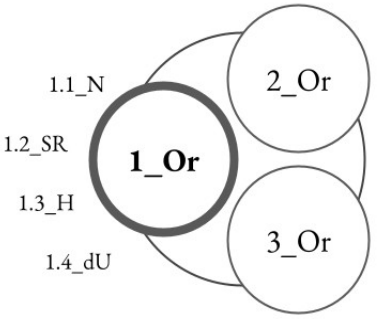

1.1_N
1.2_SR
1_Or
1.3_H
1.4_dU
2_Or
3_Or

Halbmichel

Oranges...
After The End Of Days

1_Or

Part Two

August-December 1924, Berlin

1. Thunderstorm

From the other section of the beach, the shrieking of the bathing children came rippling through the air. It drowned out the slender waves that pressed the Wannsee to the shore—if they could be called waves at all. In the balmy breeze, only finger-high distortions of the water arrived at the sandy strip in front of the Grunewald. The 'waves' were as miserable as the freshening that the gentle breeze brought. It was capricious. Sometimes it breathed from the lake into the faces on the beach, sometimes it stayed away for minutes, came again and again. And then stayed away completely.

For Hermann, these were really big waves for sure. There was no ambassador for the lido, but if there had been, it would have had to be Hermann. He knew everything about the lido. He thought everything was great. Hermann loved it here. If he could arrange it, he spent every afternoon here in the summer. And, to be honest, he could arrange it any day. The walk from the Technical University to Wannsee was no small feat, but as a budding engineer, Hermann didn't ease up even after his daily classes: At the lido, renovations were proceeding at breakneck speed. He could see architecture in the making.

And what he couldn't do was let Pierre and Gustav spy on the young ladies alone. Of course, the lido was, as it must be, divided into three separate sections. Strictly divided. Hermann, Pierre and Gustav always went to the section for men. The women had their section further north. In between was the section for families, bordered on both sides by a fence of slats. Now, of course, there were numerous knotholes, most of which, for reasons as human as they were trivial, were no longer in their place, but gave a view of the beach section adjacent to each. The three young

gentlemen would have preferred the ladies' beach to be right next to theirs, but the owners weren't stupid, after all. Besides, there was always something to see anyway. You just couldn't let yourself get caught. There was also plenty of excitement with the families, Gustav in particular thought. He was the most inconspicuous of the three, trudging along the fence as often as he could. Older couples didn't only have sons! He and Pierre found a lot of fun in comparing and consulting which of the beautiful daughters deliberately sat down near the fence and sunbathed. That gawking was going on, after all, everyone knew. It therefore almost drove them crazy when one of the girls flirted with observation. At least they assured each other loudly that it almost drove them crazy.

Hermann, of course, also joined in. He would peek through the knotholes, too, now and then. He could not avoid it. He preferred to look at Pierre, and this had almost as much to do with his daily visits here as the progress of the construction work.

But while Hermann could look at the new dressing houses and laid foundations for the big terrace houses for hours, he was very afraid to look at Pierre for even a second too long. Pierre wouldn't understand him. And he wouldn't be able to show his face around the two of them, no matter how cosmopolitan they always pretended to be.

The three men squatted side by side in the sand.

"I don't," Gustav muttered.

"But you're sweating like a pig yourself," Pierre echoed.

"I'm still not going," Gustav insisted.

"You haven't been in the water today," Pierre wondered.

"There's no point. When you go in, your body gets a brief fright, that's all. There's no wind on your skin to cool you down either. You'll end up sitting next to me again and you'll be even hotter than before."

"Why is that, please? Cooling down doesn't make you hotter!"

"Energy doesn't disappear from a system. That's physics!"

"Huh?"

"Law of conservation of energy," Gustav stated laconically. He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

"That's so wrong, I don't even know where to begin," Pierre enthused. He turned to Hermann, looking for help.

"Herm?"

"Your bloodstream and the lake are two different systems..." muttered Hermann. He hated it when his friends called him 'Herm'. Even from Pierre's mouth it sounded like a slap in the face to him.

"Or in short, you airhead, you don't get hotter from bathing!" lamented Pierre in Gustav's direction, who, however, only waved it off.

There followed an attempt at an argumentative salvation of honor. It resorted to the Descartesian dualism of soul and body, which completely unsettled Pierre for a moment. That alone was victory enough for Gustav, who had about as much idea of philosophical theories as of physics, namely nil. But, as usual, he showed enormous creative talent in complicating simple answers with spontaneously invented and highly serious brigand's tales. Pierre was regularly upset by this. And afterwards Gustav liked to light half a cigarette. Like now, while Gustav was getting on his nerves by asking detailed questions about Descartes.

Hermann barely listened. He had been looking for a while at the tall man lying on his back in front of their gang of three. He seemed to be asleep, which is why Hermann did not hesitate to examine him closely. He could hardly look away, he had to admit to himself. The tall man was slim, but not slight. He had broad shoulders and clear lines from head to toe, as if painted from an anatomical workbook. The man wore one of the usual red and white swimming trunks, but lay bare-chested on his towel.

Hermann looked at the man's skin. He smiled as he did so, without noticing. The skin was flawless: Hermann discovered not a wrinkle, not a mark, not even hair on arms or chest, let alone on the face, which seemed to be made of chiseled corners and edges like a template for sculptors.

Bosch opened his eyes.

Blood rushed to Hermann's cheeks. The man stared at him. Their eyes met and Hermann could feel himself blushing.

"The water cools the body temperature just like sweat beads on the skin. That's the reason we have pores at all," he said in emphatic casualness.

"Ha! That's what I'm saying," Pierre triumphed.

Gustav laughed. Bosch sat up and looked out over the Wannsee.

Hermann was pleased with himself. His quick wit had saved him from being called out by the stranger for gawking.

"I don't suppose you go to the open-air swimming pool very often?" he heard himself ask in an acute fit of cockiness.

"Me?" asked Bosch back. He turned to Hermann.

"You got to be careful there about sunburn," Hermann said. The unbidden courage that had just surfaced was already leaving him.

"I'm here often," Bosch said disinterestedly.

"Oh!" Hermann wanted to tape his mouth shut. "I just thought, ...well, ...because you're so chalky."

Bosch studied the young man briefly. Then he looked down himself.

"Am I?"

"A bit..." replied Hermann, relieved. He himself had a bronze hue to his face and torso by now after all those afternoons in the lido. So did the others, Pierre being the darkest of them. Even in winter, he seemed fresh from a vacation at the sea.

"Looks like it," Bosch confirmed after he finished inspecting himself.

"There's still that myth going around about the noble paleness," Hermann followed up. "If you ask me, though, a little tan is all the rage."

"All the rage?"

"Yes, there's something rebellious about tanned skin!" declared Hermann, pleased with the interest in his theory. "Mustn't look red and burnt, of course. That's why I just said you should be careful."

"About what?"

"Sunburn?" And when Bosch didn't understand, Hermann pointed

him in the direction of a middle-aged man who was packing his things near the wooden fence, his shoulders and neck as red as a pumpkin.

"Sunburn!"

"I've never had sunburn before..." replied Bosch.

"No? Well, some people just don't tan. There's that, of course. I'm sorry for you!"

"How tanned is good, then? Like you?" echoed Bosch.

"Like me?" stammered Hermann, now proudly abashed rather than embarrassed. "Well, it's a matter of taste. I don't want to look like I have nothing to do but lie on the beach."

He laughed half-heartedly. Bosch smiled.

"If there were at least waves," Gustav lamented. Pierre and he still weren't done talking.

"There are waves, alright!" interjected Hermann.

"If I fart over it, there will be higher waves than there are now," Gustav mocked.

"Those aren't waves, Herm!" even Pierre confirmed.

Hermann wanted to disappear into the ground.

"Excuse the boys and their gutter language, Herr...?"

"Bosch."

"Gustav," Gustav said. "And that's Pierre and Herm."

"Hermann," Hermann corrected.

All four nodded to each other in greeting.

"Wannsee is so big that there's always some wind pushing on the beach here. That's where the waves come from. That's why the location is ideal for an open-air public beach, after all."

"Good Herm never lets a bad word go unchallenged on his pet project, you know," Pierre commented.

Bosch nodded.

"Favorite project?" he asked after a moment of silence.

Before Hermann could answer—which he always liked to do on this

subject—his companions routinely cut him off.

"The lido is being rebuilt, and not just any old way!" explained Gustav. "The locker rooms are just the beginning..."

"... of an extensive project," Pierre took over. "The baths will become a veritable park, with terraces as big as soccer fields."

"That's not the scale I told you at all!" interjected Hermann.

The friends laughed at him.

"And that's your project?" asked Bosch in Hermann's direction.

Pierre suppressed a snort. Gustav did not pull it off.

"So, ...I, if this is my...?" stammered Hermann.

"Do you work here?"

"No, not directly. I ...observe the progress of the construction work. For professional reasons! I'm an engineer," Hermann specified.

He would be an engineer one day, maybe in two semesters. Pierre and Gustav knew this as well as Hermann, but they did not correct him at this point. They began to feel a little sorry for him in front of the stranger. After all, they hadn't meant to put him on the spot.

"There's a bar missing," Bosch muttered.

General agreement.

"Look over there," Hermann said, pointing out past Bosch to the lake with an outstretched arm. Bosch turned around.

"See that paddleboat out there, behind the buoy?"

"What's there?"

"There's nothing there yet, but in three years you'll be able to order the finest cocktails there on the pier," Hermann said. "The bridge will be the center of it all. Like a pendulum, you know, hanging off the exact center of a grandfather clock. I mean, the bridge will divide the beach and the promenade into two symmetrical halves."

"Wasn't there something about the angle, Herm?" asked Pierre.

"Exactly!", Hermann took the hint. He didn't catch that his friend was pulling his leg.

"See the bend that the beach makes? Well, maybe not as clearly as from the water. Anyway, there's an apex, right in the middle of the beach, where the shore bulges out into the Wannsee. That's where they're building the central square of the promenade, and then four huge low-rise buildings each go off to the left and right..."

Bosch followed the young man's rapid gestures with his eyes.

"The locker rooms there, you'll have to imagine them gone."

"They've just been put up, haven't they, Herm?" interrupted Gustav, this time genuinely interested.

"Those funny tents were no good, Gustav!" said Hermann peevishly. And then, back to Bosch: "Until spring, there were only tents, provisional solutions. When it rains or the sun doesn't shine for a while, the fabric quickly starts to stink. The tents weren't particularly windproof either."

"I see," Bosch muttered.

"I'm going in the water now," Gustav announced, jumping up.

"Suddenly?" complained Pierre, but Gustav was already trotting through the tightly drawn ranks of men on the beach.

"In the future, nothing will be left to chance—that is, neither to the weather nor to the crowds on weekends!"

Hermann had warmed up.

"The flat buildings will be built the modern way, with steel!"

"Skeleton construction?" asked Bosch casually, just to say something for the sake of politeness.

"Exactly! The walls get only encased with yellow clinker bricks. Are you in the business?"

"No, ...I only heard about it once," Bosch waved it off.

"Anyway," Hermann continued undeterred. "Anyway, this approach makes the endeavor very predictable. Weatherproof to boot! These will be veritable halls for changing clothes and also for sheltering in bad weather. All interconnected, and where the two flanks meet is the wide square with park benches, plateaus for music and so on and so forth. Plus the pier! It

will stand out as if from one piece. A needle poking into the Wannsee.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I've seen the models. Fascinating, I can tell you! It will take you ten minutes to walk from here to the end of the bridge. Unless you stop at the restaurant in the middle of the bridge."

"Where you get the cocktails?" commented Bosch with a hint of impatience in his voice.

"The very best!"

"How would you know? You couldn't have read that from the blueprints, give me a break," Pierre said.

"I don't have to. It's quite obvious. You just never really listen to me when I talk about the project. The materials, the floor plan, there's no halfassing anywhere. The restaurant is no exception. Everything is perfectly planned. There was nothing like this before the Republic. These architects don't build houses anymore, they build science molded into shape!"

"Getting drunk is not science," Pierre countered.

"You're not listening to me..."

Hermann had everything he knew about architecture neatly organized in his head. Like a drawer full of index cards, categories, and chronological as well as alphabetical keywords, his passion for building lay mentally before him. The arguments on the imaginary index cards all popped out of it. Whenever Pierre or other friends could not or would not follow Hermann, the drawer rattled restlessly. Here! No, here! Too many volunteers came forward from among the inner notes. Hermann then fell silent or seemed to give up for a moment. But he only sorted the arguments, as if in a kind of paralysis of shock. He never gave up. And here he had a new listener with whom perhaps all was not lost.

"The New Objectivity looks back at centuries of architecture. And it has realized that all the other expressions have only ever transferred the craving for prestige of their time onto walls, roofs, columns, gardens."

He turned to Bosch.

"...Or just their insecurity," Hermann continued. But in the face of his counterpart he read that he no longer followed his line of thought.

"People's insecurity, I mean. Either they imitated earlier styles or invented new embellishments and gimmicks so that the church and the nobility could distinguish themselves from everything else. Building to be somebody! That's all there was—but not anymore. Function triumphs over the desire to be seen! And from the optimal understanding of the purpose of a building, its beauty then naturally grows all by itself."

"Gothic Architecture I like," Pierre interjected unasked. "The cathedrals and such, really big, with the pointed arches and windows."

Hermann looked at him puzzled, which Pierre took as a welcome opportunity to justify himself.

"I do know a thing or two about architecture, Herm!"

"Gothic?"

"Yes, so?"

"That's exactly what I mean! Do you think a cathedral is practical? No one ever needed that. It was all about having and showing power."

"It's the house of God, isn't it? Would you build a wooden shack for it? It must look like something! Pray with the eye. There's your purpose."

Pierre was amused.

"Exactly! Some want to edify their closeness to God, others feel quite comfortable lowering their heads submissively in the old splendors. It's all mumbo-jumbo, if you ask me."

"Just watch what you say, Herm," Pierre warned with a jokingly raised forefinger. "Maybe God sent that thing over the Atlantic and it's coming here to spank the bottoms of heretics like you."

"What nonsense!"

Hermann dismissed the speech.

" In the end, it's a balloon, I tell you. The bet still stands!"

"A balloon over the sea? That would be suicide..."

"What do you think it is?" asked Hermann Bosch.

"Me?"

"Yes, that thing. We have five Marks in the pot. Gustav says it must be a new fighter plane, from the Yanks. I say it's a weather balloon. You hear that, Pierre? Weather! A weather balloon, without a pilot."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bosch replied. He got bored and wanted to turn away from the two men.

"You're not serious!" groaned Pierre, puzzled.

"Don't you read the newspaper?", Hermann followed up.

The reaction of the two surprised Bosch. He paused.

"Rarely," he said.

The two young men looked at each other blankly. Bosch's confident ignorance stunned them.

"With all due respect," Pierre finally said. "Do you live under a rock behind the moon?"

"No, there," Bosch replied. He pointed past the locker rooms to the woods behind the road to Wannsee.

Pierre scratched his head.

"The whole city is talking about it," Hermann tried to explain.

"More like the whole continent," Pierre corrected. "I just got my hands on a Times yesterday. Front page! Again. And there was an argument in Le Temps last week."

"The miracle of Argentina? You really haven't heard of it?" asked Hermann again. Bosch merely shook his head.

"Something came out about Buenos Aires," he said.

"The military even fired at it," Pierre added.

"Allegedly!"

"What you heard, Herm, is no more proven than my news!"

"Whatever it is, it did move at some point—and it moved out into the Atlantic, toward Europe!"

"newspapers are probably selling very well on that right now," Bosch commented, unimpressed with the story.

"You mean it's a hoax?" asked Hermann back. "Quite possibly, quite possibly. They all copy from each other if they have to. But somebody always knows somebody from over there..."

"From over there?" asked Pierre.

"South America! You told me too that you talked to that Argentine woman, didn't you?"

"...I wish I hadn't brought it up with her in the first place. She left my table faster than you can say 1-2-3! They're all scared, for real!"

"That's what I mean," Hermann affirmed. "It may be that the newspapers exaggerate. But nothing has come from Argentina for weeks, not a syllable. Absolute radio silence. And this with such a large country! How can nothing more specific be known?"

"Some whisper that people have disappeared," Pierre said.

All three fell silent.

"Pack up, boys!" said Gustav, who suddenly reappeared from the rows of sunbathers next to Bosch.

"Back already?" asked Pierre. "Well, that was a short one."

Suddenly there was a low rumble in the distance.

"Do you hear?" Gustav put a hand behind his right ear and bent it forward in explanation. "There's something coming at us, and real fast."

He pointed to the water with a curt motion of his chin. Behind the Wannsee, a few deep dark clouds had opened up where before there had only been bright blue sky. The faint rumble of thunder came from there.

"Crap," Pierre stated.

"Yes, it's going to be a proper thunderstorm, gentlemen," Gustav said as he dried himself off. "Says my big toe."

" Get packing!" ordered Pierre. Across the section of the beach, other guests began to get up and gather their belongings. A spirit of departure took hold just as quickly as the clouds seemed to swell and draw closer.

"Where's it going?" asked Bosch into the burgeoning bustle. He didn't move from his spot.

"The thing?" asked Hermann back.

"Yes."

"France, ...well, at least that's what I heard."

"Europe, definitely!" said Pierre. "And anyway, if you're interested, you've got to hear what good Gustav here has going as a bet!"

"The five Marks pot, Gustav," Hermann explained while buttoning his shirt. "What's your bet again?"

Pierre was already chuckling before Gustav could give his answer.

"That's Jesus," Gustav said matter-of-factly. He put on his shoes as he said it. "A statue of Jesus, only made of wood. It comes across the sea and passes judgment on all people it finds."

Bosch stared at Gustav. The latter, however, paid him no attention at all, but shook out his towel after he had finished with his shoes.

Pierre slapped his thighs with a silent laugh on his face. He loved the seriousness with which Gustav said it every time.

"There, the first drops," Hermann called out. He had finished dressing. With one squinted eye, he checked the sky.

"And more are coming."

Bosch looked around. Within seconds, the previously scattered beach had transformed into a cohesive community of fugitives. The clouds were being pushed across the lake by the wind at an impressive speed. No one still rested on their towels or shirts. The high summer in Berlin met an extremely weather-smart clientele in the lido. A short, gentle shower rarely caused anyone to lapse into hecticness. But what unfolded high above their heads was a full-blown thunderstorm. Every man around Bosch was on his feet by now. The first trotted toward the exit and were overtaken by a few in a particularly hurry, almost running.

Bosch rose to his feet.

"Ready, Herm?" urged Pierre.

"Off to the platform!" shouted Gustav over his back. He didn't stop to bid Bosch goodbye.

A crashing thunderclap made the entire men's section of the lido a head shorter, literally: anyone standing upright ducked involuntarily. Although utterly nonsensical, many men raised their hands protectively over their heads. After a soundless moment of shock, the sounds of escape resumed—louder than before. From beyond the wooden fence, the same hubbub could be heard, only supplemented by the shrill shouts of children.

Hermann wanted to say something to Bosch, at least to say goodbye, if he couldn't introduce this new acquaintance to the architectural grandeur of the coming bath. But two circumstances prevented him from doing so: One, Pierre pulled him up the beach by his sleeve. Second, Hermann forgot that he was about to say goodbye when Bosch rose to his full height and Hermann saw the latter's upper body. He thought Bosch looked very different than he had a few minutes ago. Before they had talked about it, the stranger had looked completely pale, as if he were sunbathing for the first time ever. Now it seemed to Hermann that Bosch was dyed bronze from top to bottom. This was not even sunburn. Even in the now milky-dark twilight of the storm front, Bosch didn't look red. More like someone who lived in the South Seas.

Another thunderclap jolted Hermann out of his thoughts. He staggered backward and Pierre pulled a little too hard on his sleeve, almost causing them both to fall. Bosch looked after them, but neither said anything nor raised a hand in greeting. Then their gazes were lost and the three young men squeezed through the exit overlooking the beach with the rest of the fleeing guests.

When Bosch had put on his shirt and pants, he reached for his jacket, already getting wet from the light rain. He patiently joined the maelstrom of people that dispersed into small groups on the other side of the entrance, on the street leading to the S-Bahn station. As soon as he had enough arm and leg space, he turned against the current and directly into the forest.

There was a trail between the pine trees at the side of the road. Bosch knew it so well by now that his hands automatically raised where branches jutted into the trail, protecting his face.

Bosch initially heard the raindrops more than he felt them. For one thing, he had already been semi-soaked on the short stretch from the beach across the street, and for another, the forest canopy with its treetops was still keeping the rain back. Bosch therefore did not hurry much. He strolled along the path, carrying his light jacket on one finger over his shoulder.

Only after a good quarter of an hour did the thunderclaps become deafening and the afternoon, which had been so sunny until then, finally turned dusky beneath the high branches. Thick drops slapped Bosch's shirt, skin and hair. Within seconds, he was at last completely drenched, and his journey had not even reached the halfway point. Now Bosch was itching to get out of the rain. He started running, at first lightly and nonchalantly, then without regard for his clothes or his own surefootedness. Here and there, tree trunks that had been knocked down or eaten by bugs lay in his path. Bosch cleared them as he ran, like a hurdler. The fact that a thin branch brushed against him every few yards became less and less important to him with every bend along the path.

The thunder was now joined by the corresponding flashes of light. The crashing sounds quickly found an ever shorter accompanying rhythm. The thunderstorm had caught up with Bosch, bringing everything it had to throw at him. He made the best of it, using for orientation any moment when the forest and the path were brilliantly illuminated. At first this hurt his eyes, but soon he got used to enduring the brightness from the sky, which flashed every few seconds, as he looked for the outlines of the villa.

When he spotted it between the tree trunks, he slowed his sprint until he reached the park behind the mansion. Bosch pranced the last few yards through the rose bushes and ornamental beds which had been carefully trimmed to a level height. Essentially, little distinguished this sprawling garden from a clearing, such as existed on the other side of the house, where

the circular drive, entryway, and main entrance were located. Here in the garden there were only a handful of tall trees that provided sparse shade or shelter from the rain.

Light shone into the garden from the rooms on the first and second floors. Outside, it had become almost dark by now, especially with the dense storm clouds. Bosch kept walking toward the back entrance of the house until a shadow at the edge of the pond caught his eye.

It was moving.

Bosch stopped. At that very moment, lightning struck not far from the garden in the pine forest. In addition, there was a thunder like a cannon shot, so that Bosch ducked a little. He lost sight of the shadow. When he found it again, it had moved a few feet further. And it was backing away from him. Bosch spotted feet underneath a cloak, then arms.

The shadow fled from the next lightning strike, past the pond and into the darkness of the pines.

Bosch started to move again. He ran the last few yards to the back entrance, tugged at it, and as soon as he stood in the dry hallway of the mansion, tore off his shirt, soaked and scored by twigs.

2. The Flaming Sea

In the corner of his room, a silent grandfather clock did its work. The clockwork ran flawlessly; every minute the thin black hand advanced one stroke. It moved jaggedly and abruptly, as if it were snapping into place. Only the matching sound was missing. Nor was there any ticking from inside the clockwork, as there usually was from such chest-high cabinets. This one was mostly unadorned, made of dark lacquered plain wood. Only the stands and the square top of the actual clock had poorly made decorations. They were probably meant to represent feathers.

Like a coffin, Bosch thought to himself. Like a coffin trying to disguise itself as a bird.

He watched the clock doing its work, while the sun shone outside. Not even the smallest cloud was left from yesterday afternoon's thunderstorm. The sky had completely exhausted its supply of rain, storms, and menaces. This tantrum of a storm had raged on until well after midnight. Bosch did not know what time it was now. If he had listened to the clamorous bustle of the birds or wondered about the blinding power of the sun, he would have noticed that it had to be well past noon. But Bosch didn't even think to read the time from the plate-sized clock in the corner —although he had been eyeing it closely ever since he slowly woke up.

Again, the minute hand twitched and clicked silently into place. No ticking. Bosch listened for the missing sound. Below the clock's feathered headpiece, the long chains with counterweights lay behind glass. The pendulum moved according to protocol, stoically from left to right. That should have been the source of the characteristic crackling Bosch was missing. But there was absolutely nothing to be heard.

Bosch lay under his blanket sprawled. His long arms hung out over the bed. When he grew tired of looking at the grandfather clock, he briefly reminded himself that he also had legs and could stand up. More than once, however, he dismissed the thought and remained motionless. Then he let his gaze wander again over the individual parts of the clock, only to end up back at the hands every minute, when the long thin one once again accomplished the feat of jumping into the next position with taut force and at the same time as quiet as a mouse.

