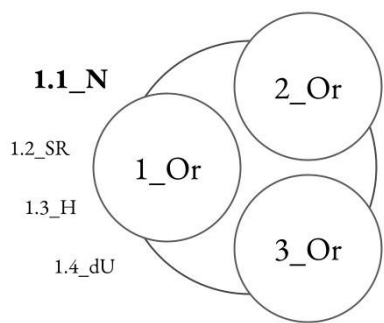


Halbmichel

Neiwolf

1.1_Or



The bodies in the front row were shaking. Some gentlemen slapped their thighs with laughter. Others pointed to the stage with outstretched arms. But not only there, but all around Neiwolf the people broke out in roars.

Laughter, scornful shouting and giggling.

Neiwolf remained silent. He did not take his eyes off the boy on the stage, while the crowd slowly calmed down again. They had no other choice. They would have fainted by the dozen if they hadn't breathed properly between the antics. Since the performers' act was just approaching its climax, the audience was used to the rhythm of the planned laughs: every few seconds, the three on stage would amaze with a new romp. There was not much time to compose oneself, straighten one's hat and await the next punch line.

The sturdy performer with the slicked-back hair didn't hesitate for long. With the boy, to be exact. Once again, the little boy played a trick on his father. Initial laughs in row one! The mother on stage acknowledged the boy's joke with wild finger wagging. He just wouldn't listen to her!

More laughter.

Neiwolf saw the boy slipping through his father's legs. The big man looked down with a jerk, only to be taken by his junior in a leapfrog. To thunderous applause, the latter now clung to his father's shoulders like a rider on a horse far too big.

That seemed to be the signal. The man reached behind him with amazing agility, grabbed the small body by the tiny jacket that looked just like his own — and threw the boy from him in a high arc.

Screaming, the guests in the first rows jumped to their feet. No one even tried to catch the boy. He banged on the floorboards as if all life had gone out of him on the spot. But instead of lying there, he rolled around a few times under the force of the impact, and then ended up sitting on his rear end with his legs spread and his eyes wide open. Right in front of Neiwolf.

Now the tent was raging. One could not have understood one's own word with all the excitement. Neiwolf did not even try to speak. He just stared into the playfully stunned face of the child. The little one couldn't be more than four or five years old. Such a countenance was an unusual sight even for Neiwolf, who had seen millions of faces. The little one's eyes were as big as chestnuts, but darker. Small pools filled with a seriousness for which even many an adult still lacked life experience.

'The Unbreakable Boy', they called him. Now Neiwolf had seen for himself why the child truly deserved the nickname.

The splint cracked insistently. Essam heard it louder and louder with each step the donkey took. If the little wooden pin broke, he would be done for. The wagon wheel could slip off the axle at any turn, and he had to turn every few minutes. This street wasn't that long. The most beautiful street in Cairo? Heck no! All Essam saw when he lifted his head and looked along the narrow path between the houses were puzzle pieces. Sure, every house existed somewhere in Cairo. But not like this. Not all in a pile. This was a tapestry of colorful patches, a joke.

What wasn't a joke was that someone had gone to the trouble of scorching the slats of his cart and smearing it with dirt to make the vehicle look old. No thought had been given to spare parts, however. In the shed behind the mosque was a small fleet of handcarts, wheelbarrows and one or two carriages. All new, all hammered together makeshift like Essam's cart. He could take any of them tomorrow, if the splint lasted this shift. Should one of the other extras bother with it! Essam had more than once taken on a rickety prop himself and then had to explain himself to the boss when it broke under his hands. If you were unfortunate, meaning most of the time, you had to pay for the damage yourself.

The splint continued to crack in unison with the donkey's rut. Essam could swear that it creaked more menacingly than it had a few minutes ago. An hour! You don't have to last longer than that, he urged the piece of wood—only in his head, of course. The guests were not to be disturbed while strolling in this toy world.

Anyone who attracted attention would be fired.

Essam gently steered the donkey into a bend. Cairo's most beautiful street had come to an end, once again. This, fortunately, was the bend where the damaged cart wheel lay inside. As the donkey turned the cart in a semicircle around its own axis, the load pressed against the splint and bearing. Something cracked there in new, ominous facets.

Made it!

What really worried Essam was the bend at the other end of the street. He would have to take it three more times before he could get rid of the cart. There, the broken wheel would be on the outside. Essam decided to take the curve extra slowly. He didn't feel like becoming a laughingstock, getting taunted about it later, and on top of everything else, paying for the damage.

The cracking wouldn't stop. At least it didn't get any worse, Essam reassured himself as he led the donkey as gently as he could. He just had to keep the cart rolling as straight as possible.

To his left, singing and laughter came from a sidewalk café.

Just let it roll straight...

To the right, merchants who were not really merchants outdid each other with shrill cries in praising their ceramics and carpets. Essam clearly heard Marik's wheezing lungs, though he tried to ignore the spectacle.

Just let it roll straight...

A fancy couple didn't watch their step and crossed the path right in front of Essam and the donkey. He had to stop the animal and let the woman in the conical dress, along with her bespectacled husband, go ahead to avoid hitting them in the heels. Essam did that with a smile, according to the rules. After all, stopping and jerking didn't affect the axle, no problem.

Just let it roll straight...

It was only the milksop that threw a wrench in his plans.

"Hey!" shouted Essam with the simmering nervousness that hoodlums used to warn their cronies about gendarmes: deafeningly quiet.

The young man did not hear Essam. He was standing next to his own cart, in the middle of the way.

"You've got to be kidding!" grumbled Essam, already tugging at the rope he used to steer the donkey out of the lane. He didn't have time to mess with the milksop. In a gentle bend, Essam maneuvered his menacingly creaking vehicle past the obstacle.

"Lazy bastard!" he hissed as he passed the lanky fellow.

He did not get a reaction.

The lanky fellow was in no hurry. He could not have understood what was going on in Essam's mind even if his colleague had explained to him the dilemma of material, time and loss of pay. No, he stood here spellbound and calm. Back there, where Cairo's most beautiful street ended, the Eiffel Tower rose above the World's Fair—and the milksop couldn't get enough of it. He had never seen so much steel in his entire life, such a construction, such a dizzying height. This spire towered so unmistakably and majestically over the city, as if it had always ruled over it. A hundred years, perhaps, not the few days since Monsieur Eiffel had inaugurated it in person. Perhaps that was one thing they had in common, the tower and the extra: they both looked older than they were. The daydreaming man in Essam's path was lanky indeed, but by no means a man. He was a boy, just turned 15.

New guests trickled into the show tent while many old ones left. The boy was the attraction for which many had paid their admission. The card player who succeeded him had a hard time engaging the audience this evening. And this despite the fact that he ate up half his deck of cards.

Neiwolf sat down away from the audience benches at the edge of the stage, where the boy dangled his legs. His work was done. He looked listless, not in a bad, but again with an aura that didn't seem childlike.

"May I...?" asked Neiwolf politely before sliding up to the boy.

The boy looked at the tree-length human with scrutiny. Even sitting down, the stranger was a good three times his height.

"That was a great act!" praised Neiwolf.

And held out a folded banknote to the child. The boy took it.

"Well deserved!"

"Thank you..."

"I have a question," Neiwolf said in a hushed voice so as not to disturb the stage program.

"Fire away," the boy encouraged him like a much older artist.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

"What, the falling down?"

Neiwolf nodded.

"Your father..." he continued, faltering. "Is that really your father?"

Now the boy nodded.

"Well, your father threw you halfway across the tent..."

"We do that every night."

"Really?" Neiwolf looked as amazed as he could. On the boy, however, the admiration seemed to wash off like water on a piece of tin.

"And you're not hurt?"

"No," the boy said firmly.

Neiwolf repeated his appreciative facial expression.

"You've never broken anything doing that?"

"Never!"

"Then it is a trick!" provoked Neiwolf the little figure at his side, who could have been a ventriloquist's dummy with its little legs still dangling.

"No trick," the boy said calmly. "You just have to be good at falling."

"Good at falling?"

"Know how to roll and not hurt. Just fall in a good way..."

Neiwolf said nothing. Instead, he let his gaze wander through the tent with all its colorful cloths and other easily transportable decorations.

He mused.

"I have no talent for falling," he finally muttered.

"...because you're so tall?" the boy asked in return.

Neiwolf laughed. One of the spectators on the sidelines heard it, but thought that backstage a strongman must be dragging his heavy iron chain across the floorboards.

"No, my boy," Neiwolf said, amused. "That's not it..."

He thought of the fall. Of the only fall that mattered to him, no matter how many times since then he had found himself in the dust.

"Some falls you can't roll off..." he said.

...because there is no ground, he thought. Because he and the others had fallen from the sky into the depths for so long that they had been completely consumed by the painful memory of what they would never see again. Because at the end of that fall there was no impact, only that seemingly endless mist that made them forget everything.

But he didn't say that.

"Have you ever broken anything?" the boy asked.

"Me?"

Neiwolf smiled.

He had always been taller. When the milksop couldn't even read, he was often scolded by adults while playing, asking why he wasn't in school. As a schoolboy, he made few friends because he looked too grown-up to the other children. Finally, on his 15th birthday, he had developed some edges on his face in addition to his height, so that his parents had to prove to officials that the boy could not yet join the military.

Most people didn't seem to look him in the face. Not once he towered over them. He rarely talked to anyone at eye level, literally. Certainly not here. On paper, he was in Paris, but never did he venture outside the World's Fair grounds. He didn't understand the language, so he didn't even try to converse with French people. But he also hardly socialized with his compatriots. He had made the crossing to Marseilles with dozens of them; he had little in common with them. The men were here for the money, he was not. Apart from that, he couldn't join in their conversations either, because what upset them or caused them to whisper behind closed doors, he didn't understand. He had been little when the English and French suddenly appeared in the streets of Cairo. The men with whom the milksop had dared to cross felt the occupation of the country like a cut to the flesh that had scarred poorly even years later. At home and on deck, they would discuss national debt, the Suez Canal, and the banishment of the great general whose name the milksop never wanted to remember.

