized, he stared at a crack in the asphalt — maybe he was searching for answers there. Or hiding his eyes.

I could feel their fear from a distance.

As for Engel... I wanted to believe the commissioner — who’d seen plenty in his life — wasn’t afraid. That he had everything under control, that he was already picturing how he’d soon get home, pour himself some whiskey, sink into a hot bath, and finally relax.

“Time to act!” someone called from behind a car.

“And do what, exactly? Anyone got ideas?” came back at once from another hiding spot.

“Shut up. We’re waiting for orders,” Hans cut in sharply.

“Meaning we wait until a hostage gets their throat slit,” Kuno spat.

“What’s there to think about?” Korbl muttered, licking cracked lips. “It’s obvious... Tom or Kuno. He ordered them to stay — so one of them...”

Everyone turned toward the car behind which the partners were positioned. Werner lit another cigarette in silence.

“I... I don’t know why...” Tom started, and his voice wavered.

“Then think, rookie,” one of the officers snapped. “You know something...”

“Don’t jump to conclusions, buddy,” Kuno growled, leaning out from cover. “You’ve got nothing to think with as it is. Keep talking and you’ll end up without a head at all.”

The threat in the air thickened. Korbl edged backward. Just then Commissioner Engel, finishing his phone call, strode toward me.

“We’re not doing this,” he said, shaking his head, eyes still on the screen. “We’re not finding his goddamn accomplice among our own. He might not even have one. That bastard’s just buying time. Question is — why?”

He tore his gaze from the phone for a second.

“I got through to his psychiatrist. I wanted to understand what this psycho wants, but... Dr. Kruspe is out of town. He can’t come in to talk to Wulf, and he won’t say a damn thing over the phone without a court order. Fucking bureaucracy’s going to get people killed again.”

His fingers flicked through contacts and he dialed the precinct.

“Hello. Where’s the building plan? Diana, are you kidding me? Or are you waiting until he starts executing hostages? Move!”

Meanwhile, the voices by the cars grew louder — the conflict kept boiling.

“Betrayal’s about to surface! Don’t drag this out — save lives!” “So who’s the accomplice?”

“Kuno, why the hell are you quiet?!”

“Shut up, Dieter! You’re getting on my nerves!” Kuno yelled back.

“None of us is an accomplice! Are you out of your minds?” Tom said, frightened. “He could’ve left already... right when some of you pulled back from the cordon.”

“That’s why he ordered you two to stay!” someone shot back from the crowd.

“Hey!” Engel barked, deciding it was time to step in. “Shut up and do your jobs — now!”

“Everything’s under control, Commissioner!” Kuno called back — and in the same second he lunged. In two strides he reached Dieter, grabbed him by the front of his jacket, and slammed him hard into the fence.

Engel’s face went crimson with rage.

“I’ll fire both of you right now! What the hell kind of shitshow is this?”

“It’s fine,” Kuno said calmly, returning to his cover. “He just pissed me off.”

Even though Kuno knew² that commissioners these days could barely do anything to their subordinates — more duties than actual authority — he still treated Engel with respect.

I glanced at my watch. Two minutes left.

“Plans come through? This is getting out of — ”

“No,” Becker said tensely, gripping the phone like he wanted to crush it. “Diana’s waiting on an Oracle to sign off... EMS and the fire department are en route, and the entry team’s at the intersection.”

“You really think one of us is his guy?”

Honestly, it was easy to believe.

“Hell, Klos, how would I know!” Engel snapped. “That scum loves planting paranoia...”

Hans grabbed his radio and checked in with the unit behind the warehouse. As expected, nobody confessed.

Everyone fell silent, sinking into an ocean of their own thoughts, fears, and suspicions...

“Eight minutes are up!” Reinhold said coldly. “What’s your answer?”

“So what do we tell him?” I asked the commissioner quietly.

Engel’s eyes moved over everyone, one by one. Kuno — hotheaded, crude, defiant, ex-military — Engel knew him well and didn’t believe anyone that blunt was capable of playing a double game. Tom fit even less — an overwhelmed rookie who could barely stay on his feet.

“Klos, you’ll have to tell him we don’t know. Ask what he wants. The main thing — stall for time.”

² Police precincts are run by so-called Oracles — representatives of the System of the New Law: bureaucrats with an almost religious faith in procedure.

With numb fingers, I raised the bullhorn to my lips. “We don’t know, Reinhold. What do you want?”

A voice came back, full of staged disappointment: “You trust your people so blindly... Fine. That’s why I’m here. Now I’ll show you what kind of moral freaks are standing among you. But first...”

A shot rang out. The echo slammed into the warehouse walls and rolled down the street.

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and let out a choked whimper, fists clenched.

“My secret helper — I’m speaking to you: your cowardice, greed, and worthlessness have just cost a man his life. The old man died because you kept your mouth shut. So what are you feeling now? What are you thinking, my friend? Do you remember the moment you stopped being human? I remember mine perfectly. We’re two monsters, you and I... And how many more monsters are sleeping inside the people standing there? They’re just waiting for their full moon... Werewolves! Tonight you will all witness the awakening of one of them!”

Reinhold let the silence sit.

“By the way, there are fewer of us now. Which means one of the police pigs has to leave your herd. Immediately! And I repeat — Kuno and Thomas stay. We still need them.”

It felt like Reinhold’s voice carried some kind of hypnotic effect: it wormed into your head and made you doubt everyone standing beside you. Even I felt it for a second — something scraping at me from the inside: paranoia, so sticky it wouldn’t let go.

He hadn’t named the accomplice — so did that person now have a chance to disappear before it was too late... or to stay put, so as not to raise suspicion? Which was it? Who was he?

Once again I slowly scanned the faces around me. Farthest away, in the shadow of a squad car, stood Korbl — pale and hunched in on himself.

“I’m gonna take a piss,” he tossed to the commissioner, eyes down. “I’ll be with the others at the intersection, okay?”

Engel stared at him with a look that could drill through armor, and gave a short nod.

“Don’t leave the rally point. We may need backup at any moment. Wait for orders.”

Hands in his pockets, Korbl walked along the road without looking back.

The commissioner followed him with his eyes, then pulled out his phone and gave someone an order:

“Gross is heading to the intersection. Don’t let him leave until I say so.”

Meanwhile, Reinhold made sure there was one less cop. He waited until the officer’s figure dissolved into the darkness at a safe distance, then spoke again:

“Well. Balance restored. Now we can continue. Tell me — what would you do with a couple million ameros³? Think hard. What would you be willing to do to get it fast and easy, without risking your life at a shitty job, without spending your best years on it? That’s exactly what my pet monster got paid for his work. He found the hostages, snatched them... and brought tonight’s main course right to me: Thomas and Kuno — true opposites, like yin and yang, made partners by fate. I know there’s a beast sleeping in one of them. And I’m the one who’s going to let it out of its cage.”

“What do you want in exchange for the hostages?” I tried to seize the initiative.

“Shut up!” he barked back. “You finally need to wake up and understand what kind of scum surrounds us! The vermin that have overrun this sick city... Their souls left them a long time ago! All that’s left are animals driven by greed — by mindless, planet-killing overconsumption.”

He drew a deep breath.

“And now...” Reinhold said, “let the show begin. I’m going to give you the names of the remaining hostages. Listen.” And he started listing them — slowly, pausing after each one. “Marta... Dirk... Ansobert... the Meyers: Ida and Adolf...”

³ The currency of the Transatlantic Union of Nations (TAUN).

Thomas looked up at the warehouse. Horror and disbelief mixed on his face — as if, in a single instant, all his armor had been ripped away. Fear locked him up for a heartbeat, paralyzed him, and then a heavy shudder ran through his body.

“Mom?..” he breathed, the word coming out as a strangled whisper. “Dad?”

A dead silence settled over the scene, broken only by Tom’s sobbing — short, ragged bursts, like he couldn’t catch his breath.

A car door slammed. Kuno stepped out slowly, eyes never leaving the window. His face was stone, but something dark — something dangerous — flickered in his pupils.

Engel, usually unflappable, a man who’d probably seen everything there was to see, was now filled with some kind of primal fear. For the first time in all the years I’d known him, I saw him like this — knocked off balance, almost lost. He stood frozen, as if he didn’t know what to do.

“To hell with those clearances!” the commissioner roared and, pulling out his phone, crouched and sprinted for the rear of the warehouse. “Come on, Diana — pick up, goddamn it!”

The ringing tightened nerves that were already stretched to snapping. Finally a woman’s voice came through.

“Well?!” Engel exhaled as he burst onto the riverfront behind the warehouse.

A pause.

He listened, teeth clenched.

“The neighboring warehouse? Perfect. The entry team has breaching charges. But we need reinforcements — one unit at every intersection on both sides of the warehouse. And a boat on the river, now!”

“...”

“I don’t care if it’s janitors — pull them off desks, pull them off calls — nothing is more important than this right now... Damn it! And for the love of God, hurry.”

* * *

Meanwhile, Reinhold kept playing his deadly game: “And finally... the Werners: Caroline and Franziska...”

Kuno froze for a beat — then slammed his fist into the hood so hard it left a deep dent. Snatching up his pistol, eyes blazing with hate, he charged toward the warehouse.

“You’re dead, you piece of shit!” His roar was pure, uncontrolled rage.

“Stop!” I shouted, rushing after Kuno. He didn’t listen. “Stop!” I repeated, harder. “You’re risking the hostages’ lives! Stop right now!”

“I don’t give a fuck! Fuck off!”

I tried to grab him, but Kuno shoved me aside roughly, the last scraps of self-control gone.

“Explosives! Did you forget?! We have to move carefully! This whole place could go up!”

He stopped. His heavy breathing made his shoulders pump up and down in a frantic rhythm.

I got up, stepped closer, and set a hand on his shoulder — careful, but firm.

“Let’s just hear him out,” I said quietly, as calm as I could manage, though I was barely holding it together myself. “Find out what he wants. We’ll stop that bastard...”

Kuno drew a deep, ragged breath. Then let it out slowly. His fingers still held the pistol grip in a death grip.

“We don’t do a damn thing, like always... We stand here like idiots... and those animals up in the brass...” He looked at me like it hurt to breathe. “You don’t understand, Klos! My wife and my daughter are in there!”

“I understand,” I whispered, squeezing his shoulder tighter. “That’s exactly why we have to hear him out. Buy time. You can’t act on impulse. Chaos — that’s what he’s waiting for. Reinhold is provoking us on purpose. Don’t give him that. Engel is working on a way through this. Trust him.”

Kuno shook his head. Hopelessness and fear stared out of his eyes.

“He’s a fucking psycho! That scum will kill them all anyway — it’s only a matter of time!”

“Then we have to win that time,” I said quietly, but firmly. “If you rush in there now, nobody’s going to have a chance. You’ll put everyone in danger — them and us. Come on. Get a grip. We’ll find a smart, safe way out.”

He stared at me for a long moment, hard and searching. Then he took one more deep breath, lowered the weapon, and nodded.

The rain didn’t let up. It drummed on car roofs and our shoulders, washing dust off the asphalt. Cold drops slid down behind our collars, but nobody noticed. Something very dangerous was building — something terrifying. We didn’t understand it yet. Not fully. Or how far its consequences would reach...

* * *

Thomas dialed his mother, fingers trembling. Ring. Again. Again. Then silence. The phone slipped from his hand and splashed into a filthy puddle.

Rain and tears ran together down his face. He didn’t even bend to pick the phone up — he just stood there, staring into nothing.

I lifted the bullhorn again.

“What’s next, Reinhold? What do you want?”

The answer came instantly.

“I just... want to play.”

His face flickered in the window — a wide, ugly grin stretching his mouth.

“The rules are simple. I won’t repeat them. Someone’s silence kills. Someone else’s silence can save lives. My accomplice’s silence just sent an old man — innocent in your eyes — to the other side. So now he’s not just a bought-and-paid-for sellout — he’s a killer. But their silence,” Reinhold gestured toward Kuno and Thomas, “might save someone.”

The silence turned unbearable. The watch on my wrist buzzed for the third time in ten minutes, warning me my heart rate was too high.

Reinhold went on: “So. Right beside me are your mother and father, Thomas — your dear parents. They’re scared to death. Crying. On their knees, begging to speak to you one last time. Looks like they’ve already made their peace with dying, but it’s not for me to decide their fate. And it’s not for you either, Tom. Whether they’re lying tomorrow in neighboring graves, dead on the same day... or whether they’ll tear out of this city with you, improvising a new life as they go — their fate will be decided by... Kuno.”

Kuno’s mouth fell open in shock. He turned slowly toward Thomas and spread his hands, helpless.

“And who’s this little girl here? Franziska, is it?” Reinhold continued in a sweet, vile voice. “And her mother, Caroline... God, they’re adorable. And they look so alike. She takes after her mom, huh? That’s what people say, right?”

“Give me the bullhorn, Klos,” Kuno said through clenched teeth — and without waiting for me to respond, he stepped in and yanked it out of my hands.

“Listen to me, you bastard!” he screamed into the window, his voice rasping with rage. “You lay a finger on them and I’ll kill you! I’ll rip your guts out and wrap them around your ugly head. You hear me, you piece of shit?!”

Reinhold only laughed in reply.

“You know what? I believe you. I studied you for a long time, Kuno. You always thought force solves everything. But right now your strength can only get in the way. Your daughter’s life — and your wife’s — aren’t in your powerful hands. They’re in Thomas’s weak, shaking little ones!”

Kuno let out an animal howl and whirled toward us. The officers began to close around him slowly, like he was a cornered beast — ready to stop him from doing something irreversible.

“Back the fuck off!” he roared, raising his pistol.

Reinhold watched our reaction for a moment, then continued:

“You can keep poking a wounded animal with a stick, waiting for the monster to break loose and gun you down in a rabid fit. You won’t stop him. So I suggest we take a breath and listen to the rules of the game — especially since neither you nor I have time to waste. The piggies are surely looking for a way inside, if they haven’t found it already. The rules are simple: two hostages will die. That part doesn’t depend on you. But you can try to save your own.”

He let that hang, and in the silence the only sound was the broken whistle in Kuno’s chest.

“You’ll have exactly eight minutes. If I don’t hear what I need in that time, I’ll give the choice to one of the hostages — say, that student. If he can’t handle it, he dies himself. Your loved ones could end up in bags. Or they might not. Roulette. But there’s another way...”

His voice sharpened.

“I’m talking to you, Thomas. Tell me something interesting about Werner — something truly dirty — and I’ll release your parents immediately, but... I’ll kill his daughter and his wife. Same offer for you, Kuno. Air Thomas’s dirty laundry — and the Meyers die, while your family lives, and you get to see your Franziska alive again.”

Reinhold gave a tired sigh, as if he was already bored by it all.

“Before you do anything, remember this: the people sitting in front of me don’t want to die. And don’t forget — those three... they have families too.”

Once again a crushing silence settled over the warehouse.

“So,” the psychopath continued, “you’re facing a difficult dilemma. How much do you trust each other? How much do your loved ones’ lives matter to you? Can you keep your mouths shut? Eight minutes. The choice is yours.”

Thomas collapsed onto the asphalt, clutching his head in both hands. His face went pale, his lower lip trembled, and his big, frightened eyes stared into emptiness — like he’d lost his grip on reality.

Kuno threw the bullhorn down at his feet, yanked his wallet from his pocket, and flipped it open. In the photo, his wife and little daughter looked back at him. A cold raindrop fell straight onto Franziska’s face... or was it a tear?

“My love,” Kuno whispered, tracing the picture with his finger. Then he snapped his head up and locked onto Thomas. “No... I won’t let them die. I won’t. You so much as squeak, you pup, and I’ll tear you to pieces! You hear me?! You hear me? Answer me!”

“Kuno, calm down,” I said as gently as I could, taking a cautious step forward. We were slowly tightening the circle, careful not to provoke him.

“Klos, shut up. For once.”

“But you don’t understand — » Hans started.

“All of you, shut the hell up!!! Don’t get involved! This isn’t your business!”

He didn’t blink. His stare was pinned to Thomas — heavy, wild, like he was ready to pounce at any second.

A flash of lightning tore his twisted face out of the darkness. Swaying slightly, he moved in on his partner and clamped his hand around his throat.

“Let him go!” I shouted — but he didn’t hear me.

“Tom... look at them. Look at my little girl...” he said in a harsh half-whisper. “She’s got her whole life ahead of her... You don’t want her to die because of you, do you?”

Thomas shook his head frantically.

“No,” he forced out through tears. “We’ll stay quiet... we will...”

“I have to save them. I don’t have a choice.”

“No!” Tom screamed with such desperate force that something inside me clenched.

I stepped aside and called Engel. The situation had collapsed. We needed decisions — now. Where the hell was he when we needed him most?! Busy. Damn it.

“Time’s ti-i-icking!” Reinhold sang.

Kuno started trembling.

“Two random hostages... that’s our best option!” I tried to stop them.