At some point, the short thick hand joined it. They both jumped on in parallel. Silently, of course. Bosch remembered the circumstance of his limbs again. He didn't stand up this time either, but for the first time that day he experimented a bit with the joints on his hands and feet. A few careful movements to the left, then in the opposite direction. A few minutes later, when the thin hand had long since regained sole authority over movement on the dial, Bosch ventured further. He stretched deliberately, at first erratically, then with more and more pleasure at getting his body under control. This was aided by the somber feeling that the thick hand would not be back in action anytime soon, and Bosch would have to wait quite a while for another pair jump of the hour and minute arms. That didn't sit well with him, although it still didn't occur to him to read the exact time. Briefly, he weighed whether he should continue to just stay in bed or actually get up.

Impatience won out. Bosch crawled out from under the covers, looked for his robe, and stepped into the slippers in front of the bed. His new room had its own small bathroom. Bosch shuffled in, perplexed as to why. Thus, he stood for a moment on the cool floor tiles in consternation. Then he made his choice.

The mirror above the sink showed the same flawless skin as always. Bosch's hair fell below his forehead lately, but he didn't notice that either. In a good suit, he would have been as good as new, fresh and ageless. And yet, once again, he didn't bother with any sort of morning routine. His

only move to the sink was to grab the tin can that sat on top of it. Bosch took out one of Goosequill's pills. He refrained from taking the sip of water with which to wash it down, but kept the pill in his mouth.

Outside the door, Bosch found a silver tray on the carpet, as usual. His breakfast was put there for him in case he didn't show up on the lower floor until noon. Sometimes he forgot and accidentally knocked the tray over with his feet. Every following morning, the stains on the carpet would be cleanly removed, but the faded spots in front of that door to the room would become more visible. Today Bosch left no extra work for the person who picked up the tray again.

Black caviar on halved eggs. For a while, it had been red. Bosch had never complained, so the change was probably due to the season, not to him. The butter in the oval dish next to it had a slight yellow tinge, and the bread looked hard. Bosch stopped inspecting the tray at that point. Everything on it should have been eaten hours ago. In any case, he rarely had any appetite whatsoever, perhaps even less than he used to. That morning, food didn't interest him at all. What he picked up and took with him was a quart bottle of champagne floating in its matching small cooler. The water was lukewarm, with no trace of ice cubes.

Bosch strolled across the hall, unscrewed the cork from the bottle, which had already been brought out, and gulped down the pill he had taken from the bathroom. The first sip of champagne served as a rinse. After that, he sipped occasionally as he wandered aimlessly through the bowels of the second floor, which he knew in his sleep. This was especially beneficial during the nights.

At some point he reached the dining room. A maid approached him, carrying a stack of tablecloths in front of her. When she saw him, she lowered her eyes and nodded fleetingly. Bosch held out the empty bottle of champagne to her.

The dining room smelled of more things than Bosch could distinguish at first. There was no one but him in the room, everything was in its place,

but the floor was littered with clothes. There were corsages, bras, pants and underpants scattered about. The whole thing formed a landscape of its own. A conspicuous mountain consisted of shirts, a pair of rubber boots and, on top, a top hat. Over an armchair hung what looked like a long, colorful rope. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a collection of scarves and shawls that had been knotted together. Bosch ran his fingers over it, then took a swing with one leg to kick up a cloud of gold-colored stockings from the floor.

"Don't! Don't do that," d'Utrecht called from the opposite side of the room. He entered the dining room from the entrance hall.

"It all has to stay like that!"

Bosch lowered his leg again. He did not move from the spot. In the doorway, d'Utrecht took a deep breath of displayed relief. Then he rubbed his hands together, rejoicing. Like a professor about to make a possibly significant discovery, he began to examine the individual piles of clothing with his monocle. He held his arms and hands outstretched, as if the fabrics had to be held in place by command. Bosch watched d'Utrecht doing this for a while. But since the latter was completely absorbed in his examination and didn't dream of explaining himself, but pranced along looking for path after path among the scattered laundry, Bosch left him to his own devices.

He walked on.

After crossing the hall and finding none of the residents in the other wing of the villa, Bosch strolled through the kitchen and the servants' quarters to the rear exit of the house. The door to the garden stood open. As he stepped through, the bright day spilled all its bits and pieces over Bosch: The light dazzled, reflected off the chalky white stones of the patio. Birds not only chirped, but screamed at each other–at least to Bosch's ears. On top of that, there was the warmth of the summer day. Unlike yesterday, however, a damp heaviness hung in the air, pressing on his chest. The thunderstorm had sunk into the forest floor overnight. The sandy paths between the hedges and beds of the garden were darker than in the dry days

before, still full of moisture. Farther back, beyond the patio and the adjoining roses, the head gardener was tending to a vine rack. It must have come loose in the storm. Bosch saw two other employees disappearing again and again into the expansive garden: They were bending down to pick up larger branches that had either broken off here or had been blown into the clearing with the storm.

The patio was spotless. Someone had just swept it. Bosch looked at his feet on the white stone. Then he spotted Neiwolf at the edge of the terrace. As he often did, he was lying on his lounger. Bosch approached quietly from the side. Neiwolf was asleep, which did not surprise him. The huge man had chosen this corner of the terrace as his favorite place. Like a cat, he sneaked to this his personal retreat every day. The fact that he looked completely out of place on the wooden couch with his absurd proportions apparently didn't matter to the architect. It had been built for normal-sized people. Under Neiwolf, it looked like a miniature version for children. Neiwolf had made do with a folding chair, which he put under his feet while his calves were still over the end of the lounger. He extended the head of it with an ironing board that he had unceremoniously screwed onto the wood. With the fine cushions that the remaining chairs on the terrace had yielded, an extremely comfortable monstrosity of a summer bed had been created. Neiwolf lay out here every day, for hours on end. And because he lay with imperturbable calm, he looked like some kind of extinct creature that had to replenish its energy here in the sun with crippling slowness.

At one point, Bosch had asked Neiwolf how he could lie here day in and day out when he had such big projects to manage in America. The weeks went by without Neiwolf disappearing into the city, as Amelia or Harstein at least did from time to time. Not to mention Sander, who was really only here consistently on the weekends. Neiwolf had thought for a moment before he gave his answer. Some things worked themselves out, he said, others did not. And he didn't always have to do something to handle the latter. Sometimes it was enough to be there. Bosch didn't understand

what he meant by that, but that day—that exact moment—had been one of the few times he'd seen Neiwolf smile.

That was at chess. The board was still in its spot today, on a small white lacquered table next to Neiwolf's couch. After all, the architect had also heard about Bosch's feat against the grandmaster. He liked the game, quite the opposite of Bosch, who still didn't care. He did care whether he won or lost: the first time they played, the game ended in a stalemate. Neiwolf had enjoyed their little battle, Bosch had not at all. No one had explained to him the fact that this game could end without a winner. Neiwolf made up for it as soon as he understood that Bosch's gruff anger at this situation was not in jest at all. Bosch himself was most surprised by the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach that made him monosyllabic. He had been tempted to split the board with his fist right then and there. In view of the old architect's slightly perplexed expression, however, he refrained from doing so. In return, though, he would not let him go until he had won. He insisted on another game, politely at first, but more pissed off with each draw. He didn't lose, but he didn't win either. They drank and played half the night until Bosch finally won.

Then the nagging feeling had subsided.

Neiwolf woke up. He blinked his eyes briefly, but was not surprised by Bosch's presence.

"A game?" asked Neiwolf.

Bosch just nodded.

"Why not..." the architect replied to the wordless affirmation. He patiently maneuvered his long legs from the folding chair to the patio floor until he sat with his torso erect on the edge of his lounger. Bosch moved the little table with the chessboard into position. He dug the pieces out of a drawer underneath.

After a while, both were asked whether lunch could be served, ...or whether the gentlemen were more in the mood for tea and cake. Bosch waved the servant away, he wanted to concentrate. The man did not dare

to ask again until Bosch had won the game. And one more. Neiwolf congratulated Bosch warmly, but then sat back, excused himself, and commenced an afternoon nap.

Bosch sought new company in the person of Amelia, who was inside in the dining room taking cognac with her tea. The terrace had finally dried at the peak of the sunny day and was radiating heat. Inside with the countess it was cool. They had some cake brought in. As for the choice of drink, Bosch accommodated Amelia, cognac—without the tea.

They did not speak to each other. Amelia lit a cigarette every half hour, puffed clouds in the air, and drank. Bosch watched her face as she sucked in the smoke. He sat in an armchair next to her. The carpet was still littered with d'Utrecht's garment art. Simian looked appropriately puzzled when, at some point, he stepped into the room from the hall and saw Amelia and Bosch sitting silently amid the clutter. A clerk appeared behind the master of the house and took his hat and briefcase for him. The man felt compelled to explain the state of the room, but this proved superfluous. Simian only looked questioningly over at Amelia, who simply shook her head in reply.

"Theodorus?", Simian then asked his employee.

"Herr d'Utrecht has instructed that..."

"Never mind!"

Simian crossed the room, saluted Bosch, and disappeared through the camouflaged door in the bookcase. Amelia and Bosch stayed behind to continue their silence together. The countess lit another cigarette. She closed her eyes and reached for Bosch's hand. So they sat wordlessly, like a royal couple in their throne chairs, greeting a parade of vassals as dull as it was endless. Except that there was no one here to pay them any respects.

Bosch just fell asleep at some point. When he woke up, Amelia had left. Her chair was empty next to him. Instead, the roar of engines could be heard from outside. Bosch didn't have to see the driveway with the ring road to know that Harstein had arrived in one of his cars. He had probably

grabbed a random one of the employees, because none of his friends were in sight to listen to the technical details of his high-performance vehicle. The engine howled, again and again. Then the horn was pressed, warning as insistently as if it had been removed from a freight train and misappropriated for the car. Bosch had no desire to listen to another of Harstein's usual lectures on the dawning machine age. He retreated through the wall of books and back out into the garden.

Neiwolf was still asleep, no sign of Amelia. Instead, Edith was walking through the garden with Rex Goosequill. When she saw Bosch on the terrace, Edith beckoned him over. He accepted the invitation.

The closer he got to them, the more surprised Bosch was by these two taking a walk. Edith kept herself rather in the background anyway, as far as the forest society's evenings together were concerned, but she seemed to have particularly little in common with Goosequill. The cold sentiment was probably mutual, and it wasn't the first time Bosch had noticed it. Rex kept a semi-step behind Edith as they both strolled slowly through the garden paths. This was despite the fact that they had a topic of conversation with a lot to be said. Bosch approached but could not hear what it was about. Contrary to his habit, Rex did not write down what was being discussed. He had taken out his writing pad and pen, but he didn't use them. He was talking non-stop to Edith without looking at her face. Hers was red. Not from the sun, Bosch realized.

Edith interrupted the poet, or at least she tried to. If she had but turned around, Rex would surely have been tongue-tied at first. He could only tolerate open confrontation when he wasn't the center of attention. However, she preferred to wait for Bosch to come within talking distance.

"My dear," she welcomed him, still a few feet away from her.

"At your service," he replied with a small bow.

"Walk with me, do me the favor, will you?

"With pleasure!"

Edith reached out her hand and Bosch placed it on her forearm. Rex

turned toward the patio at the next intersection of rose bushes and rhododendrons. As soon as he had departed out of earshot, muttering, Edith disengaged her hand again. They walked side by side. The blush had not yet disappeared from Edith's face.

Bosch decided to ignore it.

"Have you been sunbathing?" asked Edith.

"Why do you ask?"

"Your skin, it's very different from yesterday," she explained, "or am I imagining it?"

"I was at the lido."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Then you're lucky the thunderstorm didn't catch you," Edith said.

Bosch said nothing. Since Edith hadn't expected him to not find anything to say back, their dialogue broke into a strange pause.

"Will you be at home tomorrow night?" asked Edith finally, quietly. "Or do you have any appointments?"

"Not that I know of..."

Sometimes the residents of the house did not see each other at the same table for several days. It was a constant coming and going. Bosch didn't expect Edith to know about his habits. What she did most of the time was just as much a mystery to him. Apparently, however, she hadn't noticed that Bosch had not gone to any appointments in a long time. There was simply no one who would have offered him any. Amelia had not played the town guide since he moved in. Nor had the other residents introduced him to any other circles. Everything happened here, in the forest.

Bosch didn't miss the city or being passed around.

"What's tomorrow?" he asked Edith back.

"Oh," she deflected, shaking her head. "Nothing, nothing. I was just asking..."

It was a lie, but Bosch accepted it.

Edith stopped to remove the wilted petal on an otherwise immaculate red rose. She evaded Bosch's question.

"What's it like at the lido? I've never been there before."

"I lack comparison..." replied Bosch.

"Me too."

Edith smirked. She put a hand to her mouth as if she wasn't experienced at it and ashamed of herself for trying.

"Well, there's sand right on the shore," Bosch described. "At the far end is the lake. At the upper end, there are booths where the bathing suits are put on. In between, it's like a..."

Bosch pondered.

"...like an opera hall. Only without seating cards. Everyone sits close together right up to the water. Some lie down and sunbathe, too."

"And there's swimming!" interjected Edith.

"Yes."

"Is the water deep?"

"Not at first," Bosch said. "You don't like Rex, do you?"

The slight smirk on Edith's face disappeared. At least for the split second she hadn't seen coming the abrupt change of subject.

"What makes you think that?" she returned—smiling again.

"You're not looking him in the face."

"Yes, I am. You're just imagining it, my dear Bosch!"

"I only thought so because he was talking at you like that just now. You didn't seem to see eye to eye."

"That?" indulged Edith in astonishment. "Oh, he just gets so exhaustingly passionate so quickly. It was about the acting."

That was another lie, bad one at that. It was fun for Bosch to watch Edith squirm. He decided to throw another jab.

"What did he want?"

"It's not worth mentioning," Edith replied. "He's full of ideas about this play. And he can't very well keep it to himself when creativity strikes

him. You should go. There will be a first rehearsal after dinner. You know about it, don't you?"

Bosch nodded.

And left it at that.

He spent the rest of the afternoon on the patio. Neiwolf entrusted him with his self-made lounger. Harstein soon found him, sat down with Bosch and sent for schnapps. They found reasons to keep toasting. What Bosch had heard earlier in the day outside the door had been a tractor. Harstein had bought it and driven the behemoth all the way to the forest. They toasted to the 'Lanz Bulldog'. When Harstein had finished his fiery speech about the revolution that was heading for agriculture with modern machines, they toasted each other again. To the technical details of the Lanz, as well, naturally. Glow-head engine, solid rubber tires, and 'express' gears because it was a special road-legal model—cheers, cheers, cheers!

A bottle was required.

Bosch slept away the rest of the afternoon sun on the lounger. He was awakened for dinner, because all the residents of the house were always on time for this occasion. Afterwards, most of the guests retired to their rooms, not without being emphatically reminded once again by Rex of the first rehearsal. Harstein made fun of the poet's insistence, but he too was already standing on the stage in the basement when Bosch descended the stone staircase at eleven o'clock in the evening.

Most of the rows of chairs had been broken up to make room for the group in front of the slightly raised little stage. Only Amelia and Sander stood at the top. In front of the stage, Gänsekiel, d'Utrecht, Simian, and Neiwolf formed a conspiratorial semicircle.

Bosch did not sit down with them, but took a chair in the last row. At first he was not even noticed, for a discussion was underway.

"Why don't you play that angel?" asked Harstein grumbling in d'Utrecht's direction.

"Because I'm too fat!" laughed d'Utrecht.

"It doesn't matter," Harstein echoed.

"It does matter, old chap! If the angel has to keep flying the professor from one scene to another, how does that look, huh? Me little fatty with wings carrying Sander?"

"You're not actually carrying him," protested Harstein.

"But it has to look like it! Convincing!" And then, with a proud undertone, "No, basta, I'm the fakir!"

"Rex is emaciated. He would make a much better fakir."

"I'm the angel," Rex explained. "...Because Simian can't. Sisyphus has to act in such a way that no one sees the cunning in him, yet still believes that he is capable of it."

Simian found himself aptly described. He laughed.

"Lament all you want," Amelia interjected. "It' s just the best way to divide it up. If we put a big rock on the stage for you, no one will understand why Sisyphus can't roll it all the way to the top. Why, you've got a build like you ate Sisyphus for breakfast!"

Harstein folded his arms in silent protest.

Bosch noticed that Edith was not part of the meeting. He had assumed she would be down here as well. Her husband was here, after all, although Simian rarely spent the evenings with his guests.

"I thought you would like to play Beelzebub," Neiwolf said. Just by speaking up, the others interrupted their quarreling confusion. It was less because anyone was waiting for Neiwolf's assessment of the casting, more because of the sluggish hum with which he spoke. He decelerated the discussion with every syllable he managed to produce.

"Why are you resisting so much?" Neiwolf asked Harstein.

"I want something in my range," Harstein defended himself.

"That's a lead role!" shouted Simian impatiently.

"I don't want that one."

"There are just too few of us," Sander said. "That wasn't the idea. We

can't all play who we want."

"Not my fault!" blustered Harstein.

"Not mine either," Sander retorted.

They continued to argue. Amelia, meanwhile, pushed her chair back and joined Bosch in the row behind.

"There you are!"

He said nothing. She moved her chair up to Bosch and placed the manuscript on his lap, which all the houseguests were holding.

"The Flaming Sea?" read Bosch, just barely audible because d'Utrecht was making an expansive argument right in front of him with equally expansive gestures.

"That's what it's called. A drama in three acts. Rex wrote it," Amelia whispered. She drew her legs up so that her chin could almost rest on her knees. Then she leaned against Bosch's shoulder. She crouched to Bosch's side like a prompter.

"What's it about?"

"About hell."

"Hell is just a place," Bosch thought aloud. " I don't mean the setting."

"This hell is different! It's like the underworld of the Greeks. This is where the dead from the upper world go. The border is the river Styx. The dead only get across and into the underworld if they can pay the ferryman."

She pointed her finger at Neiwolf.

"Charon, the ferryman," she continued. "The living must put two coins on the eyes of the deceased as payment for crossing. Those who cannot pay the ferryman, are left on the shore and can neither travel back to life nor to the underworld. Those who do pay are allowed to board Charon's barge. And once they do, they forget who they were. They become their soul shadow."

Bosch mused.

"That's mythology," he finally said. " It's not hell."

"You don't know yet who rules the underworld..."

"Greek gods?"

"No, absolutely not! The fallen angels that God expelled from the kingdom of Heaven..."

Bosch raised an eyebrow. It pleased Amelia that he hadn't seen this part of the story coming. She smiled at him and went on.

"...And pirates."

"Angels and pirates?"

"You have to think of them as neighbors. The angels have lived in what they call Hell since the beginning of time. They don't care about the wandering souls. They ignore them, and also Charon, the ferryman. One day, however, he is not paying attention. The Styx is like a sea of flames, you know. If a soul falls in, it's lost forever. Nothing resists the Styx—except Charon's barge, his boat. Every time it crosses, the wood begins to coagulate and smolder. That's why Charon's barge must be indestructible. On land, the wood cools down again and becomes like new.

Now one of the souls wakes up one day before they reach the shore. And it finds a splinter, which it detaches from the wood and takes ashore unnoticed. Instead of marching deeper into the underworld with the rest of the shadows, the soul stays behind and waits for the splinter to recover. Remember, the wood's job is to be a barge! It doesn't stop shaping itself until the barge is quite perfect again."

"That's a lot of work for a splinter..."

"But it succeeds! The splinter gradually becomes a second barge. The soul rows back with it to the other side and steals Charon's own barge from under his nose as he picks up new souls. And the ferryman can do nothing. He is the master of the Styx, but powerless without a vessel. He can certainly not swim in the fire.

From then on the soul is free and looks for more awake souls. Together they build more barges, boats and finally big ships. They become pirates, always on the run from the angry ferryman. For although they are free, the souls cannot simply leave. The dead must be ferried across. If that

doesn't happen, hell goes out of balance. The angels sense that."

"What do they have to do with it?"

"Their boss is hell."

"Their boss?"

"Lucifer," Amelia whispered.

"Stop whispering, it's disturbing," Simian interrupted them both. "We're not getting anywhere like this. Bosch, you're missing!"

"Me?"

"You have to act with us! Take on a role..."

"Which one?"

3. Scuffles

"Oh, forgive me! I didn't mean to wake you!"

The maid disengaged her fingers from the thick-bellied glass, which still clinked on her tray a bit.

Bosch looked at her with squinted eyes. He said nothing, partly because it took him a moment to determine where he was. When the maid was neither snapped at nor smiled at, but simply ignored, she collected herself and disappeared wordlessly into the house.

He had been drinking Berliner Weiße with Strippe, chilled beer with a shot of raspberry syrup. Or optionally with green Waldmeister, which was the variant Bosch preferred on hot days. He had learned from d'Utrecht that 'with Strippe' tasted better, because a shot glass of schnapps had to be dumped into the Weiße. In short, a taste testing had been done earlier, with normal Weiße, the green Waldmeister shot, the bright red raspberry shot and, finally, with the schnapps. With the Strippe, meaning the schnapps, the color didn't matter. On that, d'Utrecht, he and both their palates quickly agreed. Bosch thought the whole thing was clear anyway: Weiße with Strippe! That was his winner.

And he had drunk a few of them before dozing off on the patio.

Left to his own devices by the maid, Bosch gazed into nothingness. The backdrop for his thoughtless stare was the garden. For once, a light breeze was blowing. It had its dear trouble pushing away the stagnant heat of the day. At most, a few leaves wobbled in the breeze. A blackbird tossed leaves that lay on the ground among the rose bushes. However, Bosch did not notice the breeze or the blackbird on the terrace. He saw nothing at all, although he stared directly out into the garden. He was busy thinking.

Only a movement too great for creatures and too abrupt for wind gained his attention. Bosch rubbed his eyes. He was not mistaken, there was a gray coat wandering along the edge of the garden. And because someone had to belong to the coat, he jumped up and went to meet him.

No one in the house disguised themselves like that. Bosch knew immediately that he had seen this coat the other day in the thunderstorm, before he had fled into the house.

The figure saw him coming. It hid behind a tree, clumsily. The ends of the coat clearly peeked out from behind the trunk. Even though it was getting dark, Bosch was still quite warm even in his loose shirt. The person behind the tree had to have no choice but to wear the coat even in summer. A beggar, probably.

"Hello?" said Bosch quietly.

There was a twitch behind the tree. A man stepped out. He was covered in dust and dirt. More precisely, the coat was dusty and dirty. The black chin-length curls seemed clean by comparison, and the face even more so. Bosch stopped some distance away, a little taken aback. This face did not actually look like that of a beggar. It lacked the furrows and dry cheeks that came with life in the streets in winter. It was downright beautiful. Bosch felt unpleasantly reminded of the young painter with the flaming red hair when he saw it. Unpleasant—and then again, not.

"A few pfennigs?" the beggar asked.

Bosch shook his head, his counterpart shrugged in response. They did nothing further. Bosch examined the man and his strange appearance closely, but he did not like the fact that the man seemed to be doing the same with him. After all, he lived here, the beggar did not. And the latter's look was a touch too self-confident, self-satisfied even.

He took a step towards the man. As if the beggar had sensed it, he almost simultaneously took a step back. He stretched out a hand toward Bosch, fingers spread wide as if to impose distance through the air. Bosch followed the silent instruction. He paid no attention to the beggar's

intentions or even his wishes. He only wanted to see what the other would do now. Because he could not resist the idea, he twitched his arms briefly, as if he were faking a jump. But the beggar did not fall for the trick. He remained motionless where he was. He still held out his warning hand.

Bosch became bored and ill-tempered. Realizing this himself, the man in the coat began to smile, as if to provide a counterpoint. Then he walked slowly sideways to a flowerbed without moving his head or taking his eyes off Bosch. The fact that Bosch followed him—at a safe distance—did not seem to bother him. With his slow steps, he amazingly quickly brought one of the rose beds between himself and Bosch.