None of that mattered to him. There was only one reason he had lied about his age and snuck into the public meeting in his neighborhood many weeks ago. He found the men there brooding over a strange business proposal from the emissaries from Paris. They had been asking questions about room and board, while the milksop couldn't take his eyes off the long swath of cloth upon which was plastered a sketch of the World's Fair.

In the middle of it all, this fantastic tower....

He hadn't dared to ask about the tower in front of all the adults. Fortunately for him, there were one or two comments from others present. The emissaries seemed surprisingly taciturn about it. The milksop almost had

the impression that they themselves did not know exactly what the tower was all about. The French seemed almost embarrassed by it.

In the end, it hadn't mattered. The milksop had signed, on the spot and without hesitation. He would not be missed, and a few months of work on a foreign continent was not long. The only concern he had had was whether the strangers hadn't exaggerated when they sketched the building. How could a structure be so tall? How could it reach up into the clouds?

Now he could convince himself every day anew that the people catchers in Cairo had not exaggerated—at least not as far as the Eiffel Tower was concerned. The anger of his colleagues about other whitewash and broken promises was far from him. No, he never tired of studying this marvel of steel and electricity. As often as he could, he left his cart to gawk.

And to feel the tower.

This he did only at night. During the day, he pretended that the most beautiful street in Cairo was really in Cairo and that he was doing normal work there. Walking in circles without ever delivering his wares (empty cans and painted boxes) was not, of course, what anyone did in Cairo. But this was just spectacle, the milksop had understood that much.

At night, he was free to wander. He was always drawn out of the shelters onto the park paths and up under the tower. He would wander well past midnight, when he could circle undisturbed around the tower's gigantic feet. He looked at the precisely fitted beams of wrought iron, networked as if woven by an otherworldly spider. He felt the fist-sized rivets. It never got old to him. There was so much to understand, so much to discover. He found more detail and craftsmanship in this cold construction than many an art lover would find in paintings by the old masters.

But he understood this structure most when he embraced it. To do so, he would seek a sheltered spot at one of the corner pillars, check that he was truly alone in the park below the tower's first floor, and then walk up the sloping concrete base from which the iron beams grew into the air. This was not a challenge. Those artificial parapets were not much higher than he was.

With a few assured steps, he was soon standing on top, pressing his face against the iron skeleton and hooking his arms between the struts.

A wonderful feeling! Even in the warm summer nights, the metal felt pleasantly cool. The milksop rubbed his cheeks against it in turn. He would have seen a grin around his mouth if he could have watched himself do it.

Others watched him instead. One night the milksop had not paid attention. Or the four young men had snuck up on him. Either way, they were suddenly standing behind him, staring from the ground at the lanky figure hugging a steel beam before their eyes.

The milksop was startled when he was approached from behind. He turned around embarrassed, but tried not to let it show. It helped that he didn't understand the man, because he spoke French.

"What are you doing, I asked," the young man repeated, now in Arabic.

The milksop remained silent. He wouldn't dream of telling the truth. That it just felt good to feel his skin on the metal. That he thought he understood the whole construction when he closed his eyes and hugged this little spot here on the eastern foot. No, he couldn't say that. Two of the young men looked like they were bored, and boredom in the middle of the night meant trouble. One of them tilted his head, the other had a battered nose. The remaining two the milksop couldn't size up as easily.

"What does it look like?" he asked.

"Like making out," replied the one with the tilted head.

The milksop laughed contemptuously.

"Nonsense," he added briskly.

And as he did so, his knees trembled. He forgot once more that people saw him differently than he saw himself. For one thing, he was taller than any of the four. For another, he had a remarkably full and deep voice for his age. They couldn't see that he was afraid of the young men, although at least the one with the battered nose had good practice at aptly gauging weaklings.

"Then what are you doing?" asked one of the two who had been silent until now. He slurred.

The milksop was thinking as fast as he could.

"Climbing..." he muttered.

The four looked at each other in turn, then instinctively up the tower.

"I'm in!" said the one with the tilted head. He tore the thin linen jacket from his torso and spat demonstratively into his hands. The slurring one expressed with a grunt that he supported this determination. The other two took turns with encouraging remarks while patting their buddy on the back.

The milksop was trying to process what just happened.

"You're something!" praised the man, who was now only in his under-shirt as he tackled the stony climb up to the parapet. A few seconds later, there were two of them standing up there.

"I want to see what are you capable of..."

"What?" the milksop stammered. He didn't understand.

"Or are you getting cold feet?"

"Cold feet? No..."

"I say whoever gets higher wins!" interjected the fourth young man, the only one who hadn't said anything yet. He wore a big grin on his face and, on closer inspection, was at least as drunk as the slurring guy. He had better control of his tongue, however. And of his taste for a proper duel.

"Get on the other side," he advised the jacketless one. "So you won't get in each other's way."

Jacketless thought this was a good plan. He walked around the nearest corner of the pillar so that he could only see the milksop through the hollows of the iron struts. They were now standing not ten feet apart, like two climbers facing a rather steep rock face.

The milksop was looking for a way out, but the three other men gave him no opportunity for excuses. They turned him around by the shoulders, toward the tower, and gave him a few friendly slaps as a signal to start.

"Son of a gun!"

"...up, up!"

The slurring man put his thumb and forefinger in his mouth, peered at his opponents out of the corner of his eye, and then whistled once, briefly—as muffled as he could—for the start.

The jacketless man spat into his hands once more before placing them against an iron strut. He had to put his feet on and off a few times before he found his footing. But then he climbed off patiently and with amazing talent.

“Now get a move on, friend!” demanded the man with the battered nose, when the milksop didn’t budge, but only followed the other’s movements with wide eyes.

“Not chickening out, are you?”

The answer came silently, by hands and feet. Now the lanky frame of the milksop was also hanging between the struts.

His progress was slower. What his thin limbs lacked in speed, they made up for in length. Like a spider, the milksop crawled higher and higher. His heart was soon racing, for he was making better progress than he wanted to. And he didn’t want to climb. He wanted to be alone, away from these men.

“He’s overtaking you!” echoed the climbers from below. The shout was for the jacketless man, who then paused briefly to check on his opponent. Indeed! Suddenly they were on the same level. Jacketless looked down over his shoulder to check the height.

A good ten feet, he estimated.

“Well you wait...” he hissed tensely to himself as he made a gutsy grab for a rivet that he wasn’t sure still hung within his reach.

But it did.

The milksop watched the maneuver. For his part, he had looked to see if the other one had given up. Now the jacketless man seemed energized by this stunt. His cronies cheered him on.

Then a small stone hit the lanky man on the left leg.

“Freeze and you lose!” it slurred after the stone.

Another came flying, but missed its target and clattered against the iron by one of the milksop's hands. His heart reacted with an involuntary gallop. He began to sweat instantly, much more than he already did from exertion.

He closed his eyes. It allowed him to suppress his tears. But now that he couldn't see what he could reach for, his other senses took over. In all the excitement, the familiar feeling of the cold iron on his skin returned, which he had previously felt only in absolute silence. He smelled the mixture of varnish and iron that had been fading for weeks. It helped against the fear.

With his spider-like gait, he overcame the rigidity of shock. A short while later, he found himself at the first connecting point of eight struts. The one he clung to came from the bottom right. He could no longer follow it because at the node all the struts came together like roads of a traffic circle. It was just too wide and slippery to climb over. So he stayed on the side from which he had come, reached for the crossbeam above and pulled himself up. Then he repeated the maneuver with shaky hands so that he could reach the sloping girder above, which led back to the edge of the tower. Further up into the sky.

Jacketless studied the path of the milksop as he breathed heavily. He had time now, for he too had reached a node. Amid a proper tirade of curses with which he inwardly berated himself, he had decided not to climb any further. This was enough. He felt sick to his stomach. The wine took revenge for the fact that this nocturnal effort had not been discussed with it.

So the jacketless one hung as if in a trance, yelled at by his cronies at the bottom of the pillar. The sight of the not stopping milksop paralyzed him. The fellow had not only reached the corner of the tower again, but was taking the next strut inside.

"Damn it!" the jacketless man continued his tirade, this time audibly.

Meanwhile, the milksop reached the next node in the middle of the pillar. And because no one told him he'd won, he feared he'd be hit with another rock if he didn't keep climbing. He had no mind for the fact that the men couldn't hit him this high up. How high he had made it, he had no idea.

He only suspected it as he fell.

For that one grab at the crossbeam above the node, he lacked the strength the milksop thought he had lent his fingers. They slipped from the metal, and the foot with which he had intended to secure the next step upward stepped into nothingness. The lanky boy tilted irrecoverably to the right, resisted gravity in vain, and plunged, arms flailing.

The body hit the lower crossbeam which the milksop had successfully cleared with his legs. The impact caused him to spin around his axis—for the remainder of the way down.

He hit the parapet upside down. The three men on the ground never forgot the dull slapping sound. The last vestige of inertia in the now lifeless body caused it to slide down the sloping wall like a flabby sack of grain that was only half full.

None of the three said anything. As if their constricted throats had made a pact. The jacketless one was the quickest to shake off the shock. Cautiously, he set about the descent. It took him what felt like an eternity to feel the ground under his feet again.

This gave his cronies time to regain their speech. They were conferring when the jacketless man joined them. Reunited, they now all squatted in a circle around the grotesquely twisted body on the ground.

They lived here on the grounds, like the milksop. They had no need for questions. And none of them wanted to be sent home early—or worse.

For all their whispered, panicked musings, it didn't occur to them to check whether the crushed figure in their midst might still be alive. It couldn't be, not with its neck twisted 45 degrees. Not with all the blood, not to mention the badly broken legs.

And so they only came close to his imperceptibly faint breathing as they lifted the unresisting body with united strength. However, their own panting, the adrenaline in their veins and the desperate search for the right path were the only things the four were aware of.