Christ, what am I saying? The best option is to burn that bastard alive... but Engel probably has orders to bring him in alive.

“Best option? For us?” Kuno snapped. “There is no ‘us’! There’s me and my family. And my best option is saving them!”

“What if he’s bluffing?” I blurted. “What if your loved ones aren’t even in there? Did you think of that?”

Sure, Thomas wasn’t a saint — none of us were. But what could Kuno even say about his partner? The kid had graduated the academy with honors, spotless reputation, not a single reprimand in his first year.

“One minute left!” Reinhold announced. “Everyone’s crying in here, waiting on your decision, killers...”

“Damn...” Kuno breathed. His chin was shaking, his lips had gone white. He grabbed the bullhorn and brought it to his mouth. It felt like everything around us went still, waiting. Even the branches stopped swaying in the wind, and the rain softened. And then eight shots came out of him, each one like a bullet:

“Tom... paid a bribe... bought his spot... on the force...”

And then one more, hoarse, almost a whisper:

“Sorry.”

The bullhorn slipped from his hand and hit the asphalt with a dull thud.

The wind picked up again. It felt like it burst straight out of Tom’s throat when he screamed:

“No-o-o! I... That’s a lie! I never... never did that!”

Kuno dropped to his knees beside the discarded bullhorn, covering his face with his hands. Thick blood seeped from his shot-through shoulder. He was crying — for the first time that night — silently, convulsively. It was as if the rage had left his body and moved into Thomas, driving him to scream through that mind-splitting pain squeezing at his temples.

“No! I didn’t do it! Kuno... you bastard! You goddamn bastard!”

Tom lunged for the bullhorn, stumbled, went down in a puddle — but still managed to reach the weapon of retribution...

“Tom, no!” I shouted, but it was too late.

“He... beats detainees!” Thomas yelled, his voice cracking into a shriek. “Abuse of power! Steals evidence! And I... I never paid bribes... Never did... I became a cop... I earned it... I — ”

When he finished, he rose on shaking legs, sobbing, staggered to a car, and dropped to his knees in front of it, pressing his forehead to the cold metal. His body couldn’t take it — he doubled over and vomited onto the wet asphalt.

“Son of a bitch!” Kuno bellowed and charged his partner.

He grabbed the kid by the head and smashed his face into the door with all his strength. Hans and I rushed in, barely dragging Werner back, while Dieter snatched up the bullhorn.

Thomas spat blood and stared at his partner in silence. In his eyes: a mix of horror, pain, and pure hate. He’d gotten his revenge. But did it feel any better?

“Let me go! I’ll kill him! And I’ll kill Reinhold!” Kuno snarled, fighting us. “Let go, I said!”

“Where’s the commissioner?!” Hans asked anxiously, clamping a hand on the furious father’s elbow.

“At the intersection,” I answered, eyes still fixed on the third-floor window.

“And he’d better — ”

Hans didn't get to finish. From the warehouse came Reinhold's voice again — nasty, as if soaked in poison:

"Your time is up. Though, honestly, it doesn't matter anymore. I heard everything I wanted — and more. Regrettably... both families will die. You made that choice yourselves. Because you two — pigs who imagine yourselves guardians of the law — are unworthy of the uniform you wear. I didn't doubt you for a second... Well then."

"No..." Thomas rasped. "No! I didn't... do anything! Kuno lied!" His voice snapped into a hysterical scream. "Don't touch them! You bastard!"

"We're fucked..." Kuno hissed through his teeth, wrenching against our grip. "If anything happens to them, I — Let me go, bitch!"

A shot rang out. Another. Another. And another...

Thomas collapsed to the ground and howled in pain — long, piercing, like something inside him was breaking.

"Freak!" Kuno finally tore free, yanked a pistol from Hans, and sprinted for the warehouse, firing at the third-floor window as he ran, barely even aiming.

Reinhold burst into laughter — loud, insane — and with a precise shot dropped Kuno by the fence, punching a round through his thigh.

At that moment the commissioner appeared by the warehouse, out of breath.

"Who fired?! What the hell is going on here?"

"We need to get Kuno out of here — now! And Thomas..." I blurted.

Engel, crouched low, crept to the moaning Kuno, took his weapon, slung Kuno's arm over his shoulder, and hauled him up. Staying behind cover, they moved slowly toward the intersection.

The commissioner ordered Hans and me to take Thomas. The kid was deathly pale, his face locked in terror. His lips moved strangely, but no sound came out. We hooked our arms under his and, keeping our distance from Kuno, followed.

Reinhold watched it all with undisguised pleasure.

"I did it..." His voice trembled with excitement. "Two monsters got loose tonight!"

Then, addressing us, he shouted louder:

"Reminder about the balance: only one of you gets to come back..."

We made it to the intersection. A field command post had already sprung up here: ambulances, fire trucks, police vans, blinding cones of floodlights cutting through the night. The air vibrated with tense radio chatter. People in body armor moved between the vehicles, and cigarette smoke hung in a bluish layer. This place breathed anxiety — like the city's heart, knocked out of rhythm.

Medics hurried to Kuno without waiting for us to bring him closer, got him onto a stretcher fast, and rolled him toward the unit. He looked feverish: sweat gleamed on his forehead, his body shook, and he groaned, repeating over and over, "Let me get to him..."

When the ambulance's flashing lights vanished around the corner, the commissioner walked over to the second vehicle and said something to the doctor. The doctor nodded and helped Thomas climb inside.

Engel spun back to me.

"Bottom line — we found something. There's a passage in the warehouse basement. Two neighboring buildings are connected underground by a tunnel, you follow? Handy little setup for a dirty racket. And that Oracle — complete piece of shit — couldn't send the warehouse plans without fucking with my head first. Kept asking, 'Does the neighboring warehouse have an owner?'" Engel mimicked. "Take him alive. No gas. Morgan wants to make a public example of that separatist freak."

The commissioner yanked the tablet out of its dock in the patrol car. The screen lit his face with a greenish flicker, laying bare the deep lines in it. Engel jabbed a finger at the building diagram on Graschtenstraße, leaving a greasy print on the display.

"The passage was bricked up, but the breaching team just... cracked it."

“Hope Reinhold didn’t hear anything?”

“Did *you* hear anything? The passage is underground. The blast was a decent distance from the target. Anyway — EOD’s checking everything now, entry team’s standing by. If they can get onto the first floor quietly, they’ll call me. Then we go in.”

He looked me straight in the eye.

“We’re taking it quiet. Very quiet.”

“What do I do?”

“Get back to position. Keep him talking — distract him. Right now the most important thing is to keep Reinhold engaged. We need time. We need him to let his guard down. The more he runs his mouth, the better — that’s how we got him last time. Let him think he’s in control and we’re a bunch of idiots standing under the windows with no clue what to do. Oh — and make sure those dumbasses don’t poke their heads out of cover again or start another fight. If anything happens, report it immediately. I’ll be on comms — put the earpiece in and wait for the call.”

He hesitated, then added, quieter:

“Don’t play hero. All the heroes are long dead.”

“Understood, Herr Commissioner,” I said, and headed back toward the warehouse at a fast walk.

Graschtenstraße stretched ahead — narrow, gray, washed-out, like all the color had been leeched from it. On the right: blind warehouse walls and rusted garage gates. On the left, behind a tall barbed-wire fence: the long brick torso of an old factory. Everywhere you looked, hulking, cracked boxes of buildings with shattered windows — filmed with dust and webbing. Almost everything here was structurally unsound — yet somehow, a few things still kept running.

I found myself breathing through my sleeve: the air reeked of chemicals. They’d probably been dumping industrial waste into the river for years. How could anyone live and work here?..

But the space around me couldn’t drown out the real thing. I kept thinking about how both of them — Kuno and Thomas — could’ve saved two lives if they’d worked together like people are supposed to. Instead Kuno decided he’d get more by betraying his partner. And Thomas... Tom chose revenge — pointless, destructive revenge. In the end they both lost everything they had. Their loved ones. Themselves.

The paradox was that each of them believed he was right. Both acted “for family,” “for their own.” Both clung to the people they loved, and in that moment everyone else stopped existing. Was it selfishness? Maybe. But it was the selfishness of people terrified of losing the last thing that matters. Each of them believed he could save his family. That’s what killed them.

The old human problem: we don’t know how to work things out. We divide the world into “ours” and “theirs,” and in that divide everything collapses — alliances, lives, destinies.

And the ones to blame are fucking bastards like Reinhold. We should’ve put him down back then... One shot — and everything would’ve been different. Everyone would’ve been alive. But the commissioner got the same kind of order again — the kind that makes your hands go limp. So when it came to the question of “what do we do,” I already had my own answer...

I’d slip into the warehouse and get to him quiet — without a sound. I’d come up behind him while that bastard stared out the window and drank himself in. I’d grab him by the hair, jerk his head back, bare his throat. And in one motion — from ear to ear... Quick. No — slow. So he’d feel the warm blood running down his chest while his eyes could still see. So he’d have time to understand it was over. So he’d take one last breath of that poisoned air and realize: this is what real punishment is. Not a cage. Not a sentence. Not talks with a psychologist or a psychiatrist. But the end. Total. Final.

Justice.

At last, I reached that goddamn warehouse.

When Reinhold spotted my silhouette in the window, he said with unmistakable pleasure:

“So. Shall we continue?”

Grabbing a new bullhorn from a patrol car, I said:

“Continue what? How many bodies is enough for you, Reinhold?”

Without hostages, he won't last long. He knows that.

“You think I need these deaths? What do you take me for, pig?” the criminal shouted, his voice thick with hatred and contempt. “Who am I talking to? What's your name, detective?”

“Klos Heinemann.”

“Klos... huh.” His tone turned almost conversational. “Tell me — what's keeping you here? You still don't get it? None of this depends on you. You — pathetic parts of the System — try to calculate my moves, but I know yours in advance. I'm running the show here. The best thing you can do is go home, Klos. Right now.”

From the outside, Reinhold looked almost relaxed — like he'd let his guard down. But I saw it: one hand dug into the hostage's shoulder; the other — gun hand — was jammed under her ribs. A living shield.

An unnecessary pause formed — one I needed to fill with talk immediately. But the moment I raised the bullhorn to my lips, the criminal continued:

“Think about the people around you, Klos. The System is rotten to the core. Three of tonight's witnesses might've been your buddies. But one of them turned out to be a traitor who sold himself — and you still don't know who. If you had half a brain, you'd have figured it out already. The other two? Until the day they die, they'll hate each other. Not just hate — become enemies. They destroyed themselves. You saw Thomas's eyes, didn't you? He's on the edge... and he will get revenge on Kuno. Sooner or later he'll cut him somewhere in a back alley — just waiting until that pig's whiskey-blackout drunk in some bar, bawling over his wife. Tell me, Klos — did you feel the monsters being born in them?”

Revenge... Kuno forged an enemy with his own hands.

“Why are you doing all this?”

“Why...” he echoed. “For years I carried that question around: what am I supposed to do, and how am I supposed to live in the imperfect world of your fucking New Law? Do you know I'm fairly wealthy, Klos? Though you probably wouldn't guess it. The thing is — money has no meaning. It... gives nothing. To anyone.”

He spoke louder now, harsher, more and more bitter.

“They say humans are social animals. But who's around me? Consumers. Dumb mannequins. It disgusts me to live in a world where human life is measured in currency and — paradoxically — worth nothing at all. From the day things got a price tag, a person became a product. Hell... was there ever a time on this miserable planet when life was truly priceless?”

The psychopath crooked a smile and leaned out for a moment from behind the hostage's shoulder.

“You know what's funniest? I really don't want to kill her.” He prodded the girl with the barrel. “I want her to live. To remember. And someday tell her child how she once stood at the edge — and the world didn't save her. Not the police. Not the law. Not God. Just a man with a gun. And that same man let her go. Because he got... bored.”

The girl sobbed. He loosened his grip a little. Just a little.

“Then let her go. Right now. Save her life, and I promise, I'll personally help you — ”

“Don't start with that, Klos,” Reinhold cut me off bluntly.

“But why kill innocent people? Who gave you that right?”

“Sounds like you want that right for yourself.” A short laugh. “Huh, detective? Would you kill me?”

He laughed again.

“If you want to understand me, look at the world through my eyes. I already told you — human lives are just a certain amount of money. I don't see living souls in front of me. I see mannequins with price tags. Try it, Klos. Come on — maybe you'll manage. Look around.”

I turned my head for show.

“Not seeing any price tags, Reinhold. You ever consider you might be wrong? Maybe if not all, then at least some human lives are priceless?”

I drew a deeper breath. In my earpiece — silence. Meaning our guys still weren’t ready to go in.

“Priceless, you say? Depends on whose.” His voice sharpened. “Definitely not these mannequins under the same roof with me — the ones you’re risking your pathetic lives for... Are they priceless to you too? Are their lives worth yours? Just so you know, Klos... these hostages aren’t random people off the street. I asked my accomplice to pick me special ones — people who understand better than most that everything in this world is for sale.”

He began listing them, his voice ringing with pleasure:

“I studied each one. Take the student, for example. Maybe to you he’s a future star of science. To me he’s a goddamn corrupt little snake who’s buying good grades right now — and later he’ll be shaking you down for a bribe so he can treat your mommy without ‘extra bureaucracy,’ because that’s how he’s gotten used to solving problems. How do you like that? To me that worthless corrupt little bastard has been dead for a long time. He’s not just useless — he’s harmful. Use your brain, detective: what epidemic of ignorance and cynicism do people like that breed? Today he buys a diploma, tomorrow he’ll be selling his incompetence... Shall we continue? Meyer’s parents — safety inspectors. Wanna guess how happily those worms take bribes during inspections? Built themselves a villa in Donner without any moral right to it — and without honest earnings to match. And this pregnant whore...” He jerked the girl by the shoulder; she let out a small cry. “Dating a young man for money, bathing in his cash, not even thinking about the child she’s carrying. Maybe...” He paused, savoring it. “Not even his.”

Reinhold fell abruptly silent.

Something cold and viscous rose in my stomach — a blend of disgust and horror.

“I don’t feel sorry for any of them, Klos. They’re not people anymore — they’re merchandise. And that’s their choice. I’d kill them right now without blinking, but what matters is that it finally gets through to you. If tonight I manage to open the eyes of even one pig — one cog in this rotten System — that will be my victory.”

His voice suddenly rose:

“So hear me! You’re doing the wrong thing. You devour the resources of our miserable planet and do nothing worthwhile. Society appointed you to keep order, to fight crime — but you can’t even see the crime right under your noses, you fools. It’s time to end this. Oh — and tell Korbl he’s next!”

Behind me came a rustle — someone cursed. I glanced back for a second. Officers were trading distrustful looks.

“I’ll wage this war until my last breath! Monsters will be born and tons of ameros will burn! Our civilization will be rid of money! The Golden Calf will see to that!”

“Franziska!” I couldn’t hold it back — my voice broke. “What has that little girl done?”

“Enough!” he cut in, his tone sharp and steel-hard. “A helicopter. On the warehouse roof. Now. You have... thirty minutes. Or I kill the next hostage.”

And two silhouettes vanished from the window.

“Damn it!” I swore and immediately called the commissioner. “Engel — he’s demanding a helicopter within thirty minutes. Threatens to kill a hostage. And one more thing: hold Korbl. I think it’s him...”

“Klos, Klos — wait. Slow down.” Engel’s voice came fast in my ear. “We’re ready to move. Keep buying time — soon we’ll take him.”

“Understood, Herr Commissioner.”

Just let them make it in time...

* * *

Later, I learned from the reports what was going on not far from us: in a mold-stinking underground passageway, a group of officers was carefully making its way toward the abandoned warehouse space at 17 Graschtenstraße. Flashlights swept over damp brick walls furred with fungus.

Once inside, those brave guys immediately ran into barrels of god-knows-what, sacks packed tight with some unfamiliar mix, and wires disappearing up under the ceiling. It looked like Reinhold hadn't been bluffing — the building really was rigged with explosives.

EOD was already working. The entry team moved soundlessly toward a rusted stairwell, checking every flight with mirrors and sensors. After each short signal from the tech, the team inched upward, knowing that at any moment the whole place could go up.

* * *

“Reinhold, let the hostages go. They haven't done anything, and their deaths won't bring you any closer to what you call justice. You have... an unusual way of seeing the world, but it isn't quite the way you see it. Come down, and we'll talk about it. I'm ready to listen. I want to help you.”

Yeah, I knew I was facing an intellectual opponent. He knew exactly how any “conversation” would end — handcuffs and a cell. There was no way back for him anymore. To change that, you'd have to change his beliefs. Rebuild his worldview. Take a personality assembled over years and put it back together piece by piece. That couldn't be done in one night. And I knew he'd sooner die for his convictions, for his cause, than surrender.

The only thing I could do was keep him from falling silent.