The beggar had probably been looking for a natural obstacle between himself and the resident of the house. Without a word he suddenly sprinted off along the flower bed. He threw his legs in front of each other as if struck by lightning. The coat fluttered grotesquely in his back. When he looked behind, he saw Bosch at the same level on the other side of the flower bed. He, too, was running. Bosch had not been caught off guard at all. He kept up, at the identical pace. The beggar recognized this from the corner of his eye alone, and because the bed ended in a crossroads of borders and garden paths, he let his run slow down.

They both came to a halt before the crossroads, still separated by the bed. They were breathing fast now.

This time Bosch took the initiative. He paid no heed to his shirt and linen trousers, which had been freshly ironed and laid at his door this morning. With a breakneck leap he jumped over the flower bed, arriving safely on the other side with both legs, but did not anticipate that the beggar would not flee but throw himself rolling at his feet. Bosch could not think as quickly as his reflexes commanded his legs to jump directly a second time to avoid tripping over the rolling mass of man and coat. Promptly, the beggar rolled under the less-than-elegantly hopping Bosch.

For a split second, Bosch now had the stranger behind him. He braced himself to receive a blow to the small of his back. However, by the time that he turned around, the beggar had already picked himself up. He simply jumped over the flower bed in his turn. From a standing position, with his much too large coat flapping around him.

Now they both stood there as before, only on swapped sides and amidst copious amounts of dust they had kicked up together.

Bosch let out a laugh that sounded like pleasant surprise. The beggar grinned wryly. Then he held up both hands and very slowly began to draw in one finger at a time. He started with the little finger of the right hand. The ring finger followed. Only when he reached the middle finger did Bosch understand that he had but a short time left. The beggar was counting backwards, 10, 9, 8, 7... .

Bosch could have ignored it and just stopped where he was. Or he could have used the time to try the leaping maneuver again now. But when the index finger of the counting hand was also snapped back, he instead ran off like a child playing hide and seek. Bosch raced back along the path by the flowerbed to a sycamore tree surrounded by conifers that seemed completely out of place. He hid behind it and peered cautiously from his post over to the beggar. He was still counting. The right hand looked like a dot at the distance, but Bosch was sure that only a bare fist was left. The left hand, on the other hand, still showed a few outstretched fingers—and the beggar had not turned around.

Opposite the sycamore tree, already hidden in the forest proper, where the sandy paths of the garden were no longer maintained and lost in the grass, stood a small green shed. This was quite a grand word for this rickety shack made of wooden slats. Bosch pushed himself off the sycamore tree, scurrying over to the shed. It was a better hiding place, because the shed was not noticeable at first glance, thanks to its color and lanky appearance. Bosch had to crouch behind it, face down, because he would have towered over it standing.

Probably the beggar was now looking out for him, he thought. To see in which direction he looked, Bosch raised his head a little.

He tried not to make a sound.

The beggar was standing right in front of him, likewise behind the shed. Bosch was startled so badly that he jumped backward. Their faces were close, nonetheless. Bosch could now see the man's unusual yellow-gold eyes. They were fixating on him with an urgency that Bosch was meant to answer. Not that the beggar said so. He was silent. Still, Bosch was sure. Only, what did he want to hear?

The fixing gaze remained, but the beggar's features suddenly softened, almost becoming mild.

"Do we know each other?" asked Bosch.

After an expressionless split second, the beggar's eyes darkened. The mildness disappeared from his face. It was the last thing Bosch saw. When the beggar's right fist landed on his nose, he blacked out.

There was a knock on the door.

Bosch was busy in the bathroom and ignored the signal. The servants never knocked twice, so he generally didn't bother to answer if he didn't want to be disturbed. As expected, there was no second knock now either. Instead, the door handle squeaked and someone entered without being invited. Bosch heard it. He braced himself to say something and forbid the unwanted entry.

"It was you!" said Amelia as she opened the second door to the bathroom and saw Bosch in the mirror above the sink.

He swallowed down the indignation that had been trying to break through a moment ago.

" I did see right after all. Did something happen? You practically stumbled up the stairs, Bosch."

"Nothing happened," he said.

"Are you bleeding?"

Amelia stepped into the small bathroom. Bosch didn't turn to face her, so she snuggled up against his back from behind and tried to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Get down!" she commanded him. With one knee, she gently poked Bosch in the thigh, making him slouch. Now Amelia rested her head on his shoulder. They looked cheek to cheek in the mirror.

"Your blood is beautiful," she whispered, "so dark, almost purple."

Bosch looked at the small stream of red under his nose, running along his upper lip. It looked more like a carefully placed brushstroke than an injury. As he had done a few times before, Bosch dabbed the blood from his skin with a wet cloth. In the pale light of the bathroom lamp, he too thought the stains on the cloth were almost purple.

"There's nothing more coming," he finally said after they had watched in the mirror for a while to see if a new trickle was forming.

"Does it hurt?" asked Amelia.

"No."

And that was the truth. When he had woken up behind the shed, he had been dizzy. Had felt a buzzing that made his skull vibrate. Plus a twinge that he couldn't have told if it was rushing from his brain to his nose or vice versa. All this fascinated him more than it annoyed him.

On the way back to the house, intermediate stops had been necessary. Sometimes the balance had been lacking to keep walking. And yet it had become easier with every few steps. Now the man in the mirror looked largely as he remembered him. He felt the same way. If he looked very closely, Bosch could see a slight swelling on one side of his nose that temporarily broke the otherwise perfect symmetry of his face. It also glimmered slightly greenish under the skin.

Bosch couldn't tell how a bruise announced itself. Or what a broken nose felt like, which he could very well have suffered from this expertly placed punch. Or not? Wouldn't it have to hurt more? And how much?

He thought about how other accidents or injuries in his life had felt. He pondered, searching his memories for falls on icy roads, like the ones he had seen all the time last winter here in Berlin. A brawl or two, the serious kind instigated by the drunks in the bars, or the not really mean-spirited kind staged by the adolescent boys in the schoolyard. Or a fall from a bicycle, a sprained arm after a failed climb in a tree, jammed fingers....

Bosch silently looked at himself in the mirror. He couldn't remember any accident. The pain behind his nose was still present, but the feeling from that afternoon was the only painful one that came to his mind.

He didn't want to lose it.

"Indeed," Amelia agreed. "It's stopped."

She slid her arms under Bosch's. One hand she ran down his stomach, the other traveled up to his chin. Her fingers traced the contours of his lips.

"Too bad, the contrast with your skin had something, ...hmm..."

"Sick?"

"Something alive, Bosch! Why do you say things like that?"

"I can't remember the last time I bled," he said.

"It suited you..."

Bosch turned around without Amelia taking her hands off him. She glided them around his body until they rested on his hips.

"How would you know?" he asked.

"Just a feeling."

She beamed at him with childlike delight.

"My bleeding big friend, then I will wear red in your honor tonight."

Bosch did not understand what the Countess meant until the middle of the night. When they both showed up for dinner, she was wearing one of her pantsuits—all black. She hadn't even put on red lipstick, but black one as well. It was only when she later had her suit, blouse and boots removed by two men Bosch had never seen before that he could see her red corsage, complete with red fishnet stockings and suspenders.

She smiled amusedly and knowingly at Bosch as she spotted him in

the corner of the salon. And before she disappeared under the arms, backs and heads of the two men.

Amelia made the first move. No set-up was needed for this, no words, no signs. The women, who had arrived in limousines throughout the evening, stood smoking and drinking in the corners of the second-floor salon until the countess had mixed in. Besides d'Utrecht, Harstein, Rex, and Neiwolf, Bosch recognized only Simian, who was the host, trolling from small group to small group with his arms wide open. A few men had also come from the city, tall, broad-shouldered ones with boyish features. No doubt hand-picked by Amelia. But the vast majority of the guests were women. They stood gathered around the residents of the villa, who tended to them in various ways. Around Rex there was silence. He looked so sullen that the two ladies at his side only sipped their champagne sheepishly. Neiwolf sat in a purple velvet armchair like a king holding an audience. He told several women stories about America. In the center of the room, d'Utrecht stood and told stories as well, placing one hand on each of the female guests' buttocks. When he laughed at the top of his lungs, he would grab them, causing the female listener to cry out as well.

Bosch listened to their mock whoops and swirled an ancient rum in his glass. He stood at the open double door that separated the salon from the hallway. Because there were only a few dimly glowing sconces next to many candles in the room, it was downright dim. The smoke from cigarettes and cigars did their part to make the whole scene seem like a secret meeting in twilight.

Sander was not there. Although the room could barely be surveyed, now holding more than twenty people, Bosch was certain. He let his eyes wander over the various groups, and was spotted by Simian. He had joined Rex and driven the two ladies away. The host grabbed the poet by the shoulders and talked at him for a long time—returning Bosch's gaze.

Amelia reappeared between her two admirers, pushed one of them to the other corner of the sprawling sofa, and sat on his lap. She snapped her

fingers at the second man. He tore the already half-unbuttoned shirt from his upper body and then crawled up to the throning countess. When he grabbed her breasts from behind, she moaned so loudly that the whole room looked at her. Half of it had done so before anyway. Some women were now putting down their glasses or putting the tips of their cigarettes in the holders on the ashtrays.

It had begun.

Goosequill did not like what Simian was insistently saying in his ear. Everyone except Bosch was focusing right now on the next best person beside them, so only he watched Rex squirming hardly noticeably under Simian's hands. His face spoke volumes as well. The more he frowned and tried in vain to make a rebuttal, the more Simian tapped him encouragingly on the shoulders. And the more happily he stared over at Bosch.

From the corner with the purple armchair came a clang. Neiwolf was surrounded by even more women than before. Two of them were pulling at the legs of his pants, a third had the belt in her hand and her mouth pressed into his lap. The broken glass that had drained its life with a crash onto a marble side table had fallen from the hand of a fourth woman, who placed her own lap with acrobatic skill onto Neiwolf's face. She wedged her knees between the upholstered back of the chair and his ears. Only his chin was seen sticking out from under her bare bottom. He didn't seem to move a bit. She threw her head back, held on to his mop of hair with one hand, and still held the other up in the air with her fingers splayed as if she hadn't realized she'd lost the glass.

Bosch looked back at Simian and Rex. The master of the house still wasn't finished. The fact that he didn't stop to look at Bosch under his torrent of words seemed to be an important aspect of the sermon. The poet was now shaking his head vehemently. When he failed to respond to Simian's appeasements, the encouraging pats on the back ceased. And Simian stopped smiling. He spoke his last words slowly—they must have been unwelcome instructions.

As if on cue, a woman knelt in front of Rex and fussed over him. He lowered his head, not really paying attention to her. It seemed more like an admission that he had given up. Whatever the host's message might have been, it had been understood.

Behind Bosch, another lady shoved her way into the room. She paused briefly, turned to him and offered her hand. He turned her down, which she acknowledged with a regretful pout. Then, prancing, she turned around again. Simian, who had let go of Rex, crossed her path. He caught her prancing movement and, after an elegant bow, whisked her away to another corner of the salon, where a makeshift bed had been set up in the afternoon for the occasion.

This time Bosch didn't join in. He had chosen a suit for the evening session after Amelia had left. The bustle of activity throughout the house had come to his attention. With his elegant two-piece, he fit in perfectly with the backdrop of excellently dressed people in front of him. Without exception, however, they were busy getting rid of as many of their clothes as possible. For some, it could not go fast enough, others made a game out of emphasized slowness that was as delightful as it was agonizing. D'Utrecht, for example, moaned theatrically and full of impatience while a woman unknown to Bosch opened each vest button for him one by one, as if they were fragile vases that should not be touched too frantically or firmly. It almost drove d'Utrecht crazy how long it all took. But he didn't complain, just continued to groan. The woman knew what she was doing.

Less time passed than the participants probably realized, until, in the dim light, it was no longer pants, blouses, shirts, and jackets that set the scene, but skin. Bosch looked around at the various piles of bodies. Most had an order to them that was easy to grasp. Harstein pushed two bare buttocks parallel to each other with his huge paws and copulated with them in turn. His back unfolded into a monstrous sail of flesh as he did so.

Other piles were harder to understand. On the old architect in his purple armchair sat now yet more women, a man even in addition. That

Neiwolf did not break or complain was remarkable. However, Bosch was more puzzled by a tangle of limbs, hair and bellies that had formed near him at the door. Where, from a purely anatomical point of view, he expected to see a head at the end of a torso, only an arm showed itself to him. Only one, mind you. Next to it, instead of a matching arm, was a lady's upper thigh. A head was indeed peeking out from somewhere, but there seemed to Bosch to be too few faces for the sheer mass of body parts. The tangle rose up to his waist.

There had to be little air below—and even more pressure.

Bosch sipped his rum. Astonished, he noticed that there was none left in the glass. So he carefully walked past the tangle and picked his way among the increasingly loud smacking and groaning audience to the mini-bar hidden in one of the red globes. While he was refilling his glass with a good shot of rum, a woman reached out for him. She reached between his legs and then jerked her fingers in the same rhythm with which she, on all fours, was moved from the rear. Bosch did not react.

He didn't want to spill anything.

Finally, he released the stranger's hand with a not very gentle slap on her fingers. Supplied with a new drink, he retreated back to his observation spot at the entrance. He usually did not refuse such evenings. For some reason too unimportant for him to really want to understand, nothing urged him to join the others tonight. He'd rather drink—and look at the twitching, vibrating, bending bodies. There was so much motion in the large room! And at the same time, everything was gravitating downward with a mindless, animalistic heaviness, onto the bed, the seating, or in many cases, simply onto the carpet.

And then Bosch saw Edith.

She was lying on the bed where just a moment ago her husband had been enjoying himself with the dancing girl. But now the two of them were standing with another couple and sticking their tongues into each other's mouths, as if they were looking for something in there together. Edith

shared the bed with a woman who gently kissed her thighs. At the head end squatted a man who may have been half Edith's age. He rubbed himself in the small crevice between Edith's neck and shoulder.

She seemed to take no notice, neither of the young man nor of her lover. Edith's eyes were closed and did not open while Bosch watched her from then on. He was oblivious to the other groups of people. The nakedness of the lady of the house captivated him. With a twitch on her forehead and slightly contracted eyebrows, she gave herself away. Bosch saw this hint of an effort whenever the woman at Edith's feet tried to open her legs a little wider.

Edith wasn't opening her eyes in lust, though. Bosch understood it now. She shut herself away from the scenes around her—and from what was happening to her.

The young man released Edith's hair from its carefully pinned clasps. He played with it a little, let it fall through his fingers and smelled it. Simian went to help him, for he had suddenly appeared behind the hair player. Now Bosch noticed movement from all corners at once: Amelia rose above her lovers and strolled stark naked across the room to the bed. A man and a woman—Bosch had never seen either of them before—let go of each other to crawl after Amelia. The three of them now headed toward Edith.

Harstein was the center of a small pyramid of bodies, from which a rhythmic slapping of flesh echoed particularly loudly into the room. He looked back and forth between Amelia and Edith over two backs with flashing red eyes. Bosch expected, with that expression on the colossus's face, that any second he would push the people in the pyramid aside like bowling pins to pounce on Amelia or Edith.

But that did not happen. Bosch licked the bottom of his glass for one last drop of rum. Empty again! At the same time, Edith finally opened her eyes, as Amelia threw herself at her feet. In the process, she had to wrestle for space with the woman, who by now had persistently worked her way up to Edith's private parts. But now the lady of the house grabbed the

woman's head courageously with both hands. She pushed the face away from her, deep into the mattress, and launched herself over it like a gymnast would over a springbok.

A muffled gasp escaped the mattress from the stunned lover. Simian and the young man both fell forward, because Edith had fled from the bed with a quick leap. Amelia was plainly knocked over in the process.

Edith hurried past the couples or larger groups that were scattered everywhere. She was heading for Bosch, that is, directly for the door. He made room for her even before she could ask for it. And so, without a word, she stormed past him out into the hallway, naked as she was.

Bosch turned to follow Edith. He saw her disappear a few feet down the hall into her and Simian's bedroom. Without hurry, he went after her, glancing back at the door of the salon from time to time.

No one was coming.

Bosch found the bedroom door open. Edith was squatting on the bed with her back to him. She had slumped to a heap of pale skin. Since she was still naked, Bosch took off the jacket of his suit. And he gently tapped the doorframe with his fingertips before entering.

Edith said nothing. She didn't react at all. Only when Bosch sat down beside her on the bed and threw his jacket over her shoulders did she raise her head to him. She was crying. Edith's blue eyes were covered with a cloudy veil from the tears. The eye shadow carefully applied earlier in the evening was smudged on one side. A few black pigments of mascara marked the flow of tears down both cheeks like tiny flotsam.

"Thank you," Edith said, pulling the jacket close with both hands across her chest. All she had to do here in her bedroom was open one of the drawers beside the bed to put on something of her own, but she didn't. Nor did she slip under the covers or back away from Bosch.

"Each time I think I can do this..." she whispered after a brief silence between the two of them.

Bosch said nothing.

"... And after all, turns out it's true."

She buried her face in her coat collar for a moment. When she lifted it again, the tears had dried.

"But it's not right."

"Why does it have to be right?" asked Bosch. "Or wrong?"

"I can tell you know this city, Herr Bosch. It goes to great lengths to put everything into perspective, to question everything. Don't do the same, please! Some things just aren't appropriate..."

Bosch liked the agitated undertone in Edith's voice. He thought it contrasted wonderfully with the image she gave off. For a woman sitting naked on the bed next to him, having just escaped from an orgy, the words came from the lady of the house with an unexpectedly resolute tone.

"Some things just aren't appropriate," Bosch repeated slowly, as if he needed to recall a difficult shopping list.

"Go ahead and say it!"

"What do you mean?"

"That it sounds silly for me, of all people, to talk like that," Edith explained. She looked down at herself, then shrugged.

"I don't think it sounds silly."

"You know, it's just how he wants it," Edith continued, not acknowledging Bosch's interjection. "He's my husband. It's the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' He says I'm not doing anything wrong when he's around. And yet... it's a sin..."

Bosch looked at Edith as she spoke. He tried to gauge from her cheek and from her still trembling lips whether this was the woman he had seen a few minutes ago. Or if he was completely mistaken about her.

He let his eyes wander over the walls.

"Are you looking for a cross?" asked Edith. "You won't find one, nowhere. Simian can't stand them. The great financier! The ever so welcoming host! A little piece of wood upsets him. I had to take it down."

"I didn't know..."

Edith interrupted Bosch, placing a hand on his leg.

"That there could be a devout woman living in this house, too?"

"You didn't let on, I suppose."

"Maybe because I'm ashamed..."

A few individual tears returned. Edith shrank a little more into Bosch's jacket.

"Isn't that why you're acting?"

" Acting?"

"Gänsekiel's play," Bosch helped. "It's not exactly the stuff for devout audiences."

"No one has shown it to me. What makes you ask that? I mean, now?"

"I thought the reason you invited me the other day was because you were also in the play."

"Theater with your friends!" She laughed tensely. "If I weren't Simian's wife, they wouldn't even tolerate me in the house."

What had previously been an agitated undertone now tilted into something that seemed laced with galled bitterness.

"A fine little secret society you have there."

Bosch pondered these words.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Your way of not knowing things is disarming every time," Edith said. But this time with honest relief.

"I don't think I've ever met a man who cares as little as you do about how ignorant he is..."

"Is that a compliment?"

"...and as a result, seems even more confident than anyone else in the room. It's impressive."

"I'm not doing this on purpose."

"I know," Edith murmured. "I know that."

The last words were little more than a whisper. The inner cloud that had made Edith flee loomed over her again.

"Don't ask me about your friends. What would I know about them? Bosch, they're only here because of you."

"Simian invited them, long before he invited me."

"I can't explain it," Edith insisted. "Since you've been here, everything's been different. Your friends are different. Before, they all went their separate ways. I hardly noticed them. And there was no..."

Bosch waited.

"...there were no games like these. None of them."

"Are you saying this is being done just for me?" asked Bosch.

"Can't you see that you're always the center of attention?"

"I'm just the most recent person here," Bosch placated. And he meant what he said. Edith's perspective puzzled him.

"What if you're the last one?"

"Again, I don't know what you mean," Bosch confessed.

"All the guest rooms," Edith explained hesitantly. "I never thought anything of it. And I can't say why, but I don't think anyone will come anymore. It's like everyone's been waiting here. For you."

They fell silent, one more time. Edith's words echoed in Bosch's mind. She withdrew her hand from his leg.

"We're alone here," he said softly after a while. "If we went back into the salon, you'd see that I'm not the center of attention. Everybody's in there. I'm not. I'm here, with you."

"Isn't that strange?" replied Edith, more to herself than to Bosch.

"Why did you run away earlier?"

Edith looked Bosch straight in the eye. Her brows contracted a little and her hands gripped tighter into the coat fabric in front of her chest.

"You know why!" she retorted.

"You just said it was wrong..."

"And that it was a sin."

"But that's not why you left, is it?" asked Bosch. "I was standing in the doorway and I saw you. You were part of it, at first anyway."

Heat rose in Edith's cheeks. Red blotches blossomed on her neck and became full-blown blushes as they went upward.

"It made me uncomfortable to begin with," Edith justified herself quietly. "I can't see the bodies. It's so..., so random. As if we were animals."

"But for Simian, you were willing to ignore that..."

"For the covenant we made," she improved. "It's his own soul, and his sins are enough for him to carry. I can do nothing for him that will ease his judgment. I will stand before our Maker with my head bowed. I know that. And Simian? He would only laugh at me if he heard us talking like this."

"Then why didn't you let it happen?"

Edith jerked back and forth on the edge of the bed as if she were sitting on a pointed object.

"I was trying to be somewhere else, at least in my mind. I can make the greedy hands and the kisses go away—or pretend it's not me feeling them, but someone else. But those soulless sounds, I..."

She broke off in mid-sentence.

"You're smiling!"

The two words came hard and cold from Edith's mouth. She didn't ask Bosch about it, she presented him with the fact that he was smiling. The observation sounded as incensed as if he had said something unforgivable out loud instead of just thinking it.

She was right, it occurred to Bosch. The instant she had said it, he felt the tension in the corners of his mouth. They were drawn up to the tip of his nose. A colossal, overly satisfied smile was on his face. Bosch didn't need a mirror to know how inappropriately elated he must look right now, while the lady of the house was baring her innermost feelings.

Edith struggled for words. Bosch could see the disgust growing in her expression with every second in which he said nothing.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" asked Edith aloud. She stood up and took two steps back from the edge of the bed. In this erect pose, she looked like a teacher about to reprimand her student.

Bosch considered saying something in his defense. But Edith, in her deeply hurt anger, seemed so alive and at the same time so at his mercy that something very satisfied arose in him and made him keep quiet.

Edith trembled. Bosch had not stopped smiling.

"You're just like the others," she said wearily.

"I'm not."

"Maybe you're worse!" continued Edith. His retort infuriated her. "You're a perfect fit for them! Why do I only see it now? You don't need to drool like d'Utrecht. You don't need to yell at people or threaten violence with every move they make like Harstein. Maybe you are different from your friends, Bosch. But they're satisfied with a curtsy and some skin from me, you're not. At least they out there don't pretend to be interested in anything about me other than the flesh. You sit here and gloat!"

"Please, Edith, you misunderstand me. I gave you my jacket after all..."

"Not over my body! You're gloating over my guilt!"

Edith shouted it in his face.

"Get out!"

Bosch obeyed. He closed the door behind him and walked slowly back across the hall to the salon. The smile slipped from his face now. Grimly compressed lips took its place. The satisfied feeling that had arisen in him a moment ago continued to hang firmly and comfortably in his chest. But mixed with it was a discomfort that he did not understand. And which he found unbecoming. Need he be ashamed of something? Had he taken Edith away from the salon? No. Had he gone after her to see her cry? No, he had not known why he had followed her. He had run out of rum. The door to the bedroom had been open. What could he have done about it?

Suddenly Bosch understood what this uneasiness inside him meant. He despised the weakness that Edith had shown. And this clarity hit Bosch no less violently than the beggar's fist blow—only without bloodshed. All

at once he realized that, as far back as he could remember, he had never cared about whether people liked him, avoided him, were satisfied with his words, or were shocked by them. Contempt! Why did this feel new?

He tore his shirt off his torso. His jacket was still in Edith's bedroom. Bosch had walked no more than three or four steps deep into the salon before the first women turned to look at him. Whatever they were tangled with or connected to, it suddenly became less interesting than Bosch's beautiful and quivering silhouette. The unknown men had the same experience, even those for whom this kind of attraction came as a surprise. Only the house guests did not immediately lose their heads at the sight of Bosch. But they also noticed his return and acknowledged it with a smile.