They slogged through a few rows of bushes to avoid having to cross the established paths under the tower. The slog did not last long. The wall to the

Seine was behind the last bushes, and so were the stairs to the dock that the one with the battered nose had remembered. The four of them dragged their load down the stone steps as quietly as they could, but only so far as to let the body slump onto the moored barge. Then they scrambled to decide who would have to sneak onto the ship to cover the body provisionally with a tarp.

On the way back to the grounds of the World's Fair, the young men kept silent. And did not speak to each other again for the rest of their lives.

The captain knew his way around. Ships, rivers, and trouble. He smelled the latter ten miles upwind. He didn't like the sight of trouble. In the afternoon he made a round of the deck, which rolled out like an elongated tongue ahead of his command cabin. The tarpaulin over the coal in the belly of the ship stretched tightly against the dozens of fastening lines. One by one, the captain had to climb over them to make his way to the bow. He was in no hurry. He puffed indifferently on his pipe as he sauntered forward. It was completely unnecessary to check the fastenings. He had done that only three days ago while loading. The captain simply wanted to stretch his legs. A half-hearted grip on the rafters here, a jiggle there; the reflex was too profound for his hands to hold still.

By the bow, he found the patch of the tarpaulin that he had assumed to be rolled up next to the railing. But the patch lay spread out in front of the coal cargo, like an outgrowth of the big tarp. And it didn't belong there.

This didn't smell like trouble. It reeked of it.

The captain knew that the tarp couldn't have gotten loose on its own. It was covering something, and that was the problem. The captain didn't have to check for that. He had already been robbed, here on the ship. But thieves took something away. Thieves didn't bring anything.

After inspecting what was under the tarp, the captain made his way back to the cab. As he did so, he re-stuffed his pipe, mused, and calmly climbed over the tie-downs. Although he didn't want trouble, he knew how to handle it. He continued his trip as planned. However, he did not make the stop he had wanted to make in the evening, but continued up the Seine. He thought it better not to dock. Not yet.

When it was dark night, the captain throttled the engines. Poor soul, but what could he do? He crept back to the patch, removed the tarp, and prepared to roll the body to the railing, where he would deliver it to the river under cover of night. He did the former, but not the latter. Rolling the body was not so easy. The captain gasped, but to his surprise, so did the body. After reassuring himself that it was indeed not a corpse at all, he sat down on the bottom of his pants and began to think.

An ex-corpse. Maybe not dead, but certainly with no future in the realm of the living. The captain had already seen some injuries, but this...

The ship picked up speed again. The captain headed for a place on the shore that seemed deep enough, notwithstanding the blackness of the night, that he would not run aground. He managed to hoist the body into his dinghy, although it turned out to be more of a fall than a lowering.

The ex-corpse did not complain.

Beyond the shore there was a small knoll, lined by a row of trees. This would do. The captain pulled the body up there. More than once, under this drudgery, he wondered why he was putting himself through this. He didn't really mean the question, though, because he knew the answer: throwing dead meat overboard was one thing, but letting the guy drown was something else. The fact that he probably wouldn't have even noticed made no difference. Nor did the fact that the ex-corpse would die either way. There was nothing he could do for it. Making it worse for it, however, he wouldn't do that either.

A coup de grace? No! It gave the captain the shivers to think about it.

And this is how the milksop ended up on a carelessly parked cart behind the row of trees. This most rapid and highly unusual development had, in the

course of a day, transported the boy from his cart on Cairo's most beautiful street to a second cart not unlike his.

The captain scratched his head one last time and looked at the trail along the row of trees. It was sandy, frayed at the sides, and gave the impression of not being very frequented. Far and wide only meadow. And this single cart.

Back in his cab, the captain set to work. He stuffed his pipe, determined to forget more of this episode with every puff.

"I know who you are," said the little boy with the big eyes.

"Oh?" murmured Neiwolf, still half lost in thought.

"Do you want to buy the show?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Father says you have tents in Europe. Quite a few!"

"Do I need another one then?" asked Neiwolf, but only to make a joke. He had no intention of playing games with the kid. He had traveled far to find him. And he was tired.

"No, I'm not in that business anymore, son," he corrected himself.

"Oh, since when?"

Neiwolf looked at him piercingly.

"Since today..."

Roubaix and trouble got along well, unlike the captain. The gaunt, short man with the oversized top hat had little fear or respect for anything. That helped him to assess a tricky situation quite impartially if push came to shove. And he was usually quite good at spotting an opportunity in impending trouble.

The cart on the side of the road belonged to Roubaix. The distance from his errands back to the vaudeville tent had been too long to cover in one stretch. Roubaix did not fear being robbed, so he had gone to sleep in the shade of the trees. The cart remained on the trail. That on the next morning there was more in it than he had bought....

...trouble or opportunity?

The young man had not been able to help him answer that. He was alive, clearly. His breathing was calm and regular. Almost peaceful. Roubaix suspected that the guy must be more lucky than good, because at the same time he found the body uniquely battered. He preferred not to look at the crooked neck, so he didn't, but harnessed the pony.

After a few hours, Roubaix was greeted by his employees. And the load on the cart was still breathing peacefully. This caused general amazement, and that was saying something, given the fact that every single person in Roubaix's extended family was a performer, an attraction, a wonder of nature, or a shrewd trickster, wise to all the arts.

Madame Marmotte thought that the young man ought to be dead. She didn't need to consult her tarot cards for that. Heaven forbid! The cards were meant for higher things, for mystical things and tête-à-têtes with fate. Whoever had such a broken neck to show, was on the way to the underworld. And without a stopover.

Liev, the old contortionist agreed with La Marmotte. For him, who for decades had been able to perform any bend, no matter how incredible, with his body, the sight of the broken bones was almost unbearable. He put on his snake mask in discomfort—without noticing it himself. He always carried it around with him like others carry their favorite hat.

The Eisenfex just shook his head silently. That meant at least as much to the showmen as a long monologue from the Master Of Ceremonies. No one worked for Roubaix longer than the Eisenfex. His authority did not come from his strength, the fact that he could bend open a prison gate on stage, climb through it and straighten it from the other side. Eisenfex was simply the bedrock of the troupe. He did not argue. He didn't complain. He looked out of the blue beady eyes under his bald head, stroked his seal-like mustache and gave his opinion with nods or shakes of the head.

Madame Marmotte ignored the disapproval written on the Eisenfex's face. At least, she pretended to. In any case, she did not retract her judgment about the stranger's fate.

Roubaix himself was not sure. As his deformed find lay there on the cot behind the big tent, he too felt that all hope was in vain. But the young man had not died on the way home. So what to do?

The half-twins finally took the initiative by ending the rubbernecking. All three of them made themselves useful. Anele shooed away all the onlookers. Elena and Cisternie carried the cot into the tent next to the kitchen. Among the potatoes, other supplies—but mostly potatoes—and fully loaded clotheslines, there was enough room for a bed camp.

The Master Of Ceremonies did not like the accommodation at all. He indignantly straightened his uniform, which was hung with a ridiculous number of medals, and wrinkled his nose when Roubaix only shrugged his shoulders. Of course, the boss didn't care! After all, he didn't have to keep an eye on everything when the troupe changed roles behind the curtain every evening on the fly. The Master Of Ceremonies had no sympathy for backstage disturbances or uselessness. After all, that's what Roubaix paid him for, too. Since when were they a hospital?

But even the Master Of Ceremonies finally could no longer suppress his curiosity. For the first few days, he didn't pay any attention to the cot or the invalid. He emphatically looked elsewhere as he whirled through the tents and guy ropes to organize the troops. Nor did he care when the three half-twins

spoke of a miracle. The Master Of Ceremonies thought it was nonsense. At some point, the stranger had to kick the bucket. Maybe he was just going through one last 'hurrah' of his body before it ended. That kind of thing happened! The Master Of Ceremonies had already heard about it.

But when he caught Madame Marmotte secretly consulting her cards about the stranger, the Master Of Ceremonies became suspicious. Although La Marmotte objected, she obviously no longer thought it beneath the dignity of the cards to concern herself with the young man's future.

Finally, the Master Of Ceremonies tested the Eisenfex. He made fun of the half-twin's enthusiasm, hoping the Fex would agree and wave him off. But he didn't. Instead, he shook his head and gave the much smaller Master Of Ceremonies a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Finally, he convinced himself.

The stranger lay awake. He still couldn't move, but his formerly distorted neck looked like a neck again. It was bruised all over with yellow and green, alright. The young man's head, however, sat reasonably properly on his shoulders after these few days. It was only when the Master Of Ceremonies stepped closer to the cot that he could still see an unhealthy curve in the neck.

The half-twins denied having straightened the neck. That was believable, Roubaix and the Master Of Ceremonies agreed. Accidents happened all the time in their show. No one in the troupe was spared injury. So each of them knew all the better when to keep their hands away from one. No one here wanted to be responsible if the young man's spirits were to slip away after all—under their own well-meaning hands.

A few days later, the entire troupe had gotten used to the newcomer. He was now practically part of the inventory. La Marmotte began to spend the boredom between her performances next to the cot. She explained the cards and their meaning to the young man. Not that he understood a single word. Madame Marmotte had figured that out quickly, but didn't see it as much of an obstacle to conversation. The half-twins also liked to hang around their sick friend. They could rehearse their dance routines in front of him.

Even Octavian, the fish man, hoisted himself up on a chair next to the cot now and then. He usually avoided walking any distance because the bones in his fused, widened toes ached under the weight of his body. The newcomer seemed a fellow sufferer to him there. Sitting down, he explained to him who were the people rushing frantically past them and what the duties of each member of 'Roubaix' Rarities & Amazements' were.

The young man nodded silently. And grew healthier day by day. After two weeks, there was nothing unusual about his neck. He also trusted himself to get out of bed. His broken legs no longer hurt, so why not?

He succeeded. The half-twins performed a dance of joy around the young man. The Eisenfex stayed in the background, but the stranger thought he saw him nodding. Others congratulated him on this miraculous recovery, even if they did not understand how such a thing was possible. The stranger felt the same way. He did not understand why he was still alive. More perplexing than this quite existential question, however, he found a far more practical conundrum: when he went to put on the pants he hadn't needed since being moved to the cot, they no longer fit him. They were too short.