My voice, amplified through the loudspeaker, rolled over the wet rooftops and drowned out the careful steps of the entry team climbing the stairs inside the warehouse.

Time crawled. The rain finally let up, leaving only the shine of water on the roofs and the soft drip of runoff from the gutters. Reinhold returned to the window again, shielded by a hostage, and, like a prophet, went back to spewing his destructive philosophy about money and how it had broken his life. Money, he said, was cancer. Money was chains people put on themselves and call freedom.

Of course, no sane person could justify his methods — hostage-taking, murder... They disgusted me too. But what struck me was something else: how far a human being is willing to step into the abyss for the world inside his own head. What a terrible price he'll pay for the illusion of meaning.

That kind of energy, that kind of willpower — it could've made the world better if his goal had been different. But he'd chosen destruction.

There were only fifteen minutes left until the next hostage died — no one doubted the psychopath would do it. The entry team froze at the last door, listening to the thud of strangers' hearts behind the thin barrier. Downstairs, sweating cold, EOD cut the last wires.

We were close to the end...

But right before the end, the worst thing always happens. I knew that too well.

* * *

Static.

A small, dark room. A single bulb hangs from the ceiling by its cord, buzzing as it flickers. The light spasms across the walls, snatching patches of black mold and rust-smeared stains out of the darkness.

By the window stands Reinhold — short-legged, fat, with long, light, curly hair plastered to his wet forehead. A crooked smirk is frozen on his face.

Right in front of him, shielding the criminal, stands a young man in a rumpled suit — his hostage, the muzzle pressed to his temple. He whimpers, but he has no strength left to fight. Near the entrance, on the floor, lies a messy heap of five bodies — two police families and an unknown old man. In the far corner, curled up against the wall, sits the pregnant young woman. Her soft, broken sobs are the only living sound in the room. Across from her — another hostage, tied up. Behind him, jerry cans

of flammable mixture are set out, detonators taped to them. One careless shot, and all that will be left of the warehouse is a smoking crater.

The police tear through the static. The lock gives a barely audible click, a gloved hand pushes the door, the hinges squeal loud.

A quiet:

"Fuck..."

The door blasts inward with a deafening crack, throwing up a cloud of dust.

Reinhold yanks the hostage by the collar, pulling him away from the window, and pins him to his chest.

"Police!"

"Hands on your head!"

"On your knees!"

The criminal laughs and jams the pistol harder into the kid's temple. The hostage breaks and lets out a choked sob.

"Drop the weapon!"

"Helicopter."

"Surrender! You're surrounded!"

"He-li-cop-ter!"

* * *

When shouting broke out inside the warehouse and Reinhold suddenly stepped back from the window, cutting his speech off mid-sentence, I felt a flicker of relief. Tonight that monster had dealt out a lot of undeserved pain to everyone unlucky enough to be near him. But for them, this story was about to become the past. Another trauma — one not everyone would be able to live through.

Spotting the commissioner's bulky silhouette in the distance, moving fast toward us, I moved to meet him. Engel caught up and grabbed my elbow.

"Klos, where the hell are you going? Our guys are already inside! Stay close — we might need you."

"What about Detective Gross? Where is he? Reinhold named him as the accomplice."

"Damn it." Engel scanned the area, searching for Korbl. "I completely forgot about that little shit... All right, it's fine — he's already under watch. I'll swing by on the way back and question him. Hell, we should've gotten a warrant right away — God knows what we'll find at his place..."

"And Kuno and Thomas?"

The commissioner let out a heavy sigh.

"They've been taken to hospitals. They're holding on. Probably won't see them again anytime soon... Poor bastards. I feel for them."

He glanced at his watch and frowned.

"Our guys are taking too long..."

* * *

Meanwhile, the situation inside the warehouse had barely changed. Time hung in a taut pause. The end felt close, but what it would look like — no one could predict.

"Bird's inbound," came over the radio. "Be ready."

"Roger that."

One of the entry officers, with Reinhold's permission, carefully approached the hostages' bodies and began checking pulses. From the spreading pool of blood, it was clear they didn't have a chance — but when the officer reached the little girl...

She was lying on her side, face in the dust, hair matted with blood.

The blood wasn't hers.

He pressed two fingers to the side of her neck and froze.

A pulse. Weak, but steady.

Not a single wound. Just unconscious.

He barely managed to hold back a shout of joy.

“We’re taking the bodies,” the officer told Reinhold flatly, forcing every emotion out of his voice.

“Do whatever you want with them,” Reinhold tossed back, indifferent.

A couple minutes later, medics rushed in — white coats hidden under heavy body armor. Officers carried the bodies out. The medics got them onto stretchers and almost at a run cleared the danger zone.

They’ll save her, the officer repeated to himself feverishly, eyes locked on the stretcher with that small shape fading into the dark. They’ll save her... They’ll save her.

* * *

Things started moving fast — one after another... A minute ago we’d been standing there helpless, doing nothing but waiting.

With each passing second, the roar of the spinning blades grew louder. A helicopter came in fast from over the river, tearing through the air. Its shadow slid across the rusted roofs of the abandoned warehouses — then it hovered ten feet above the roof, blasting up settled dust and debris. Inside the building, the surviving windowpanes began to rattle.

“You’re not as stupid as I thought, piggies!” Reinhold shouted. “You did something right for once. Let the pilot set it down — but don’t shut the engine off,” he ordered, smiling in triumph.

Every gaze, every thought was pinned to the helicopter — and no one noticed the shadow that slipped toward a rear window on the warehouse.

Kuno Werner.

A hard wind tugged at the blood-soaked bandages wrapped around his leg and shoulder. He moved with a limp — heavy, dragging his foot. But steady. Sure.

Gripping the board that covered the window opening, he tore it free with his bare hands with a low scrape — and vanished into the belly of the dark.

* * *

“I’m going up!” Reinhold shouted over the helicopter’s roar, yanking the hostage by the arm. “She’s coming with me. Move — now!”

The woman sobbed and sucked in a shuddering breath, like she was already saying goodbye to her life.

“You can take the rest, pigs.”

He shoved the student toward the entry team, all the while keeping the woman pinned tight to his chest with his free arm.

A few officers hurried the remaining hostages out of the warehouse. Others stayed in the room, waiting for the order. Weapons trained on Reinhold, fingers taut on triggers.

They could feel the decision hanging over them — maybe the heaviest of their lives. Kill him and sacrifice the woman to save dozens of future victims? Or let him walk, spare one life, and give the monster the chance to keep killing?

“Spread out! Back up!” Reinhold backed toward the roof door, inch by inch — slow, careful steps.

* * *

Engel’s phone vibrated in his sweat-slick fist like it was trying to break free. A frantic voice came through the speaker: “Herr Commissioner! Herr Commissioner! This is Dr. Braun. I’m sorry, but I have to report... your officer is gone.”

“What?!” Engel squeezed the phone so hard it crackled in protest. “Who?”

“Herr Werner. About ten minutes ago... he jumped out of the vehicle.”

“Goddamn it! How did that happen?! Where is he now?!”

At that moment, over the relieved shouting, Dieter came at a run, nearly going down. Blood streamed from his broken nose, washing across his face.

“Commissioner... Kuno... he attacked me... my gun...”

* * *

On top of the deafening roar of the rotor blades, a new sound cut in — screeching brakes. Several civilian cars rolled right up to the warehouse and parked wherever they pleased, clogging the access lane meant for emergency vehicles. Reporters spilled out of the brightly colored cars like a swarm.

“Just what we needed,” Engel snapped. “Who the hell let them through? We’ve got everything sealed off!”

A red sedan slid in beside my car and parked sloppy, too close — nearly kissing my rear bumper. The door flew open, and a petite young woman hopped out: brown eyes, dark-blond hair to her shoulders. Short skirt, white blouse — like the weather was just a rumor. Round glasses sat on her nose, more fashion than function. She swept her gaze over the chaos, locked onto me, and came straight over.

“Belinda Shafer. *Gestalt*,” she said before she even reached me, offering her hand.

Her face — and her name — clicked somewhere in my memory. Where had I seen her before...?

“Detective Klos Heinemann,” I nodded, taking her cold fingers. “Do you have authorization to —”

“I do. Can we step aside? Just a couple questions.”

I gave her a brief, clipped rundown — only what I could say without putting the operation at risk. Belinda listened, but her attention kept drifting past my shoulder, into the thick of it. Her eyes flicked around like she was hunting something more important than my words.

From time to time, the commissioner glanced our way, dragging nervously on his cigarette. He knew someone was feeding the press far too much, and he didn’t like it.

The whole exchange took less than a minute. Belinda lost interest just as quickly and darted off toward her next target.

The sky, meanwhile, seemed to thicken — as if someone had shut off the lights. Thunder rolled, and a downpour came hard and sudden, tapping Morse code on the car roofs. The storm hit like the sky had decided to step in.

And then it happened: I felt an icy fear spread through my body.

Something was wrong. Something was going off-script.

* * *

Each step up the stairs drove a red-hot nail through Kuno’s shot leg. He dragged himself along, blood-smeared hand clamped on the shaky railing. The bomb techs were so absorbed in their work they never noticed the shadow slipping past.

One flight. That was all that separated him from payback — from the last thing Reinhold had left him in this life. The last thing keeping the void from swallowing him whole.

He stopped to suck in air, and the world snapped into a frightening clarity. Thick black “vines” of cable hung from the ceiling, crawled along the walls, dove into holes in the floor. On the landing sat a barrel — those same wires ran straight to it.

“What the hell is that bastard up to?” Kuno hissed through clenched teeth, his fingers biting into the railing.

The staircase felt endless. His head rang, dark spots swam in his vision, but vengeance kept him upright.

Finally, an ajar door. Through the crack — Reinhold’s rough, all-too-familiar voice.

Down below, on the first floor, something clattered — then, from outside, came shouting and applause, like this was some goddamn show.

Kuno snarled. Tightened his grip on the pistol. Yanked the door wide.

Right by the entrance stood police officers; a few steps beyond them — Reinhold, shielding himself behind a pregnant hostage.

The image wavered. Barely standing, Kuno raised the weapon. His hand shook, his head swayed slowly from side to side.

“Scu-u-um...” he rasped — and tears spilled down his blood-smeared face. The second time that night. Hot, uncontrollable, helpless.

The officers spun.

“No!” Their shouts fused into one horrible chord.

Reinhold’s face twisted into a grin, baring a row of yellow teeth.

A shot cracked.

The bullet missed him, only grazing his arm. And in that instant Kuno saw it: a thick black wire, like a snake, disappearing into Reinhold’s sleeve. Reinhold shouted something unintelligible and slammed his fist into his own chest with all his strength.

For a heartbeat, their eyes met.

Then the room went white.

And the lives of everyone inside turned to dust.

* * *

I threw my elbow up on instinct, shielding my face as bricks, glass, and a wall of dust blew out in every direction. The blast rolled for miles. The ground convulsed, and the shockwave slammed me onto the asphalt.

I got lucky: my conversation with Belinda Shafer had kept me farther from the epicenter. Chunks of the building rained down from the sky, along with burning pieces of the helicopter. One of them — a huge, jagged section of a rotor blade — came down on a camera operator, and he vanished under it in a blink.

People scattered, screaming. Someone wailed in pain. The downpour lashed with savage force, hissing on the hot wreckage and wrapping everything in thick steam that stank of burning and death.

Fire crews screamed in from the intersection, sirens wailing. Somewhere in that hell, a few figures in heat-resistant suits — pushing through the fear of a secondary detonation — charged into the smoldering ruins, dumping foam and water that instantly turned into filthy, boiling runoff.

Behind me, someone vomited hard.

The commissioner ran past me. His face was almost black with ash, his voice blown raw into a rasp:

“Klos... go home. Now. That’s an order!”

My ears were still ringing. And I would’ve given anything to be a thousand miles away from that place. But, as it turned out, not everyone shared that desire.

The most relentless reporters — like vultures, drunk on the scent of disaster — were already trying to swarm the police, me included. Shoving microphones at us like I was on a red carpet and they were immortal. Well — some people just don’t have a self-preservation instinct.

I didn’t say a word. I shoved him aside and pushed through to my car. It had survived, but it was coated in a thick layer of gray dust and fine glass grit.

Belinda Shafer still hadn’t left. In the corner of my eye, I saw her hurrying to her own car. We exchanged a brief look — empty, scorched.

I squeezed into the driver’s seat, threw it into reverse with a squeal of tires, barely missing her bumper by sheer luck, and drove home.

* * *

Hans was standing near one of the intersections, where the command post had been set up from the start of the hostage-rescue operation. His radio crackled to life and, through the static, the message came: "Werner's daughter... condition stable." Hans couldn't stop himself — he smiled. He pulled his phone from his pocket and called. He wanted to be the one to tell his friend the news: the worst nightmare of the night hadn't come true. His little princess had made it.

The guilt that had been sitting on his chest like a stone eased for a heartbeat, replaced by something fragile — hope. He stood in the pouring rain by the intersection and looked into the distance, toward where they'd taken Kuno only minutes before. He stood there with that kind, sad smile, like he was barely holding back tears.

And then an explosion went off behind him.

The dial tone kept sounding in his ear — steady, endless, indifferent to the fact that somewhere out there, at the epicenter, there was no one left to pick up.

II Insomnia

Saturday, October 1

A deep crisis reshaped the whole world. Technological progress — once boiling over with ideas — froze at roughly the level of the early 2020s. Wars that tore through Africa and the Middle East, the COVID-19 pandemic, a string of conflicts in Europe and Asia, a brazen assassination in the White House, and, finally, the fiery mushroom of a nuclear blast — all of it split humanity into three hostile blocs, each fighting for global dominance.

By 2047, under the pressure of insoluble geopolitical contradictions and blood-soaked conflicts, many countries of the former united Europe — as well as Canada, Mexico, Australia, and a number of others — sacrificed their independence, dissolving into a federal state under U.S. rule and declaring the New Law across their territories. The young formation began calling itself the Transatlantic Union of Nations (TAUN), emphasizing that it had expanded beyond the Western Hemisphere.

On the other side of that chessboard, the Eurasian Union was gaining strength — a powerful counterweight that included Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and North Korea, with support from India, Iran, China, and several other countries of the Global South.

A third force was forming at speed as well — the Arab Union, led by Saudi Arabia. Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan had already joined; another dozen were waiting in line.

There were also those who chose to remain independent. Some national leaders deliberately avoided backing either side, maintaining neutrality, but most were happy to sell their loyalty to whoever paid more.

For citizens of the TAUN, the world beyond its borders became a blind spot. The internet fell under harsh censorship, the borders were sealed tight, and high walls went up — topped with barbed wire, watched by military patrols. Relations between the poles of the world, as had happened more than once in history, slid into a cold war, occasionally spilling into a “hot phase.”

All the institutions of power in the former Europe were taken over by bureaucrats — a caste of officials appointed by the leaders of the Transatlantic Union of Nations. They proclaimed themselves “Oracles” — bearers of absolute truth. That truth, apparently, consisted of the rapid and merciless Americanization of European society.

For decades we’d been frightened with the specter of World War III — a nuclear apocalypse that felt inevitable. Tension rose day by day, yet the years kept passing, and the war came only to our streets: a battle between escalating crime and society itself.

The showy rhetoric of “Unification” — standardizing laws, institutions, cultural norms — required enormous funding. New names for agencies and titles, signage, forms, stamps... all of it demanded colossal cash injections. Year after year budget priorities were arranged so that the police got almost nothing. The result: mass layoffs in law enforcement, which triggered a criminal surge unlike anything we’d seen. That picture became typical across all the European — “states,” as they were now called. And yet whenever people mentioned it, they always added with bitter irony: “Well, not in Old America.”

The idea of “Unification,” once announced as a path toward prosperity, strength, and democracy, turned into a grim dystopia. Under the guise of a transition period, all power concentrated in the hands of the American elite, while the masses — divided and crushed — lost hope a little more every day.

Once, Mother Europe gave birth to America. Now the child had grown up, returned home, and fucked its stupid mother.

For several years now, a secret organization called the Justice Front had been trying to resist Europe's criminal collapse. Some saw it as the last hope; to others it was just a myth invented by the desperate. No one knew where their headquarters were, how to join, or whether they existed at all. But the rumors kept smoldering like sparks in the dark, promising that someone, somewhere, was still fighting for justice.

Rosenberg became a vivid example of what the New Law did to Europe. Everything in the city accelerated to a near-unthinkable pace. What used to decay slowly now began coming apart in a hurry, while anything that had been limping along suddenly surged forward at an insane rate. Rosenberg even swallowed an entire new residential district with state-of-the-art infrastructure in the space of a couple of decades. And yet, at the same time, the city that had once been calm, safe, and breathtakingly beautiful was turning faceless — shedding its history, losing the architectural character that made it unique. It sold its soul to the neon devil.