It was the very same kind of smile that had seized Bosch just moments ago. And like him, they didn't notice how the corners of their mouths now pulled up with delight.

4. Dandelion

The beams and floors of the villa groaned and creaked. Apart from that, it was dead quiet in the house. The wood was battling a scorching heat that was pushing through the roof from outside. Bosch wandered the deserted hallways in his robe. Someone had, as usual, left breakfast for him outside the door. Once again, the butter had since turned yellow, the bread hard.

Not even staff was to be seen. Bosch tried to work out what day of the week it might be. But he did not succeed. Maybe it was Sunday and the staff was off?

As he walked across the patio into the garden, he let himself fall into the stagnant heat more than he moved forward. The muggy air seemed to stand, thick as absorbent cotton and smelling of a mixture of pine needles and rubber tires. Everything that wasn't wood or stone softened, adding to the slightly acrid scent: the shingles on the roof that bent upward by the dozens, the water hoses in the blazing sun, even the grout in the patio. Behind the frail shed, where rusting tools stood next to cords and old bags, it was especially bad. Bosch glanced only briefly behind the cluttered far side, then turned his attention back to the garden.

So the beggar wasn't here either.

Bosch gave up the search. He did not believe that the fist in his face was the last he had ever seen of this strange figure. By now, whenever he went into the garden, he would search out of the corner of his eye to see if there wasn't a scrap of the coat somewhere, a suspiciously wiggling bush, or a movement behind a tree trunk. But nothing. Not a trace for days.

Over there, in one of the circular openings between the garden paths, something clanked. Immediately, Bosch's blood rushed to his head. He

clenched his hands into fists. In no time at all, he had crept up from the shed, keeping in the shade of the waist-high hedges and flower beds.

The sight disappointed Bosch beyond measure.

The circular place was lined by a round park bench. It encircled the area in a single piece, broken only by the three sand paths that converged here. Rex Goosequill lay on the bench, one leg in the air, a tray of grapes, peaches and other fruit at his feet. And an unlabeled bottle in his hand.

Rex seemed completely drunk. The fruits on the tray had begun to develop rotten spots in the heat. They attracted small flies, which were driven away again and again by the swinging foot of the poet. Not that Rex gave a damn about the fruit. He wiggled his free-hanging leg in time to a song he was humming gleefully to himself. Here and there he interrupted the tune for a suppressed giggle, accompanied by a funny remark.

Funny at least to Rex. Bosch didn't understand a word of what Goosequill was muttering. He understood that he was unlikely to find the beggar today, so he set about returning to the house.

"Here, have a sip," Rex said.

Bosch paused. Rex lay unchanged on the bench, bobbing his foot and humming. His eyes were closed.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Drink, man," Rex fluted cheerfully. "It's good. Look at me!"

Bosch did. Still, he turned around, took the bottle from Goosequill's hand, and sat down on the bench next to the poet. Rex acknowledged it with a quiet, not entirely earnest sigh of exultation.

The first sips hurt Bosch's mouth. They burned the throat like raw liquor, but on the tongue, in addition to the pain, they left sweet pinpricks that tasted the way the kitchen in the house smelled when spices were being swirled for feasts.

"Not all of it by yourself, sir!" admonished Rex. He had opened his eyes now. From below, with his head on the bench, he looked up at Bosch, who had put the bottle to his mouth.

Bosch suppressed the next sip that his restless thoughts demanded. He handed the bottle back to Rex.

"Cheers!" the latter commented. After managing a few sips himself, he set the bottle down.

"What are you doing out here?" asked Rex. His tongue was heavy. The words didn't come with the usual snappy bite.

"Nothing."

"Well, if anybody's doing nothing, it's me. Your're doing stuff! You're sniffing out corner after corner," Rex countered. "Lost something?"

Bosch didn't answer. Instead, he bent down for the bottle, took a swig, and then kept it in his lap.

"Well, that's a no," Rex commented listlessly. For a few minutes they were both silent. Only the bottle moved back and forth between them periodically. When it ran out, Rex inspected it with a glance through the neck of the bottle up into the sun. Not a drop left.

"Harr, harr, harr!" the poet suddenly roared. As a physical underscore to his abrupt outburst, he sprang up from the bench. He kept the bottle in both hands, one eye squinted, the other fixated on the hole. Like a pirate peering through a telescope.

The pose was well chosen. Bosch jolted up from his hunched sitting posture. He saw Rex standing next to him with the improvised apparatus, his chest swelling with pride. However, inertia caught up with, or rather overtook, the poet. He had stood up with too much momentum. For a split second, he tried to keep his balance with clumsy steps, but in vain: Rex toppled to the side and fell nose-first. The bottle flew out of his hand and smashed against one of the iron stands of the bench.

Rex laughed. He stayed down rather than stumble again. But he stretched an arm up in the air as if to speak up.

"Don't despair!"

With these words Rex rolled once around his own dusty axis. It was enough for him to reach under the part of the bench where Bosch was

sitting. He pulled out a cardboard box, from which three more of the labelless bottles stared at Bosch.

He stared back. They were full.

And so they opened the first of the three bottles, and shared its contents. The sun was high in the sky above them, bringing more and more beads of sweat to Bosch's forehead as time passed. Rex, too, was melting in the heat, but soon neither of them could muster up to seek shelter in the somewhat cooler house. They just kept drinking. Bosch felt the inner burn of the liquor stronger than the sun on his skin. It bordered on pain, but that's what he wanted to feel in his gut today.

"Have you learned your lines?" asked Goosequill.

"No," Bosch replied, without any sense of guilt.

"Of course not, why should you?" muttered the poet, apparently unsurprised. "You want to have nice lines and put on nice clothes, that's all. The work is left to me..."

"Did you really write the play?" wanted to know Bosch.

"Of course."

"How does that work?"

"Writing a play? Not worth mentioning, you just write down the story you come up with," Rex explained. "Sometimes you make it up as you go along, too. It doesn't matter. The individual words aren't as important as they are in a poem. And it's not as much work as a novel. In fact, all you need is a framework of a few characters, places, and jokes..."

Rex paused for a moment before continuing.

"..or injustices—depending on whether you want it to be a comedy or rather a tragedy."

"I don't know what kind of play yours is," Bosch confessed.

"Maybe you should have learned your lines!"

Rex spat into the rose bed behind the bench. He had to clear his throat and coughed, but that didn't stop him from opening the next bottle.

"Doesn't matter, anyway," he said quietly. "It's just a finger exercise

anyway, something for in between. Simian wanted an easy one. Well, here he has an easy one, tatatata!"

"You don't like it?"

"It's still better than most of the stuff they play on Ku'damm. What do you mean, don't like it? I never write trash. But Lucifer, Beelzebub, the angels? Carrying dead souls through the air like carrier pigeons? This is a children's story, Bosch, nothing more. A little farce for big kids. Something was needed; I put something together. Period."

Bosch let this sink in as best he could. He was, first, not used to really listening to Rex for more than a few sentences. Second, his head was slowly spinning and he relaxed more and more into a reclining oblivion next to Rex on the bench.

"You don't seem to know any really big stories, do you?" speculated Goosequill. "Big, because they're real!"

"I paint..." slurred Bosch.

"You want me to tell you a really big story for once?"

Bosch didn't even try to respond in any way. Rex was already getting himself into storytelling mode.

"Take the angels, let's stay on topic," Rex lectured. "Wait a minute..., wait a minute!"

He held a finger to his mouth as if he had to stop himself. With nervously searching eyes, the poet looked around him, again and again, until he found something he could use at the foot of the bench, slightly behind his back.

Rex plucked a dandelion from the ground.

"Who cares?" asked Bosch sullenly.

"You don't? Why?"

"...I don't know"

"I'll tell you exactly why," Rex eagerly jumped in. "Our little play leaves you indifferent because my angels are just there. They have no story, just roles. They lack pain, the outrageous, and everything that makes them

great! That's why my play is just a finger exercise. It's small."

"What... outrageous... outrageousness?", Bosch pushed out piecemeal. He felt the searing heat on his forehead suddenly much more intense than before the last bottle.

Rex drank.

"Heaven's, Bosch," he replied. "That one is outrageous! The throne of God, immortality. And the war..."

"What war?"

"The only one," Rex whispered, handing Bosch the bottle.

Bosch drank—reluctantly.

Goosequill turned the dandelion back and forth between his fingers. The last yellow blades of the flower had completely lost their color and hung withered between the white fine hairs that ended in countless dots. The lightest gust of wind would have been enough to blow them away.

"That's the story I'll tell you," Rex began. "It's not the kind of thing you write down. And it's not the kind of thing people want to read, let alone see on the stage. They want to keep their angels in church. That's just what they know: pretty little white figurines on colorful leaden windows..."

Rex laughed spitefully, like eavesdropping guests around a campfire who want to demonstrate to storytellers that they are listening and of the same opinion. But there was no one else here, so Rex had to do it himself. Bosch just glared at him and said nothing.

"And then they talk about the stories in the big fat book. There's something about the Devil and Adam and Eve and the apple and sin. There they find their pretty angels from the lead windows again. All beautiful and with curly hair, so noble and pure."

Another spiteful laugh. This time Bosch mimicked Rex and followed it up with a contemptuous snort. Rex liked that.

"Which one of those pious folks out there has read up, I ask you? Who among them knows that their nice story of good and evil never existed? Angels here, devils there? There was no such thing in Heaven, only millions

of immortal beings. The angels were God's first creation and he created them all equal, at least none of them better or worse than the others.

There were only the angels and God, for all eternity. He had made them in his image, so they were just as timeless as he was. They were always beside him because he is the beginning and the end. The angels had no concept of living or dying, why should they?

They loved him and he loved them. Nothing else mattered. They didn't look like the pictures people make of them. Not at all. They were neither woman nor man. And they didn't have wings. Do you know why?"

Bosch shook his head in a daze.

"There's no air in Heaven!" said Rex with a laugh.

"No one needs to breathe. No angel ever needed feathers to swing into the air and get to another place. Heaven is their realm. It does not obey the laws that humans have made up about the earth. It is the other way around. Everything that is beautiful on this earth is an attempt to press the beauty of Heaven into form. With everything that is ugly, it has failed."

"War!" it burst out of Bosch demandingly. One of his eyelids twitched open and shut involuntarily.

"The war, Bosch, of course," Rex said. "The war began with joy. With the greatest joy Heaven had ever seen. All the angels gathered as God created the Messiah before their eyes: his Son. All, without exception, were spellbound by it. God became the Father, the Son became his essence. He proclaimed Him before the angels and His every word penetrated every corner of Heaven, through every thought, every possible form. God proclaimed that this was His Son—and all the angels praised Him. They became like Him in their visages. They knelt before him, in love. It was a day of rejoicing!

The joy that rose in the angels was like no other they had ever felt. Only one of them did not feel it. Lucifer felt something that no angel before him had known. Jealousy smoldered within him. And when he could not explain how this new and burning feeling had taken hold of him,

his thoughts rushed helpfully to this mystery. They found meaning. His thoughts determined that this was not just. He was one of the first angels, if not the first. Though created equal, he outshone thousands. His place was at the side of God, all knew it—and now he was to bend the knee?

He withdrew while the hosts of other angels rejoiced before the throne of God. For the last time he spoke with his real name to his closest confidant, Beelzebub. He lied to him, with the first of all lies: Beelzebub was to lead away as many angels as possible, out into the vastness of Heaven, where he would join them in a reception for the Son of God.

Beelzebub did as he was commanded. A third of all the angels in Heaven responded to his call.

The next time Lucifer spoke, he lost his name to eternity. They called him from then on only the enemy, the 'Satan'. And he bore this name not with shame, but with pride. He came before the angels who had followed Beelzebub. He summoned them, opened wide the eyes of their souls with his words! He said that they were the creatures of Heaven, that none of them could remember when they had been born or made. They had always been themselves: sufficient unto themselves and made of themselves. Gods in their own right. Why should they kneel before the Son who had only been created before their eyes? Why should they be humbled when they were free and could rule over Heaven? They should take the throne..."

Rex paused. Bosch looked at his lips. They seemed to be trembling a little. Because the pause became too long for him after a few moments, he held out the bottle to Rex, which by now had landed back in his hands.

It worked. Rex reached for the bottle and drained the rest in a gulp so long that Bosch felt slightly nauseous just from watching.

It brought life back to the poet's tongue.

"They listened to him, stretched across the horizon as far as the eye could see. And only one angel, a single one, stepped forth when Satan had spoken. His name was Abdiel. He stepped forward because he had recognized the vanity in Satan and knew that he was lying to himself. He

warned him of the wrath of God. He addressed the assembled multitudes behind him, but they remained silent. They did not listen to him, for in their hearts Satan had sown the seeds of doubt.

Satan let Abdiel go. Even more, he was to proclaim the message that he and his army would come and reclaim what belonged to them.

And so the war began, Bosch! Abdiel rushed to the throne of God, where his news did not surprise. God sees everything, doesn't he? He called Michael and Gabriel to him, who, like Satan, were among the first of their kind. They were to raise an army, matching the enemy in numbers and size —and they did.

When the battle began, Heaven took on the very shape of their thoughts. Like a canvas, Bosch, on which you splash paint. The angels didn't know what to do. They almost burst with love for each other and with sorrow over the fact that the other side didn't understand why they were wrong. And in some, hatred was eating away at their immortal souls: Satan and his entourage grew into dark warriors, with black, gold and blazing armor. Even the most inconspicuous of them stood as immovable and fire-breathing as a volcano in that valley which suddenly dripped from the ether. Satan and his closest associates became giants. They crafted shields as large as planets.

Michael and Gabriel were their equals. They found themselves on the other side of the valley. A hill appeared below them, from which they cried out to attack.

They made hands, and in them formed bright swords, heavy as mountain ranges, but as smooth and sharp as the horizon above the sea. The sky turned into a stage for the frenzy that seized all the angels, no matter on whose side they fought.

The first stroke of the sword, which Satan defied with his shield, thundered in its negation louder over the vastness of the battlefield than any thunderstorm ever heard by men. It pierced the angels' marrow and bone—neither of which they had had before. But their passion now turned

into bodies, their attacks into blows and arrow shots, their search for shelter into boulders, mountains or forests. And all this in size and beauty so fantastic that the bodies on earth, the rocks, mountains and forests here are not even a reflection of them.

On both sides the millions fought until they had to retreat, exhausted. For the first time in their existence, they all had caused and suffered pain. But no angel paid with their life! All of them are immortal!

The next day the armies clashed again. In their desperation, Michael's legions uprooted the forests and threw them at Satan's troops. The sky darkened under the projectiles before the trees rained down like continents on the angels. And yet, this was not the end, but only the beginning.

Mammon was the first to discover sparkling beauty in his tomb beneath the heavenly earth. He formed ore from it and saltpeter, and dug himself free. The others did the same; it looked like a retreat. But they only deceived God's angels, who nearly celebrated their victory. Mammon and Satan gave free rein to their hatred. They created weapons that Michael's army could not have dreamed of.

The cannons that Satan brought into position shredded everything they hit. The sky turned purple, the ground split. Thousands of angels were scattered to the winds with each shot. Those who could take cover soon did not know up from down. The noise of the guns brought them close to madness, so that they almost forgot their love for God. Desperate, they dug themselves into the bowels of the battlefield. With their last strength they hurled the stuff of Heaven itself at their opponents, so that soon the ether began to tremble.

And when the third day dawned, the sky was about to break. Neither army could win. They had lost their heads so that they did not comprehend this, even the faithful angels.

Only then did God send the Son..."

Rex lifted the dandelion between his and Bosch's faces. He had held it nervously twirling in his fingers the whole time.

"The Son descended in a chariot. Where he passed through the ranks in the midst of battle, Satan's angels fled before him. The rest fell to their knees, as much from exhaustion as from awe. The Son wielded a sword like no other. He did not strike his enemies with a blade, yet he drove them screaming before him as if he had cut their souls in two. Divided into their true self, which still loved God, and into their own delusions of grandeur, whose seed Satan had planted in them.

He did not cut them. He kissed them with the truth. And they ran, faster and farther. Only Satan did not. But his own army washed over him like a tidal wave. They swept him along, to the edge of Heaven. For there the Son drove the army.

There was no mercy. Not even a last look back at the ruins of Heaven they would leave behind, which had been their home. The Son drove them all, every last one of them, to the edge, where the sky gapes into chaos.

And then he spread his arms without saying a word."

Goose quill blew into the white flower of the dandelion, which immediately lost half of its tiny dots to the breeze. They stood for a fraction of a heartbeat in the hot summer air before slowly gaining weight and sinking down, to the garden floor. Bosch watched them go in silence. Rex watched him do so.

"They fell down, one by one," he said. "By the hundreds, by the thousands. Their screams died away as they went over the edge. Chaos swallowed their bodies, every sound and any hope of resisting the fall.

Mammon fell down and Moloch, who seemed to surpass even Satan in size and violence, right beside him. A moment ago he had terrified the faithful angels in droves, now he fell helplessly like a child from his mother's arms. And for all of them, Heaven was both mother and father. God and Heaven had been one. The Son tore both from their souls—with nothing more than a wave of his hand.

Mulciber fell down and Belial. The one had created from the ether itself the most beautiful forms to bring joy to God and the rest of the angels. The other had always been the voice of reason and measure, esteemed and loved like no other.

Dagon fell and Beelzebub, who would have done and did everything for Satan without thinking. And this, his brother, to whom he had always looked up, fell above him into Chaos. Satan alone had the strength to reach into the firmament one last time, as the disorder of his terrible destiny sucked him into the depths. With all his fury he reached into the ranks of the spared angels, but not by chance. He grabbed Abdiel and dragged him down with him. A final act of revenge. The only angel who had resisted him and his multitudes was not rewarded for his piety. The son did not save him. God did not save him. They let him fall with the damned all the way down to Hell.

For nine days."

Rex's Adam's apple twitched up and down twice. He had to spit beside the bench, accompanied by a disgusted sound. His haggard face twitched erratically, as if the sinews and muscles were fighting a battle whose trigger was long forgotten. Rex swallowed again, and then again, and again, until he managed to bring calm to the turmoil of his physical reactions.

He took a deep breath and, with the utmost willpower, drove away a dull cloud that had settled over his eyes with the last words.

He was done.

"Do you know the story, Bosch?" asked Goosequill. In reply he received, if it could be called that, a wide grin beneath glazed eyes.

"Hmmmm," Bosch blurted out.

Rex nodded. He spat again before bracing himself with both hands on the bench to move closer to Bosch.

"Hey, you, Bosch?" he asked with a heavy and quiet tongue. "And can you remember your birthday?"

He waited for an answer, but it took a while for Goosequill to realize that his counterpart was not contemplating silently, but had fallen asleep with his eyes open. Bosch lapsed into a barely audible snore.

The poet's expression darkened. He looked at Bosch's face up close while he considered what to do. Finally, he simply stood up and quietly retrieved the very last of the peculiar bottles from under the bench. They had emptied all the others, the two of them.

Rex took another deep breath before loosening the bottle's cork. He looked up at the sun until his eyes hurt. Then he put the bottle to his mouth and drank it down. In one go.

Afterwards he turned and slowly walked back to the patio and the house. He moved with sure steps, without lurching, stumbling, or the heaviness of a drunk.

Upright. Thoughtful.

5. Curtain Call

Sander never talked about work. Ever. There was a piece of cake in front of him and it was his day off. That's why he also sat at the salon table today while coffee was poured for the residents. There was talk about this and that, but Sander remained silent. He was looking forward to the cake.

"Excuse me, Herr Sander, you are requested at the door," a servant told him quietly over his shoulder. He had come out of the hall, heading straight for Sander's chair.

"By who?"

"A police officer. He says it's urgent."

Sander put down the silver cake fork he was holding, the prongs already pressed into the cake batter. He nodded silently without answering the servant with words. He was not in the mood, but it could not be avoided that he would have to deal with the man.

He was on call.

Sander pushed his chair back and excused himself. A policeman in uniform waited for him in the hall. He was still standing in the open front door, watched suspiciously by the employees who were going about their duties, crossing the large hall from all directions. They were not used to an official visit. Even walkers never found their way through the forest. Not even by chance.

Bosch was present in the hall, too. He came down the stairs. When he saw Sander by the uniformed man, he stopped curiously behind him.

"Good afternoon, captain," said the policeman.

"Masurke," Sander replied curtly. "What is it?"

"I'm really sorry, boss..."

"Yeah, yeah, just spit it out! I do realize you didn't drive all the way out here out of boredom."

"We got us a body," Masurke said. He muffled his voice and leaned forward a bit to be closer to Sander.

Still, Bosch understood what was being said.

"Where?"

"Eichendorffstraße, in a basement."

"In the Poets' Quarter?" commented Sander, astonished. "It' s been a good few months since we've had one..."

"Firearm," Masurke continued. "The victim is male, between twenty and thirty years old, presumably, shot at close range. Right in the chest."

"What kind of basement is this?"

"Small cell, like the others. There are definitely more basement compartments down there than there are people living upstairs. Something's fishy about it. There are no name tags on the shacks, either."

"And it's small?"

"Whoever fired the shots, they must have seen each other. An execution, if you ask me. Colleagues are on the scene, securing evidence."

"What do you make of it?" asked Sander.

"Art scene, apparently. The basement is full of paintings. The body barely has space. A couple of paintings were buried under the man as he fell. There's blood splattered on well over half of them."

Sander nodded absently. He was thinking.

"Witnesses?"

"None," Masurke said. "Kids were playing in the basement and found the body doing hide and seek, ...supposedly. That's what it said on the note someone turned in. No one wanted to hear questions about the basements, obviously. All illegal, I think. We'll figure that one out."

"Suspects?"

"No one on the scene. But this is an Ox neighborhood, so..."

"Excuse me?" hooked Sander gruffly.

"Oxen-Otto," Masurke pressed out, somewhat caught in embarrassment. "Otto Jülich, I mean. That's his territory."

"Bring him in," Sander ordered. "Along with his henchmen."

"Which ones?"

"Somebody. We'll have to apply some pressure here..."

Masurke nodded.

"Anything else?" asked Sander. He took a deep breath and stretched to his full height.

"The clothes are strange. We found the body in a thick coat. There were gloves in the pockets and he has a scarf around his neck. But he can't have been lying there long. The rigor mortis is gone, but the body is fine, in perfect condition. No bites, no decomposition..."

"...except for the bullet wound," Sander added sternly.

"Of course! I only meant he looks like he's just asleep."

Sander puffed out an emphatically long breath.

"Let's go then, I guess," he said.

Sander turned to accept the jacket which was brought to him. Only now did he notice Bosch.

They looked into each other's eyes. Sander remained silent while Masurke helped him into the jacket. Bosch felt scrutinized by the older man, but said nothing in turn.

"See you later," Sander at last said. "Work is calling."

"See you later..."

After Sander had left with his subordinate, Bosch wandered aimlessly through the house. He happened by the coffee table, sat down, but became grumpy about the conversations that didn't interest him—and he didn't have an appetite, either. One reason was the piercing look in Sander's eyes, which Bosch had never seen from him before. He couldn't make sense of it, couldn't read it. And for once, this bothered him. On the other hand, he

hadn't had any appetite all day, because Goosequill's strange substance was still lingering on his tongue. Yet it had been the day before yesterday that they had been carousing. Bosch had hardly left his room the next day. A burning headache confined him to bed. The pain had subsided by now, but a whiff of nausea still came over Bosch now and then.

He felt restless. It kept him at the table only briefly before he rose again. He preferred to walk through the corridors, from floor to floor, until he could stand it inside no longer. In the garden, he made a few laps along the paths. It was hot again, though not as dry and scorching as the other day. Bosch's thoughts jumped from one uneasy place to the next. With one eye, he again looked out for the beggar, but as usual, he was nowhere to be seen. Bosch was convinced that he would get his revenge, if not today, then tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or sometime. And this certainty did not seem at all comfortable to him. It only made him even more upset than he already was. No sooner did he think about it than Sander's probing gaze appeared before his inner eye again. Then, from one second to the next, he remembered the taste of that liquor, that is, especially the smoldering feeling in his stomach and the pain of yesterday. His sulkiness grew into full-blown moroseness as he did so. If he couldn't give the beggar a good pounding, he would have settled for Goosequill today. He had never liked him anyway. Although that usually signified nothing special in Bosch's case, because he didn't like most people. He didn't care about them. But Goosequill had gotten on his nerves with his lecture in the sun. He had been thinking about that yesterday in bed when he felt this novel feeling of dislike for the poet in his stomach. He was out for the scrawny fellow. Yes, Bosch couldn't stand him. As to why he was only now becoming aware of it, that question lodged itself insistently and unanswered in his mind. It had good company there: Bosch also wondered, among other things, why this garden binge had left him in such a desolate state. He couldn't remember his last hangover. Or his first. When he tried to remember, he felt as if he had no practice at this.