A whole one hand too short.

On top of that, when he tried to squeeze into his shoes, he was at a complete loss. He could no longer fit into them. There was no swelling on his ankles, no water like in the legs of a bedridden old man, no. His feet looked perfectly normal. But he would have had to chop off his toes to still be able to fit into his usual shoes.

Roubaix saw the astonishment in the young man and rubbed his peculiar beard, which he shaved into pointed triangles every morning with a businesslike calculation. One under the lip, one pointing left from the upper lip to the cheek, the third neatly separated under the nose, with the same posture to the right. Roubaix was always thinking about business when he stroked his beard islands. Everyone knew that. No one told him they knew it.

Roubaix gestured to the stranger to stand against the support pole of the kitchen tent, with his back against it. Then he took a stool, stood on it and carved a notch in the wood with a knife, just above the top of the head.

Six feet and seven inches. Roubaix announced it to his troupe as if La Marmotte's cards had told him something of the secrets of the universe.

Though the young man might not understand the language used by all around him, he could read the tape measure used to measure the notch. Their languages shared those dashes. And he tried to make the troop understand that they must have mismeasured. He didn't know exactly how tall he was, but surely not that tall!

Roubaix was glad that the young man could walk again. He had been happy to help him, all these days; to let him be supplied with food, further constricting the already scarce space, generously accepting that the newcomer was distracting the whole troupe from their work....

Yes, Roubaix did consider himself generous. A philanthropist, even if he didn't make much of a fuss about it. That was a matter of good upbringing! Also, that support in times of need was appreciated by the rescue. And appreciation in these times, more than ever, meant reimbursement. Roubaix would have liked to explain this simple principle of mutual care to the young man in detail; after all, he had experience in it. And also the patience necessary to make his point. To his happy surprise, however, he didn't have to explain anything at all to the young man. When Roubaix put a hammer in his hand and pointed his fingers at the Eisenfex, the stranger just nodded and walked straight over to the mute man. The Fex showed him how to swing the hammer so that the tent pegs could be driven tightly into the earth. The two of them were soon hammering away at the tent's fastenings, taking turns.

Roubaix was pleased. A good fellow! The young man understood his debt. And Roubaix was proud not only of him, but of himself. He had even given the convalescent new shoes after he got off the cot—before he put the hammer in his hand.

The new guy was doing well. He didn't talk back, learned quickly, and had a strength that his thin appearance didn't suggest. That he was so tall also suited Roubaix visually. Unusual statures underpinned his rarities and amazements. Unfortunately, it was not enough for a giant, Roubaix had to note self-critically, otherwise the newcomer could have filled this one gaping hole in the program. Roubaix had always wanted to promote a giant. However, with six feet seven and a little spit on top, only the villagers would be impressed at best. And Roubaix was on his way to the city. Week after week, the show moved closer to Nantes with bag and baggage.

It did not occur to the young man to ask about the terms of the unspoken repayment. How long? What work? What pay, if any? He still did not understand French. He used the few words the half-twins had tried to teach him as best he could. He could not understand his new friends. He didn't have an ID, not here. Where he was at all, he didn't know. Back to Paris? That seemed hopeless to him. He didn't want anything there. He had no one there. He was glad that he was still alive, and he wanted to justify this miracle by doing good works for his helpers.

Only of the tower he had to think more than once, longingly and embarrassedly touched at the same time. As much as he wanted to see it again, he felt a crushing shame. This perfect construction was no gymnastics apparatus. The young man could not shake the thought that he had insulted the tower with his climbing. And sullied it with his blood.... He could not step in its sight again.

So the young man stayed where he was and with whom he was. With the Eisenfex he erected and dismantled the large tent and the smaller structures at each new location. He was adept at it. Decisive nods from the Eisenfex became a regular accolade for the new helper. He would lend a hand with the cooking, and during matinées he would diligently follow all the signs given by the Master Of Ceremonies: when lighting effects had to be mirrored with a piece of sheet metal, curtains aired, or utensils cleared from the stage in the shadows. The Master Of Ceremonies had to acknowledge that there was

nothing to complain about the lad's attitude. Nor did he make a single mistake once someone had explained his task to him using hands and feet.

Too bad, the Master Of Ceremonies thought. He wanted to complain.

Soon no one looked at the young man like a stranger. It took only a few weeks, then he had learned all the moves, understood every element of the performances and behaved as if he had always been part of the troupe. Where his hands were needed, he stepped up. When he had no task, he watched the performances quietly and unobtrusively from the wall of the tent.

The Eisenfex had rehearsed a new sensation. After his signature discipline, bending the prison bars, the Master Of Ceremonies let play an ominous rattle. The Fex dropped to all fours, apparently still out of breath from his exertion. While he stared at the floor, panting, two of the three half-twins came out from behind the curtain with a pillory. They placed the two halves of the wooden block around the Eisenfex's neck and hands before he even understood what he had been surprised with. Then the women locked an iron hinge on each side of the pillory and ran off.

Every night, the Eisenfex would send up a bloodcurdling scream to the tent roof as he rose from his knees, pumped himself up and burst the two hinges with renewed strength.

A surefire act, it turned out. The audience regularly went crazy.

The young man did not understand the act of the half-twins, at least not at first. Only when he guessed that they were supposed to embody a very unique caprice of nature did their movements make sense. Anele and Elena were twins—just not to each other. The Master Of Ceremonies explained to the guests each evening that they had both been born on the night of a full moon. It turned out that they did not look alike. Nor did they have any of those special bonds, half thought communication, half shared feelings, that twins often exhibit. On the contrary, they had nothing in common, were like fire and water, inside and out. But what they lacked in resemblance to one another, they had in common abundantly with their older sister, Cisternie. Anele felt what Cisternie felt. She was also the spitting image of her, her left

half to be exact. With Elena it was the other way around. Her features resembled the right half of her big sister's face like two peas in a pod.

And when the Master Of Ceremonies implored the incredulous audience to look closely at Cisternie's face, a murmur went through the rows. Didn't the face of the woman in the middle look strange? Two halves of one face that didn't quite seem to fit together? As if there were an invisible line from the top of the head to the chin, holding together two people with completely different features? Even the eyes were different colors!

Cisternie was always in the middle on stage. Elena and Anela took turns dancing up to her from the sides. One copied the graceful movements of the other sister as if she were a mirror image. And Cisternie formed their center, the calming force in an exalted ceremony of curved arms, stretched legs, twisted eyes, and a fantasy language that regularly made the young women giggle as they practiced in the empty tent. During a performance, on the other hand, they seemed enraptured, animated by the connection among themselves, and not at all silly. At the climax of the number, the young man had to slide two partitions onto the stage, one each to Cisternie's left and right, so that Anele and Elena could no longer see their sister. Then the two would go into a trance and, with their eyes closed, point at people in the audience, whom Cisternie would finally describe in a loud voice and in great detail—without being able to know who her siblings were pointing at.

The young man studied this final act closely whenever he disappeared back into the penumbra after helping. He also studied all the other acts with complete devotion. Roubaix sometimes watched him benevolently without the young man noticing. What the showman considered interest in the traveling arts, however, was not what fascinated his newest employee.

It was the tent. The young man felt the makeshift beams shake whenever the Eisenfex let one of his heavy weights rumble to the ground. He felt the air grow heavier with humidity when Octavian, the fish man, was pushed onto the stage in his tank. The heavy fabric of the canvas then became clammy and its seams began to crackle, even though no one but the young man could hear

or feel it. And when the three half-sisters performed their dances, their steps resonated along the beams, up the supporting poles to the crown of the tent, which soon swayed to the same rhythm as the women's feet.

The young man could not help but listen to the tent. Not only to the large tarpaulin itself, no, to all the wooden and metal parts that held it together rather poorly than well. If the tent had been a human being, it would have been an old man whose skeleton was in poor condition. With painful inflammations in the joints. For the young man, this comparison was anything but strange, because he began to worry about the entire construction. He felt sorry for it. Since his life took place almost entirely in this constantly moving structure, that sense of familiarity had returned that he had first felt when embracing the Eiffel Tower.

He understood the show tent with its makeshift little shelters surrounding it like children. He understood the weight with which the oversized sign, complete with the inscription 'Les Raretés et Stupéfactions de Docteur Roubaix,' tugged at the crown of the tent. He felt a headache when he thought of it. And the sign was only the most obvious imbalance. This structure was a patient in many distresses. The young man quickly realized that. Disaster was going to strike if someone didn't take care of it.

A disaster for the tent, he meant. He did not consider the people scurrying inside and their audience.

Using every fragment of French he could muster, the young man tried to convince Roubaix to let him mend the crown. He was granted permission, mainly because Roubaix by no means understood what the young man was so vigorously asking of him. It was too late to retract after the Eisenfex, completely taken by surprise, had helped the young man up into the rigging. Roubaix wanted to say something, but remained speechless in the face of the impressive sure-footedness and grip with which the tall fellow hauled himself up to the crown. Before Roubaix knew it, or any of those who rushed in curiously, the young man began pounding high above their heads. Each blow,

each scrutinizing glance looked skillful. The young man understood what he was doing there, no doubt about it!

For admiration, the admired had no eye. It was worse than he had suspected from below. The supporting lathing of the crown was rotten wood. He never got to see it during dismantling because the Eisenfex took care of it. Rain penetrated through the top of the tent panels and over time had exposed the crown to moisture. The young man got new wood, tore it from the cart and other carts that had more than enough cladding. He cannibalized old barrels and burned down roadside shacks just to somehow find dry material with which to make the crown more stable.

He got it done. Not to his satisfaction, as the tent still groaned with pain. But he would not give up and would work his way from top to bottom.