The place we're in now is called Rock-Port — also known as Old Rosenberg. Sounds like somewhere for a romantic stroll, right? Don't kid yourself. In reality, it's a dump. The largest district by area, it sits in a hollow on the right bank of the Elbe. Right now I'm in the industrial zone: grim factories, a forest of blackened stacks, warehouses, and the rusted frames of workshops — caked in old dust and webbing.

Closer to the bridge that would carry us out of this dead end to the left bank lay the residential strip. Slums. These overcrowded quarters, like anthills, were packed with aging apartment blocks affordable only to the poorest layers of society. A weak light burned in some windows, and behind faded curtains human silhouettes flickered. But even this place could pass for a little patch of paradise compared to the bleak refugee camp farther down the road. No one in their right mind would show their face there — by day, and certainly not at night.

Horrible poverty, predictably, meant the highest crime rate in the city. Chaos and violence became routine. Narrow alleys, damp basements, abandoned buildings, rusted cars, leaky roofs... nowhere felt safe. Mountains of cases piled up at the precinct: murders, disappearances, assaults, rapes, robberies... The river took bodies every day, as if it were some deranged sacrificial rite.

Dirty air, dirty streets, dirty souls. It all pooled here. And yet this is also where the city began. It was founded in 1856 as a small workers' settlement called Stein, spread out at the foot of the Elbe Sandstone Mountains. Among the descendants of the locals, a sinister story still makes the rounds: one of the mines suddenly caved in, burying dozens of miners under the rubble. But the worst of it fell to the ones who lived... They lost their minds, unable to forget what they'd seen in that pitch-black dark.

Germany's industrial peak changed everything. In the years leading up to the First World War, an industrial district began to take shape around Stein, and it was christened Rock-Port. First came a steel mill, then an arms factory. Progress couldn't be stopped. The thud of hammers and the shriek of steam engines carried across the whole region. Soon a repair shipyard appeared on the Elbe; then came electrification. Chemical plants multiplied along the right bank, racing the spread of new housing. A key hub of military industry, the settlement kept expanding even during the war years — development pushed onto the left bank. And so, in 1917, with official approval, the magistrate decreed the founding of the city of Rosenberg — named for its distinctive bright-red sunsets, like the glow of factory furnaces.

I pressed the gas, eager to leave behind the ugly fence topped with rusted barbed wire — and the grim bulk of Eisengitter Prison crouched behind it. The road carried me toward the nearest bridge to the left bank, into West Rosenberg.

Through a veil of fog ahead, the ghostly outline of Horbindrow emerged — the thirty-story casino complex that had once passed for luxury. Even before the New Law, Siegfried Muller, the former burgomaster, had ordered it built on the riverfront: a desperate bid to revive the city through

tax revenue and make Rock-Port look a little less like a dead end. It didn't work. The casino changed hands more than once, then shut down for good, turning into a massive tombstone.

There was the bridge. It wasn't long, but the view still caught in my throat: a majestic red arch crowned with a giant "R," and a multi-level interchange spreading a spiderweb of roads toward every district of the left bank, glittering with millions of lights. Streetlamps poured a soft, yellowish glow over the wet asphalt. In the rearview mirror, the dangerous district fell away. Ahead — only the illusion of safety.

Off to the right, about thirty miles from Rosenberg, the stacks of a power plant belched smoke into the night. Nearby, hidden deep in the forest, lay one of the strangest places in our region: the small ghost town of Amurscheid, abandoned in 1943 for reasons no one has ever explained.

I crossed the bridge and rolled into Downtown — the most compact district in the city, the center of business life. Tall office towers stabbed into the clouds like syringes filled with poison. Branches of American corporations stood here alongside the stock exchange, the biggest banks, City Hall, police headquarters, the courthouse... You could almost believe order lived here. Almost. Downtown was safe in the same way it's safe to keep cash in a safe with a glass door: visible, protected — still tempting. Cameras and patrols didn't erase risk; they just forced criminals to get smarter. The city center owed its calm mostly to the contrast with places like Rock-Port. Everything's relative.

I don't know if it was always like this, but now a person's worth is measured in money. We live in a society ruled not by people, but by cursed pieces of paper — soaked in the stink of sweat and greedy hands.

All subway lines converged in Downtown like blood vessels feeding a single heart. One glance at the map was enough to see how far the city had stretched along the river, especially on the left bank. Traffic jams were routine; the underground was a genuine lifeline. But it had picked up another reputation along the way: by day it was hunting ground for pickpockets, and by night it became a habitat for prostitutes and junkies.

Downtown bordered the three remaining left-bank districts: Karbon, Rainer Heights, and Donnertal. All of them were relatively small — and even together they covered less ground than Rock-Port.

My route cut through gray, unremarkable Rainer — the fastest way out to the suburbs.

Nearby, only a few blocks away, lay Karbon — Rock-Port's little brother. Same wear in the brickwork, but without the smoking factories and industrial zones. Mostly old residential buildings here, largely apartment blocks inherited from the GDR.

And then Donnertal — or just Donner: a world of upscale high-rise apartments, modern townhouses, green parks, and wide, multi-lane roads. The kind of place where neon signs never really go dark — famous boutiques, giant shopping-and-entertainment centers, clubs, bars, restaurants. The district for the city's richest. My girlfriend lived there — Alice Klein. Lis, to those who knew her.

Twenty-four. Slim, petite, with eyes the color of spring leaves and a voice you remembered from the first word. An architect by training and an artist by instinct — I used to joke she'd been born with a pencil in her hand, because she'd been drawing for as long as she could remember. She lived with her mother, who, like me, worked in the police. Alice's parents split up before she was even one: her father had wanted a son, and he couldn't live with the fact that a girl had been born instead.

We'd celebrated our second anniversary not long ago, and I loved her just as fiercely as I had at the beginning. She was smart, caring, kind — and beautiful. With her, I felt genuinely happy. I was grateful to fate for putting us on the same road.

Ahead, a tributary of the Elbe appeared, with an old stone bridge over it. Beyond the bridge, the road wound through thick forest and climbed a high hill. There, in the shade of the trees, sat the suburban settlement of Stern — where I lived. Alone.

My parents — Till Heinemann and Rebecca Heinemann — were murdered.

Till was taller than me, almost six-foot-three. You could feel his strength even in a handshake. He served in the police, and his partner — his best friend, too — was Engel Becker. Inseparable, like brothers.

Mom... Mom was my father's opposite — fragile, elegant, a head shorter than him. Rebecca held a high position at an insurance company, but for some reason I never picture her in a business suit. I always see her in the light dresses she loved.

Ten years ago, when I was seventeen, life still felt carefree — full of hope. Then one Sunday changed everything. It was Unification Day. I was at the movies with my closest friends — Johan, Melanie, and Friedrich. I still remember it in detail: after the film we went bowling — Fritz threw strike after strike, and Johan managed to drop the ball on his own foot. Then, tired but happy, we split up after midnight and went home. The evening had been perfect.

At home, a different reality was waiting.

When I opened the door and stepped inside, Engel was standing in the entryway. Even now, it's hard to think about without feeling something snag.

My parents had been heading to a restaurant that night. They'd already left, but my father got an urgent call — into Donner. He followed the order... and he didn't come back.

You know what the worst part is? I didn't know then — on the worst day of my life, walking out to meet my friends at the movies — that I was seeing my parents for the last time. I still try to remember their last words to me... and mine to them. I can't. There's a blank in my memory, as if someone tore a page clean out of the book.

Engel told me everything he knew — he'd been thrown into that meat grinder too. My father died a hero, stopping a monstrous terrorist attack aimed at supporters of the New Law.

After that nightmare, the only family I had left were my grandparents. In a hurry, they moved into the house. Cancer took my grandfather soon enough — fast and merciless. My grandmother held on by sheer will, slowly dissolving into dementia; she died on the eve of my eighteenth birthday. I inherited our house in Stern and large sums from my father's accounts, but none of it could drown out the scream inside me: *Why?*

That's how I ended up alone. From then on, every holiday that could have been filled with family warmth turned into a bleak reminder of loss. No one could truly understand me, share my joy, or stand with me when it mattered. No one loved me anymore simply for existing. And I never fooled myself into thinking anyone would be moved by my story — most people still had at least one parent.

In the end, I learned to rely on myself.

From the first days after they were gone, loneliness began erasing me from the world. And to feel alive, I had to flirt with death. That's how I ended up at the police academy, though I'd never dreamed of that life. Engel kept an eye on me — he'd promised my father.

Years passed, but neither he, nor my friends, nor the women I dated — no one could pull me out of the black abyss I was falling into. That feeling — grief mixed with rage and emptiness — became my constant companion, and each year it only grew stronger.

And there was Stern: my home settlement, spread across high hills and wrapped in dense forest. I liked everything about it, but most of all the fresh pine air — nothing like Rosenberg's choking smog. Stern was huge for a settlement — much bigger than, say, Karbon. Its history went back centuries; the first houses were built here long before Rosenberg was founded. Mostly two- and three-story cottages, but also imposing mansions, and in recent years tidy townhouses appeared more and more often. No surprise the locals were mostly well-off, working in City Hall, banks, insurance companies, private clinics, the police, and the power plant. Nearly all the local elite were old-stock Germans whose families had lived here for generations, not newly arrived Americans who preferred Donner.

The car came to a silent stop by the garage. I stepped out and froze for a moment, taking in my home. It stood alone at the forest's edge. A vast lot, ringed by a five-foot hedge, drowned in greenery. The three-story house occupied only a quarter of the property. Behind it lay a small rose garden and

an elegant gazebo — Mom's pride and favorite place to rest. There was also a guesthouse, a utility shed, and an open-air pool.

A ten-minute walk away stood Engel Becker's house. He lived there with his daughter — Melanie, my best friend. Mel — dark-haired, gentle by nature — was a year younger than me and taught math at the local school.

Back when we were kids, little Mel and I played all day in the Beckers' big garden. That's how I still remember her: a mischievous girl with scraped knees in a dress sprinkled with stars. I remember Dad joking that we'd "make a great pair."

Melanie... Fate put us together so we wouldn't lose our minds alone. She's the kindest girl I've ever met. Her father is the same, even though he's grown into the role of a strict, hard-edged boss. Behind that mask is a man with an enormous heart.

Their family had its own loss, too. When Melanie was fourteen, her mother never returned from Old America — the plane went down somewhere over the cold Atlantic. That tragedy shook both our families.

I climbed the steps slowly. The key clicked in the lock, and the door, creaking softly, let me in.

A long, dark corridor stretched ahead, ending at the stairs to the second floor. Doors on both sides led to a spacious kitchen, a small restroom, and the dining room where the whole family used to gather. Through an arched opening I could see the fireplace in the living room — Dad's pride and joy.

At the far end of the hall, past the stairs, a narrow passage led into the garage. There, too, a basement hatch was disguised as part of the floor — slide the heavy cover aside and you could descend a long stone staircase curving down like a half-moon.

The basement was a kingdom of oppressive darkness. A tiny window had been sealed shut with old, faded newspapers and covered by a heavy curtain. But one flick of the switch and the room came into focus: short rows of low shelves lined with a wine collection — my father's inheritance, and his fathers' before him. Among the bottles were truly rare vintages, and that was why the sunlight had been entombed. Nearby sat boxes of my sports gear, and at the base of the stairs an old stove was built into the wall with its own flue — probably meant to heat the basement in winter. Though I couldn't remember anyone ever using it.

The floor was laid in cobblestone, but near the bunker entrance there was a small "island" of tile, dulled by time. Yes — there was a thick door down here leading to an underground bunker. Dad told me it had been built at the start of World War II, but Grandpa insisted it was much older. The lock had been welded shut, and the key had vanished without a trace.

The stairs to the second floor led into a wide corridor bordered by a balustrade and washed in soft light. Up here there was a large bathroom with a jacuzzi, and an office laid out to mirror my workspace at the precinct. On the walls hung suspect composites, commendations for service, and old, yellowed newspaper clippings about my father's achievements — a silent reminder of who he was, and the standard I was supposed to reach. It was a refuge from the noise, a place that let you sink into work without getting snagged on little things. Nearby were two bedrooms and a long balcony overlooking the backyard and an endless sea of forest stretching to the horizon.

The old mansion, built several generations ago — before Rosenberg even existed — held plenty of secrets. I remember playing hide-and-seek with Dad once as a kid. He decided to mess with me — knowing I was peeking, he hid behind the stairs. I was already about to shout triumphantly, "Gotcha!" but... no one was there. Not in the garage. Not in the adjacent rooms. And then, just as excitement started giving way to anxiety, the carpet runner under my feet lifted — and a familiar smiling head appeared right out of the floor.

No wonder I couldn't find him: the hatch cover, as I said, matched the floor perfectly. And it didn't have a handle, so nothing betrayed it under the rug. The only way to open it was to pry it up by feel, finding a hidden recess.

But that wasn't the most interesting part...

One day, wiping dust off the massive frame of an antique mirror in the office, I felt a small bump. At first I thought it was a sloppy craftsman's mistake — a glue drip or a lump of plaster — and tried to scrape it off with my fingernail. To my amazement, the mirror shuddered and swung open smoothly, like a secret door. Examining the frame carefully, I found a tiny lever — something I must have hit during cleaning.

Behind it was a tiny windowless room drowning in dust and cobwebs. Bare walls kept silent about what it had been for. Dad never mentioned it, and at first I even thought he hadn't known...

On the third floor were my parents' bedroom, the nursery, the guest room, and another bathroom — each one a painful reminder of childhood and youth, a museum of a past that couldn't be returned. The rooms had stood untouched for years, frozen in time like a photo in an old album.

The only place on the third floor that didn't tighten my chest was the balcony, with its breathtaking view of the city, the sky, the river, and the distant silhouettes of mountains.

There was a second hidden room in my parents' bedroom. I found it right after discovering the first — went upstairs to a similar mirror and, as if I already knew, easily felt out the same concealed mechanism.

But this room wasn't empty. On shelves and wall mounts lay a sizable arsenal: assault rifles, pistols, grenades, and gear — from climbing gloves and flashlight mounts to reinforced sleeves and even body armor... A neat stack of fake license plates sat there too. All of it, without a doubt, belonged to my father and was most likely tied to his professional work — at least, that's how I tried to explain it to myself. For a long time I wrestled with the urge to ask Engel about the arsenal, but in the end I kept quiet — I didn't want to reveal the discovery itself. Over the years the burning curiosity faded, replaced by a certainty: some secrets, apparently, are meant to stay unsolved.

In the third-floor hallway, a rope loop hung from the ceiling; pull it and a folding ladder dropped down, leading to the attic — dusty, abandoned, yet strangely cozy and warm, lit by soft light spilling through a window. I stored junk up there: old things I couldn't bring myself to throw away. Dad once said, "If you haven't touched a thing in six months, you don't need it — get rid of it." But I kept them anyway...

I sat on the wooden bench on the balcony, cradling a warm mug of coffee, and watched the first rays of dawn. My body ached with exhaustion, but I was so tightly wound after the night's events that I knew I still wouldn't be able to sleep.

That train of thought was cut off by the sharp chirp of an incoming video call. A name popped up on the screen: Ralphie.

Ralph Schneider — twenty-seven, skinny, overflowing with restless energy. We'd gone through the police academy together, but he got bored fast — dropped out and flew to Pennsylvania to devote himself completely to music. Now Ralph was the vocalist and guitarist in a rock band.

He stared at me from the screen. Since our last meeting he'd grown a neat little beard, dyed his hair coal-black with red streaks, and pierced his lower lip. His ears were so crowded with metal there was barely room for more.

We stayed friends, and despite the distance and the constant busyness, we kept in touch. He came back to Rosenberg now and then, but less and less each year. Recently Ralph started thinking about enrolling in university, which meant we'd drift even farther apart.

"Yeah, Ralphie. I'm here," I answered, tired.

"Damn, Klos — how long's it been since I heard your voice?" His voice was, as always, pure energy.

"How you doing?"

"Great, like always. The band's picking up speed. We play bars every week — next up, our own show. How about you?"

"I'm alive," I said after a moment. "Been worse. Been better. Work's draining me dry. You coming back to Germany at all?"

“No. Not planning on it,” he said — and it stung a little. “You and Alice are good, I hope? You haven’t married her yet?”

“No. You’d be the first to know, Ralphie.”

“Still not living together?”

“Yeah. Her mom insists you only live together after the wedding. And Lis... it’s convenient for her to keep things the way they are. Good neighborhood, everything nearby — work, mall, park, clinic, metro... So nothing changes.”

“Ever think about renting a place in Donner so it’s convenient for her, and you could live together — or at least see each other more?”

“I’ve thought, Ralphie. God, I’ve thought about everything.” I exhaled. “I don’t want to wreck things with her mom. And I can’t leave the mansion. I tried. Couldn’t do it.”

“I get it,” he said, a shadow of sympathy flickering in his voice.

“And you? Found someone?”

“Of course! But there’s nothing to tell yet — we’ve only been dating a month. All right, Klos, I won’t take up your time.”