What remained were echoes of the confused lecture he had been given by Rex. Bosch heard sentences over and over again in his mind. And they made him angry. The words made him almost as angry as Goosequill himself. His pinched facial expression, the constant scribbling....

There was a knock at the door to Bosch's room.

He jolted out of his thoughts and found himself at the window next to his bed. Bosch was looking out at the forest.

"There you are!" said Amelia as she cautiously poked her head between the door and the frame into the room.

"What?" asked Bosch over his shoulder. It sounded cold and hard, to his own astonishment.

"Oops," Amelia whispered. "I just wanted to bring you the lines."

She stepped slowly into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Sorry," Bosch heard himself mutter. His mind was already careening again. Part of him was like a spectator, looking at Amelia and himself as two actors. Another thought of the day before yesterday, of Sander, and of everything Bosch suddenly had dislikes for. Goosequill first and foremost.

"Here," Amelia commented on the soft clap with which the stapled sheets of paper landed on the small table of the room. "He rewrote the whole scene. You have new lines."

Bosch ignored her. He turned back to the window.

"We could go over it together, but I sense you're not in the mood..."

"No."

"Is everything all right?"

Amelia joined Bosch at the window. She grabbed him by the waist and gently spun him around to face her.

He looked into her eyes, at her hair, at her mouth, and then lingered again in her dark, unfathomable gaze. Bosch thought of the first time he had seen Amelia. Back at the Felicita, the secret ball of the underworld. He remembered the back so proudly stretched, by which he would recognize Amelia among thousands. And he remembered how everything around her

had faded the closer he had come to her.

Bosch took Amelia's right hand between his own two. Gently, he unfolded her index finger and placed it on his lips. This was how she had shown him not to disagree at the ball.

Amelia smiled at Bosch. She was not touched by the gesture, however. The corners of her mouth rose for a moment, mild and full of familiarity. But then the smile disappeared again. Bosch didn't notice because he closed his eyes. The smell of the finger under his nose triggered the same feeling as the first time. He didn't understand it. But today he did what he had failed to do then: Bosch pushed the tip of his tongue out from between his lips and licked at the skin on the countess's fingertip.

"Stop it!" hissed Amelia.

She withdrew her finger, hand and all. Bosch remained in the same pose, that is, with his eyes closed and both hands folded protectively in front of his mouth—as if Amelia's finger still rested in it. He tasted her skin, and the blood rushed in his ears. The remnants of the nausea and headache he had carried with him all day fizzled out as if by a magic trick. From the tip of his tongue, Amelia's taste spread like a flood throughout his body. It shook Bosch to the bone.

He opened his eyes and saw his hands sink to Amelia's hips and back. With one hand he slid into the curved valley above her bottom, with the other he ran circles over her side. Her taste had instantly ended the confusion in his mind. She tasted of order, of how he should feel. Nothing sweet about it, no lipstick he knew, no smoke, no traces of her day. Her skin tasted like nothing Bosch could have put into words. She just tasted like he could brush off anything that bothered him.

"Amelia..."

She pushed him off her with both hands. The thrust was so strong that Bosch not only slipped from exploring her body, but stumbled backward until he landed on the bed, bewildered.

"No!" she barked at him. "You can't."

"Why not? What do you mean?"

"You're not yourself," she said, squinting her eyes as if simultaneously losing patience and being unsure if it was right to be so open.

"I'm here," Bosch replied. He crawled down from the bed and approached Amelia again. On his knees.

"What do you mean by that? How could I not be myself? Everything is fine—with you around me. Can't you feel that?"

Amelia took a step back from him, toward the door. Bosch stood back up so that he towered high above her. With his back, he obscured the daylight that streamed through the window.

"I want you, Amelia," he said softly, almost breathy.

"You can't have me! And I can't have you. You are not in your right mind, or you would know that yourself."

"What nonsense are you talking?"

Bosch raised his voice. He had had enough of her insinuations.

"Are you afraid of me?"

"You're afraid of yourself, ...Bosch!" said Amelia coldly. She pushed away from the door, which she now felt at her back, and lunged forward with one hand at Bosch's throat. He stood still, not resisting.

"We were made for each other, yes," she whispered in his face. "But not for this! You love only yourself; I love only me. I'm not afraid because I know you as no one else does. We belong together. I have found you. That's all, you hear? You shut your mouth now and learn your lines."

Bosch grasped Amelia's hand at his neck. Slowly and effortlessly, he released each finger one by one. He tried to kiss them, but Amelia clenched her hand into a fist.

"I'm warning you!" she said, "Don't ever try that again. Forget it! For both our sakes..."

And with that, she pushed down the handle and fled the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Scene 4"

Bosch remained where he was. He stood frozen until the frustration of the day—in all its manifestations—broke through with a blow of his fist. There was a bang similar to the one a few seconds earlier when Amelia had slammed the door. The thudding and abrupt sound of his knuckles on the wood of the doorfold faded. All that Bosch was left with was a scratching pain in his bones. He contorted his face, daring only very slowly to look at the four bright red dots on the back of his hand that were his maltreated knuckles. Touching them with the fingers of his other hand produced tiny sparks in his eyes. He got so dizzy that he staggered backward.

"On a hill Beelzebub stands looking down on the battle. On the flaming sea some pirate ships, facing Charon and his doppelgängers..."

But he did not fall down. With an angry snort, Bosch shook the dizziness out of his head. The pain from his knuckles then traveled up his arm to his chest like a licking flame. Bosch soaked up the feeling, greedy and full of defiance. In his mind's eye, he saw his desperate slam against the door replayed over and over. As much as the consequences of it pained him now, this completely senseless act amused him. It struck him as silly, but not in an embarrassing way. He breathed in and out deeply as the pain spread throughout his body, but in the process was already disappearing from his knuckles. Banging on the door literally seemed like the act of a child to him....

"So in the background we have the battle. I'm thinking of a cloth that will be stretched across the whole stage. Who's going to paint it?"

...An angry child who doesn't know where to put all these thoughts that he can't combine into a pattern. Now Bosch smiled at this, with all the

pain in every fiber of his body as witness, for he was not a child, but a father. He knew better. And if it took broken knuckles to remember that he was above childish riddles, games and whims, then it was just as well.

Amelia was right, he sensed it. That he didn't understand why she was being so secretive didn't matter. He would figure it out. He would play along. And win.

"Good. So onstage we have Beelzebub, of course, then the teacher and the fakir. We're ready to go!"

The pain disappeared, completely.

With two quick steps Bosch was at the side table next to the bed. He reached for the crystal decanter that stood on it, not bothering to decant some of the cognac in it into the appropriate tumbler. He put the decanter directly to his lips and drank half the bottle like water.

The pages of paper on the table caught his eye.

"...And Beelzebub, please!"

Bosch set the decanter down, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and picked up the new lines for the play. Without reading a word, Bosch crumpled the paper with relish in the very hand that had left four small dents of cracked varnish on the door of the room. He wanted it to hurt.

"Beelzebub?" said Rex. It was less a question, more a demand. As little as the poet usually had to say around the house, when the group gathered in the basement, he was the director. Even Harstein held back his usual threatening gestures toward Goosequill during rehearsals. Most of the time, anyway.

"Are you with us?" repeated Rex.

When Bosch didn't answer, d'Utrecht nudged him with his elbow.

"Huh?"

"Your cue," d'Utrecht whispered.

All eyes were on him. Bosch forcibly jerked himself out of his thoughts and searched for his line.

"They all should burn," he recited. "Even in death they play for their lives. I don't understand people."

Harstein nodded appreciatively. He was seated—supported by two chairs—next to Goosequill, who was positioned in the center like a conductor in front of the orchestra. On the other side sat Neiwolf.

Up on the stage, Bosch, d'Utrecht, and Simian were crowded together. Amelia had not come. Sander had excused her. He himself was leaning against a post at the other end of the stage. Shortly after dinner, he had returned from the city. He did not mention a word about his visit to the crime scene. Nor did anyone ask about it.

"All right, so there you have it. Does anyone else have a question?"

No one said anything. There were only nods, so Rex continued.

"Best just give it a go. We'll start with Sisyphus going up the slope. The fakir and Beelzebub follow him."

"There is no slope," Neiwolf grumbled from the front row.

"Why, it's only the first rehearsal," Rex placated.

"But will there be a slope?"

"Do you think we need one?" interjected Harstein.

"I can build one," Neiwolf merely muttered.

"Get sand from d'Utrecht," Harstein suggested.

The jeweler up on the stage had heard it all right, but didn't comment on the dig. Bosch wouldn't have even known the remark was a dig if d'Utrecht hadn't instantly turned crimson.

"We can't put sand on the stage," Rex said loudly.

"Why not?" asked Harstein a notch louder.

" This scene is in the middle of the third act, Harstein! There are two more scenes to come where we can't just have a load of sand in the scenery.

We can't just shovel it up and then back down in between!"

"I'm building a slope," Neiwolf pressed out unapologetically.

"Fine, but no sand," Rex said.

"Fine!" said Harstein.

Sander was amused up on the stage side.

"Go ahead, then, please! Just imagine the slope for today. But please don't act it! I don't want to see any funny stepping movements from your legs. No panting either, please! Entry from the left..."

D'Utrecht and Simian slid out of sight behind the second post, just opposite the one Sander was leaning against. When Bosch didn't follow of his own accord, they pulled him along by his sleeves.

"Scene four!" commanded Rex.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Neiwolf bobbed his head in a long, gentle wave motion. To Harstein, this looked like approval, which only made him more impatient than he already was. This artistic pause unnerved him. Just as he was about to say something, Simian finally stepped out from behind the post and onto the stage.

Simian walked slowly and with his head held high a few steps towards the center of the stage. There he stopped. After a moment without a word, he turned around and beckoned the others to join him.

He was followed by d'Utrecht. He had the disadvantage of not being endowed with Simian's natural grace, which made the master of the house stride mysteriously and underworldly even without strenuous acting. The jeweler dragged himself forward three or four steps, puffed in simulation of a slope climb—Rex rolled his eyes in the first row—and then stopped slightly displaced behind Simian.

"Do you see it too, fakir?" asked Simian quietly.

"The battle begins," d'Utrecht replied solemnly. For his role he had accustomed himself to a higher and invariably singsong tone of voice. He delighted in it.

"What's happening?"

"You just don't know pirates, Sisyphus, my good man," nasalized d'Utrecht. "They'd rather go down fighting than run from the ferryman."

"That's insane!" rumbled Simian now. "Charon is bound to the passage. He can never follow them ashore. What good are their ships if they fall into the flaming sea?"

"They think they can defeat him with this fleet. Look, there are hundreds of them! All the ships have come!"

D'Utrecht pointed his finger down, across the imaginary slope, at the blazing ocean. In truth, he was pointing at Sander's feet, who stood dead-silently at the edge of the stage.

Simian shook his head dramatically.

"We're all just souls now. Every single one of us knows that. And no soul ever emerges from the sea again if it falls into it. How can they not see that Charon cannot lose? He is the ferryman. He is part of this hell. Charon is not a soul and that is why he will never disappear. They could make a million ships from his barge, yet he would still send them into the fire one by one. Charon has time. What the pirates have are memories of their bodies, of sword strokes, of wind and of waves. That's why they'll fall in, tumble or trip."

This was Bosch's cue.

He was the last to step on stage. In character, d'Utrecht turned to him and beckoned him to join him and Simian.

Bosch took his time. He had only two big steps to take to rejoin the other two. But the way he took them seemed to take an eternity for the three spectators. Bosch had the same graceful movement as Simian. He didn't try hard for it, at least it didn't look like it. And yet all the pairs of eyes that rested on him could vividly imagine a steady walk over boulders, carefully placed steps, heat rising from below and scorching the soles....

With a gentle sweep of his arm, Bosch wiped the fakir from his path.

"Hey!" groaned d'Utrecht, certain that this was not in the stage directions at all.

Sisyphus, on the other hand, quickly bowed his head in surrender and simply stepped aside of his own accord so that Beelzebub could stand at the edge of the imaginary slope and watch the naval battle.

Bosch stood with his head held high in the center of the stage. He folded his arms in front of his chest and waited. No one in the audience breathed. There was absolute silence.

"They all should burn! Even in death they play for their lives. I don't understand people."

Goosequill had silently joined in the words. Since the text ended at this point, he now wanted to interrupt, but Bosch turned to face him, Harstein and Neiwolf head-on at that very moment.

He just kept talking.

"When they come, they're naked. Or rags hang from their bodies. A fall, perhaps, has torn their clothes. A fight with fists or sticks, cutting, shooting! Others carry flowers in their hands. The blossoms on them are all colorless, dried up and dead. More than one I saw still wearing the mask they had on their face when they died. And whether they wore it to play, with long noses and gems around their eyes, or it was simply a sack from the hands of their executioners, they don't take it off when they come here.

People do not let go of their little things. The dead flowers remain in their hands for all eternity, the sacks over their faces, the fake long noses... They wear their clothes because even when they leave their world they cannot understand what they actually are. Their souls get lost here in the endless corners of hell and they wear shoes while doing so. Shoes!

It does not take much to understand life. I can feel it. Life flows even through mortal creatures. And those down there? What are they doing?"

Bosch pointed his finger to the front row.

"They sail ships across the flaming sea. Because their little souls remember little things. All the stories people tell each other all their short, numb lives are becoming so important that it makes their souls small. They think of captains who sailed the sea—as if they weren't carried by the wind

alone. At the mercy of tides and luck! Now they act out what they were told by those who passed from miserable life a blink of an eye before them.

Why must I tolerate this?"

Bosch began to shout.

"Our souls are great! Life breaks forth in me, no matter where I am! No matter if captured or not! Let the ferryman dump them all into the flames, who cares? What do I care about any of these silly games? I am life! We are one with life, unique and beautiful! These tiny souls in their disguises of cloth, flowers and jewels are not worth the dust they kick up on land. And if they never ceased their maneuvers of circles and feints there on the sea of fire, not a tittle in the waves would lick otherwise than it wishes.

You there!"

With a deafening shout, Bosch turned his head back toward the edge of the stage, as if looking down the slope toward the ships.

"Don't you see that a god is standing above you?"

In the penumbra of the stage post, Sander gulped quietly. He shrank a little under Bosch's gaze, which was not really on him.

Silence.

Then Neiwolf clapped his plate-sized hands, so slowly that everything turned to him in wonder after the first clap, before the hands came together for the second time in agonizing slowness.

Neiwolf nodded.

Harstein still searched briefly in confusion in his lines where Bosch's monologue was, but when everyone else also clapped, it finally dawned on him, too, that there were no lines.

6. Box!

Luna Park had seen better times. With the new money, more guests came to visit again, but that didn't put the paint back on the cardboard and wooden walls. For once, it was mild today, after the sweltering summer days of late. That's why the park wasn't quite as deserted as it had been when the heat was blistering. The commuter train continued on from here to the lido, and the water slide in the park's artificial lake had long since ceased to attract the sweating city folk.

A few families had strayed to the end of Kurfürstendamm, where the park towered like a bouncer in front of Grunewald. In addition, there were the gentlemen who liked to sit at the edge of the pool and palaver.

Her friend Sylvia had been so happy when she bought cotton candy earlier. Such bright eyes! Mavi saw it in her mind as if two hours hadn't already passed. She also thought of the little pieces of paper the cashier had given them both. They felt pleasantly rough in her pocket.

Mavi at that moment wanted to go back to the entrance of the wobbly staircase, which was shaken by motors to make those who dared tumble. Sylvia and herself had been so excited! She wanted that feeling back when her legs were soft as pudding and she had laughed on almost every step as they descended.

Or to buy cotton candy again! Earlier she had declined because her teeth still hurt from her waffle ice cream. Now she wouldn't care. The afternoon appeared to her now like a picture book, which she had opened and in which she could marvel one by one at every beautiful scene of her visit to the park. That was the good thing about this unexpected

conclusion. Time seemed to stand still. Unfortunately, she could not now continue to flip forward in her imaginary book.

She knew what was happening inside her at that moment, and it annoyed her more than it saddened her: Her day had taken a turn here, in front of the queue of the little mountain railroad—and she had not agreed on that. She had thought it all out so well! Her and her friend, the little purse filled with what they could both pool together, the cloudless blue sky, ice cream, going to the restaurant once more...

Mavi wanted to turn back the clock, to the cotton candy and the unexpectedly rough feel of the paper.

"Hello," she said to Bosch.

Bosch stood next to the line.

"I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me," he said with a smile.

"Don't be silly," Mavi whispered.

"Or that you didn't hear me," Bosch hastily followed up.

"Hello!" interjected Sylvia, sneaking up behind Mavi with a plucky long stride. "I'm Sylvia!"

She held out her hand and Bosch took it. He breathed a hand kiss on it, which delighted Sylvia and pleased Mavi as well because it gave her a second to think.

"Bosch," Bosch introduced himself.

"Oh, like the..."

"We have to get on now," Mavi interrupted hastily.

A red-faced man who worked for the ride untied a small chain that blocked entry to the rail car that park guests used to chug through the paper-mâché alpine panorama.

Mavi hooked arms with Sylvia, discreetly pulling her into the car.

"I'll wait here," Bosch said as the red-faced man hooked the chain back on. "Have a good journey!"

The car jerked into motion. Sylvia made a quick turn to Bosch to wave him off.

"Thank you, mister!"

Mavi stubbornly looked straight ahead until the friends had disappeared into the first tunnel.

The train made a few laps around the fake rocks until it arrived back where the passengers had boarded. Sylvia and Mavi got off. Bosch, meanwhile, had retreated to a railing from where he watched the two.

"Well then, sweetie," Sylvia said to Mavi, kissing her on the cheek.

Mavi smiled wryly. Then Sylvia turned on her heel, not without giving Bosch a serious but by no means unfriendly look as she passed.

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Bosch.

"Not at all," Mavi replied. "They're not real mountains, and I'm a little distracted right now."

"I'm sorry..."

"What are you doing here?" asked Mavi.

"I thought I'd watch the fireworks, later."

"And I thought you were going to be gone for a while."

"I was..."

"Does that mean you're back?"

"I'm not sure."

Mavi looked deep into Bosch's eyes. She couldn't for long, but she didn't really need to. She nodded, more to herself than to Bosch.

"That's you after all," she said softly. "I was kind of afraid you had a doppelganger who was missing me and looking up and down the city for me. You know? The kind who follows me here because he wants to surprise me. And bring flowers! And a fabulous story about the last few months right along with it. I'm honestly relieved that I don't have to call the police because someone is doing a bad impression of you. You are Bosch! The real deal! Who else would say something like that? Who else wouldn't be sure he's back in town?"

Bosch said nothing. Mavi looked up at him as if at a tower, eyeing him as her words sank in. Nothing about his posture or his expression changed.

Mavi would have bet money that the mountain of cardboard and lath would crumble behind her before she could affect Bosch with her words.

And that's what felt familiar. Familiar and good in that one particular way, which was knowing how nonsensical and bitter it would all turn out.

"I want a beer," Mavi said.

"Me too!"

Bosch offered her his elbow, but Mavi just gave a short contemptuous snort. He took it.

They strolled off side by side, passing several food stalls. They left the Luna Palais on the left and headed for the Bayern Village instead. Both restaurants were open. They were also both equally empty. In front of the fancier Palais, a waiter kept a bored lookout. He would have been happy to offer Bosch and Mavi a table, even though he was otherwise only moderately interested in advertising the place. They were just a pretty couple, he thought.

No one advertised outside the Bavarian Village. Here people drank beer, and for little money at that. That's what the hall was made for. Bosch and Mavi sat down at a long bench. They didn't speak until they each had a large pint in front of them. Then they toasted each other, and Bosch drank the tankard halfway down in a few draughts. When he put it back down, he saw that Mavi hadn't even sipped yet.

"When did you come back to town?" she asked.

"I'm actually out of town," Bosch said.

"Now cut it out! Will you?"

"Cut out what?"

"Being evasive," Mavi explained. "You're dodging my questions."

"Why would I do that?"

"Yeah, why would you?"

Now Mavi drank, too. This time Bosch watched her do it. And like her before, now he was thinking hard.

"Simian told me there was this park and the fireworks. That's why I walked here."

"Who's that?" asked Mavi. "Simian?"

"An acquaintance."

"Funny name..."

"You think so?"

"...And you walked here?"

"Yes, from the forest," Bosch tried to explain. "It's the first time in, ...I don't know how long."

Mavi's brow turned into a skeptical landscape of pondering wrinkles.

"You don't look like you live in the woods!"

"It doesn't matter where I live," Bosch replied calmly.

"That's true," Mavi admitted. "In fact, that's very, very true..."

And with that, she wanted to say goodbye. If she hurried, she would still meet Sylvia at the exit. The fifteen minute wait they had agreed on in the mountain train was just about up.

"Have you been to the revolving house yet?" asked Bosch.

"What?"

"I haven't yet. Are you going in with me?"

"Into the revolving house?"

Bosch nodded.

"I've never seen anything like it," he added enthusiastically.

"It's just a fake," Mavi said, but it didn't sound at all as demure coming out of her mouth as it should. She heard her amusement.

"Really?" Bosch looked out the window of the Bavarian Village across the square in front of the restaurant. In the distance, a large shadow moved in a circle.

They went on to pay the bill. While Sylvia slowly made her way to the station, Mavi and Bosch got closer to the ticket booth outside the revolving

house. The house looked real, with a tiled roof and timbered walls with exposed beams. Except there was a short boom of steel sticking out the sides of the house. It hung from it like a giant spit and slowly rotated around its own axis. It even had two floors. A balcony was attached to the upper one—but there was no door leading to it. It was merely painted on.

The house stopped just as Bosch and Mavi reached the ticket booth.

"Two tickets, please," Bosch said.

The vendor looked up from his newspaper. He put it down without haste, so that the bold letters on the front page of the special edition were legible even upside down by Bosch. 'Paris imposes state of emergency!" the headline screamed silently.

'Ten pfennigs,' the vendor demanded kindly.

Bosch paid.

"Take care of your lady, boss," the vendor advised as he handed over the scraps of paper.

"Why?"

"You get dizzy quick in there," the salesman explained. "The ladies get their legs pulled out from time to time from the spinning."

Mavi ignored the man. Bosch put his index finger to his forehead in acknowledgement. Then they went into the house.

The door looked like heavy wood, but as soon as they stepped into the hallway, small holes appeared in the wall. Time had eaten away at the paper-thin panels of fabric. It gave a backdrop to the interior of the house. Upon closer inspection, it consisted of only one room. The path through it was defined by a railing on each side of the hallway. Bosch and Mavi followed this kind of walkway for a few steps, then it bent at a right angle so that the two of them stood in the middle of the room.

The door slammed shut and something cracked that couldn't be a lock. They were all alone in the house.

"Look," Mavi whispered to Bosch. She pointed up to the ceiling.

Bosch saw roof beams, a few hanging tools, ladders and a large spider.

None of it was real; it was all painted on. The second floor, which the revolving house suggested from the outside, didn't even exist inside. The only actual decoration on the ceiling were two old suspended oil lamps. They provided illumination with one dim bulb each.

On either side of the walkway was furniture that looked so lost it could have been forgotten when someone moved. A rickety table with two stools loitered on the left, and a closet leaned against the wall on the right. As the house jolted, there was a squeak in the furniture.

Mavi was a little startled.

"Hold me steady!" she called over her shoulder to Bosch, who was standing behind her on the walkway.

He obeyed and put his hands on Mavi's hips, but quickly let go, preferring to hold on to the railings.

"I almost believed it now," he said, amused.

"What?"

"We're not spinning!"

Mavi had a firm grip on the railings as well. She watched the table and its stools slowly rise and come toward her. The cabinet next to her sank away. The room spun around the walkway. Mavi and Bosch did not move.