What he had not considered was an accident. Even the tent could not predict that. The Eisenfex understood that his strength was sensational only if the audience noticed how weak they were compared to him. Therefore, to warm up, he would invite a few strong men to join him on stage right at the beginning of each routine. They were allowed to try their hand at arm wrestling against him. Roubaix had thought of that. An excellent business idea, as it turned out, because the challenge got the guests going. There were always two or three village daredevils who tried their luck to jeering applause. None won against the Eisenfex. He remained undefeated every time, displaying humility and asking for applause for the brave challenger, who was really very strong, too.

After this, the local guests were usually all warmed up. That the challengers were now and then already quite drunk when they wanted to defeat the Fex was nothing unusual. On this evening, however, when the Eisenfex pressed the third challenger's fist down on the competition table, he stumbled backwards in a particularly clumsy manner after being defeated. The man, as drunk as he was massive, lost his balance and flew shoulder-first into one of the support poles.

The pole was not wet like the crown. But it was old and riddled with cracks. It snapped like a twig where the drunk's shoulder hit. Immediately a cannonade of ominous sounds went through the rafters. The young man was the first to jump up, from the penumbra directly to the broken pole. He reached the point where the drunk lay on the ground, just in time to catch the wooden crossbeam with his shoulders.

The audience fled the entrance screaming, clogging it within seconds, and seeking other ways out of the collapsing tent. Some guests scrambled under the suspended fabric walls, others fled across the stage to the back. Roubaix led the way. Only the Master Of Ceremonies kept his composure, shouting loudly for order.

The young man remained standing where he was. He felt the pain of the materials around him. The oversized sign at the crown bent the top of the tent to one side. Two of the other poles gave way under the imbalance of the guy wires. In the young man's mind, the tent groaned, equal parts agonized and relieved that it could now forcibly end this state-of-day-to-day disrepair.

Understanding this, the young man allowed himself to give up. The crossbeam forced him to the ground where no one had helped the massive challenger escape. The young man was buried under his so carefully mended crown. Its weight broke his legs. Again.

Madame Marmotte was afraid to ask the cards about the future. She knew a sign of fate when it was waving in her face. The young man was again on the cot, again completely knocked out for a few days. And again his legs were broken. There was something wrong here, and it had nothing to do with bad luck, Madame Marmotte thought.

The rest of the troupe looked at the recent incidents with much more optimism. And that's why La Marmotte kept her thoughts to herself. Heaven forbid that the others should dismiss her as a croaker!

For Roubaix, the young man's pitiful condition was above all testimony to his heroic deed. Good man! No one had come to harm, except the poor

fellow, of course. The tent had been crushed, but it was just a tent. The torn fabrics were quickly fixed. Only a few supporting parts needed to be replaced. Good that they were mostly wood, Roubaix thought. Wood was cheap.

In any case, the young man had proven himself worthy. With that selfless attitude, he could go far in this business. Roubaix took it upon himself to take him under his wing. He would think of something...

He didn't have to wait long for an inspiration.

After a few days, the young man woke from his stupor. The whole troupe came to see him, overjoyed, amazed and grateful for what he had done. He, in turn, also thanked them, quite humbly. And what was new about it was that the troop understood him. The young man not only seemed to have all his senses together again, but also suddenly had some halfway comprehensible French under his belt. La Marmotte felt queasy in light of this minor linguistic miracle. The half-twins, on the other hand, were delighted and were just happy that they could finally talk to him.

Roubaix caught himself untypically surprised at the change in the fellow. For a second time, the young man was on the mend so suddenly that it was hard to believe. After just another week, he was ready to return to work. He asked for it in almost accent-free French. But that was not the end of the story. Not only could he actually put weight on his legs again, even though they had been broken. On top of that, his pants were once again too short.

The new notch that Roubaix carved into the pole for good measure was a whole hand's width further up than the previous one. He measured the difference three, four times, because otherwise he would have thought himself foolish. But just looking up at the young man's eyes as he now stretched to full height assured Roubaix that the hero of the day was considerably taller than he had been before the accident. No matter how many times he repeated the procedure, the tape measure showed seven feet.

Roubaix had his giant, finally!

The young man said little when Roubaix told him about his business idea with effervescent enthusiasm. He didn't mind being an attraction from

now on. But he wasn't exactly thrilled either. He was simply pleased that his lifesaver suddenly seemed very happy with him. He only asked him for one thing: The tent, it should no longer be a shell of itself. He wanted to keep working on it, on everything. Roubaix readily conceded this to his newly minted giant—inwardly quite touched by his protégé's concern for the safety of the troop and the guests. Roubaix had no idea that the young man was not at all concerned with the well-being of the people of flesh and blood, but with the fragile soul of the tent.

They came to an agreement even so.

And so they all went back to work. Roubaix let himself be kissed by the muse and submitted all kinds of name suggestions for his giant, which produced varying degrees of enthusiasm among his employees. Roubaix was used to this and did not take it badly. A genius needs strong opposing voices to coax the best out of him. Only when it came to the accompanying story of the giant did Roubaix not let himself be argued with. That was set. He had to be 'The Indestructible'!

After all, the best stories are those that contain more truth than fantasy. Roubaix had learned this during all his decades in the business. The Eisenfex, for example, was only so convincing with his act because he was truly strong. The audience bought it all because he actually bent the iron. Simply tricking, that's not how you win over doubters. And the young man, Roubaix had found him in a corpse-like state. He would have confirmed it before a judge! Whoever survived a broken neck, broken arms and legs, then the whole thing again, and did not become a cripple, but instead grew to superhuman size, was truly indestructible. No question about it! Not to mention that the fellow also seemed to get smarter the harder he was hit in the head.

An abnormality of nature! A miracle! An indestructible giant!

Roubaix was extremely pleased with his interpretation. All that was missing was the name. He entered into creative reclusion: René, the giant! The indestructible Ursus! Guillaume, the indestructible giant! Wolf, Wolfgang, Boris, Sindibād, Nepomuk, Neidhart...

One morning, Roubaix solemnly appeared before the young man, made a sweeping movement with his arms, as if he were beginning to describe the whole world, and called him 'Neiwolf, the indestructible giant'.

The young man had finally been able to tell him where he came from. Roubaix was just thinking about that when, finally bored with the task, he simply merged two names on his list into one: Wolf and Neilos, after the Greek name for the Nile. A good combination of the primal power of the dangerous lunar howler and the mystical past of North Africa. Neiwolf!

Done deal.

'Neiwolf' didn't disagree. He was given a costume that was supposed to look like fur. Wearing it, he let the guests in, which caused them some amazement even before entering the tent. During his actual performances, he had little to do. Actually nothing at all, except to stand straight on the stage and look grim. The Master Of Ceremonies took care of the rest, namely a wild tale of fictitious incidents in the life of the indestructible Neiwolf, as well as true accounts of the catastrophic accidents from which this superhuman being only emerged stronger and greater.

The young man, who was now an official giant, spent every spare minute improving the newly erected tent. Just as he had said he would. He showed a remarkable talent for procuring good material from the most unusual sources on the brief journeys across the country. He even hauled iron. Roubaix raised his hands in disbelief, at least initially. He didn't want to spend money on iron, nor did he want to imagine having to carry all that extra weight with the caravan. But the young man persisted. He didn't ask for any money at all, so Roubaix left it at that and preferred not to ask how he got the material in the first place. And as for the weight, the young man just shrugged his shoulders. Roubaix should just stop moving about. He would build a palace for the troupe and their show if they just stayed in one place.

Roubaix ignored the fantasies of his giant. He would rather just let him keep doing whatever he was doing.

Something else demanded his attention, as he overheard more whispers from the customers and met more fellow showmen doing business in the bars and cafes: giants were en vogue, it seemed. In Paris, a man measuring more than seven foot three had appeared in vaudeville. In the south, Jean Gallac, who was almost on the verge of bankruptcy and whom Roubaix disliked, had recently added an eight-foot man to his act. This was obviously an exaggeration, Roubaix concluded from the suspicious distance which the rumor had had to pass via many mouths and ears. He also inferred it from the thoroughly bad character of this Jean Gallac. By contrast, Monsieur Barnabas Brabeux was liked by Roubaix because he was an honorable representative of their profession. And even Barnabas supposedly had hired a gigantic, fat man who reached six foot six to the shoulders.

Competition!

That in itself was nothing new for Roubaix. Competition never deprived him of sleep. Normally, he couldn't help it anyway if someone presented a better draw than he did. But the other showmen had only giants. None of them had an indestructible, a wonder of nature. And a real one! His giant was not subject to the laws of normal growth. This one kept growing when he wanted to. Although, of course, that wasn't quite true, technically speaking, Roubaix had to admit. The young man didn't enjoy breaking his arms and legs. He didn't want to. Who would want something like that? Even if, against all medical knowledge, the recovery took only a few days, and instead of permanently weakened bones, the entire body was only bursting with more strength than before.

It had hurt the lad, of course. Roubaix knew that. He also felt terribly sorry for his giant. He was not a brute...

But he could still ask questions, couldn't he? When it comes to business, questions must always be allowed, Roubaix told himself.

As was to be expected, the young man said no. On the spot, as if he hadn't given the question any serious thought at all. Roubaix understood

that, too. Still, he would have liked less precipitousness. Just sleep on it! Weigh the pros and cons, simple as that....

But no, the young man didn't want to break his limbs again. And he didn't want to have them broken either, for the sole purpose of growing even more and out-growing some other giants he'd never seen before. He also didn't understand how these strange people would disrupt business here. Roubaix then explained it to him again. And again. And gladly brought up the subject at every opportunity that presented itself—or not.

The result was always the same. Neiwolf, the indestructible, waved it off. He did not want to be broken so that the story of the Master Of Ceremonies could become longer. He also saw no advantage for himself in becoming even taller. He barely fit things, as it was.

No, the young man waved it off. He withdrew when he saw that spark in Roubaix's eyes that announced another pitch. He would grab his tools and set about improving the tent.

For this, it was very grateful to him. As for the rest, it was on his side.

"You are like me," said the little boy at the edge of the stage.

"What do you mean?" asked Neiwolf.

"Why, because of the name!"

Neiwolf raised his eyebrows and puffed in agreement.