“Don’t be stupid. We’ll talk again. Later.”

“Take care! It was good to hear you.”

For another minute I stared at the sky, lost in thought. Then I went to bed. A gentle autumn sun rose, promising a beautiful day.

* * *

Saturday, October 1

I woke up around three in the afternoon, eyelids glued shut. My cat, Vikki, sat on the windowsill, waiting for her first meal. Her stare said it clearer than words: *I’m waiting. And I’m not happy.*

On autopilot I slid out of bed and went to the kitchen, cracked three eggs into a pan, poured myself a mug of hibiscus tea, and dumped dry fuel into the cat’s bowl.

Night shifts turned my schedule inside out, grinding down my strength and my health. The only things still keeping me in the police were decent pay and a long list of benefits.

After the reform, detectives had to combine desk duty with patrol. We worked in pairs; two pairs formed a “cell,” and each cell had to have a forensics tech assigned to it. Despite the catastrophic staffing shortage, the department pretended to run twenty-four/seven in two shifts: the day shift split into morning and noon, the night shift split into evening and midnight, chopping the day into six-hour blocks. But the borders between shifts were a joke — “day people” got called in at night all the time, and “night people” got dragged in during the day. Officially it was three on, two off, but who cared when something serious happened? They’d hand out comp days later, so the schedule changed every week anyway. District assignments also ran on whatever logic they felt like. A unit from Rock-Port could easily get yanked to a call in, say, Karbon. And Central bounced across the whole city like sewage in the pipes.

The night crews had it worst, because their shifts caught the bulk of the crimes. And — how do I even explain this? — most often they staffed nights with the most useless employees: rookies, or people about to retire. There were exceptions. In my case, Engel personally asked me to transfer to nights — there was a need to build a strong cell. Out of respect for my father’s best friend, I agreed; we settled on one year in that rhythm. Night hours paid noticeably more, but at what cost? Half the time you still had to work days too, if only because you can’t meet every witness and take statements at night.

Otherwise my schedule was relatively flexible. The main thing was to close the case. When I interviewed witnesses, hunted down evidence, dissected motives, consulted specialists, or ran reconstructions — that was my problem.

After breakfast and a shower, I went to see my childhood friends — Johan Krause and Friedrich Braun.

Outside, it was a little chilly. Clouds, like tentacles, dragged across the gray sky. Just don't let it rain...

The Brauns' house, inherited by my friend, looked like a miniature castle: a turret, huge eye-socket windows, stern stonework. I pressed the doorbell, and soon the door swung open.

Friedrich stood there. Three years older, a little shorter than me, blond hair buzzed close, a shameless grin, and piercing blue eyes — the kind that make women lose their minds. A tattoo peeked out from under his T-shirt sleeve, a pattern reaching up toward his neck — a souvenir from service in the New Law Army. These days Fritz busted his ass at the Rail Transport Administration, but today he had the day off.

"Hey. Want to go for a walk?" I asked, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Klos!" he grinned. "Sure. Give me a couple minutes, I'll change. Want a beer?" he yelled, vanishing into another room.

"Not today!"

"Where to?" he asked, returning in a beat-up light jacket.

"First to Johan. We'll drag him with us."

We stepped outside. Fritz lit up immediately, blowing smoke into the gray sky.

Friedrich Braun. Fritz. He wasn't my first friend, but he was the one I'd walked the most miles with — through this settlement and the city beyond it — turning ordinary paths into routes for great expeditions. And if the army and the academy hadn't pulled us apart, I think we'd still be best friends.

As for Johan — he was a tall, skinny, curly-haired nerd in big round glasses. He'd just turned twenty-six, and he already had two degrees — information security and artificial intelligence. Now he made a living freelancing, still living with his parents on the far side of Stern. Modest, kind, and painfully shy, Johan sometimes seemed too soft for a world this brutal.

"I fought with Ellie yesterday," Fritz said suddenly, kicking a pebble along the sidewalk. "Again. Jesus, I've completely forgotten how to tell what's going on in her head."

"Forgotten?" I smirked. "When did you ever know?"

"We just finished the renovation, and she got mad at me for God knows what — poured a whole can of paint down the stairs. Screamed so loud I thought the neighbors would show up. Or call the cops. I swear, one day I'll look at her wrong at breakfast and my back's gonna meet a kitchen knife. You'll protect me from Ellie if it comes to that?" He winked, grinning.

I just shook my head, holding back laughter. With them it was always like this... Three years together. Three years of daily blowups, loud breakups, and equally loud makeups. They seemed to live from fight to fight — and maybe they even enjoyed it.

We approached the Krauses' luxurious mansion, swallowed in greenery. If my house looked impressive, their property could be called an estate without exaggeration. No surprise there: the head of the family, a well-known banker, clearly didn't skimp on status.

A familiar silhouette flashed in one of the huge second-floor windows.

"Hey, Joni — get your ass out here!" Friedrich barked. His cigarette-rough voice, tempered by army commands, carried down the street, making the crows in a nearby tree caw in irritation.

The window flew open, and Johan appeared.

"Can't. I have to clean my room," he replied quietly, almost monotone, as if apologizing to everyone — including the crows.

"Get out here, I said!" Fritz kept at it, then turned to me with a sly grin. "All right, Klos. We're taking him by storm."

I laughed, already anticipating the show.

Fritz didn't make us wait. With the agility of an alley cat he climbed the fence and balanced his way toward the garage roof.

“Careful, hero!” I shouted. “Don’t break your neck. Save that for Ellie.”

“All under control!” Friedrich called back. He edged closer, then jumped — caught the roofline, hauled himself up. Once he was on top, he moved to Johan’s window, pulled himself up by the sill, and slipped right into the room.

“You’re insane!” someone yelled inside, and I laughed even harder.

About ten minutes later, both of them came down to the street.

“Mission accomplished!” Fritz announced solemnly.

Judging by his face, Johan wasn’t thrilled about this “mission.”

“Where are we going?” Joni asked, buttoning his jacket as he walked. “But I can’t stay long, okay? I really have a lot to do.”

“We’ll see,” Fritz drawled.

“Let’s just walk around Stern,” I suggested, feeling the stale knot of anxiety in my chest finally begging to come out.

The autumn air — cool, sharp with pine — cleared my head, washing away what was left of the night. Childhood friends walked beside me — the best company for a stroll. And it would’ve been a sin to stay indoors: soon the weather would turn for good, and days like this would be worth their weight in gold.

We wandered until dusk. Friedrich, as usual, entertained us with army stories, weaving a fresh complaint about Ellie into each one. Those often comic tales would give way to Joni’s student-life memories, which always began with “So my neighbor once...” or “One time Hein pulled this...” Johan, it seemed, did nothing but write code. Thank God he never tried to impress us with descriptions of that “exciting” process.

There was a time when we walked these same streets — right here, in this settlement — carefree, not hiding pain behind stories. The world felt different. And at home my parents were waiting...

The heavy memories wouldn’t let go, no matter how hard I tried to throw them out. And police work only fed that depressive spiral, slowly burning out the boy with the easy smile. It’s hard to laugh when every week you run into beasts wearing human masks. This world, warped by human cruelty, I’d been quietly hating for a long time.

By the end of the walk I finally decided to talk — to tell them about last night in Rock-Port and how tired I was of all of it... But the conversation was cut short by Engel’s call — his “Where are you?” sounded, as always, anxious.

“Just wanted to stop by for coffee, Klos,” the commissioner said, inviting himself.

“Fine. Come by in half an hour,” I replied — and after saying goodbye to my friends, I headed home.

* * *

My house. A gigantic three-story mansion. Just as big as it was useless and empty.

Every time I crossed the threshold, I caught myself thinking the same thing: I should sell it and move into a normal apartment somewhere in Rosenberg. But... I can’t. A buyer for that kind of property would take years. And more than that, it was my home — everything that was left of our family. Spacious rooms, tall ceilings, endless hallways you wander through with nowhere to land, slowly realizing that in solitude you’re going a little crazy without even noticing. Slowly, day after day...

Once the house had been full of life. Ghosts of a happy past kept appearing before my eyes, and then I’d dive headfirst into memories — bright as photographs. Sometimes I ran from them. I always envied people who don’t know that pain — when you can’t even listen to music anymore because almost every sound or word is tied to the past, but silence is unbearable too — the walls close in. In

those moments the only salvation feels like escape — to where there are people, where other voices drown out your thoughts. And you return home only to feed Vikki and collapse into bed.

The mansion had always been the pride of every Heinemann — except me. Sometimes the thought crept in that one day I'd still build a family and continue the line. Then maybe this pile of building materials would become dear to me and gain some new meaning, not soaked in the past... if, of course, by then I hadn't moved out. But every time the idea of renting a place came up, something stopped me from acting.

I went into the kitchen and switched on the kettle while waiting for Engel. My gaze fell on the wooden clock shaped like an owl: its eyes darted left and right in time with the pendulum. There was still plenty of time before I had to leave for work.

It wasn't too late to call Alice.

I grabbed my phone and tapped her name.

"Hey. What are you doing?" I asked, sinking onto the soft living-room couch.

"Hi, Klos! Dyeing my mom's hair. You?"

A smile showed up on its own just from hearing her.

"Waiting for Engel. He said he'd stop by."

"Got it." Her voice went distant — she'd probably pinned the phone to her shoulder or put it on speaker.

I paused, drawing in air like before a dive into ice water.

"Will I see you this weekend?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Probably... yeah. Just — first I have to stop by my sister's. And then... we'll definitely meet."

A delay. The most reliable form of refusal.

"Great, Lis," I managed, so quietly the words barely reached the receiver. "How do you feel?"

"Eh... My head's a little sore."

"Again?" I blurted. She complained about headaches often, and sometimes it felt like a cover to push meetings back.

"Don't worry. It's my blood pressure. Weather's probably changing."

Just then the doorbell rang — sharp, like an alarm.

"Company?" Lis asked, curiosity flickering in her voice.

"Looks like Engel."

"Mm." She fell silent. "Well... then I won't distract you. Good luck."

"Good night."

The phone screen went dark. I tossed it onto the couch and went to the door.

At the door, under the weak yellow spill of the streetlamp, stood Commissioner Engel Becker — tired, rumpled, dark circles under his eyes.

"Did something happen?" I asked, alarmed.

"Yeah, Klos. I'm dead tired. My back's killing me..." He smiled without warmth and stepped inside. "Dropped my car off at the shop. You mind giving me a lift?"

"Of course. Want coffee?"

"You even have to ask?" He shrugged off his jacket and headed into the living room.

Engel loved coffee even more than I did. Not surprising — the commissioner worked practically around the clock.

I went to the kitchen and started the machine. The weather had turned fast. Outside, wind pushed waves through the grass; trees swayed like they wanted to tear themselves out by the roots. The sky thickened into lead. In moments like this, all you wanted was to wrap up in a blanket and not cross the threshold.

"How's Melanie?" I asked, carefully carrying two steaming cups. The smell of fresh coffee filled the room like a warm wave.

"Ask her yourself!" Engel snapped. "She misses you. Why'd you stop coming by?"

“I don’t know... The days started to feel suspiciously short,” I smirked, taking a burning sip.

Engel settled into the corner of the couch — his usual spot — as if he’d grown roots there over the years. Silence hung, broken only by the steady tick of the kitchen clock.

“Ah... I remember sitting on this same couch with your father,” he said, slipping into memory. “Feels like yesterday... Every Saturday we’d grab beers and switch off, staring at the TV. Those were days...”

I dropped my gaze, and in that instant the floor vanished beneath me and I fell into my memory archives — twenty-seven cabinets of neatly filed folders. One cabinet for every damn year of my life. I’d started structuring my memories back in school, when I got into psychology. At first I kept something like a diary: at the end of each month I wrote down everything significant and saved it as text files on my computer. But over time I learned to manage without writing. Psychological practices let you adjust memories — make some brighter, dim others.

Engel looked at me as if he wasn’t seeing me, but Till. Maybe in my features he saw a piece of my father and hoped I’d grow into the same man. Sometimes it felt like Engel was unconsciously shaping me into that man — his best friend’s copy...

To escape the pressure of that thought, I abruptly shifted the topic to work. We talked about recent events, and the conversation inevitably dragged us back to the Korbl case.

“Enough with this crooked-cops talk,” Engel grimaced.

“Am I wrong?” My fingers tightened around the cup. “Can’t anything be done? Can’t you influence it? You’re the commissioner.”

“Don’t be a child, Klos. You know how it works. I can’t fire anyone. I barely influence anything. And the Oracle doesn’t care — he’s busy hunting secessionists.” Engel glanced at the clock. “All right. Time to go. We’ll talk in the car.”

I threw on my suit, started the car, and we drove to the precinct. Outside it was already dark — streetlights cast long bars of light, wind pushed leaves across the asphalt. Ahead waited the city, glittering with lights, suffering from insomnia.

“Herr Becker...”

“What now?” He rubbed the bridge of his nose, exhausted.

“Do you think Judge Libert really lets people walk if they pay enough? I saw something on the news the other day...”

“Klos,” the commissioner cut in, “you’re blowing my mind tonight with how naive you are. I’d bet that piece of shit has a price list. Otherwise why would Burgomaster Meisner shove him into that job? Head of the city...” Engel snorted. “You know, I never really believed in elections, democracy... but after the Americans, the circus got too obvious. I miss the former burgomaster, Siegfried Muller — have you heard anything about him since he resigned?”

I shook my head.

“Exactly. No proof, but from what I’ve heard, the Oracle forced him out. Then they fixed the election and Christopher Meisner became burgomaster, and Muller vanished, leaving a public resignation letter on his desk at City Hall. And now that bastard sits in the chair, doing whatever his owners tell him. As long as he’s here, no real work gets done — just pretty reports on paper and stuffing his pockets.”

Engel fell silent, staring up at the sky through the windshield. Then he added, calmer:

“So drop your insane fantasies about putting the city in order. Forget justice — it doesn’t exist. Protect whoever you can. Don’t overstep. Nobody expects more from us.”

“Would you want to be burgomaster?” I asked. “To change all this...”

The commissioner looked at me, then burst out laughing. We drove in silence for a while, but eventually I still took the risk and said what I’d been holding in.

“Have you ever thought about how a criminal is made?”

Engel snorted, leaning back.

“You feeling nostalgic for the academy? All right. Go on.”

“I mean... what we do — it’s like we scrub society instead of stopping crime at the root. We lock up one, another pops up, a third gets released. It’s a closed loop. Why not build a system where the very thought of breaking the law feels absurd? Where people understand: punishment is so inevitable and so harsh that it’s simply smarter to stay on the right side of the law.”

Engel didn’t answer. Lost in thought, he stared straight ahead, the city’s flickering lights reflected in his eyes. The headlights pulled an abandoned playground out of the darkness — broken swings hanging like gallows.

“Our problem is that the police fight criminals as a consequence, not a cause,” I continued.

“Not *our* problem,” Engel snapped. “Parents. Teachers... politicians, for Christ’s sake. We’re the ones stuck shoveling the shit.”

“I’m saying society grows its own monsters. When someone ruins another person’s life, they don’t think they’re leaving trauma behind. And I’m not only talking about the obvious ones — killers and robbers — we know what they are. I’d put sadists, bribe-takers, thugs, drifters... even unfaithful lovers on that list too.”

“Oh, here we go,” Engel muttered, pulling out a cigarette.

“We label people like that ‘abnormal.’ So who made them that way? One person breaks another’s mind. That one goes on to ruin the next... an endless chain reaction of damaged people.”

“Jesus Christ,” Engel said. “You’re on fire tonight. Just like your father...” He cut himself off. “You can’t cut it out at the root. Trauma can start in childhood. We can’t control every person’s life from birth.”

“We can’t?”

A long pause settled in the car again.

“Klos...”

“What?”

“Crime is rot. You cut rot out with a scalpel. That’s why society invented the police. For safety. That’s us. That’s our job. And no matter how much you want better, we’re already doing everything we can for this city — everything within our power. Maybe we’d do more, but instead of doing real work, officials keep breeding more officials and inventing busywork for each other. Thank you, Mr. Parkinson⁴. There’s a murder — what do we do? We write the goddamn paperwork. For one desk, another desk, deputies, deputy-deputies... and if you don’t write something, you write why you didn’t write it. The machine eats itself. You know it.”

This time I kept quiet.

Engel. Chronic stress had burned him from the inside out — leaving irritability, cynicism, emotional exhaustion. His passivity was proof of how trauma can paralyze. I hoped it would never get me.

“I believe that one day we’ll live in a different society.”

“WELCOME TO ROSENBERG!” I read on a sign riddled with bullet holes.

“It’ll be a bright, clean world of equality and justice!”

* * *

Sunday, October 2

At midnight we reached Downtown, where glass skyscrapers, like grim titans, reflected the weak streetlights. Their cold facades stared down at us through tinted windows. Above that artificial canyon hung a pale moon — the only witness to the night’s events.