They turned toward each other as the roof beams, complete with painted spider and fake ladders, hoes and a wagon wheel, arrived at the level of their shoulders. Only the two oil lamps stood out from the canvas. The chains from which they hung were made of welded links, so they did not bend to gravity.

"A mousetrap!" said Mavi as the wall with the cabinet disappeared beneath her feet. Bosch could see the yellow-painted piece of cheese. The two lamps followed. At the points where they would crash into their fixed chains into the walkway, however, contrary to expectations, they silently cut through the iron and reappeared unharmed beyond the second railing.

Bosch had to step forward in order to avoid the rear lamp on its passage. Only now did he notice the recess in the walkway and railing.

"That's great!" cried Mavi.

She had to raise her voice because the diesel engine that turned the scenery around the skewer in the middle sputtered louder and louder. The house picked up even more speed.

Bosch didn't answer. He gripped the railings so hard his wrists hurt. He couldn't take his eyes off the other lamp, which circled faster and faster behind Mavi. Mavi was saying more, but he couldn't make her out. The light, which gave little more than a strained buzz, suddenly burned his eyes. Table and stool whizzed by above his head, and a little after that, the closet. But the circular glow of the lamp bound him, as much with his hands to the iron as his gaze: The faster the room spun, the more Bosch saw not a light bulb but a continuous bright arc. The glow ate into his memories and he couldn't help but think of a sword slicing through air—more glaring than any lightning bolt.

"Can you hear me?"

A shudder seized Bosch. From one second to the next he felt cold, then hot. He heard his heart pounding. At least this distracted him from the glare of the arc. Bosch threw his head into his neck. Above him, the hoe and the wagon wheel flew by. A beam crashing through the image reminded Bosch of a tree, or better, a giant factory chimney. So unnaturally large did the trunk hang in the air above him. He could not resist the intuition that a gigantic bludgeon was about to come down on him. Everything within Bosch revolted, demanding a battle cry that he thought he could already hear in countless echoes at his side. At the same time, his body sought protection from the inevitable giant stack.

Mavi went to her knees with Bosch as she tried to somehow keep his long body from slumping. She didn't have the strength to hold him upright, but she protected his head with one hand and with the other in his back she was able to slowly ease him into a sitting position.

"Can you hear me?" she asked anxiously.

Bosch nodded.

"Take a deep breath," she commanded in a composed voice.

That worked. Bosch closed his eyes briefly as he felt the freshness of the air in his lungs again.

"I'll be all right," he said.

Directly above him he now saw Mavi's face. It was serious, but not cold. Bosch sucked in the sight of Mavi. In a surge of inner anger, he pushed the strange images of a moment ago back into the odd corners of his head from which they had crawled. This did the trick. All he saw above Mavi in the background now was rotating canvas with objects brushed on it rather poorly. Nothing more.

The house slowed down. Moreover, the clacking roar of the diesel engine subsided. After two or three more rotations, it died abruptly and the room swung ponderously back into its original position.

Silence fell.

Mavi put a hand on Bosch's forehead. At least it looked that way to him, but Mavi jerked her fingers back just before she felt his skin. She turned her forearm back and forth awkwardly, as if shying away from a difficult operation. Finally, she made up her mind. She placed her hand gently on Bosch's shoulder.

"I don't know how to touch you," she said.

"That's a lie," Bosch murmured.

Mavi considered this.

"Probably," she admitted. "I guess I just don't want to follow my hands. The hands are just the beginning..."

Bosch let the words echo around the room without any comment. There was another crack from a door, but not from the entrance. At the other end of the walkway, the exit opened.

"You're all right again?" asked Mavi.

"Yes," Bosch assured her, slowly picking himself up to prove it.

"Good, let's talk outside. I want to tell you something."

They emerged from the revolving house arm in arm. The exit curved

in a little path through flowerbeds that were supposed to be a magical garden. The path merged with the main square at the ticket booth.

The vendor smiled mischievously as Bosch and Mavi walked past him in their tangled pose.

"You'll be fine, young lady," he called after the two. Then he picked up the newspaper with the warning front page. As he read, he shook his head again and again. Paris, my goodness! Tomorrow he wouldn't come to work, he'd get the hell out of there. Who knows what the authorities knew about the state of emergency in France—and were keeping it to themselves. He wouldn't buy it!

Mavi led Bosch for a bit. She walked more or less aimlessly across the grounds, and Bosch sensed that this drifting had an important function. Mavi took a start-up, in the truest sense of the word, for what she wanted to share with him.

It began to dawn. Interestingly, more people filled the pathways than in the late afternoon. Now it was almost exclusively adults, too. Mavi pulled Bosch past a cluster of them. They were facing the show booths, where puffery announcers tried to get paying customers into their tents and board halls.

"Do you want to see anything?" asked Mavi.

"No," Bosch replied, knowing full well that it was an impromptu question. But still, he meant what he said in explanation:

"Do you know what they're showing in there?"

"Giants?" pondered Mavi. "Pygmies, strong men, cripples..."

"All of them humans."

"Yes, I don't like the gawking either."

"Humans all look alike, I mean," Bosch corrected himself. "What am I supposed to do in a tent with people looking at people on the other side?"

They left the announcers and their speeches behind, but they still had to pass the tent with the only line. There, the yeller in charge had an easy time of it. People pressed their money into his hand by the dozen.

"Come closer!" the man shouted at the top of his lungs. "The last seats are filling up. The French may be cut off from the world, but here we have Madame Bourgnon, perhaps the only woman who has seen Paris and can still tell of it! The people disappear! The omen is coming! Don't wait, don't skimp! Madame Bourgnon will tell you what the bigwigs are hiding!"

Bosch pushed a few ladies and gentlemen out of the way as politely as he could, cutting a path through the hubbub. Mavi followed him without listening to the whip.

"Every time you talk about people like you don't belong to them, you scare me a little," she said once they were alone again.

"Really?" asked Bosch in amazement.

"You don't even notice, I know," Mavi continued. "That makes it all the more strange having you around."

They continued walking, past the mountain railroad. Bosch pondered Mavi's words.

"I don't even mean to say it feels unpleasant. It's not nice, either. It's just weird. And I can't shake the idea that you're strange. Like, a stranger everywhere, you know? Do you belong to anyone, Bosch? Or to anything?"

"...I used to never think about questions like that," Bosch replied after a pause. "Now I do. Because I don't have an answer to them. What was I thinking before? I don't know why I can't remember."

"You're famous, aren't you?" asked Mavi, pausing. "Maybe you have always been too busy?"

Bosch shrugged. He had a suspicion, but he kept it to himself. He didn't believe he had been too busy in the past. He was more and more troubled by the fact that he would not have been able to sum up his life for all the money in the world. He looked into an empty hole in his memories.

"Possibly we have that in common," Mavi continued. "I don't belong anywhere, at least not here. I've known that for a long, long time."

She turned to Bosch, then gently guided him with her hands toward the high wall to which she had led them both. It was the opposite side of

the mountain railroad, or more precisely, of the fake mountains. They dropped vertically to the park floor beyond the last curve in the tracks. The wall was as high as a street facade and as wide as two apartment buildings. It was not actually a wall, but an elaborate scaffolding on which panels of canvas were stretched, much like with the revolving house. The huge screen showed canyons of buildings in a neat grid. High-rise towers with hundreds of bright window lights could be seen on every square foot of the wall. To the left and right, at the edges of the wall, water protruded. At the top, a few particularly prominent skyscrapers jutted out of the picture. The horizon above was also composed of water. The outline of a figure was painted in the middle of it, one hand raised, with a torch painted out red in it. The figure was completely removed from the rest of the scale of the motif so that visitors could recognize it on the cityscape. The Statue of Liberty seemed as tall as a skyscraper.

"I've been coming here for years," Mavi explained. " By myself, too. Just to look at the picture."

"What's that?" asked Bosch, after taking two steps back to survey the entire painted surface.

"What that is? That's New York!"

"New York..."

Bosch remembered the night he had first dined at the mansion. Neiwolf had been quizzed by the others about his work in New York.

"Don't you recognize it? How many cities in the world do you know that have that many skyscrapers?" asked Mavi, suddenly amused.

"Of course, New York!" confirmed Bosch.

"You've never been there?"

"No."

"You could have," Mavi whispered gravely. "But I wouldn't want you to tell me about it anyway. I'll see for myself."

Mavi looked down at the floor as she said this. Bosch stepped closer again and grabbed her by the hand.

"You're going to New York?"

"I'm a stranger here. I have no home to call my own."

"And you think New York will be one for you?" echoed Bosch.

Mavi shook her head. Then she looked up, and when she looked into Bosch's eyes, there was the same clear and fearless gleam in them that had surprised him so much on their first night as he had tried to steal quietly out of the parlor. Bosch loved it.

" It`s not why I`m leaving. This isn't easy to explain, and I'm not going to explain it to you, you hear? Don't be angry..."

"I'm not angry."

Bosch took Mavi's other hand in his as well.

"It's just, ...I used to have a place where I was happy. Then it was gone, and with it everything that is part of a home. It's not about New York or America for me. Berlin is a big, dirty hole, but whether I live here or over there, where supposedly everyone can get rich, I don't care. The point is, over there I may be as much of a stranger as I am in this country, but at least it's new."

"I understand."

They were silent for a while. Bosch took another look at the flat New York on the wall. Mavi did the same.

"When are you leaving?"

"I don't know yet, that is, not exactly. I've looked into it all pretty thoroughly, the crossing on the ship, and how I'm going to get there. There are still a few things I need to sort out, but no matter what, I need to be in New York in January."

"In January?" repeated Bosch questioningly.

"No later than the 24th, yes," Mavi explained. "Sooner would be better, but it mustn't be later."

"Why?"

Mavi hesitated.

"You don't need to tell me if you don't want to," Bosch said softly. He

could see arguments waging a battle in Mavi's facial muscles. She began to twitch barely noticeably and work her lower lip with her teeth.

"There's going to be an eclipse that day," she finally said. "And I need to see it happen there."

Bosch found himself being mustered. He could literally feel Mavis' scrutinizing gaze on his face.

"I know this may sound strange to you..."

"Why do you have to see it in New York," Bosch interrupted. "Doesn't it get dark everywhere?"

"Around the world? Of course not! Well, you can see the moon before the sun in many countries, but a total eclipse is only visible in a much smaller area. It's like looking through a burning glass, only upside down. You know what I mean? It's not the light that's focused, it's the shadow."

Bosch smiled at Mavi. She took it as one of his frequent moments of insight, as sudden as it was infantile. He liked her simple explanation. When she had not known him long, she thought he was making fun of her. Mavi quickly learned, however, that Bosch wasn't faking it.

"For example, this eclipse is only visible in the northern hemisphere," Mavi continued. " Best in America, or right over the Atlantic Ocean, but no one is there anyway. You also can't just be anywhere in America to see the full eclipse. Maybe even New York is too big for that, and I have to be careful where I go so I don't only see part of the moon."

"How do you know so much about it?" asked Bosch.

"I read an article in the paper a few weeks ago. There was a description of the trajectory and a few cities from where..."

"About solar eclipses in general, I mean," Bosch followed up. "You even want to base your travel plans on it!"

Mavi released her hands from Bosch's. She took her time answering.

"Have you ever seen one?"

"A solar eclipse?"

"Yes. Have you seen the moon slowly move in front of the sun like a

pitch black disk until it sits right in its center?"

Bosch shook his head.

"It goes completely dark within minutes. Everything happens much faster than in a normal twilight. And in the end, the deep blackness of night is also missing when the light has been swallowed up. Rather, everything is gray, completely dark, but things still cast shadows as if made of milk. Everything becomes silent because the wind stops blowing and the animals are confused. Birds stop singing. It turns spooky. Not for long. Just for a minute or so. But it feels like an eternity, especially in my memory....

Above you, the wreath of the sun burns very narrowly and evenly around the edge of the moon. This is the perfect moment. It takes a lot of luck to see that once in a lifetime."

" So you' ve seen such a perfect eclipse before?" held Bosch.

"I have to see it again. Just this one more time, when I leave everything here behind. Tell me, are you as much a stranger in this city as I am?"

Bosch mutely answered in the affirmative.

"Nothing will change for me in New York, whether I stay there or move on. There I am as much a stranger as anywhere else—unless I can look up into the perfect wreath of the sun on January 24. That's where my home is. It needn't be long, I know what I'm looking for."

"I don't understand," Bosch confessed.

Mavi stroked him on one cheek.

"I believe you."

"Explain it to me," Bosch pleaded.

"I told you it wasn't easy to explain, didn't I? And this is the part I'm not going to explain to you."

As she spoke, Mavi stretched. She stood before the much taller Bosch like a statue that had seen every storm whistle overhead and could only smile wearily at each subsequent one.

"It feels weird to have me around you. Didn't you say that earlier?" asked Bosch, deferring to Mavi's resolute refusal.

"I did. Presumably this story makes me weird, too?"

"I don't know," Bosch admitted, musing. "Mysterious, is more like it."

Something boomed over their heads. Their sudden silence made it louder and louder until they were both looking up into the sky. A bright yellow plane was approaching the park. The biplane trailed a fluttering banner that had to be at least as large as the painted Manhattan behind Mavi and Bosch. The roar of the engine turned into a monstrous rattle as the plane banked into a turn directly over the park's bathing lake. In the process, the human-sized letters on the banner could be seen reading.

"Luna's fireworks! 10 o'clock!" read Mavi.

The yellow biplane quickly disappeared from her view again, but returned several more times to display its message to as many guests and local residents as possible.

"I'd love to see it," Bosch said.

"It's beautiful," Mavi agreed knowingly.

"Will you stay also and watch it with me?"

It was pitch dark on the forest trails when Bosch walked among the trees around midnight. The moon rarely flashed through a hole in the canopy, so some light reached the ground. Bosch didn't mind walking in the dark, though. He even leapt light-footedly over toppled rotten tree trunks where he strayed from the path. He had to do this a few times to return exactly the same way he came. The occasional forest road and hiking trail all followed their own logic. But that didn't foresee anyone wanting to cross half the forest from the southern end of the Kurfürstendamm. Bosch headed south in a straight line, no matter what was in his way. He found himself more in brush and deep hollows than on the paths shown on maps.

At this time of year, no one strayed this far into the Grunewald for no reason. Animals ruled this part of the night undisturbed. A fox picked up Bosch's scent. There was a ceaseless rustling around him. But no creature

approached him, not even those who felt disturbed by him. A pack of wild boars made a loud grunting noise because the running figure was getting too close to them. A sow launched a brief charging attack, but abandoned its plan just a few feet beyond its group.

Bosch noticed none of this. He ran on, inhaling the scent of the grass where Mavi and he had lain as the colorful rockets exploded above them. He still carried the smell in his nose.

All the smells. He could literally taste them on his tongue, too. As he arranged in his mind's eye images of Mavi, the explosions in the sky, and the sensations in the spinning house, the forest around him grew ever brighter. The night was by no means ending, he simply could see better and better where he was. And thus, not only did he see the ever-opening curtain of countless trees clearly before his eyes, but soon he also saw the lights of the mansion in the distance.

Bosch took the last stretch of the way along the driveway through which the Adlon cab had brought him to the villa months ago. He strolled across the circular forecourt with its fountain, but then instinctively turned away from the front door, whence he made his way to the garden through shrubbery along the wall of the house.

As soon as he passed the corner that led on to the winding garden paths, he broke into a run. The smell of grass disappeared from his nose and the images of the day from his mind.

The beggar was standing in the middle of the garden, in the circular space where Goosequill had gotten Bosch all drunk. When he saw Bosch running toward him in the moonlight, the beggar disengaged himself from his waiting position and did likewise. As he ran, he stripped off the coat he was wearing even on this warm late summer night.

Bosch leapt over two rows of carefully trimmed rose bushes before darting toward the beggar with a final bound, shoulders and head first. Their upper bodies collided and they came down together on the forest floor as a groaning heap.

Bosch was the first to scramble to his feet, with the beggar still crumpled in the dirt below him. He took a step back to look at his accomplishment. The breath in his chest broke its course regardless of pain. Bosch gasped. Then he enjoyed the force with which his lungs were doing hard labor. Briefly, he considered kicking the beggar at his feet in the stomach while he could not yet fight back. But he decided against it. A burning twinge sprouted in his rib area. That's where the beggar must have caught him with a liver hook Bosch had not seen coming. He rubbed the spot, and gave his opponent even more room to get back up.

The beggar rolled to the side. Then he rose, shook sand from his shoulder, stretched, and put some distance between himself and Bosch. Without the cloak as a clumsy covering, the man looked completely different—more respectable. He wore a stained shirt under which muscles flexed. Bosch eyed him closely. He didn't even need the moonlight for that. He could sense how proud and strong the beggar was. His counterpart was not afraid of him and his blows.

The same was true for Bosch. The surprised face of Henrik Espen shot into his mind like a flash: the look on his face when he knew he was at the end of his rope, just before Otto had shot him in the chest. Bosch remembered the taste of his lips, how cold they were, and how much fear he had sensed in the big man. The bitter disappointment that now surged through Bosch, he squeezed into his hands. He clenched them to fists.

The first blow hit the beggar right on the nose. With that, Bosch had his revenge for the surprise attack earlier in the summer. But the beggar did not waver, and it almost seemed as if he too wanted an even account between the two of them, for Bosch's second blow he readily parried with his forearm. More than that, he grabbed Bosch's fist with both hands afterwards, which flew into emptiness, spun his back into Bosch's chest and threw Bosch over his shoulder to the ground.

One of the beggar's outstretched knees came crashing down on Bosch like a guillotine, but he stopped it before it could hit him in the neck. With

all his strength he threw the beggar off him. The latter rebounded as if from a trampoline, laughing as he did so.

A wild scuffle ensued. Both men gave up trying to surprise or outwit the other. They ended up in a mutual grappling, two erect wrestlers trying to squeeze the upper hand out of the other by sheer force. The beggar breathed heavily. Bosch too groaned under the pressure. They took turns pushing back a step or two, but neither of them could gain any real advantage. And neither of them wanted to give in.

It went on like this for a while, until their cramped and soured limbs took away any deliberate decision from them. Bosch and the beggar shoved each other away. A silently accepted truce ensued, albeit perhaps the shortest in history, for after no more than ten seconds they charged at each other again. Only this time they stopped short of confrontation. They raised their fists for a boxing match. Bosch caught a blow to the temple that was quite something. He felt all the teeth in his skull rattle as the haymaker hit him. However, he matched the steadfastness shown earlier by the beggar and did not falter. Bosch shook off the looming faintness. It surprised and intoxicated him in equal measure how easily he did so. Pure will overrode the alarm signs of the body. He felt invincible, overcome by nothing and no one.

The next blow came from Bosch, with a short, powerful hook to the liver of his opponent. The beggar doubled over but did not utter a sound. He straightened up again with a wide grin instead of a face distorted with pain or a dazed look. In reply, he slapped Bosch's face, and it seemed to come out of nowhere. It clapped so loudly on Bosch's skin that an owl, which had been watching the spectacle indifferently from a branch of the surrounding trees, fluttered up in fright.

A second clap followed. Bosch gave the beggar a retort. For lack of further ideas, they now fell once again into a wrestling embrace that ultimately brought them both down. Both landed a few punches on the other's body during their carom on the ground. A punch to the thigh, a

determined hit to the stomach, to the back of the head. It rained blows for minutes, at first hard and frequent, then with steady fatigue more and more irregular and less devastating.

They stopped at the same time—as both expected by now. The blows stopped. Instead, the gasps for breath could be heard throughout the garden. Bosch released his final grip from the beggar's hair, rolled to a safe distance away from his opponent, and then crouched on an ornamental stone just outside the patio. He looked around at where the fight had actually brought them.

The beggar sat up as well. Behind him was a bench, onto which he dropped, panting.

After both had breathed enough, so that they could return their attention to the other, the men grew quiet. Bosch just looked at the beggar. The latter did the same.

None of them said a word.

7. Naked Mist

It was much too early for a rehearsal. The houseguests usually met in the late evening hours. There had been a handful of nighttime sessions as well, but none in the afternoon yet. The sun was still up high in the sky, and Bosch had no desire to go down to the basement.

He had slept poorly. That in itself was remarkable, because Bosch until now had little to say on the subject of night sleep, just as he had nothing to say on many other things that usually bother people: past loves, great deeds from one's own past, aging, pain in the limbs, tears shed or quarrels. Or sleep, with the too-much, the too-little, disturbed sleep, sleepwalking and, of course, nightmares. Bosch could not remember ever having any of these problems.

That was over now.

Bosch couldn't get last night out of his mind. He was also feeling the effects on his back of constantly tossing and turning in bed and desperately trying to get back to sleep. It pinched and tugged in places Bosch never paid attention to.

And now, the third reminder from his fellow actors to hurry up and get to the basement. Amelia had been the first. She found him still in bed. Simian was next. He buzzed Bosch awake with all sorts of tales about current local politics. Simian's warm, charming voice could turn any story, no matter how boring, into something you couldn't turn a deaf ear to.

Still, Bosch hadn't been able to get up. Instead, the images from his dreams slowly emerged from his subconscious. Then, when Harstein had issued the third invitation within a few minutes, it was more like a threat. Harstein had none of the elegance or persuasiveness of his roommates. He

rattled his words into Bosch's room with the precision of a jackhammer, sent him a twinkling look from squinted eyes, and pulled the door shut behind him so hard that it was in danger of breaking out of the frame. Be it out of fear.

Now Bosch squatted on the bed, unwilling to hear yet a fourth guest knock. It was a mystery to him who or what this hustle and bustle was for. Even more so in broad daylight! He resigned himself to going to the cellar, but not before fingering out a flask from the shallow drawer of the little table by his bed. After a few sips, Bosch felt a familiar warmth in his throat. Perhaps this familiar feeling provided the necessary calm within him that his dream images needed to finally spring back to mind.

Bosch had dreamed of sitting on a glistening throne, high above two armies. It was the war in Heaven that Goosequill had so vividly described to him. At his feet, angels fought in a million-fold confusion. They reminded him of ants, so distant and small they appeared from the throne.

He took a few more sips and was surprised to find not a drop left in the bottle afterward. Bosch wanted more. He didn't want to rehearse, he wanted to drink. The memory the throne was repugnant to him.

Now he remembered that he was not alone up there. Henrik Espen had been sitting next to him. Stoical and handsome, in a way Bosch had never actually seen him before. He had been strangely touched and enchanted by his flawless face, but the short time they had shared in the winter had been driven by hustle and bustle. Driven, that best described Espen anyway. Whether he had bloodied his fingers in the snow or had to fight his way through the crowd to get through to Bosch. There was never a quiet moment between the two of them. And yet, in Bosch's dream, the man with the flaming red curls was so still, so at peace with himself. Bosch felt that he had understood Henrik Espen better this past night than when he had met the real man. The dream image did him justice, not reality.

And there was more in the fragments that remained of Bosch’s troubled sleep. The residents had also appeared in it. Bosch had seen them

among the ant-like angels. Harstein, lashing out in a bloodlust, with two swords that looked from Bosch's throne like little wooden skewers in buffet bites. He had been able to get a good look at Harstein because he was slashing a clearing into the sea of angels with furious blows.

Simian had at some point stolen out of the fighting mass, heading straight for the throne. Bosch wanted to say something to him, but didn't have to, because Henrik Espen rose briefly, vigorously rebuffed Simian with his arm, and then sat back down just as motionless as before. It was different with d'Utrecht and Neiwolf, who fought side by side without any thought of retreating. Bosch also recognized these two immediately, although they looked completely different from what he knew them to be. In real life, these two in particular were the most physically abstruse pair that could be matched in this house. Neiwolf, with his superhuman size, not only appeared almost twice as tall as the jeweler, no, the effect was made even greater by d'Utrecht's buoyant girth. He looked compressed next to Neiwolf, as if he had been compacted in a large press. But on Bosch's dream-distorted battlefield, the two looked like brothers. Neiwolf was still the taller of the two, but they differed little in body size. Moreover, one lacked the corpulence, the other the slowness bordering on decrepitude. Only their faces were recognizable.

Even Sander was there. His dream shape had shed the almost grandfatherly calm that the policeman had always displayed toward Bosch. Here he seemed youthful and no less agile and passionate than the others Bosch had spotted.