"You're Neiwolf the Indestructible."

"I used to be" Neiwolf corrected.

"You used to be Neiwolf the Indestructible."

"And you are The Unbreakable Boy."

"Isn't that funny?" the boy asked.

"Maybe it's not the only thing we have in common," Neiwolf skipped over the question. "What do you think?"

The boy shrugged and looked at the ground.

"How old are you?", Neiwolf changed the subject.

"Eight."

"That's bogus," Neiwolf stated with a smile.

"True," the boy admitted with a grin. "Father and mother always say I look older when I look all serious on stage. And that the audience likes it better, too, when they think I'm already taller."

"I see," Neiwolf commented. "I, for one, am very, very old. Do you ever feel older than you are?"

"No."

"I only ask because your act is truly remarkable. It's hard to believe you're taking all these falls without harm. I once heard that there are people who have lived before and retain their talents in the next life. Geniuses, so to speak, who can do things as kids that others need years to learn..."

The boy now looked Neiwolf in the face. He studied him and remained silent. When he finally opened his mouth, Neiwolf knew that this conversation was not going to take the course he had hoped for.

"I don't really know what you mean..."

"Never mind."

Neiwolf waved it off apologetically.

"Mother and Father just take good care of me," the boy offered as a second thought. "I can fall just fine, but the whole family makes it happen."

Neiwolf nodded mutely.

"Where's your family?" the boy asked.

"My...?"

He composed an answer that wouldn't cross his lips, despite several attempts. Neiwolf hated that word. Family...

They came in the night.

They had not bothered to ask the Eisenfex. Roubaix did not believe that he would join in. And he wouldn't hold it against the Eisenfex either. After all, they had known each other long enough for Roubaix to have a pretty good idea of the Eisenfex's moral compass. Its directional needle never moved. Roubaix was considerably more flexible in his own opinions. After all, the wind didn't always blow from the same direction. One had to adapt to the conditions.

No, the problem was not the Fex's opinion, but his determination. He would probably have intervened. With his fists.

They were enough for the task without him. The Master Of Ceremonies was there, La Marmotte and Cisternie. The latter had had a proper argument with her two twins, for Anele and Elena were horrified. She couldn't do that! It was cruel, they said. He had saved them all only a short time ago!

Cisternie did not win the argument, but she ordered her sisters to be silent, to go to sleep, and to trust her that it was best for all of them. For the giant, too. He would understand, later...

The four of them crept over to the hammock where Neiwolf slept. Roubaix fumbled the vial of narcotic out of his jacket. He had possessed it for years, not knowing when it would come in handy. La Marmotte handed him the cloth she had brought. All four took a silent breath and then held it as Roubaix wet the cloth with the contents of the vial. He then placed it over the giant's mouth and nose as quickly as he could.

Neiwolf woke up, mainly from the pressure of the hand on his face. His eyes opened for no more than a startled second before the pupils rolled back and the lids closed again.

Done. Roubaix threw the soaked cloth as far away from him as he could.

It took the strength of all four people to lift Neiwolf out of the hammock. Suppressed curses accompanied the sweaty endeavor. No one had the nerve to drag their prey too far afterwards. They laid the body on the sandy ground right next to the hammock. While the rest of the accomplices

caught their breath, the Master Of Ceremonies fetched the log and the lump of stone, as discussed.

What they had not discussed were some awkwardly practical details. This became apparent when Roubaix cleared his throat and announced that they must now get down to business. Cisternie asked about the arms. Them, too? Roubaix didn't know how to answer. La Marmotte interjected that Neiwolf had only broken his legs the last time the tent had collapsed. When they first found him, however, he also had his arms. The Master Of Ceremonies agreed with her and commented that their giant still looked quite normal as far as his limbs were concerned. All very long, of course, but still the proper length. The arms and torso must have grown along on their own last time. So maybe it was enough if they just did the legs...?

A debate ensued. And not least because it was conducted in that typical conspiratorial hiss, tempers flared with impatience and nervousness. Roubaix put his foot down. Play it safe, then! You didn't want to make the boy's life harder with arms that were too short, did you?

He placed the wooden block under Neiwolf's left upper leg. The assembly looked at this picture and was silent for a moment.

They all left the tent later, their faces as white as chalk. And ashen in their thoughts. Not that any of them had imagined beforehand that it would be easy. Still, doing it was something else. If they had spoken during the act what all of them were thinking, then another discussion would have erupted. An idle one, though. They couldn't have stopped in the midst of things.

It didn't help that Neiwolf jumped up at the first blow. His wide eyes and grimacing face looked like he woke up from a nightmare. The scream that everyone expected, however, failed to materialize. The body instantly lost its shock energy and slumped limply back to the floor. It was because of the anesthetic, thought the four, who then fixed the arms and legs in the sand with their knees. They had no idea that the tent had interfered. It had knocked the body out before it could understand what was happening to it.

Neiwolf had done more than mend the tent with his tireless labors. He had looked at it so intently, felt it and listened to its sounds, that he understood it. And now it understood him. It understood him enough to sense that there was more slumbering in him than the giant was aware of. There, into that slumbering, it now shoved him as Roubaix lashed out again.

Something cracked and the tent kept Neiwolf from returning to the surface of his senses, though they screamed for his attention. No, the tent nudged him down deeper. Images of an unspeakably grand palace passed through Neiwolf's stunned mind. A palace as if built of light, with millions of windows. He had built it. Now the light broke and with it the walls.

Something else cracked and the tent pushed Neiwolf deeper. He looked out at a shining field where marbles moved in elegant waves. The field seemed endless on all sides. Angels had once danced on it, Neiwolf remembered. He had poured this field for their dances. Now it was buried under dark masses as large as mountains that could still be seen from hundreds of miles away.

Cracking, pushing, ...so it continued. Image after image, memory after memory took possession of Neiwolf's subconscious. His body was overwhelmed. He had no time to care about his pain until finally it was all over.

Anele and Elena ventured into the tent after the four had silently returned to their beds, where they waited sleeplessly for dawn. They had hoped that the remaining half-twins would take care of the rest, with worry and anger. And they did, to Cisternie's relief, after she had crawled into her chamber, emphatically careless and loud. Her younger siblings took the splints and bandages that lay beside the hammock as if on display. The Eisenfex was woken up by the fish-man and helped to tend to the wounds. He didn't speak a word to Roubaix for weeks after that. He never said anything with his tongue anyway, but kept silent in his own way. No nodding, no shaking of the head. He acted as if Roubaix didn't even exist in his sight.

Roubaix accepted it. Everyone came to terms with the rift that had gone through the troop. Until the rift became a scar in the daily hustle and bustle

of work that quickly faded. It didn't disappear, but the show acquiesced in its disgrace, not least because there was no ill word from Neiwolf, no anger, ...nothing at all.

It worried not only the half-twins that although he had awakened from his absent state after a few days, as usual, this time he did not pretend that nothing had happened and that he just wanted to get up and work. Neiwolf woke up—and left it at that. He didn't say anything, he didn't want to leave the cot. His fractures were healing, quite obviously. It was no less amazing than the times before, which comforted Roubaix and his allies of that night immensely. It was the head that seemed to be shouting out a different motto after this incident: something was wrong. Neiwolf did not react. In him thousands and thousands of images raged for classification, which he could not have described with language on his life. His brain was working at full speed. But inwardly. There was no time for food; the half-twins took turns feeding Neiwolf. Conversation was impossible, let alone work. To remeasure his giant, Roubaix and a few helping hands had to lift him up and hold him steady, because Neiwolf would have collapsed in on himself otherwise.

Accordingly, Roubaix's triumph was left uncelebrated. His indestructible giant remained indestructible. And now he had grown even more than the first two times. Roubaix and the Master Of Ceremonies went over all the rumors they had heard. No, no one offered up seven and a half feet. No one in all of France! Jean Gallac and his brigand's tale of the eight foot man could be ignored. Ridiculous! A fairytale, nothing more.

After a few weeks, Roubaix, with all the sympathy he always had for the worries and needs of his troupe, could no longer avoid the business question of his giant. He couldn't merely be kept fed, taking up space like a superfluous prop! Physically, everything was fine again, he repeated over and over again to his employees. Neiwolf was awake, too. He was undoubtedly conscious. To get back to his old self, he simply needed a little push. He was so unique now that he didn't even need to do anything to make money off his greatness.

The Eisenfex reluctantly built a cocoon out of wire and a few slats, like Roubaix had in mind. People needed to see the giant so that the Master Of Ceremonies could tell his scary and spectacular miracle stories about him.

They put Neiwolf in the cocoon with combined forces, just before each show. Then they would drape his arms so that they hung out of the contraption on either side. Finally, the cocoon was hoisted three feet above the ground next to the stage with a pulley. The reinforced beams under the canvas groaned under the weight, but it was a matter of honor for them that they would not break and let Neiwolf fall.

The plan worked. Neiwolf hung from now on as a gigantic trophy next to the audience for the whole show. The Master Of Ceremonies gave what he thought was the best laudation he had ever composed for a wonder of nature. He even managed to explain credibly why the giant seemed to be in a trance with his eyes open. In the audience there were only benevolent murmurs of consternation in response to this white lie.

For a little change, children were allowed to step up to the cocoon and touch the arms. Sometimes also women, if they paid more. All in all, Roubaix was happy with this solution, even if he had imagined the future of his giant show differently before this whole delicate operation. This here was working.

For now.

Who knows how long Neiwolf would have lingered in his state had not the Eisenfex met his guilty conscience with creativity. He thought up another act just to distract himself. Swords! He had worked with them in his youth. That was many years ago now, the Eisenfex thought to himself. But it tempted him to use again the mothballed weapons he still carried with him. He didn't know if he was still fast enough to wield them as he used to. Besides, he needed a counterpart.