Ahead rose the massive building of Rosenberg Police Headquarters — a monument to the law.

⁴ It was a reference to Parkinson’s laws — the set of principles empirically formulated by the historian C. Northcote Parkinson.

Leaving the car in the underground garage, we took the elevator up to the precinct. The commissioner went to his office, and I moved fast down a long, faceless corridor where the air carried the sharp stink of cheap coffee mixed with cigarettes — straight to Homicide.

In a cramped, dim room, one of the desks held a guy my age — tall and lean, Maurice Neumann. Thick chestnut curls framed his tan face, and his eyes held that familiar focus. He smiled often, but even more often he sat in silence, thoughtful.

“Hey.” I offered my hand.

“Hey,” he replied without looking up from the paperwork. His desk was always chaos: stacks of folders, loose documents, and beneath the glass a collection of yellowed newspaper clippings. Above the monitor hung a modest certificate declaring him the best in our cell. Not just in ours, I was convinced — Maurice was destined to become commissioner one day.

“How’s it going?”

“Last night in Karbon someone blew up a deputy’s aide’s car. Hank and I went out,” he rattled off, barely glancing at me. “The Oracle sent us Heinz — turned out to be pointless. No evidence, no witnesses... But motives? Plenty.”

“We were at the docks,” I said. “A psychopath took hostages in an abandoned warehouse. Reinhold Wulf — does that name ring a bell?”

Maurice nodded.

“Among the hostages were... relatives of our guys. Reinhold set up another death game, and then...” I swallowed. “He blew the building. The warehouse collapsed with everyone inside.”

“Yeah, I know,” Maurice said calmly. News in the police travels faster than official bulletins.

The door banged open and my friend and partner walked in — Detective Heinrich Zimmermann, known to everyone as Heinz. Heinz was average height, with short hair, piercing blue eyes, and sharp features. His constant grin and dry humor cut through the precinct’s gloom. Kind, reliable, and maybe too human for this place, he was a year younger than me. “Hey, buddy,” he said, grinning wide. “Hey, Maurice!”

He dropped into his seat — my desk’s polar opposite. No papers, not one unnecessary item — just a computer, printer, scanner, clock, and a cactus aligned with geometric precision. The tower hummed; his fingers flew over the keyboard.

With a sigh, I sank into my own chair — tidy, but still with a touch of mess.

Maurice and Heinz were excellent detectives, which didn’t match the usual caliber sent to nights. I figured the brass dumped them here so someone would actually work after dark. Otherwise we could build a second Berlin Wall out of open cases and finally separate ourselves from citizens bold enough to bother the police at night.

“This is bullshit!” Heinz cursed, slamming a fist down on the keyboard.

“Tell me about it,” Maurice murmured without lifting his eyes from the monitor. He’d been rewatching camera footage for days. The neural net had spat out results long ago, but the stubborn detective always double-checked everything himself.

“Klos — do me a favor, boil some water,” Heinz yawned. “I swear I won’t survive if I don’t get caffeine right now.”

“Hank will do it,” I said, suppressing my own yawn.

And sure enough, a minute later the door opened again and — late as always — Detective Hank Bauer stumbled in: tall, solid, long blond hair, oval face, an open forehead. He was a master with a sniper rifle and the same kind of master on guitar. Hank could’ve followed Ralph’s path and become a musician, but some curse kept him in the police. He rarely smiled, though he loved to crack jokes. Like me, he was already twenty-seven.

“What, Klos, falling asleep already?” Hank asked. “Coffee?”

“Me!” Heinz cut in immediately.

“Damn night shifts,” I muttered, feeling my eyelids turn to lead.

“Don’t say it...”

But sleep evaporated instantly: at two-thirty we got a call. Then another. Two murders that would haunt us in the reports.

The long-awaited end of the shift — and I was home, in bed. It felt like one more second and I’d drop into sleep. But the moment I closed my eyes, something started knocking insistently at my eardrums. Somewhere — maybe the bathroom — a drip began. My patience snapped fast; I had to get up and shut off the tap.

And as soon as I got back into bed, a new irritant appeared — sunlight. Its stubborn rays pushed through the curtains, refusing to let me relax. I buried my face in a pillow. Didn’t help.

Cursing quietly, I got up, scooped Vikki into my arms, and trudged into the living room. The TV filled the silence, mumbling about political scandals while the clock hands crawled toward nine a.m.

Sleep never came.

In Rosenberg, time flowed by its own laws — accelerating in chases, freezing in smoke-filled offices among stacks of paper. Today it wasn’t in a hurry. It took the day off and decided to laze around... Oh, right. I’d almost forgotten Engel promised me a day off. Maybe tomorrow. Or never.

I ate a quick breakfast, then called Melanie — we agreed to meet in the evening. All I could do was hope I wouldn’t fall asleep by then.

Actually — no. I was hoping for the opposite...

* * *

Sunday, October 2

At exactly six p.m., I stood at the Beckers’ gate. The door opened almost immediately, and my best friend, Melanie, appeared in the doorway.

“Hey! Nice dress!” I couldn’t help myself, pointing at her favorite house robe.

“Klos!” She rushed into a hug. “I haven’t seen you in forever!”

“Missed you too.”

“Tell me everything. Actually — wait — I’ll change fast and we’ll talk on the way. Where are we going, by the way?”

I just nodded toward the narrow path that vanished into the woods right between our properties.

“We won’t get lost?” she asked, a small anxious edge in her voice.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mel...”

“Then I’ll just — throw on my ‘hobo outfit’ — and let’s go.” She disappeared into the house.

I knew this forest well. I’d left so many thoughts here among the whispering leaves that they seemed to seep into the air, becoming part of it — its soul. My refuge.

Mel returned, and we stepped into a world completely unlike Rosenberg. Though it had one thing in common: life was loud here as well. Sounds reached us from everywhere — rustles, skitters. We took a few steps and froze, watching a squirrel: glancing around, it hurriedly buried its stash in soft earth. Somewhere high in the branches, birdsong still rang out — soon to be replaced by an owl’s low hoo-hoo.

When we entered the shade of the trees, Melanie took my hand.

“Let’s keep going,” I said with an encouraging smile.

The last lights of the settlement disappeared behind us, and she squeezed my palm tighter.

“Don’t be scared,” my voice came out so calm I felt the tremor in her hand begin to fade. “You know I’m at home here.”

We’d spent almost our whole childhood in this forest — little fearless explorers... But after Melanie’s mother died, something in her cracked. She lost her bond to it: the forest, once familiar, became foreign, full of anxious shadows. For me it was the opposite — I came here more and more, finding comfort.

“How are things with Alice?” she suddenly asked, stepping carefully over a rotten stump.

I slowed down without meaning to.

“Overall... fine. It’s just...” The words didn’t come right away.

“What happened?”

“We barely see each other. Way less than at the start. She has so much going on she almost has no time... And the main thing is, Alice doesn’t want, or can’t, move in with me.”

“Klos, try to understand her.” Melanie stopped, making me turn back. “Her life can’t be only you. She has family, friends, work. Hobbies...”

“Sometimes it feels like Lis has everything you listed — but not me. Like we’re not a couple at all, just... acquaintances. I get what you’re saying, Mel, I just... If we lived together, I wouldn’t feel so alone. Even when she’s at work. Even when she’s with friends. Or someone else... I’d feel us. You know? What we have now...” My voice thinned. “It’s hard for me to be alone. I need people near me. I need her...”

“Klos.” She touched my wrist softly. “In life, not everything happens the way we want...”

“Man proposes, and God disposes,” I whispered, looking into the dark thicket ahead.

Dusk thickened, wrapping the forest in a soft haze. We’d switched topics several times, but the thought of Lis stuck in my mind like a splinter, dragging behind it the same unspoken question about our relationship. When I drifted too hard, Melanie lightly punched my shoulder.

“Klos! Are you even with me?”

This time she smacked the back of my head. I jumped, and before she could process it, I slipped behind the trunk of an old oak.

“Klo-o-os!” Her shout carried through the forest. “I’m going to kill you!”

My laughter echoed among the trees.

“Are you insane? Come out and I’ll bury you right here!” she threatened.

My back slid down the bark and I sat on the ground. It smelled of moss, wet earth, and rotten leaves. I hugged my knees — and then it came back. The other thought. It returned and wiped out everything else.

Relationships... aren’t they supposed to be an island of joy? A place where you understand each other without words, where you’re in the same union, walking the same path through fate. And we... for a year now we’ve been standing still, or even stepping backward.

Suddenly the world went dark — someone’s palms gently but insistently covered my eyes, cutting off the stream of thought.

“Melanie,” I breathed, almost certain.

Silence. No answer.

“Mel?” I tried again, more serious now, catching her wrist.

“Found you!” she beamed with victory. “Scared?”

“Sure,” I smirked.

“And what about this?” she said with a sly grin, scooped up an armful of dry leaves, and dumped them down the back of my jacket.

“Congratulations,” I said calmly, shaking autumn out of my collar. “You gonna wash it yourself, or take it to the cleaners?”

“Dream on,” she replied, lifting her chin.

We walked a little more, until we reached the edge of the woods and — on a sudden impulse — spun into a ridiculous dance to the applause of the branches. Then, when night had fully fallen, I walked my friend home and headed back to mine, carrying a strange mix of warmth and unease in my chest.

The forest fell asleep. Only my thoughts — like fallen leaves — kept circling quietly through it: about happiness, friendship, and half-dead human relationships.

* * *

Monday, October 3

Ceiling. Shadows. Branches outside the window, swaying in the wind, drew bizarre patterns across the white surface — faces, animals, or just chaos. I turned on my side, then my back, then my side again. Exhaled.

Where are you, kingdom of Morpheus?

Time stretched painfully. I paced the house, trying to trick my own body. I tried sitting on the windowsill. Lying on it. Then on the floor. On the living-room couch. Finally I went back to bed. Nothing worked.

I barely recognized myself in the mirror: a worn-out man stared back with inflamed eyes, dark circles beneath them like charcoal smudges. A little more and Rudy from Narcotics would start asking questions.

“Damn,” I breathed.

The reflection said nothing.

I grabbed my phone and texted Lis good morning. We agreed to meet at three in Donner. Usually she came to me in Stern, but today we decided to go shopping — maybe a change of scenery would help.

Outside was a gray, overcast autumn. Leaving the settlement, I couldn’t take my eyes off the forest burning gold. When you see something too often, you stop noticing its beauty...

I crossed a small bridge, picked up speed, and soon dissolved into the restless life of Rosenberg. The huge Americana Mall greeted me with the cold shine of its display windows. After parking, I went to meet the woman I loved, hoping her presence would make my condition even slightly better.

Lis stood at the entrance, and even in all that gray she looked like a sunlit spot — shoulder-length hair under a strange visor cap, a faint smile, green eyes.

As I got closer, her familiar sweet perfume wrapped around me. I pulled her in. People hurried past, paying us no attention.

“What’s with you?” she asked softly.

“Thinking,” I said, not letting go.

Lis looked up at me and smiled.

“Thinking too much is bad. We’re blocking traffic.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Arguments with her could go on forever. And I loved them — her stubbornness, her will, that living spark that always flared in her eyes when she started to argue. And when Lis said “yes,” nodding slightly, it looked like she was agreeing with herself — confident, independent...

“Want to grab something to eat?” I asked, trying to hide my fatigue.

“That’s why I came!” she winked.

We went in and rode the escalator up to the food court.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Mostly fine. Just really tired. Work is a total nightmare. You?”

If Lis had a “nightmare,” then what was mine?

“What’s going on?”

“It’s just a hard day,” she frowned. “I hate when you dodge the question.”

“I’m good.”

She fell silent, staring at an ad sign, then asked:

“Aren’t you cold?”

“Next to you I’m always warm. Remember? ‘Little sun — particles that are in your body right now once burned inside the stars...’”

For a moment our first Christmas flashed before me: the smell of pine, tangerines, and her perfume. Soft string lights. And the card I'd put in her gift — handwritten lines still full of faith that happiness was ahead. Music from those days played quietly in my head, and deep inside a forgotten warmth spread.

I tried to smile, but she abruptly looked away, down. My beat-up face probably said enough.

"Then why are you shaking?" she asked at last.

I held out my hand and noticed a slight tremor.

"Oh, that... Night shifts. I can't sleep."

"And you say you're fine. You haven't seen a doctor?"

"Not yet. I think I'll take a day off and just sleep. I'm sure that's all I need."

We stepped into our favorite café and took a table by the panoramic window overlooking all the floors of the mall.

"What do you want?" Lis asked. "And don't tell me coffee."

"I'd like coffee..." I began, but she cut me off instantly.

"You can't."

"But —"

"No."

We both stared at the menu in silence, even though we knew it by heart. When the waitress came, I ordered herbal tea and Lis ordered a latte.

"After this we'll pick up the skirt I ordered," she said, absentmindedly stirring the milk foam. "And then the pharmacy. You'll buy sleeping pills."

I nodded, watching the pattern in her cup. The lines looked unsettling, like a sign. Lis drifted off too, nervously biting her lip. I touched her hand carefully. She lifted her eyes and looked straight into mine — like she was searching for something there. Did she see the reflection of that fire from the night the warehouse exploded? Or the fire of love that burned in me every time I looked at her?

We smiled at each other. She looked away.

What happiness it is when Lis looks at me, when she smiles at me...

When she's near.

We spent two hours together — an eternity for a mayfly, but for me only a moment. We never bought the sleeping pills — Lis was running late, and I promised I'd go to the pharmacy later. I walked her home, kissed her goodbye, and for a long time watched the silhouette of the woman I loved disappear.

Ambivalent feelings flooded me: the happiness of real love tangled with the ache of rare meetings. It was wrong, unfair, but nothing could be changed. She couldn't.

I got in my car and drove aimlessly around the city, trying to quiet the emptiness inside. Rosenberg's roads shimmered under streetlights, but their light never touched me.

I came home and collapsed on the couch in front of the TV. Images flickered by; my thoughts were elsewhere. Sleep still didn't come.

* * *

Tuesday, October 4

By morning I was on the edge. Insomnia had eaten me from the inside out, leaving only a fragile shell. I had to go to the pharmacy and buy a blister pack of strong sleeping pills. I was so weak I could barely drag my feet; sounds came as if through a wall of water, and even the thought of food made me nauseous.

Worst of all, I had a shift that night. In that state I couldn't focus on even the simplest tasks. I should see a doctor.

At one p.m. I swallowed the first pill. Nothing. Half an hour later — the second, without any hope left. Lying in front of the TV, I stared at the flickering screen, but my mind refused to shut off.

When the clock reminded me of duty, I exhaled hard, forced myself up, fell into the car, and drove to the precinct at a crawl. My hands, heavy and uncooperative, barely held the wheel. My feet pressed the pedals sluggishly, then felt like they dropped through the floor. Everything blurred. My temples pounded. Feverish heat spread through my body.

When I reached my desk, I collapsed, resting my forehead on the cold surface. Maurice, buried in paperwork, set it aside and gave me a measuring look.

“You okay?” he asked instead of greeting.

“Insomnia,” I muttered, lips barely moving.

Without a word, he pulled a pack of oddly shaped tablets from his drawer and held it out.

“Here. Strong stuff. Tested on myself. Get some sleep and you’ll feel better.”

“I already... took sleeping pills...”

“Don’t argue,” he snapped.

Too tired to resist, I obediently swallowed the large green tablet. Almost instantly a shiver rolled through me — but sleep didn’t come. Instead, reality began to split. My consciousness doubled, my thoughts tangled, and my body felt like it was dissolving into air.

I should ask Engel for that promised day off... flashed through my head before the world began to drift.

Sound vanished. I wanted to scream, but my lips stuck together. No strength. At last, mindlessly shuffling papers, I blacked out. My head hit the desk. My mind fell into an abyss.

And I dreamed—

I’m sitting on the balcony, staring up at the sky — blue, clean, unnaturally perfect, like a child’s drawing. The sun hangs motionless, as if someone glued it to the heavens.

Then — thunder. Out of nowhere, ripping the air apart, something crashes into my backyard... a bolide. It slams into the ground, flinging up torn clods of soil. My heart pounds; I run down the stairs.

My mother’s rose garden is gone. In its place, at the center of a small crater, thick smoke coils and writhes. Dust settles, revealing chunks of rock that have arranged themselves — somehow — into a ritual circle.

I peer into the pit and freeze: a baby lies at the bottom. It’s crying, but the sound isn’t human. It’s metal grinding, wind howling through pipes, domino tiles clicking as they fall into infinity.

“There he is,” a voice says inside my head. “Finally born.”

I turn. From the dark forest comes a man in a long cream-colored coat. His face is blurred, as if covered by mist.

“Who?” I ask.

“You, Klos.”

“What... Who are you?”

“He’s so small. So helpless,” the stranger says, pointing at the child. “But now he’s here. How sad... and how inevitable.”

“What should I do?”

The stranger slowly shakes his head.