What had finally woken him, right from the thick of the battle, was a skirmish Sander had had with three other angels. He made short work of two of them, but almost had to concede defeat to the third before they got separated. And that third opponent was Rex Goosequill. Like d'Utrecht, this one had undergone a transformation for his better in the dream. He fought upright, lean and muscular at the same time. The wild hair was wild even in this imaginary world, but the face underneath was not as bitter as

usual. Only this contrast made Bosch really aware of how tense and reserved the poet moved through the house day in and day out.

"Damned Abdiel," Bosch muttered to himself as he walked down the hallway to the rear tract of the house.

He was briefly surprised himself that he had actually left his room. As he walked, he looked at his hands because his fingertips itched. He spread all the fingers of his left hand and reflexively began to count.

"Beelzebub, Moloch, Dagon, Mammon, Mulciber," he heard himself mutter. Five fingers were now retracted.

He continued with his right hand.

"Belial..."

Here he faltered. These names meant nothing to him. Why was he listing them? Goosequill had mentioned them. This story about the war in Heaven seemed to get stuck in his head.

He felt a little nauseous. The cool breeze that greeted him at the entrance of the spiral staircase to the basement did him good. Bosch walked down without haste, slowing down even more when it occurred to him that only Amelia had been missing from his dream.

Or had she not? Hadn't it felt as if the countess had been very close to him, too? Maybe not as a figure he could see, but as his good spirit....

Bosch staggered down the last steps to the cellar. His head was bursting with thoughts. Too many to focus on his walk. It took all the eyes of all the house guests—directed at him—to finally pull Bosch out of his thought cycles and into the now.

"It's about time," Amelia said in a played reproachful tone. She walked up to Bosch and took him by the hand.

"You're here?" asked Bosch as she walked.

"I wouldn't want to miss this!"

He accepted this answer, even though he hadn't seen Amelia at a rehearsal once in recent weeks. She had come down to the basement only on one occasion at all, and that was the day they had given Bosch the part.

"Dress rehearsal, my good man," Simian whispered to Bosch as he tugged wrinkles into order on the chiton he had just put on.

"Dress rehearsal?"

Bosch didn't understand. No one had told him that there would be a performance soon. It had been clear to him that all the rehearsals were leading up to a goal; after all, the others hadn't stolen their time. At least that's what he suspected, even though he never saw anyone go to work except Sander. But dress rehearsal? There had been no mention of a date.

"I didn't know that," he told Simian.

"I didn't know that for sure either," the latter admitted.

"None of us did!" shouted d'Utrecht from the stage curtain. "But it's high time, isn't it?"

The jeweler looked around with a grin, trying to garner approval in the faces of Sander, Harstein, Rex and Neiwolf. However, he only garnered silence, ...many an icy stare even.

"No humor. I see," d'Utrecht echoed quietly. He turned to the curtain, which was moored in the center with a stately gold cord.

It was new. The modest elevation of floorboards was usually never draped. The ends of the curtain typically remained at the edges of the stage, where they concealed the exits.

Sander watched Bosch stare at the curtain.

"A real dress rehearsal, Bosch," he said. "I'm actually a little excited."

Sander, too, had changed into costume. He wore coarse knickerbockers, with a vest over them and a summer-appropriate tweed jacket. Balanced on his nose was a bowless binocle. Sander looked well suited for the role as a last-century literature professor.

"When are we performing?" asked Bosch. "And for who?"

"We'll see," growled Harstein. Why he was so curt, Bosch couldn't say. But he recognized that special mood in the giant, from which the half-drunk roughnecks in the illegal bars would recoil. Bosch had witnessed it more than once. A sixth sense told the usual suspects that just one wrong

word was enough to make the brawny man, whose build defied the laws of nature, run amok. Everyone avoided Harstein when he growled like that.

Bosch didn't care. He knew no fear of Harstein. From the first moment he had simply been fascinated by him. Still, he didn't bother to follow up now, because d'Utrecht seemed to be done with his unknotting.

"Voilà," he intoned.

"Wait a minute," cried Goosequill.

"What now?" asked d'Utrecht gruffly. He held the two edges of the parted curtain in his hands, but did not pull them apart.

"Is everyone ready?"

Rex stood in the middle of the room, the other actors around him.

"Get on with it!" boomed Harstein, who correctly guessed that Rex simply wanted to take advantage of the moment to remind everyone once again that he was the director down here in the basement.

"Did you manage to finish it?" asked Goosequill of Neiwolf.

The architect was the only one not on his feet. He sat folded out on several chairs. The construction was clearly modeled after his improvised lounger on the terrace.

"Of course," it roared from Neiwolf's throat. " Why do you even ask?"

Neiwolf pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his forehead with it. He looked tired, as if from some hard physical labor.

Amelia approached Neiwolf from behind and massaged his shoulders without being asked to do so. He acknowledged it with a silent nod of his head along with a low growl that would have rivaled any lion.

"Neiwolf built us a slope," Simian Bosch explained. "Just like he promised. It's a surprise!"

"Excellent," Rex rejoiced. He turned with a thespian gesture to d'Utrecht, who was still waiting for a sign.

"Can I?" he asked.

"But please, by all means!" said Rex.

Accompanied by a soft flicker, the curtain moved aside. When

d'Utrecht had fixed the fabric at both edges of the stage, he stepped back and joined the staring actors. No one said anything.

Bosch didn't either. He gaped. Where the other day he had pretended to walk up a slight hill so that Beelzebub could see across the slope to the sea battle, there was now rubble on the stage. Bare rock flashed out between reddish-brown pebbles and sand. And at the end of this slight mound of perhaps six feet, the rock dropped steeply, as if the ground there had been chopped away. Bosch looked down on a bare wall of rock that jutted a good three hundred feet into the depths. He had to lower his head and venture a little closer to see a flaming carpet at the base of the precipice.

"That's not a slope," Harstein grumbled.

"Excuse me?" asked Neiwolf back from his seated position.

Harstein folded his arms across his chest. As he did so, he made an important face.

"This is a cliff, not a slope," he explained.

"It's all right!" interjected d'Utrecht eagerly, before the architect could provoke an argument with Harstein with a remark—any remark.

"There's even the flaming sea," Simian observed aloud.

Bosch looked more closely at the flames that seemed to flicker so far from him, but whose heat he imagined he could nevertheless feel offstage. It made him a little dizzy to reconcile his knowledge and his vision: He was standing in this cellar, which was not ten feet high. Neiwolf even had to perform ever so slightly crouched on the plank stage in order not to bump his head. And yet, before his eyes, the section of a cliff extended into the ground, many houses high and deep respectively. Bosch looked out at the sea of flames, even after rubbing his eyes more than once to check that he wasn't imagining it all. But no, he could actually see ripples in the distance. He looked further and further across the flaming sea, where he could really only expect to see the bricks of the basement wall. Instead, he had the feeling that he was overlooking the vastness of an ocean. And far out, halfway between the impossible shore and an even more impossible horizon

of flames and black rocky sky, Bosch's eyes made out a dozen or more ships. He made out fingernail-sized masts on frigates, smaller boats even, flickering as they disappeared and reappeared, depending on whether they were obscured or lifted by the crests or troughs of waves of fire.

"The sea is stormy," Amelia said softly.

"I didn't have much time," Neiwolf commented in a tone of exhausted relief. "You have to work with what you have. But yeah, I thought a little sea swell would fit the dramatics of the scene."

"Well..." grumbled Harstein.

"I think it's great, Neiwolf!" said Amelia.

"Really, well done," Sander agreed. And having said that, he turned away from the spectacle of the set to search Bosch with his eyes. He looked directly at him without saying a word. Just positively pierced him with his gaze. And everyone did the same. Goosequill, Harstein, Amelia, d'Utrecht and Simian all turned to Bosch in unison.

The dizziness in his head intensified. Bosch resisted the urge to lean on the back of one of the chairs. What he saw paralyzed him, overwhelmed him and, above all, his senses. It seemed impossible to reconcile the impressions: There was a rocky cliff on the stage, with a sea of flames surging against it. It seemed large and vast like a country—and yet confined within the walls of this cellar. Not that the familiar surroundings had disappeared, no. Bosch could clearly see the back of the stage, where the dampness of the forest floor made dark spots grow on the wall. He saw the curtain on both edges of the stage. Only there was now a barren landscape in between, as well as an impossible lake the size of an ocean. And in front of it stood the assembled householders, neatly lined up. They looked as if they were his audience. At their backs, the mighty slope fell like an abyss into a depth that could not exist. Beyond the others a world burned. But they seemed to simply take it for granted. Instead of staring at it and struggling with the sight as Bosch did, they just looked at it silently.

They were waiting.

"Well done, yes," Bosch said.

For a moment, there was absolute silence in the basement. No one moved. Only Neiwolf smiled contentedly and again dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Is everything all right with you?" asked Simian cautiously.

Bosch nodded.

"I think it's excessive," Harstein said, somewhat piqued. And with that, he elicited various groans or laughter, respectively. The group abandoned its collective position of observation.

"Then we'll start from the beginning, last run-through," Rex said.

While the others attended to their costumes and Bosch remained bewildered, Harstein climbed onto the stage. With three big steps he had reached the slope and jumped down. But he did not plunge into the depths; instead, as he jumped, he gripped the rock face with impressive agility. A single hand was enough for him to cling to a stone ledge. The veins of his leg-sized forearm stood out like strings of a double bass.

"Look at me," he shouted from the backdrop. "I'm a monkey!"

Harstein had walked only a few feet, from in front of the stage to up the slope. But where he now dangled from the cliff, his voice sounded distant in Bosch's ears.

"Come out of there, please," Rex asked carefully. "The cliff has to go for the first act."

"Ha!" cried Harstein, dangling. "That' s what I was talking about! Slope, my ass. Herr Architect just can't dial it down. Everything has to be large and grand."

"Harstein, come back," Simian now said.

The words of the master of the house were calm. He seemed more preoccupied with his robe than with the situation, surreal to Bosch, that a mountain of a man hung like a miniature version of himself from the cliff in the basement of his mansion. Harstein didn't pay much attention to the interjection either. He rather climbed a little more crosswise, low and up

again below the cliff edge in high spirits. It was only when Neiwolf rose agonizingly slowly from his perch, then headed for the stage, that Harstein recollected himself. As nimbly as he had entered the set, he now effortlessly heaved himself back over the cliff edge, rolled down the slope in one single movement without standing up, and leaped out of the set. He landed with both feet on the basement floor, making it rumble loudly.

Not a second too soon, because Neiwolf reached briefly into the middle of the scree at the foot of the slope, made a few skilful moves there —and the stony ground collapsed by itself. The slope broke up into countless small tiles. Neiwolf gave one or two an extra swing, but most of them turned, folded, compressed on their own in no time at all. The waves of flame at the edge of the coast fizzled out into nothingness. The coast contracted on all sides like an accordion. There was even a similar sound to it, though it echoed through the room in a disproportionately more metallic and ominous way.

Bosch barely had time to rub his eyes before only a fist-sized cube remained of the landscape. The architect put it in his pocket.

"Wonderful," Rex said gratefully. "Act One, Scene One!"

Bosch dropped into one of the wooden chairs. It wasn't his turn, not for the entire first act. While the rest of the troupe got into their respective starting positions, Bosch felt unobserved. He clutched his chest, for his heart was pounding frantically. The dizziness had not subsided and now it was exacerbated by the fact that his stomach was cramping. He felt as miserable as he had only once before, on the day of the garden binge with Rex Goosequill. Or better: as on the day after. He felt the same whirlpool of disordered thoughts, this time underlined by a downright panic.

Amelia did not go onstage. She sat down in the front row and ignored Bosch just like the others. Not even she turned to him, Bosch thought. As miserable as he felt at that moment, this observation was indication enough for him that something was not right here —as it had been so many times before. He was not even concerned with the magically collapsible landscape

that had just appeared in the basement and now had disappeared into Neiwolf's jacket pocket. Absurd! But, no, what he found suspicious was how matter-of-factly everyone had taken it and not approached him about the whole thing. As miserable as he was physically, he could see this clearly in his mind.

He had sworn to himself after Amelia's enigmatic hints the other day that he would play her game, and win. He had had enough, not in an offended way, but in a hunter's way. The time had come. Bosch tried to get the nausea and dizziness under control. Obviously, it wasn't just Amelia who was trying to throw him off balance. All the residents of this house were in cahoots. It had to be that way. The way they were jumping across the stage in front of him now, reciting, laughing and yelling. Bosch didn't hear a word of it. He was not listening. He realized that they had called him to the cellar today on purpose. That they all knew that this feat of the architect was not normal. That they ignored him now, as if none of this had happened, or perhaps it were only a figment of his imagination.

Unnoticed, Bosch spat the bitter saliva on the floor beside him that he had accumulated under his tense thoughts over the last few minutes. He took a deep breath and unmistakably and irrevocably ordered himself to pull himself together.

He would play along.

It was a done deal, even if an ominous need for liquor overcame him at the same moment. A second and last time he covertly spat on the stone floor between the chairs.

And then he had to go onstage. Rex turned to look at him, gave him a sign with his fingers. Bosch stood up. He did not waver. He stretched his back and said his lines. Then he walked off, and on again when asked again in a later scene.

He performed. Most of the time he sat in front of the stage and watched the others. When he had to go onstage for the last time, there was a short changeover break. Bosch had kept a small, germinating hope that he

must have been mistaken. Perhaps he had ingested something that was working away at his senses in an unexpectedly bizarre way. But when Neiwolf approached the stage again, took the cube out of his pocket, and with a few almost hypnotically slow movements placed the cliff, complete with flaming sea, back into the basement, this last hope crumbled.

It was back to how it had seared itself into Bosch's eyes. He could literally feel the vastness of the landscape. It drew him to the stage like falling winds on real coasts. And this time, it wasn't just Harstein jumping into the middle of the scenery. Bosch had to follow Simian and d'Utrecht up the slope, as he did the other day, and say his lines.

Bosch managed that, too. He did his best to hide his unsteady footfall over the scree. Or his excited heartbeat as he himself stood on the edge of the rocks, the sea of flames below him. He could feel the heat of the blaze beneath him. And he spoke again when his cue came. The words were different from the last time—because once again they were not lines, but pure improvisation. Bosch talked himself into a frenzy. He swaggered from the crest of the slope down into the burning depths of the false hell that Goosequill had imagined.

There came applause. He immediately forgot the words he had spoken. It cost him more strength with every passing minute not to slip out of the role. Although by now it was a matter of two roles: one in the play, the other one in the house. With beads of sweat on his forehead, Bosch waited for the final curtain so that he could leave this spectacle behind and gain some distance from his fellow residents. When the group, with him in the middle, had practiced the obligatory bows for the missing audience, general whispers and merriment broke out. Bosch took the opportunity to silently steal away.

He virtually flew up the steps of the spiral staircase, although he felt more like lying down and closing his eyes to his wavering surroundings. Bosch knew that he was the problem, not the walls or the floor. It wasn't the light from the usually overly dim sconces in the hallways that was too

harsh, but his nerves were frayed to the extreme. He seemed to lose consciousness briefly between some steps. In any case, he startled several times during the run, as if wondering where he was.

In the end, these apparent lapses of his head proved to be somnambulistic certainty. Bosch found himself in front of the red globe that stood in the corner of the dining room. He tore it open at the northern hemisphere and inspected the core like an accomplished surgeon inspects a body. He knew where what would be in which place. And so he didn't hesitate long and reached for a bottle of Scotch whisky.

He drank from the bottle, at least the first few draughts. They did their job: Bosch's throat went completely numb with acrid pain in the face of the extraordinary quantity of the strong stuff. It was enough to slow down the whirring chain carousel of his thoughts a little. Now Bosch noticed how hard he was breathing. He was drenched in sweat.

A glance at the door in the bookcase reassured him that no one had followed him. The entrance to hall was also closed. Bosch did not know which of the two ways he had entered the room. He listened briefly to find out whether or not footsteps could be heard above him in the gallery. Then he calmed down some more, enough to find time to pour himself the next dose of scotch in a heavy glass appropriate for the occasion. He promptly emptied it. And then another, and another. In no time at all, the bottle was down to half full.

But Bosch didn't stop drinking.

A little later, there was a creaking above him on the walkway. He heard the handle of a door. That was enough to startle him. Bosch didn't want to see any of the others, not even Amelia. Leaving the whisky and the red globe open, he slipped out of the dining room and into the hall. To his relief, no one was around, except for a cleaning lady mopping the marble. Bosch straightened up before her, noticing for himself that he was stooping and slinking through the house with his shoulders hunched. The stretching had an effect on his mind that half a dozen double whiskeys hadn't been

able to produce: Bosch felt superior. Even if it was only the unsuspecting cleaning lady who instinctively recoiled from his corrected posture, it still did his self-confidence good.

His memory, on the other hand, reacted with bilious bitterness. The almost physical feeling of superiority was accompanied by the epiphany that he felt superior far too rarely. Yet this deeply rooted feeling was his natural state. Bosch was not made to follow or obey. He didn't look up to anyone, never had. He was better. He was more determined, was stronger.

Than what? Than who?

The cleaning lady backed up demurely as she took a few unobtrusive steps toward the far end of the hall to make room for Bosch. He walked past her, across in the direction of the other wing.

Than all of them. This was the honest answer. Bosch didn't need to say it or think it. Every fiber in him wore this truth like a tattoo: He was better than everything and everyone. No second tier, no problem he couldn't solve. He had not needed to feel this on the night he first met Amelia. Bosch remembered the game of chess at Romanisches Café. His opponent must have been savvy about the game, or there wouldn't have been a cluster of onlookers gathered behind him. Nevertheless, Bosch had won without ever having played the game. The other guy wanted to beat him. He had not even taken Bosch seriously. That alone had been enough for him to lose in the end.

And Hendrik Espen? Bosch tasted that last kiss in his memory as intensely as if it had happened yesterday. Why had he done that? Why not play along with the farce the young painter had asked him to play. He who was as beautiful as he was, as proud as he was, as talented as he was?

So much him...

Because there could be no one else beside him. Another answer that wafted through Bosch's body more than he could put it into clear thought. It was not least due to the fact that the thirst returned, that insatiable desire for rest and numbness.

Bosch stormed into the kitchen. The cook, who was putting the finishing touches on the first dinner course, almost dropped in shock the shallow pot of gravy he was guiding over some plates. He was alone in the large room, in the middle of which stood an island of sideboards, work surfaces and hot stoves that would have honored a fine dining restaurant. Bosch stopped in the doorway and looked around like a hunted animal suspecting a pack behind him. Then he closed the door to the hallway.

"The table is being set," the cook offered as a conversational cue. He quickly got the well-founded hunch that he would be waiting a long time for a word from Bosch if he didn't initiate it. And he didn't want his employer's guest in the kitchen. No one had any business here. Here, he was in charge.

Bosch didn't understand the friendly hint. He wasn't even listening to the man, but was looking at the spotlessly clean kitchen. It didn't seem particularly tidy to him. There were bags, bowls and bottles everywhere. In some corners it looked like a witch's kitchen. The general clutter, however, gave Bosch a thought.

"What have you got to drink here," he asked the cook, still standing near the door.

"Sir, I have to make..."

"What you got, I ask," Bosch bossed the man across the room.

The exasperated intonation had the desired effect. The cook decided right then and there that he wasn't going to order Bosch out of the kitchen. He would not mess with him.

"I'm sorry," he explained meekly. "The goulash is still simmering over there in the big pot. The sauce reduces best from a strong Pinot Noir."

The chef pointed to an empty bottle beside him on the countertop. A few tiny red drops beaded down the inside to the bottom of the bottle.

"I don't have anything else here, I'm afraid."

"What kind of kitchen is this where there's nothing to drink?" asked Bosch in his displeasure. He didn't really expect an answer.

"We have wine in the cellar, of course," the chef defended himself. He couldn't help but bite his tongue in the same moment as Bosch walked slowly toward him.

"Shall I ring for the evening waiter?" the chef offered frantically. "He has an excellent selection of spirits for the night."

"Why are you talking about spirits?"

"Cognac, whiskey..." the cook stammered, uneasily suspecting he was saying something wrong with every sentence.

"What's that?" asked Bosch.

He had spotted a couple of honey-colored bottles with colorfully decorated labels in the open cabinet behind the cook.

The cook turned around.

"Pastis!" he exclaimed, immediately ashamed at the relief in his voice.

"Is this drinkable?"

"Why, yes!"

"Then don't you dare hide it from me when I ask you for something to drink," Bosch admonished the man, who hastily turned around and already fetched a bottle of pastis from the cupboard.

"It's more for cooking than drinking. Well, you can always drink pastis!" the chef corrected himself before Bosch would beat him to it with another aggressive question. "Anise is exquisite for flavoring, you know. I cook with it. That's why I didn't think of pastis just now..."

At the other end of the kitchen, a second door opened. A couple of waiters swarmed into the room, clearly surprised to find one of the residents of the house here.

"Dinner is served, Herr Bosch," one of the waiters said politely. "The ladies and gentlemen are already seated at the table."

Bosch gave the waiter a scowl. The cook hastily waved him off.

"Then don't stand around, serve!" he ordered.

Everyone knew whats to reach for. Eight soups stood neatly lined up. Bosch made no move to leave. It relaxed him a little to know where the

others were. He was neither hungry nor in the mood to go near them.

The cook produced a narrow, not very tall glass from somewhere. It was fogged with chill. He placed it on the middle counter and poured some pastis into it, while Bosch found a stool in a corner of the kitchen, which he carried to the glass and then seated himself in waiting.

As quickly as the waiters had arrived, they were gone with the soups—with all but one. The plate left behind was for Bosch, but he didn't care. Instead, he gazed at the bronze liquid, which miraculously shrouded itself in milk-colored mist as the cook filled it up with water in the glass. The man prepared a small carafe and placed it next to the bottle and glass.

"Straight from France," commented the chef, who had seen Bosch's curious inspection of the natural cloudiness. "Doesn't taste like much when it's neat. The French add water to the Pastis."

The kitchen gave Bosch some peace of mind. That's why he didn't down the whole glass of Pastis after the first sip, as he had done with the Scotch. It didn't burn his throat as much, either. A sweet taste of licorice and fennel spread through his throat and on his tongue. Bosch took a deep breath, and became aware of it as if he hadn't taken one in hours.

While the chef got busy with the other courses, Bosch remained motionless on the stool and drank one glass of Pastis after the next. He diligently topped up the two-finger-high bases with water each time.

"The main course is ready," the chef said quietly across the pots at one point. "Don't you want to have it in the parlor, too.... ?"

Bosch did not respond. By now the cook had made his peace with the intruder occupying his kitchen. He had only briefly tried to persuade Bosch to move to the regular dinner table. He couldn't stand it when his food went to waste or was ignored. So now he placed a plate of the venison goulash for Bosch on the sideboard next to the pastis.

The resident did not touch the food, not the main course and not even dessert. The soup already had a slightly dried layer on its cold surface when the cook, with a heavy heart, collected it again and ate it himself.

"Do you have syrup?" asked Bosch abruptly and after more than an hour of thoughtful silence.

"Syrup? Yes, of course," the cook replied.

He left the washing up he was doing to fetch from a cupboard a small bottle of golden sugar syrup. He placed it before Bosch, who immediately took the bottle in his hand, opened it and smelled it. Apparently satisfied by this, he added some syrup to his mixture of pastis and water.

The cook looked at Bosch questioningly.

"That's how they drink it in Marseilles," Bosch said.

"Oh, you've been?"

"Apparently..."

The cook finally gave up trying to talk to his kitchen intruder. First the man had made himself at home at his workplace without being asked, almost threatening him. Then he pretended not to know what Pastis was, only to boast now about regional variations. Not one straightforward answer was to be had from him.

He returned his attention to his dishes. When he was done and the kitchen was again in sparkling clean condition, he headed for the door. Bosch, in the meantime, had opened a second bottle of Pastis, of which there was also only dregs left.

"Just turn off the lights when you leave," the cook said. "Please..."

Bosch stayed behind alone. He watched the misting in his glass as he poured water with the decanter. The honey-yellow Pastis faded gently and evenly into a milky haze.

He thought of France, of Marseilles. His remark to the chef was neither unkindly curt nor arrogant. Bosch had simply spoken what he was thinking. It seemed to him that he knew Marseille well. He saw the syrup before him, in his memory of warm summer evenings, the sea roaring behind him. Round tables stood in the streets, where either cobblestones were laid or simply trampled sand paths ran between the whitewashed houses. Bosch had all the smells in his nose, from the strong coffee, the

smoke of cigarettes and indeed the syrup-soaked Pastis that people toasted each other with. He could see himself at a table, at least his feet, his legs crossed, his arms and gesticulating hand movements. Everything but his face. As if he were sitting there again in his usual place. Across from him, someone was talking to him. He studied the face in memory and recognized it. A name did not come to his mind, but the almost physical perception that these were images from his life, images from the south of France. He had lived there.