The old contortionist, Liev, was perfect for the role. He too knew a thing or two about swords. In his youth, which was much further in the past than that of the Fex, he had learned to fence. The fact that he was now wearing a mask for his own act made the element of surprise easy. After all,

the Eisenfex needed an opponent out of the audience. He explained to Lief what he had in mind: the Eisenfex would look for a challenger, just as he had done in arm wrestling. Lief was to sit in the audience and come forward. No one would know his wrinkled face with its knobby chin and gray curls hanging over it. Lief would pass as a normal guest because his snake mask revealed neither wrinkles nor curls.

Onstage, the two would engage in a scuffle, with crashing thrusts, lots of foot stomping, and loud yelling. The audience, of course, would cheer along with their own man, seemingly propelling him to victory, before the disarmed Eisenfex, in an act of desperation, would stop his opponent's blade with his bare hands and bend it into a crumpled mess. Thunderous applause! Curtain!

That's how the Eisenfex imagined it. And so it came to pass.

Night after night, the plan worked out. Under Neiwolf's eyes, the two competitors slashed wildly at each other. Their swords clanked deafeningly. They would snort and groan, dodge and parry, as if both lives were genuinely at stake. The audience roared along, as planned with more sympathy for the old man who seemed to be fighting for them.

At first, Neiwolf only heard the sounds. What his eyes saw, his mind ignored. But the sound of iron hitting iron tickled his senses. And night after night this went on. Each performance followed the same pattern. The rattle of swords began to blur into a persistent whirring in Neiwolf's ears. And something in that iron rhythm reminded Neiwolf of the past.

Soon life returned to his eyes, which until then he had moved only reflexively. From now on they studied what was happening onstage. He saw the much taller Eisenfex slashing at the old man with his shiny sword. He saw the old contortionist save himself each time with nimble lunges. And Neiwolf heard the audience acknowledge each parried blow with excited gasps.

The Eisenfex also had lines. However, he did not speak them himself, but let the Master Of Ceremonies do it.

"An unexpectedly strong opponent, ladies and gentlemen," the Master Of Ceremonies usually intoned, while on stage even a few sparks were flying.

“Stand back! Stay calm! The masses didn’t get in the way of a Hector and an Achilles either...”

There was mention of great heroes, of masters of the art of swordplay, on land and sea, among the ancient Greeks as well as among the pirates of the seas and distant lands.

Neiwolf listened, up in his unintended lodge. He studied the movements, and found them strangely out of place. At first, he couldn’t figure out why. But when he eventually internalized the unchanging movements, he noticed how weak the blows seemed. In the first rows they flinched, but Neiwolf found the rattling and stomping no more disconcerting than when a grain of sand carried by a light breeze meets another grain of sand. The bodies of the two men below him seemed smaller to Neiwolf with each performance, until he thought they were miniatures. Terribly delicate, fragile effigies of real combatants.

In his mind there were memories of such, of true warriors, Neiwolf noted. These were the first disjointed pieces in the iconoclasm that he was able to separate from the chaos of his thoughts and place neatly in a quiet corner. It was a beginning, and Neiwolf felt an unknown relief in it: never before in his life had so much self-assurance and gratitude coursed through him at the same moment. Not that he knew what he was grateful for in this situation.

Not yet.

Those first few images in his restless mind now had an order, a context. He saw warriors before him so tall they could have carried the entire tent as the crown of a peculiar finger ring. When they struck at each other, lukewarm sparks did not fly. Forests burned down. But some of the warriors were tiny, no bigger than a nail. When it suited them, they could duck under blows. Or under flying land masses. Or escape the devastating path of cannonballs as large as moons hurtling through the ether.

Neiwolf understood these images now. He had seen them. He had been there. He was one of those warriors himself.

The tent did not like these thoughts. It felt Neiwolf digging deeper and deeper into his memories, and it tried to soothe him. The tent saw into Neiwolf's innermost being. It feared what was inside him, but had no chance to hide it from the broken man in the cocoon.

For he understood one evening that he was not a man.

A woman shrieked as the contortionist lashed out for the grand finale, bringing his sword down and wedging it between the Eisenfex's bare hands.

"Oh, my God!"

This word, which he had heard hundreds of times in his life, reverberated in Neiwolf's head that day like an echo of whipping lashes. It hurt. Anger rose in him faster than magma in an exploding volcano. Why was she calling on God, this woman? Because of this charade on the stage? What was this consternation, this fuss about the fidgeting of these little humans?

Little people! Neiwolf's muscles began to spasm. He clenched his fists so that his fastening in the cocoon vibrated under the tension. Little people! He was not one of them. When he thought of God, he loved him in all his greatness and until the end of time! He had loved him when this world had not existed. And yet he had not called upon him so profanely.

He was one of God's first!

On stage, the Eisenfex bent the blade of his opponent's sword. When he succeeded, he threw it carelessly over his shoulder to loud applause. The battered blade got caught in a curtain and remained there. No one could see the small tear in the fabric left by the blade. Neiwolf felt it, however, as if someone had stabbed him between the ribs.

The tent shuddered and retreated from Neiwolf's feelings, like a snail retreating without a trace into its home from a threat. Normally Neiwolf would have noticed this on his part, but at that moment there was nothing left of the young man who had not known what had drawn him across the sea to the World's Fair with its intangible tower.

The undiscovered tear in the curtain blew more memories from Neiwolf's iconoclasm across into the now second-by-second expanding,

ordered gallery of his true self. He saw such a tear, a billion times larger, splitting the scout tower he had built for Beelzebub's army. Built in half a night, higher than a hundred Eiffel Towers, and not to be felled by any tremor of the earth. But only one glance of the Messiah had been enough to split the tower in two.

More and more images left the chaotic vortex that had paralyzed Neiwolf physically and mentally for weeks. They arranged themselves in the mental gallery in no time at all; rushed into it like an unstoppable tide.

All the palaces he had built for the angels and all the beings of heaven had been trampled in the great battle for the throne. Neiwolf plowed through the now perfectly aligned memories as if he were catching up on thousands of years all at once. He felt the pain of his buildings as they were stormed by the legions. He heard the infernal rumble that Lucifer sent across the battlefield with the cannons he had created. Saw the foundations of the ether torn away from under their bodies and the light darkening over their heads....

And then the moment when his troops were driven to the edge! None of the faithful angels had so much as touched him in battle. He led thousands, and only he had not yielded. Forever and ever he would have faced the enemy, alone if necessary, like an immovable rock. But when the Messiah put himself at the head of the other army, the fleeing masses ran everything down. The halls, towers, platforms and surfaces that held Neiwolf's heart and soul collapsed. And with them, he too lost his footing—in mourning for the beauty he had created.

When the Eisenfex on the stage stopped the old serpent-man's blade with feigned effort and finally snatched it from him, Neiwolf's memories sent him tumbling over the edge of heaven a second time. And he remembered the faces of the other angels who fell into Chaos with him. Their expressions had been of disbelief, of shock, and of fear that they would never be able to return to this home of theirs. He had studied them all. For him, time stood still, which he felt pulling at every fiber of his self beyond the sky now. He was no coward. He knew then that he could endure exile, no matter what it would

look like or how long it would imprison him. No, what broke him was not the thought of his own fate, but the worry for his works. Which ones were left, could endure the scars of that inglorious day? What would they do without him? Without their father?

There was a piercing stab through Neiwolf's heart. It took his breath away for a second. Then the pain seized his whole body and turned into hatred. With a guttural scream that caused the guy ropes of the tent to vibrate, Neiwolf burst the fixings on his wrists. With two or three short blows, he chopped the cocoon to bits, sending the whole contraption crashing to the ground. Neiwolf was by then no longer inside his prison, but had leapt onto the stage as he fell.

"Neiwolf!" shouted the old contortionist, scared to death.

The addressed figure wiped the stringy little man aside with his arm, like pencils on a table. He snatched the already half-bent sword from the stiffened hands of the stunned Eisenfex and straightened himself to full height. Next to him, the colossus of a man, which the Eisenfex was usually and quite rightly referred to as, looked like a child.

The audience breathed in collectively, dumbstruck by the sight.

"Don't you dare insult me with that human name!" the giant on stage blustered in the face of the coiled contortionist.

"I am Mulciber, the builder! I rule over fire and form. Begone! Or you shall all feel my wrath!"

Neiwolf took the curved blade between his thumb and forefinger on both hands, so that the weapon looked no bigger than a twig in his fist. He then effortlessly straightened the blade before holding the sword outstretched above his head. In this pose, the tip of the blade reached almost up to the very top of the roof. No one in the tent had ever seen such a towering figure.

Thunderous applause.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mulciber, the heir..."

The Master Of Ceremonies had acted quickly to make the best of the situation. Only Neiwolf's throwing of the sword was even quicker. It whizzed

across the tent with an eerie whirr, and slammed like an arrow into a beam not two fingers above the Master Of Ceremonies' hat.

Thunderous applause, again.

While the Master Of Ceremonies was still patting down his body to make sure everything was really in place and unharmed, Neiwolf reached between the curtains and dragged Madame Marmotte to him into the center of the stage. La Marmotte had no choice but to submit to this. At least she could scream at the top of her voice. To her aid, Roubaix and the Master Of Ceremonies now stormed onto the stage together, from different directions. The Eisenfex, too, had seen enough. He rushed at Neiwolf like the rest.

The Fex got off lucky. He found himself a few seconds later dazed between the first and second row. How he had gotten there, he could not say later. In any case, the giant's blow must have landed. But the paying guests were more impressed by what had happened to the Master Of Ceremonies. At least, according to the conversations on the way home. The giant had grabbed the Master Of Ceremonies by the neck, shaken him vigorously and, with inhuman strength, finally lifted him above his head with both hands. A fantastic act! The much smaller man had flown smoothly over the curtains behind the stage as if he were light as cotton wool. No doubt he had fallen softly behind the curtains, on bales of straw perhaps....

He had not. The audience suspected a stunt, but there was none. The Master Of Ceremonies fell badly, and still felt it months later.

La Marmotte was treated to her share of Neiwolf's rage. Only Roubaix he did not catch onstage, because as soon as the latter saw the havoc his employee wrought on the troupe, he preferred to take to his heels.

Before Neiwolf followed him outside, he turned to the jumped-up guests and insulted them.