“Fate will take care of everything.”

He lifts his hand — and the world around us begins to crumble into tiny cubes, like pixels on a broken screen.

“Once, I only nudged the first domino,” he says. “Yours. And after that... do you hear it?” He presses a finger to his warped lips.

And I hear it. That clicking. Everywhere — under the ground, in the air, in my own chest.

“A chain reaction. But you’re not an observer, Klos. You’re a participant. Out there, on the endless field of the Kingdom of Fatum, among nine billion chains of dominoes made of bone — where each person has their own.”

He steps closer, places a hand on my shoulder, and says — his voice trembling:

"I'm sorry that all of this will happen, Klos Heinemann."

I look into the crater again. The baby stops crying. It reaches toward me with tiny hands. Its eyes are just like mine...

The baby's cry dissolves into Maurice's shout.

"Klos! Klos!!! Wake up!"

A blow yanked me out of the void.

My eyes opened with effort. Above me hung six blurred faces: Maurice, Heinrich, Hank... and their copies? Mouths moved, but the sound arrived delayed — muffled, as if from underwater.

"W-what... happened?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"You had seizures," Maurice said flatly.

"Domino chains..." I rasped, barely separating the dry words. "They're falling. Everything's falling."

"Take him home. Let him sleep," Engel's voice cut in, and I finally made him out — by the window, inside a haze of cigarette smoke. "Day off tomorrow. See a doctor, Klos."

Everyone froze, staring at me. A crushing silence filled the room, and through it, faintly, I could still hear dominoes falling.

"Heinrich, what are you, deaf? Follow orders!" the commissioner barked.

"Yes, Herr Becker!"

Heinz gripped my arm, and in that moment the office walls shuddered and flowed, bending as if made of paper.

My partner drove me to the mansion. I thanked him, stumbled to the bedroom, and the second I touched the pillow, I dropped into sleep.

No more dreams. Only emptiness.

But when I woke — alongside relief — I felt something strange inside me. I walked slowly to the window, pulled the curtains apart, and looked at the old world with new eyes.

III

Masquerade

So many masks around us...

Sometimes you can't even tell where the mask ends and the face begins. Ever since we built society, our lives have turned into a damned masquerade — one where you can never be sure who anyone really is. A dance of shadows, where smiles and handshakes hide intentions you can't always read. You never know who's standing in front of you: a friend, or an enemy playing a part. People look you in the eye and smile, but behind that smile there can be ice.

I learned long ago: it's better to be surprised and discover someone is deeper and more honest than you assumed, than to realize — too late, with bitterness — that you opened your soul to someone who didn't deserve it.

But sometimes the mask slips. In that moment — in that single second when a person adjusts it — you see them as they truly are. Remember that face. It's your trophy. From that point on, you're stronger, because now you know exactly who's standing in front of you.

Wednesday, October 5

Bright sunlight was shining straight into my room — friendly, almost intrusive. Its rays slipped through the not-quite-clean glass and crawled over the blanket, tickling my eyelids until they finally forced me to open my eyes.

“Goddamn sun...”

I flung a pillow at the window. It hit the pane with a pathetic thud and dropped to the floor. My head felt like it was splitting apart. My mouth tasted like a litter box.

I made myself get up, stumbled out of bed, and dragged my feet toward the bathroom. The toothbrush moved in my hand like a machine while I tried to scrub off the residue of the night. Animal hunger pushed me downstairs to the kitchen, where I hoped I could find something — anything — that might bring me back to life.

13:14 — Incoming from Heinz: “You alive?”

I smirked. Strangely, it felt like I really had slept. My body was wrecked, but inside there was a lightness I wasn't used to — like the last few days had been one long dream.

For breakfast I fried eggs and sausages and turned on the TV for background noise. The local channel was running the midday news.

“...and the highlight of Unification Day will be the traditional holiday masquerade in the main square, organized by Rosenberg's Department of Culture — for all residents of our glorious city and, of course, our dear guests...”

I froze with my fork halfway to my mouth.

Unification Day. The cursed city was celebrating yet another anniversary of turning Europe into American toilet paper. I had personal reasons to hate that day — the day that took my parents.

A bitter lump rose in my throat, but the mention of the masquerade lit a spark anyway. Maybe I should go for once... if only because it was the perfect excuse to spend whatever free time I had with Lis.

I dropped onto the couch — it complained with a creak — and dialed her number.

“Hey, Lis. Am I bothering you?” I glanced at the clock. She was probably at work.

“Not really. Hi,” her soft voice came through the speaker. The sound slid into my ear so gently it felt like warmth spreading through my body.

“How are you?”

“I’m good. You? Did you beat the insomnia?”

“I think so. At least today I finally got some sleep. I had this really strange...” I stopped, trying to grab the memory, but the images slipped away.

“What?”

“Uh... I don’t remember.” I laughed, suddenly feeling stupid. “Okay, I’ll tell you later. Want to meet up today?”

“Sorry...” Her voice dropped. “I can’t. I have to watch my nephew.”

“Too bad,” I said, not even surprised. “Listen — Unification Day is coming up. There’s going to be a masquerade in Downtown. Want to go?”

“A masquerade?” A short pause. “Oh. I get it. Of course! We’ll go. Definitely.”

It was time to stop being afraid of the demons in my past. And take a step toward whatever was ahead.

“Love you. Bye.”

“Love you too,” her voice trembled. “Bye, Klos. Call me.”

Let this Unification Day bring something good into my life...

Lis hung up.

* * *

That evening the sun sank behind the forest earlier than usual. I stood on the balcony watching the fireball drift lazily down behind the jagged silhouettes of trees. Inside was an emptiness not even that majestic sunset could fill. I threw on my coat and went out.

Cold autumn air hit my face, instantly jolting me awake, sending adrenaline through me. It smelled of decaying leaves and damp earth — the smell of fall, the season when nature dies beautifully. Fallen leaves crunched loudly under my shoes.

I walked through Stern with no goal at all, along the edge of the woods.

My thoughts scattered like startled birds: Lis. Reinhold. Korbl... everyone whose life ended in that cursed warehouse... and the funeral that had taken place today. Franziska — Kuno’s daughter — now waiting alone for her future behind the walls of an orphanage. And that strange dream I still couldn’t recall, slipping away like fog the moment I reached for it.

I thought about the city. The world. Unification. Life. And how the damned New Law was slowly, steadily blurring European nations, eating away at the foundation of our civilization. Criminals and petty scum multiplied like parasites in this warped reality, in a bureaucracy built to suit them. We had to change something. There were so many of us...

The 21st century had promised safety and calm after two world wars. Instead, it sank deeper and deeper into filth. Eisengitter Prison was bursting at the seams. How many had I sent there? How many had our unit sent? We worked like the damned, but it didn’t matter. The bastards served their time, walked out, and went right back to it — relapse after relapse. They carried off someone’s health, someone’s life, someone’s hope. A metronome of death.

And how many criminals avoided punishment entirely? And even if prison was punishment — was it really, when inmates lived better than some poor, law-abiding, decent people fate had driven to their knees?

Once, it had been different. Once, the highest penalty was the death sentence — and it also served as a deterrent. A warning. Fear made real in the minds of the dim-witted what neither school nor conscience could: the inevitability of payback. Fear forced them to look into the abyss before stepping forward. Not all of them. But at least some. When the punishment was abolished as “inhumane,” crime began to climb.

And that evening, under the hush of leaves and the cold breath of fall, a Purpose was born in me. Simple — and terrifying in its clarity. It had been ripening for years, smoldering somewhere

deep, and now it flared up, and I saw it: a new world. Safe. Just. A world where order wasn't just a word but a law of existence.

I wanted it. Not just to dream, but to build.

Can one person change anything? History answers that clearly: yes.

With those thoughts, I reached the far end of the settlement and turned back along the street. It was dark, but lights glowed in the houses. Through windows I could see moving silhouettes. People — buried in their problems, needs, small joys. Dinner. Cleaning. Television. And they had no idea that somewhere nearby, something was being born that would turn their world upside down.

Something made me stop at a small, cozy cottage. On the mailbox, under a weak streetlamp, a surname gleamed, engraved into metal:

“Shafer.”

“Belinda?” I remembered. “That journalist?”

“Good memory, detective,” a familiar voice said behind me. “Herr Heinemann, if I'm not mistaken?”

I turned. She stood under the streetlamp in short denim shorts and a baggy T-shirt, a half-full trash bag in her hand. A light, almost mocking smile lit her face.

“Want to come in?” Belinda tossed the bag into the bin and nodded toward the house. “Tea — my treat.”

“Thanks — I won't say no,” I heard myself answer.

She slipped inside, and I followed. In the entryway I shrugged off my coat, trying to look around, but Belinda grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the living room. Her touch was unexpectedly warm — almost burning compared to the cold outside.

A sofa sat in the middle of the room, a dark wooden coffee table beside it, and a huge TV on the wall. Heinz would've sold his soul for one like that. Warm lamplight, blue curtains, and a fake palm in the corner made the place feel comfortable.

“Sit,” she said, pointing at the couch. “Tea? Coffee? Or something stronger?”

“Tea,” I forced out, fighting the urge to choose coffee. Sleep mattered more than temptation right now.

She smiled and disappeared into the kitchen.

“A little sugar, please!” I called after her.

“Okay!”

I sank into the couch and almost disappeared into it. A couple minutes later Belinda returned with two mugs: tea for me, coffee for her — the sharp, energizing smell filling the room immediately.

“Thanks.”

“Nothing.” She waved it off, sitting beside me. Her voice — slightly high, but melodic — came fast and crisp, like a journalist used to catching every word on the fly.

“Alright, Klos. Proper introductions. Tell me about yourself.” She leaned closer; curiosity sparked in her eyes. “I should probably know who I let into my house. What if you're... a maniac?”

She laughed. I couldn't help smiling back.

“Hobbies?” she asked. “Besides work?”

“Besides work...” I watched the steam above my mug. “I want to try politics. Change something. Make the world... better.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened — not with delight, but with sudden alarm. Her hand jerked under a pillow. For a second I thought she was about to pull out a recorder, but instead she yanked out a phone that was vibrating like it wanted to escape and answered.

“Yeah?” Her face twisted as if she'd been hit by nausea. “What do you want?! We've already talked about this. Fuck off forever!” she barked, then muted the mic and shot me a guilty look. “Klos, sorry. Ex-husband...”

I nodded, hiding a grin. I took a sip of tea and nearly choked. It was so strong it could've brought me back from the dead and demanded I finish the mug.

Belinda — without the slightest embarrassment about my presence — spent a few seconds unloading everything she thought about the person on the other end, adding a couple new entries to my swear-word dictionary. Then — just as abruptly — she killed the call. The shorter the call, the more effective it is.

“So...” she said, trying to regain calm, though I couldn't miss the tremor in her voice or the white knuckles around her cup. “Where were we?”

“Politics, I think,” I supplied, pretending not to notice her state. Something told me that call had a whole story behind it, but I didn't pry. “So... right.”

My phone cut in then — solemnly breaking into the anthem of old Germany⁵. I glanced at the screen: Heinz. Damn. I'd forgotten to answer him.

“Now I understand your political views,” Belinda smirked. “Pick up.”

“Later.” I declined the call. “Nothing urgent.”

We sank back into conversation, and time seemed to melt in the warmth of her living room. Belinda wasn't just smart — she was disarmingly open. Her questions were sharp and genuine, her laughter contagious. No awkward pauses, no tension (aside from the ex-husband call). She admitted the cottage had come to her after the divorce — after a long, ugly court fight — which explained a lot. The house was impressive. Not many journalists could afford a place like that.

When the tea was gone, tiredness rolled over me in a soft wave. Time to go. She walked me to the door.

“Come by again, Klos,” Belinda said, and there was something in her voice beyond politeness.

“Thanks for the evening,” I replied, feeling her hospitality leave something bright inside me.

* * *

The night's silence was pierced by crickets. Their monotone song seemed to set the rhythm for my steps along the dusty roadside. Above me hung the moon — the one I used to imagine, as a kid, as a giant wheel of cheese dangling on a string in the sky.

But now, in its cold light, I saw something else. It felt like a lone lighthouse in an endless ocean of emptiness.

Like you, Lis.

You're out there somewhere — miles away. Just as beautiful, just as distant. You light my world when everything around me is dark. Not the whole planet... just a tiny corner of it. Just me.

My light in the pitch-black night. My bearing in the dark. The moon slips behind torn clouds, but thoughts of you remain. You're as singular as that moon. Sometimes you appear, and I can breathe again. Then you disappear...

Lis...

I look for the moon whenever it shows itself. It's our bridge into infinite space — and a bridge between lovers, too. The moon can connect those distance has pulled apart. Wherever you are right now, Lis, look up at it. Know that I'm looking too — and in that moment there are no miles between us, no time.

I stare into the moonlight and, on the surface of that bright yellow sphere, I see the sweet face of a beautiful, kind girl I love more than anything...

When I got home, I collapsed onto the bed. The cold night stayed outside the window while the moon, peeking into the room, threw silver patches across the walls. I closed my eyes, carrying your image with me, and for the first time in a long while I slept peacefully — as if it, and you, were keeping watch over my dreams.

⁵ The national anthem of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland — the third stanza of “The Song of the Germans” (1952—2047).[\[3\]](#)

* * *

Thursday, October 6

When I woke up, I reached for my phone first. My heart sped up just thinking about Lis — I wanted to hear her voice as soon as possible. After a few long rings, a sleepy greeting finally came through.

“Klos! I was just about to call you.”

“Hey, sweetheart. What are you doing?”

“Just woke up. Getting ready for work. You?”

“Nothing special.” My face spread into a grin as I pictured her on the other end — pulling on tights, smoothing down a stubborn strand of hair. “Just got up too. Will I see you today?” I asked, hopeful.

“I’ll be free around... one. My coworker and I are handing in a project, and they’ll let us go early.”

“That’s great. Hope everything goes smoothly.”

“It will. You have no idea how much time we poured into it...” She exhaled. “Okay, I have to run.”

“See you...”

After breakfast I locked myself in my office — it was time to finish a couple of reports. The last thing I needed today was Engel chewing my head off. My partner, Detective Heinrich Zimmermann, and I had decent stats compared to the other detectives, but even we had cases with no leads at all.

Work swallowed the hours — lines of reports, the hiss of paper. A sharp alarm ripped me out of it at noon. I threw on my coat and pulled on leather gloves (the autumn cold was already biting), then headed for Donnertal, to the architecture firm where Lis worked.

She was waiting on a bench by the entrance, her fragile silhouette against the gray facade. I parked and got out to open her door.

“How do I look?” Lis asked, tilting her head flirtatiously.

“You ask me that every time. And every time the answer’s the same...”

“Klos.” She smiled, and warmth ran through me instantly.

“Come back to my place?”

“Let’s go,” she said easily, sliding into the car.

I knew the week’s weight would leave me alone today — everything ugly and heavy I’d been carrying. Health scares. Dark thoughts. Exhaustion. The insomnia. Today my black sedan cut through the air as if it were moving through some other reality. Lis reclined in the passenger seat, still a little amazed.

The road brought us quickly to Stern — the forest settlement on the hills. Stopping at a light, I spotted Belinda. She was walking toward her house and, recognizing me, waved in greeting.

“Oh.” Lis frowned. She knew all my friends and acquaintances, but she’d never seen Belinda. “Who’s that?”

“Belinda Shafer. A journalist.”

“And what is she doing here?” A note of jealousy slipped into her voice.

“Living here, I guess.” I shrugged.

“Why haven’t I heard of her?”

“We only met yesterday. Work. Remember I told you about Reinhold’s case?”

She didn’t answer. For a few seconds she studied the stranger in the side mirror, and I watched the corners of her mouth tighten. Then she turned to me and said slowly:

“Pretty...”

“Lis, stop.” I eased over to the shoulder and turned to her. “The prettiest one is right here.” I touched her nose gently.

“Really?” Lis frowned theatrically.

“Really.” I smiled. “The most talented, the most beautiful, the smartest.”

Finally she smiled back. A thin, strained smile — like it was owed to habit. She caught my gaze and immediately turned toward the window.

Cold ran down my spine.

But the house met us with warmth. I left the car in the garage and we went inside. Lis hung her thin red jacket in the closet and went straight to my office, where she pulled out an unfinished canvas and an easel. I helped carry everything to the balcony while she grabbed brushes and paints.

On the canvas Rosenberg was frozen in place — not the gray, dirty city I saw every day from my balcony. This was a different city entirely: white mountain peaks in the distance, the Elbe like a mirrored ribbon, the casino — either not abandoned yet, or bought out and restored — and a ghostly gray moon in a bright-blue sky.

Lis chose a brush and went back to work.

She’d started the painting in summer. Now it was autumn, and the city felt tired, sick. But on the canvas Rosenberg stayed alive — full of strength and color. Lis had saved it forever, as if she’d breathed her soul into the paint. That was her gift: seeing beauty in the ordinary.

I brewed bergamot tea and carried two fragrant mugs out to the balcony. We sat on the bench, savoring one of those rare moments when we actually got to be together.

“You paint the city better than it really is,” I said.

Lis rested her head on my knees and closed her eyes.

“Maybe I just see what’s hidden.”

“You don’t just see it.” I looked at her. “You pour your soul into it...”

And it was like you poured one into me, too...

“You have no idea how much I need to hear that right now,” she whispered.

“But it’s just words...”

“Sometimes simple words are what keep you alive.” Lis opened her eyes and looked straight through me. “Art... is how I don’t break. I pour out the sadness, the loneliness, the pain that piles up inside. Turn it into something beautiful. Otherwise it’ll eat me from the inside.”

She hesitated.

“I just don’t understand...” Her voice thinned for a beat. “How do you let your pain out? You have so much of it...”

Her words went straight through me. I glanced at the painting — at that ideal, sheltered world she’d locked in with color — and, for some reason, my mind jumped to Ralf, who’d also gone looking for salvation in creation.

And what had saved me?

Out there beyond the balcony, the gray, sick city kept existing. But here, in this fragile moment, there was only our world — shaped by her brush, held together by my love.

* * *

“Alright. I guess that’s it for today,” Lis said when the first heavy drops began drumming on the balcony railing. We carried the painting back into the room carefully.

“Concrete Moon,” she said softly, her gaze lingering on the canvas. “That’s what I’ll call it.”

“Because of that gray smudge in the corner?” I nodded at the barely noticeable brushstroke.

“It’s not a smudge. It’s the point.” She smiled faintly. “Look — everything in the city is flooded with sunlight. It feels alive... and above it is the moon. Not a bright yellow night disk, but a gray one — concrete — like it’s forced to pretend it’s just as artificial as everything down below. But the truth is, the moon is the only real thing in the whole picture. A piece of nature in a man-made world. It reminds you that even in the most chaotic, imperfect place you can still find something beautiful. You just have to want to see it... and keep it.”

I stared at the painting, letting it pull me in.

“And to me,” I said slowly, “that moon is a silent sentry. Frozen above your shining city, watching us — warning us. Warning about the threat. About the evil pulsing in the real Rosenberg, always ready to break through and destroy the fragile ideal you’re guarding with your brush.”

Lis gave a sad little smile.

“You and I look at the same thing and see different things. You see a threat. I see hope...” Her eyes slid away from mine. “Take me home,” she asked quietly.

“That’s it? You came all the way here just for this? Just to... draw?” The word came out sharper than I meant, and I instantly regretted it.

“Paint, Klos,” she corrected, not looking at me. “You paint pictures.”

Outside, the sky finally gave in. A hard downpour slammed into the village. We got into the car and drove toward Donnertal. The wipers lazily shoved sheets of water aside, but the world beyond the glass still looked blurred — as if someone had painted it in watercolor. Rain hammered on the roof, filling the heavy silence between us.

I kept stealing glances at Lis. She sat staring at the rain-smeared window, and every so often her lips moved like she wanted to say something — then closed again, locking the words inside.

What’s wrong with her? What is she thinking?

We stopped by an eight-story brick building. In a second-floor window, Laura Klein’s silhouette flickered past.

“Take care,” I said, breaking the silence.

“Bye,” Lis answered dully.

She stepped out, shoved her hands into the pockets of her red jacket, and walked toward the entrance without looking back. She moved through the pouring rain, eyes fixed on the asphalt. I watched her go, something inside me tightening into a painful knot.

When her figure vanished into the darkness of the stairwell — when she climbed and appeared in the window, blurred by raindrops — she looked at me.

Just for a second.

Our eyes met. That look — packed with unspoken pain, with longing, with something I couldn’t name — hit me like a lightning strike. My heart jumped, like it might split in two.

I lifted my hand and pressed my fingers to the cold car window, reaching for her without meaning to. Lis turned away and kept going, still sad, still lost in thought...

Like a stranger in an imperfect world. Nothing like the perfect reality she could build on canvas.

* * *

The rest of the day burned down into the madness of longing. The rooms needed cleaning — and I gave my evening to them without holding anything back. Sometimes I hired a cleaning service, but I preferred doing it myself. For me it was a kind of meditation: time to talk to myself, to put not only the house but my thoughts in order.

When I finished, I set my alarm for the morning and climbed onto the wide windowsill. Outside stretched a black autumn sky — deep, bottomless, sprinkled with stars.

It’s strange, watching a world gone mad carry you from one reality to another. You remember your life... how simple everything used to seem... how you thought it would stay that way forever. You sit by the window, warming your hands on a cup of tea, and you think: years will pass, and you’ll still be right here — in this same place. Just older.

Space and time... You never know who you’ll become, or what the world around you will look like. Spacetime worms have punched so many holes in this place that you can’t look at a single object without a memory catching underfoot — and hurting.

A sip of tea. A gaze sinking into the night...

You watch the stars and all kinds of thoughts crawl in. The future. The past. The vastness of the universe. God. Everything that seems close, and yet humanity is held at arm's length by some invisible hand. Thoughts like that don't visit often — but when they do, I feel free. Free, and at the same time unbearably sad. You want to reach. You want to know. But it feels out of range.

And sometimes you want nothing at all — when her face starts to show itself in the outlines of the constellations. My beloved. My dear. The only mystery I still can't solve. Like a missing piece in the mosaic of my life...

November was creeping closer, bringing more cold and more questions. But for now, sitting here on the sill with a cup of tea and stars above my head, it was enough simply to know: somewhere out there, under the same sky, she was breathing.

* * *

Friday, October 7

I woke up a little before the alarm. Raindrops tapped a steady rhythm on the window — the nagging sound hauled me fully out of sleep. I opened my eyes, got up slowly, told the voice assistant to boil water, and stepped onto the balcony.

"Well, this is shit..." The weather matched my mood perfectly. I used to love rain — its sound, its smell, the way it could wash everything clean. But with age I understood there's nothing better than a warm, sunny day.

The city was waking up. Not a city — a beast with a billion fiery eyes. Little cars crawled through traffic. Work, home, supermarket on the way — day after day, year after year. Life on repeat...

Boredom.

The rain didn't let up. Time slipped by. It felt like I'd just opened my eyes, and it was already time for work.

Then the evening silence was ripped apart by my phone. The Commissioner. Calls from him never meant anything good. My body moved on autopilot — straight to the office to change into a suit.

"Klos! Get moving. Now. This is urgent!" Engel's voice thundered in my ear.

"What — » My insides tightened into ice.

"Gross is dead," Engel cut in. "They're cleaning up, the bastards..."

"How?!" I blurted.

"Not now. Heinz is already there — he'll tell you everything."

"Where do I go?"

"Karbon. Wilhelmstraße, forty-four."

"Got it. I'm on my way."

He hung up.

Well... looks like my boring day just ended.

I didn't waste a second. I jumped into the car and headed for Karbon. Rain whipped the windshield; the wipers barely kept up.

The neighborhood greeted me with a maze of narrow streets, stretched like a web. Roads jammed with parked cars twisted between old buildings and tight little courtyards. Traffic, puddles, flashing headlights — all of it blended into a chaotic, jittery dance. I nearly got lost searching for number 44 until I finally spotted a familiar silhouette under a streetlamp: Heinrich.

In the middle of the road, right on the wet asphalt, a body lay sprawled. Puddles reflected camera flashes and the pulsing lights of emergency vehicles. The air felt drawn tight, like a wire. The quiet was broken only by hushed voices and the dry click of a shutter. A patrol officer was taking a statement from a pale, shaken woman.

I went to Heinz. He noticed me, clicked off his flashlight, let his camera drop against his chest, and gave a small nod.

“Hey, buddy,” he said — but today his voice didn’t have its usual lightness.

“Hey. What’ve we got?”

“Korbl Gross.” He glanced at the body flattened in a pool of blood. “Dead. Found half an hour ago. That woman was coming home, saw a man lying there. Went closer to check on him and saw the blood...”

Heinz pulled on a glove, crouched, and pointed to three red tears in the fabric of the coat.

“Three stab wounds. Clean, deep — whoever did it knew where to go. Vital organs hit. Korbl was wanted. Looks like they just... removed him.”

He stood, stared off into the distance for a moment, then lifted his index finger like he’d remembered something.

“Evidence.”

He walked to the car and came back with a clear bag. Inside was a knife — long, narrow. Dark blood clung to the blade, already drying at the edges.

“Ta-da,” he muttered without a smile, like he was presenting a trophy.

I stared at the bag.

“Seriously? They just left it here?”

“Yep.”

“That confident?”

“Or in a hurry.” Heinz turned the bag in his hands. “We’ll pull prints. See what we get.”

“You think there’ll be anything?”

“Of course not,” he said, smirking. “But we have to check. Can’t hand the Commissioner an empty report.”

The rain intensified. The patrol officers hurried to the shelter of their cars. Heinrich and I opened our umbrellas and went back to the body.

Detective Gross’s corpse lay on the wet asphalt. Water diluted the blood into thin red streams. How did they kill him? Who did it — and why?

We started building the picture of the crime — drop by drop, smear by smear, chasing every stubborn trace the rain hadn’t yet erased.

* * *

A Few Hours Earlier

The night in Karbon was thick as ink spilled across the sky. The rain had just stopped, leaving puddles that mirrored dull streetlights and a few lonely stars. Korbl — tall and bony — hurried along a narrow street. His scarf was pulled tight over the lower half of his face, leaving only a long, sharp nose exposed, like a raven’s beak. The wind tugged at the tails of his coat as if trying to hold him back, but Korbl didn’t slow.

He was almost running. His heart hammered up in his throat, drowning out everything else. Ahead, the entrance to his building appeared like a promise of safety — but something made him slow.

Korbl snapped around, scanning the dark cut-throughs.

Nothing.

He tried to swallow the lump in his throat, tried to draw a deep breath, but anxiety — like poison — was already in his blood, spreading through his veins.

A sinister shadow flickered to his right, peeling away from a parked car. Korbl lunged forward, gasping. His footsteps rang too loud in the empty street. The entrance was so close...

But the shadow caught him halfway.

A knife — cold, merciless — drove into Korbl’s back. Once. Twice. Three times. He didn’t even have time to scream. Didn’t even have time to understand he was dying.

A wet rasp.

The knife clattered against the cobblestones, and the shadow vanished around the corner. Korbl collapsed onto the slick asphalt and lay still.

Warm blood mixed with rainwater and spread through the puddles, drawing a dark, cruel pattern.

* * *

The rain washed away the last traces of blood. The medics loaded the body bag onto a stretcher and took it to the medical examiner's office. Heinz and I split up in grim silence, got into our cars, and raced back to the station, where Maurice was already waiting.

Headlights carved only puddles and the occasional hurried figure out of the raw, damp dark — people rushing to get out of the weather.

Inside, the station was its usual chaos, soaked in the smell of coffee and cigarette smoke. The moment we stepped in, Engel pounced on us.

"Everything you've got. In the report. Print it. Bring it to me. Now." He barked it while covering the receiver with his hand.

We did it without a word. The Commissioner — grim, tight-jawed — had taken Hank's desk again (Hank was missing, as usual) and was flipping through papers, muttering curses under his breath. By the window, Maurice had his phone pinned to his shoulder while he wrestled with an ancient coffee machine. The smell of burnt coffee was already seeping into the room.

I went back to my computer. Heinz headed for the lab to lift prints from the bloody knife.

As soon as he left, Hank Bauer finally showed up — rumpled and half-asleep. Seeing the Commissioner at his desk, he slid quietly into Heinz's seat instead, then flicked a cautious look around the room. When he realized nobody was about to chew him out, he launched Chess on his computer.

Smoke from Engel's cigarette thickened the air.

"Hank, move." Maurice ended the call. "Docks. Workers found a woman's body. Dead. Hands cut off."

Hank didn't show a flicker. He closed the game, stood, and went to the locker where he'd just hung his jacket.

"What the hell..." I muttered as their silhouettes dissolved down the corridor.

"Mmm?" Engel grunted without looking up.

"How long is this supposed to go on?" My fists clenched; anger climbed into my throat.

Hands... cut off...

The picture formed by itself — bright, unavoidable.

A narrow alley. Wind howling loud enough to swallow every sound but my breathing. I'm chasing the killer... The first shot takes out the kneecap — dull crack — he goes down, clawing at a trash bin with his fingers.

I hate—

"Those animals..." My voice shook. "They're not afraid of Eisengitter Prison, not afraid of court, not afraid of the police... not even of the Devil himself. For them it's like justice doesn't exist."

"And what do you propose?" Engel finally looked up, and something tired flickered in his eyes. "You can't do anything about it. We've already been over this."

The second shot punches straight through his calf. Now he can't run. He crawls in the dirt, wheezing, folding in on himself, begging for mercy. And I just stand over him... and listen.

Enjoying it.

In the dim light of a streetlamp, a blade flashes.

"We need different measures," I snapped, unable to stop the anger.

"Like what?" His voice hardened.

I'm a surgeon, cutting out a cancer. The knife goes right into the armpit, slicing tendons and muscle. He screams. I pull it free and drive it in lower — under the ribs, into the belly. I pin this piece

of shit's head to the wet asphalt, stare into two bottomless wells of terror... and drag the blade across his throat.

Justice.

"Capital punishment," I said, meeting his eyes.

Engel didn't say anything for a few seconds. He studied me, then gave a short nod.

"Come with me. My office."

He snatched up a folder, walked out, and vanished behind the heavy door at the end of the corridor. I hurried after him.

The Commissioner's office was a little smaller than ours. A massive oak desk sat in the center, buried under papers and crowded with ashtrays. A few chairs. Cabinets packed with files. An old ceiling-fan chandelier lazily pushing cigarette smoke around the room.

Engel pulled a cigar from a drawer, clipped the tip without rushing, and lit it. The sharp smoke joined the haze, making it thicker.

"You've stirred up some memories with your talk," he said, staring past me as if into the past. "I'm curious where your thinking is going to lead you..."

I kept going, unable to stop myself.

"Even the Bible talks about capital punishment. Stoning, hanging, burning..." I hesitated, then — seeing interest in his eyes — pushed on. "You can't fix people like that, Engel. You have to eliminate them. Wipe them off the face of the earth. That's the only way to build a healthy society. Only the fear of death can stop chaos."

"Why doesn't the average person just snatch a phone off a display stand? What stops him — morals? upbringing? Most of the time it's fear. Everyone knows there are cameras, security... you get caught, you get punished. But imagine there is no punishment. How many people would still resist the temptation? That fear has to be the foundation of order — at least right now, while society is poisoned with crime."

Engel drew slowly on the cigar. Smoke slid out of his mouth like a ghost of thought. He watched me for a long time, and there was something new in his eyes — something between respect and warning.

"Klos," he said at last, squinting, "have you ever thought about what the death penalty *was really for*?"

"Huh?"

"From ancient times to today, society has carried a hunger for public sacrifice in its blood. Witch hunts, burnings, brutal executions, gladiator fights... it all served one purpose: to legalize and ritualize our innate craving for violence." He tapped ash. "And it's chemistry. We get certain... reactions when we witness something extreme — blood, dismemberment, that kind of thing — while staying safe ourselves."

"Simple example: you want to feel fear, you watch a horror movie. You get your shot of adrenaline and you walk away intact. A vaccine. Against the real nightmare."

He paused and took another drag. I opened my mouth to argue, but he rolled right over me.

"You walk down the street, you see a fire. You stand with a crowd watching firefighters climb into a burning building, and deep down you're waiting for it — injury, death, catastrophe. Don't you dare argue, Klos!" he snapped, raising his voice. "That's our nature, and there's no outrunning it, no matter how hard we play at civilization. We clap for the rescuers, and inside we're a little disappointed it ended well."

He leaned forward.

"If that weren't true, why the hell do people go to rallies, motocross, rodeos? Why do they watch a lethal show with their hearts in their throats — just to cheer because the riders made it through cleanly, politely even, without taking each other out? Or roar when a bull gets played with a

red rag? Remember this, Klos: *the crowd usually roots for the bull*. Bread and circuses. That's how it was, that's how it is, and that's how it'll be. Even if nobody admits it. Even to *themselves*."

"But — "

"Hold it, Klos. The death penalty is a bad solution. You'll get more spectacle, and whether it solves anything — or creates something worse — is a big question."

"Herr Becker — "

"Don't interrupt!" he barked. "Let me finish."

I clenched my jaw and shut up.

"Years ago we chopped heads here — traditional execution. Arsonists were burned. Traitors were quartered... In the GDR they didn't abolish executions until the late eighties; in the FRG it happened earlier. Believe me, there were reasons." He jabbed the cigar in the air. "In this world, very little happens for no reason. We're trying to beat back our primitive instincts, build a humane society — damn it all. The death penalty never removed the roots of the problems you're talking about."

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