"Go home, little people! You're a disgrace! The show is over!"

One last time, the audience outdid themselves with applause and jeering whistles. Neiwolf paused on the stage for a moment, confused. Then he left and chased after Roubaix.

"I have to go see my parents," the serious-eyed little boy said as he leaned forward and thoughtlessly let his fingers crawl along his shins.

It was the first time Neiwolf had been able to see the boy's back since they had both sat down on the edge of the stage. He made out a small bulge in the upper part, between the shoulder blades. It was not particularly noticeable, and intentionally so. When the boy stood up straight, the bulge disappeared almost completely from the silhouette of his back. The children's suit, cut a little too large, helped with this effect. When bent over, however, as he was now, something clearly pressed outward beneath the fabric.

Neiwolf narrowed his eyes. He examined the spot and recognized the slit in the fabric, where he suspected it to be. Or rather, where he feared it to be. The rippled pattern of a suitcase handle gleamed from beneath the slit.

"It's really all a matter of technique..." he muttered to himself. He genuinely startled when the little boy commented on it.

"Told you," he agreed, leaping from the edge to his feet.

Neiwolf returned alone from the forest behind the tent. Roubaix never surfaced again. Strictly speaking, the troupe could not even tell if the giant had rounded up and found his boss at all. He didn't talk about it, ever. Not even in the years that followed. The fact that he had dealt with him was indicated by the suitcases and belongings that Neiwolf dragged out of Roubaix's car that very night and threw to the edge of the forest. The troupe did not stay long enough to see if anyone picked them up.

A second clue that the chase had indeed been successful: Neiwolf, on his return, stood before the assembled showmen, before the badly battered and before the unharmed. He spoke to them in a voice that had lost all accent and rumbled an octave lower than before his imprisonment in the cocoon. He explained to them quietly, but with unmistakable authority, that he was now the director of this show. That he owned everything. That any person who wanted to leave now should come forward and tell him so to his face.

No one dared to do that.

And so Neiwolf ordered them all to work for him from now on. His first order was to clear out. The next morning, the caravan of carriages, wagons and carts set off, heading south. For the last time, as it soon turned out.

Neiwolf had the convoy camp on the outskirts of a major city. He saw an empty meadow near a main road that he thought would be just fine. While the troupe set up the tent, he set off. In the cafes and pubs he asked for the owner of this meadow. It was not long before he got the information he wanted, along with the address. Neiwolf stopped for a while in front of the man's house. He looked at the stately building, which was getting a bit old.

The owner of the house, and of the meadow, thought he had misheard. The sinister, tall stranger offered to renovate its façade. Restore all the decorations, clean the stone, add a few columns where the architect had apparently forgotten them, and so on. And all this for free? Such an offer was too good not to have a catch, the owner knew. However, he found himself unusually shy in talking to the giant-like man. For some reason, he neither slammed the door in his face nor turned down the offer.

Three days later, the façade looked so new that the owner almost walked past his own house every time he returned home. He couldn't believe the difference. Everything looked perfect. Yet he had hardly noticed the really unmissable stranger. Had he been working at night? And where had all the helping hands been that he had undoubtedly needed?

Too many questions, too surprising this phenomenal gift! And as if the work had not been more time-consuming than frying an egg in a pan, the tall

stranger casually offered to fix up the yard and roof for the owner as well—if the meadow on the outskirts of town would be left to him in return.

The members of the troupe were no less astonished than the owner of the house when Neiwolf told them that they would build their own theater on the meadow. They thought it was a joke until he started selling the carts that same day. With the money he bought building materials, first a bit, here and there, then more and more. He had the troupe put on three shows a day in the tent. He himself did not take a look inside when the performances were on. He would work outside.

First Neifwolf enclosed the tent with wooden walls, even though he knew very well that this would only be a temporary solution. He tried to find out from the tent how it liked this. But the tent had withdrawn from him and their common bond was lost. It was ashamed, suspecting that it was now nothing more than a ridiculous imitation of the structures Neiwolf had birthed in his original form. Like an off-key whistled children's song compared to a symphony.

It was right about that. Neiwolf could no longer find anything fascinating about his tent. The hours, days, weeks he had once invested with pleasure in understanding the tent's essence now seemed superfluous to him. He understood it in the blink of an eye. And it was, indeed, not even a shadow of his own earlier works. And yet he still cared more for the tent than for people. He would not abandon the tent, but give it a role. Piece by piece, he transformed it into a breathtaking hall that not only towered over every other building on Main Street, but surpassed it in style. It grew in height month after month, got wider, got porches, kitchens, workshops. In its center, Neiwolf built a round amphitheater over which the remains of the tent canvas hung like an unreachable canopy.

While more and more visitors came to admire the hall just as much as the show, Neiwolf used the profits to build a flame furnace next to the workshops. For this purpose, he hired blacksmiths who, after a short time, watched in wonder as their new boss worked in the furnace himself. He

handled the pig iron personally, decarburized it in the brutal heat of the furnace, and hit the red-hot patties hardest during the final forging. He didn't even flinch when sparks flew up into his face because he was working too impatiently or too carelessly.

Neiwolf bore every tiny scar on his forehead and his cheeks as if it had always belonged there anyway.

He hired construction workers to help him put in metal piers and braces where in the early days of the hall he had to work with wood. During times when there were no shows, the entire property became an infernal source of noise, filled with hissing, hammering, and workers directing each other.

It wasn't a year before Neiwolf's palatial hall and show were known far beyond the city limits. Of the original tent troupe, all were still performing their acts. By now, there were twice as many new performers, wonders of the world, and magic acts. Neiwolf hired a director, turned his back on his thriving business and built another vaudeville hall in another city. And another, and another, until he was represented throughout the south of France. He now resorted to just drawing up plans for his show palaces and having reports on every single new attraction that his directors and masters of ceremonies bought in.

He didn't find what he was looking for.

Eventually, Neiwolf built his way into the middle of Paris' curio theaters. New halls were built, profits increased. The handouts about the new acts in his houses became thick stacks of files. Hundreds of performers were soon in his employ, but none of them had that truly supernatural something Neiwolf was looking for. None of them were like him. Yet these havens for the different, for those rewarded or punished by fate, were the best place to find someone else like himself.

He could not be alone! Neiwolf allowed himself no doubt. He had woken up from the foggy daydream of those countless human lives. Then why shouldn't others have done the same?

Two years later Neiwolf went to England, with nothing in his luggage but an obscene amount of banknotes. Music halls in London were all the rage, so he tried his luck in that sphere. In no time, a handful of halls were in his possession. He settled down and devised improvements to his buildings to distract himself from the bleak prospect that he might forever be the only one of his kind on this earth.

Eventually he was told that the Americans were setting up their own shows, scattered over half the East Coast. The wildest tales of outrageous attractions reached Neiwolf's ear, no doubt distorted and exaggerated on their puffery-filled way back to the Old World. Either way, the vaudeville became the latest fashion in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. The only way Neiwolf could verify if what was being said about fire-eaters, levitating magicians and eight-armed clairvoyants was true was to go to America.

And he did. As he expected, there was nothing to the rumors. He would travel from one place to the next, looking at every show he could—without once getting the feeling that he was discovering a familiar soul behind the faces of flesh and bone.

Until someone showed him a drawing of the boy with the large, serious eyes. A picture of the unbreakable boy.

"It has been a pleasure," said Neiwolf, bending his long neck down in farewell. "What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"Buster!"

And with that, the child bowed to the giant, launched into an elaborate cartwheel, and ran backstage without another word.

Neiwolf remained seated. He waited for the next act to begin before he carefully brought his long limbs to life and walked past the spellbound audience to the exit.

Outside, the sun blinded him.

He'd seen handles like the one on the boy's back before. They were cut from suitcases, the fabric sewn into a corset or chest harness, and the whole thing put on under clothing so the audience wouldn't notice. There was always a tosser, or even several, and a much smaller person who could be grabbed by the suitcase handle especially well and tossed around.

The kid was still so little, Neiwolf thought as he adjusted to the brightness. What might he weigh? Hardly more than a sack of potatoes. His parents had taken care of everything. The three of them knew their business.

Neiwolf sighed softly to himself.

Once again, nothing. He was tired of searching. All the years he had now spent looking for the other fallen on the most peculiar stages of the two continents. It seemed in vain, idle. Even though the longing for his comrades still burned within him as painfully as it had at the moment when he first remembered them clearly in the cocoon:

Neiwolf had enough.

He blinked until the scene before him came into sharp, glistening focus. Beyond the Hudson River towered the silhouette of Manhattan. Here he stood, faithful and tireless in trying to redeem his loyalty. He had wanted to find Lucifer, Beelzebub, any of them. Neiwolf wanted to give them so much and take so much away. Maybe they didn't have to go down the same ghastly path that fate had laid out for his own revival? Maybe he could spare them that, if only he could find them?

The boy was just a boy. He was not a god trapped in flesh awaiting the end of his punishment. The boy just wanted to play, make his parents proud, and hear the laughter of the audience.

Neiwolf drew a line in the sand. Why should he look any longer? Hadn't he tried everything? And if he really was the only one here, shouldn't he make his mark on this world that could never be more than a grotesquely inadequate knock-off of heaven?

The skyscrapers across the Hudson fell silent as Neiwolf eyed them, pondering in sunlight. They were a thousand times taller than the tent Neiwolf had left in France and not seen in years. But they were no more majestic, no better. Neiwolf could feel their mass all the way to where he stood, miles across the water.

And then he made a decision. He would stay here, in America. And he would do what he was meant to do. He didn't care whether he got his hands on worthy material or had to make do with the clumsy achievements of humans: wood, iron, steel, concrete. What counted was his skill. He would go first to the great city across the river. He would build it houses the world had not yet seen. It was his destiny to create beauty.

Neiwolf's quest was over. And if he was not alone after all, then they should look for him now. He had done his part.

After all, he would make it easier for them than vice versa. They would not be able to overlook his works. His genius would stab the clouds!

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