Bosch looked at the bottle of Pastis before him. He could read the label, everything on it. He turned the bottle in his hand to read the label on the back, which had advertising slogans printed in French along with the ingredients. Bosch understood what it said, and in his mind the words of his conversation partner at their usual table took on meaning. The man spoke French fluently. Bosch listened to him. He could not put his finger on what it was all about, although everything he heard seemed familiar to him. He understood every word. Bosch thought in French, and he knew it was like a mother tongue to him.

The third bottle from the cabinet would have to be opened.

He submitted to the procedure of mixing Pastis with a studiousness, as if he were brewing a magic potion. He had all the time in the world. The kitchen seemed to him a hidden fortress where no one would look for him. With each prepared glass came a sip that rolled slowly back and forth over his tongue, then a minute-long pause, then the whole thing over again until the glass would be empty. The impressions from his past became familiar with this sequence. More and more arrived. Lined up as if in a neat queue, they waited until the next pleasurable sip ran down the throat. At first it was more scenes from Marseille. People, not many, and a few recurring locations. Then came images of colder places, of mountains, of ships, forests. Bosch was able to locate some areas because he spotted recognizable landmarks. They were linked to sentences, warnings, laughter. For a time, the images accompanied him with Italian furor in the voices of people from

his past. Then he understood Hungarian, then Turkish. And the same realization befell him each time: he had mastered the language, each one of them just as fluently and as if he had learned it from childhood.

In a fit of rage, Bosch picked up the empty glass, took a swing, and hurled it across the kitchen with all his might. It shattered on the wall next to the door through which the cook had fled the room earlier in the evening. An oozing yellow stain was now emblazoned on the wall. It spread slowly. Drops came together to form small lines of Pastis, all of them leisurely streaming downward.

Bosch looked down at the stool he had knocked over. The dizziness and nausea he had so patiently drunk away in his kitchen exile were coming back—even more unpleasant than before. No matter what he did, he felt as if he were in a spiral from which he could not escape. Every time he had tried to banish the looming thoughts, it had gotten worse.

He spoke every language. All of them. Bosch didn't have to check, he just knew. And what would have pleased others about this outrageous ability threw Bosch back into the very despair that had begun with the impossible farce in the basement. He could no longer suppress the fact that the events of that evening, and so many before, had been unnatural. He was not afraid of it either. What made his heart leap was the suspicion that he himself was not natural.

Behind Bosch the unsoiled door was opened. Startled, he turned, just in time to see d'Utrecht step into the kitchen, whistling cheerfully.

"Oh," the jeweler exclaimed.

He stopped as if stunned by shock. Bosch did not move either. He noticed that d'Utrecht no longer wore his customary combination of vest and jacket, but was in a nightgown. It stretched perilously over the jeweler's stomach, but reached down to the kitchen tiles like a grotesque train. The man's torso was simply too short for his dress size.

With one hand d'Utrecht still held open the door, in the other he carried a flickering little oil lamp.

"Is it you?" d'Utrecht broke the silence cautiously. He seemed almost more hunched and stocky than his shape dictated anyway. Whereas he had just been whistling happily, he now stared nervously in Bosch's direction. He looked anxious.

Bosch merely replied with an unnerved expression on his face. The Pastis violently got into his head, which had a hard time making sense of d'Utrecht's entrance.

"Ah, 'Bosch'!" said d'Utrecht. The nervousness vanished. He straightened up so that the edge of his nightgown barely touched the tiles. Also, his countenance regained format.

"Well, good night," the jeweler bid him, and started to move. He shuffled in his slippers past Bosch on the opposite side of the cooking unit, straight toward the other door. As he walked, he resumed his interrupted whistling tune. He noticed the Pastis stain on the wall, which continued to grimace downward, with an appreciative, mocking nod. Then he reached for the second door and without another word disappeared into the bowels of this wing of the house. The door slammed gently into the lock.

Dirt. Bosch processed the impressions of the last few minutes with some delay. The edge of d'Utrecht's nightgown had been completely dirtied. This wasn't from dust that had perhaps eluded the cleaning staff in one place or another of the vast estate. It was a dark brown crust, as if made of dirt or wet clay. Even if d'Utrecht didn't care for his appearance, which the brightly polished metal knobs and brass chains on his clothes disproved, he must have noticed this enormous layer of dirt.

And where was he going, anyway? The jeweler's room was upstairs on the second floor, Bosch remembered. Not only was the kitchen on the first floor, but the exit d'Utrecht had been seeking led into the strange red wing of the house and into the basement.

Bosch reached for the Pastis bottle on the sideboard, which contained only a remnant of the undiluted liquor. Since he now didn't have a glass anymore, Bosch dumped the remaining amount down his throat just like

that. It almost knocked him off his feet. He had to support himself with both hands on the sideboard and breathe in quick shallow gasps until he regained his senses.

There had been no bed in d'Utrecht's room. Bosch remembered the chase through the house that the game had let him do. There had been dirt on the floor, pebbles and gems mixed together.

He decided to follow d'Utrecht. If he couldn't avoid him and the others, he would have to confront them. Bosch staggered to the door, opened it quietly, and peered into the hallway. The jeweler was no longer to be seen. Nor was there any sound of the whistling. Bosch looked into a deserted narrow corridor that demanded a first decision from him. Along to the right was the laundry and the red wallpaper that Bosch had avoided since his first week in the house. Somewhere back there was also Sander's room with its peculiar glass box.

Bosch preferred the left corridor. There were rooms here, too, and if perhaps he was imagining it, he was imagining it very well: Didn't the endless runner that stretched on the floorboards to the next corner and around it seem darker in some places? Darker than it did in the other direction, as if some soil-like dirt had gotten caught in the high fibers?

The decision was made. Bosch crept quietly ahead, to the corner. He glanced down the corridor. No sound could be heard from any of the adjoining rooms. By now it must have been almost midnight. The tract seemed deserted. Bosch became aware of his own softly shuffling footsteps on the runner. As he walked slowly forward, he ran his fingers along the wooden doors. If d'Utrecht had entered somewhere here, he must have closed the door and dropped dead. Surely no one went to bed like that, completely without making a sound! No more than a minute had passed before Bosch had risen to his feet and set off in pursuit of the jeweler.

At the end of the corridor waited the rather unsightly shaft that reached into the basement. This was not the spiral staircase that led down to the stage in the other wing. The basement obviously extended under the

entire house, and Bosch had never explored its vast dimensions. He knew the shaft here—only from above, though. Here, an impressively massive ladder stood almost vertically in the square hole. It could be called a very steep staircase, because the treads of the ladder were so deep and wide. Whoever in the kitchen was to replenish supplies had to climb down here.

Bosch heard something from below. It sounded dry, sliding, like a tiny avalanche of tin and rattling cans. There was nothing to be seen. The shaft was pitch black. It wasn't until Bosch stood on the first rung of the ladder, got down on his knees and caught a slightly more profound glimpse, that he saw a lone light bulb dangling in the distance of the basement vault. He climbed down the ladder to the bottom.

Supplies were stowed on either side of the shaft. Bosch passed a whole barrage of wine racks, which were greatly needed given the constant drinking, not the least of which was by himself. Here hung the lone light bulb. Figuring out the label of a wine bottle in the sparse light would have been pure luck in the absence of clairvoyance. Bosch's eyes, however, quickly adjusted to the darkness. He felt his way along the walls, deeper into the cellar. There it became a little brighter. Bosch made out a flickering light that looked suspiciously like the flame of the oil lamp.

It stood on a mound of dirt. Bosch reached a large room, and the mound inside belonged to a huge circular hole. The oil lamp perched on it like a birthday candle on the encrusted rim of a cupcake. The hole itself might have been twelve to fifteen feet in diameter. It took up this part of the basement almost completely. Only the four corners remained untouched, but they were as empty as the rest of the cool and dark room.

Sounds could be heard from below, out of the hole. Bosch ducked involuntarily and snuck to the edge. To get a look inside, he had to lean his upper body over the rampart.

The jeweler worked away at the depths. He was as deep below the rampart as the hole was wide. The walls formed a funnel, and a rather steep one at that. Even with the poor lighting, Bosch could see the ground

changing color the deeper it went. At the top, a few roots still protruded into the hole. The basement floor had been excavated for the hole. Where the edge was not covered with the dug-out, sharp concrete edges stood out.

There were a few improvised steps cut into the soil. Still, it wasn't clear to Bosch how the chubby d'Utrecht had made it down the funnel safely and in one piece. But there he stood now, at the bottom of his excavation. Beside him in the damp sand was a second oil lamp, its glow not reaching all the way up, but producing enough light at the bottom of the hole. Bosch could see d'Utrecht clearly.

He was naked. And he was digging in the earth with both hands. His nightgown lay carelessly stripped on the sloping wall of the funnel—no wonder it was dirty. Bosch watched d'Utrecht's antics, first in shock and then with growing fascination. The jeweler worked with his back to him, on his knees. He dug diligently like a mole in the ground, so that splashes of earth constantly flew to the left and right of him. More and more clods of dirt strayed onto d'Utrecht's soft shoulders, his cheesy back and even stuck to his buttocks in the wild digging. In addition, he made noises like an animal on the hunt. He literally grunted. And he spoke to himself in between, completely out of breath.

"Come on, come on," puffed d'Utrecht. "Just one! One will do, won't it? It's not too much to ask, is it? Can't sleep otherwise, little friend..."

He dug obsessively, without turning around even once. Bosch abandoned his covert post and climbed the embankment. D'Utrecht did not notice that either. He drove his fingers into the hard ground as if he didn't care about his joints. The dirt marks on his skin gradually became a map of dirt patches. D'Utrecht shoveled recklessly. Bosch expected him to cry out in pain any second as his fingers broke under the effort.

And d'Utrecht did indeed cry out, but not in pain.

"Gotcha!" he triumphed.

Bosch could not discern what it was that suddenly put a stop to d'Utrecht's digging frenzy. In any case, the jeweler held it in his hand. He

crawled excitedly a little ways over to the second oil lamp, where he looked at his find in the glow of the light.

The result of the inspection seemed to satisfy d'Utrecht. He babbled to himself, out of breath with delight. As he did so, he licked the stone, which Bosch could not see properly, clean with his tongue. Gradually, this seemed to calm him down, because the incomprehensible babble lost momentum and grew quieter and quieter. Finally, d'Utrecht pressed his find affectionately against his beefy chest with both hands, then gradually sank down, smiling contentedly. He slid inch by inch onto his side until he lay at the bottom of the hole with his legs drawn up and no longer moving.

Bosch waited to see what would happen now. But the jeweler had no more words to say nor energy to waste. He lay down there, naked and weary, as if he were falling asleep.

Suddenly there was a dead silence in the basement. Without d'Utrecht's spectacle, the bare walls and the churned forest dirt receded into soundless darkness. Bosch did not stir. He could not take his eyes from d'Utrecht. The naked man lay huddled twelve or so feet below him on the bare ground. The coolness of the earth spread up to Bosch from down there. He felt it on his face. It had to be cold in the hole, especially since d'Utrecht was lying with his skin in the sand. It was no longer dry at this depth. Damp dirt was smeared in broad stripes on d'Utrecht's hips and legs. His hands, in which he protectively enclosed his find, were jet black. It looked as if he had gloves of lacquer on.

The jeweler breathed calmly now. Bosch could not form a clear thought. His body made a disorganized as well as lame attempt to steal away, back to the ladder on the first floor. But that did not happen. Bosch stood still and silent. Beneath his feet, a short stream of sand grains trickled out from the rampart and over the funnel wall. They didn't get far, and certainly not to the ground, but Bosch could hear the trickle of grains as loudly as an orchestral piece from row one.

D'Utrecht apparently could, too.

"If you won't save me," he said softly, "at least let me sleep."

He didn't move. Even his eyes d'Utrecht kept as shut as before. The words came out of his mouth without haste. The rest of the man continued to lie peacefully in the dirt as a pale lump of flesh.

"Do you know what it's like when you can't get any sleep?"

"No," Bosch heard himself say.

"People say that everything becomes colorless and tasteless," d'Utrecht explained from his horizontal position. "And that they can't think properly anymore. It's like you're in a frenzy, but without the fun."

Now d'Utrecht opened his eyes. Bosch found that they glistened even in the darkness. There were tears in them.

"I wish I had that..."

D'Utrecht turned onto his back so that he could face Bosch, who was pinned high above him like the spire of a tower on the earthen rampart.

"When I'm not asleep, I see everything more clearly. I can smell more and I keep smelling, through walls and the walls themselves. I can't eat then because my head threatens to burst from so much taste. And the more hours go by, the worse it gets. I see, hear and feel this world with all my senses. It's terrible! Do you understand?"

Bosch didn't know what to say.

"Do you understand?" cried d'Utrecht suddenly. His shrill voice resounded up from the earth funnel like a projectile and bounced off the ceiling and basement walls as a fierce echo.

Now Bosch nodded, startled.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? When I can't sleep, this world pushes its ugly face deeper into mine. All its knock-offs! These things, smells and silly sounds you can't hear, but I'm cursed to! This ugly copy of Heaven, ...lousy! And you paint it even, aren't you ashamed?"

The jeweler was not calm anymore now. He talked himself into a rage, although the shouted anger could not hide his despair. Tears were flowing down his cheeks right and left. Bosch saw the two bright lines running

between d'Utrecht's eyes down his jaw to his neck.

"You're talking crazy! What do you want from me?"

"I want back!" roared d'Utrecht at the top of his lungs. The wobbly flesh beneath his narrow shoulders quivered on the dome-like belly.

"I want to see Heaven! You promised!"

"Me?"

That was all Bosch could utter. With each sentence d'Utrecht hurled at him, he grew more tense. The nausea that had plagued him time and again now took on a different form: a vague foreboding spread through Bosch, making him equal parts uncertain and angry. He wanted to run away—but not from the naked, ranting man below him, who had broken through the basement floor of this villa and was digging a hole with his fingers at night. No, from himself. He wished this all revolved around the habits and fancies of the occupants of the house. But it didn't. What if it was all because of him? This was what had obscured the nausea in him so far. The others had kept him in the dark, from a distance at first, then with gimmicks, with magic tricks. As if they had been afraid to tell him to his face what they had to share. And as long as that had gone on, Bosch had been able to persuade himself that he didn't have his wits about him.

But now it was over. A thicker curtain than the one of the impossible stage set had been pulled aside. The jeweler shouted it in his face. Bosch could not ignore it.

"This is no longer punishment," d'Utrecht whined as he slowly raised himself to his knees. " Their false memories draw me in!"

D'Utrecht reached into the mud beneath him and held out a handful of dirt to Bosch.

"This earth! For a few slivers of quartz, a crumb of amber, a night-black schorl once in a blue moon..." he continued. "For that, I beat my brains out all night. Like an animal! I've tried a thousand times to stay in bed. Not one second of sleep is granted me if I can't lie underground. I have to feel it on my skin, I have to breathe it in, ...for just an hour or two of rest

at least. And why? Only for love! You know as well as I do how beautiful it was. How could you have forgotten it, all this time?"

Bosch didn't need to answer with the counter question that popped into his head. The kneeling d'Utrecht spotted his cluelessness.

"Heaven! Won't you remember!"

Whatever d'Utrecht might have expected Bosch to say in response, he found himself bitterly disappointed. And he took it out on his tear ducts and vocal cords.

"You're a disgrace, just so you know!" he nagged from the hole. "I'm not afraid of you. Why don't you come down here and have it out on me! Come on down to my bed! I share it with worms and bugs. Now that's something for a king! I am a king, you hear! No less than you are! Why do I have to humiliate myself night after night? Why not you? You should be in my place, if you can't remember the most beautiful of all sights. The hills we imagined when we felt like it! The splendid paths on the radiant web of the firmament, interwoven and interspersed with gold and diamonds! Just once more I want to touch it, kneel on it and kiss it. Just once more...

You promised that you would find a way! You promised that we would fight..."

"Look at you," Bosch blurted out, in the middle of d'Utrecht's tirade. "You've lost your mind, Mammon!"

Bosch startled.

The addressee jumped up from his bruised knees, but staggered awkwardly backwards because his center of gravity didn't quite want to follow him. The jeweler landed on his rear end. He dug his fingers into the wall of dirt at his back. This time not out of an obsessive greed for a beautiful stone, but out of surprise.

"You said my name!" he whispered as reverently as if he feared erasing the fact retroactively if he spoke too loudly.

"You did! You called me Mammon!"

"No, I, ...I...," Bosch stuttered.

He didn't know what had possessed him all of a sudden. The jeweler had abandoned all reason. He probably wanted to pull him down into the same delirium he must have drunk himself into. That was the only possibility. Bosch should get out of there before the maniac could drive him insane for good.

"Is it time? Are you here? Do you recognize me?" asked the naked man in the pit. "Please, forgive the way I look! It's just one of those ugly shells that time squeezes me into. You got it better, that's for sure!"

A broad grin sprouted on the jeweler's face. He unclasped the tiny stone between the fingers of his right hand, which he had found a few minutes ago and first kept at his chest, then clamped between his knuckles with sleepwalking assurance. Now he put the faintly glittering stone into his mouth. He swallowed it—his face distorting in pain. He needed all his fingers now. On all fours, he traversed the hole to slowly climb up Bosch's side of the funnel.

"Remember how I drove the axe through those pious yes-men? I was so tall and so beautiful!"

Bosch felt the images of his dream come back into his head. He saw a bustle of arms and weapons circling. In the midst of it, the jeweler, at least from the looks of his face. He remembered.

"Stay down there!" threatened Bosch.

"Call me, like you did then!"

"No!"

"I'll follow you!"

Bosch pushed some dirt over the edge of the rampart with one shoe. It pelted the climber in the face, but didn't stop him from continuing to climb up the small steps.

"Call me by my name!"

Another load of dirt flew into the hole. Then Bosch turned on his

heel and fled. He stumbled back through the darkness of the basement to the ladder that led back to the first floor.

The rather sparse light from the sconces blinded him harshly. Bosch squinted as he reached the top. Beneath him, he heard rumbling. Without giving it a second thought, he reached for the hatch of the shaft, which was always open. He dropped it on the basement entrance. The loud bang of the heavy hatch startled Bosch while he was still running. He wanted to leave. He had to get out of this house. In no time at all, he had reached the hallway with the door to the kitchen. It was still ajar, just as Bosch had left it during his stealthy pursuit. Now he thought he saw shadows scurrying past in the kitchen. Were there not also voices to be heard?

Bosch turned as he ran, thinking he heard the creaking of the basement hatch coming from behind. With long strides, he rushed past the kitchen, toward the red part of the hallway. Bosch navigated the confusing twists and turns of the tract with speed and with his hands. He pushed off from the cramped walls, sometimes deliberately bumping his shoulder against the red wallpaper when he was unable to slow down. It made a noise that would not go unheard in the middle of the night. But Bosch didn't care, because he could swear that they didn't bother to be quiet behind him either. He could hear shouts. Every few steps he turned around, again and again. There was still no one to be seen.

He bumped hard against something that was cold. The impact almost knocked him off his feet. Bosch hadn't paid attention and had looked around once too often as the corridor came to an end. He had to forcefully shake the drowsiness out of his head. As the flashing of light disappeared from his eyes, he found himself standing in front of the large pane of glass next to Sander's room.

A dead end.

Unlike last time, Bosch couldn't see through the pane. There was darkness, and it took one last moment of dizziness before Bosch realized: the cell was filled to the ceiling with water. It cast a dark green glow back

into the light of the narrow corridor. There was no light behind the glass.

Before Bosch could process the sight in any way, it grew brighter in several places behind the glass at the same time. Something drifted silently toward the pane.

It was Sander. He floated in the water as if he were sitting on an invisible chair. His arms hung down his body, where in an armchair the armrests would be. His legs were bent.

Bosch could not believe his eyes. It was getting louder behind him, but he couldn't help touching the window with both hands. Sander was wearing pajamas. The loose, white fabric moved in the water around the policeman's arms and legs. Now one of his elbows reached the glass, and at that very moment a reflex went through the drifting arm, as if Sander were not in a water tank but shooing away a mosquito on the patio.

Sander was not dead. The little elbow nudge pushed him away from the glass again. Already his contours beyond the pane were blurring. Still, Bosch saw quite clearly that Sander's brow was furrowed. It hadn't been a moment ago. Only, the man wasn't awake either. His eyes were closed.

Sander was asleep. He floated in the water tank, which, from what Bosch could see, was filled to the brim. There was no air to breathe. Also, Sander hardly moved at all. His feet did not reach the floor, his head did not reach the ceiling. He hovered; apparently set in motion only by Bosch's brutal impact on the glass.

It looked peaceful.

Bosch reached out to drum on the glass and wake Sander up. Behind him, however, someone yelled out, so instead of drumming, he turned around. Time was running out. He could hear the voices loud and clear. One last look into the water tank and at the sleeping Sander, then Bosch reached for the door handle to his room. It was unlocked. Bosch pulled the door shut behind him, instantly leaving the room totally dark.

He wouldn't have the tranquility of his first uninvited visit to Sander's room this time. His heart skipped a beat. He stumbled forward

through the darkness until he felt the desk he had been looking for. Bosch leaned forward and also found the dusty, thick curtain he remembered. He wiped everything on the desk out of the way with the flat of his hand, climbed onto the table, and yanked the curtain aside.

It only got a little brighter, at most by a bluish tinge. But that was enough for Bosch. He had the window in front of him. Outside, the moon shone behind clouds. Footsteps could be heard outside the door.

Bosch found the shutter of the window. He didn't bother to be quiet. The double window opened squeakily. Bosch put one foot on the window sill and jumped outside without even a glance at where he would land.

Fortunately for him, it was a short leap into the unknown. He came to a safe landing on the lawn, on the short side of the villa. To his left was the garden; straight ahead the woods reached almost to the house. Bosch instinctively ran to the right and after a short sprint reached the mansion's front. He was greeted by the waist-high hedge of small rhododendrons that separated the path along the side of the house from the circle with the statue. Bosch took it like a steeplechaser without slowing his pace.

The massive entrance door to the villa was wide open. Light spilled out, and Bosch saw from the corner of his eye a slender figure coming.

"Wait up!" someone yelled after Bosch.

It was Simian. Bosch passed him at a speed that would have been good enough to win him a medal. The master of the house couldn't help but start running as well. However, he only got around the circle until he gave up immediately, because it was obvious that he would never manage to catch up with Bosch.

"Let me explain!" shouted Simian. "Wait! My Lord, do wait!"

Bosch put yard after yard between himself and the dwindling light from the villa's entrance. He gasped. His shoes banged loudly on the pavement of the road. Still, he heard the shouts behind him. He understood every single one of the far too many words.

8. Arrivals

Torn shirts were rarely to be seen on the Kurfürstendamm. And certainly not at well past midnight. It had gotten chilly that night, nature's first and gentle reminder that it wouldn't be summer forever. Still, Bosch was not cold, despite his completely wet shirt. It had slits that covered his belly and back in such broad and numerous patterns that, at first glance, he looked like the victim of a knife attack. At second glance this could not be the case, because he was not injured, except for a few scratches he had caught from the branches in the Grunewald.

The wide promenade truly began to live up to its name around here, where Bosch had long left Luna Park behind him as he ran. Under the glow of the lanterns, he allowed himself to slow to a walking pace. He had no sense of how long he had been running. He could have run farther if the horror of that night had still been breathing down his neck, like it had when he jumped out the window in Grunewald. Step by step, he felt safer here now, where the espalier of houses on Ku'damm stretched for miles to the east. It drew Bosch in, invited him in. His breathing slowed, and the boulevard seemed to him like a path back to life as it should be.

Perhaps he could have walked it to its end, but not this night.

Voices could still be heard from some of the bars. But Bosch saw no one on the sidewalks. He wandered alone between the advertising boxes and abandoned café tables. An eerie silence lay over the street, which Bosch didn't notice because it was loud in his head. Images from the last few hours piled up and clogged his thoughts. Plus, the ever same phrases that Bosch had heard looped in the recesses of his mind. The stillness of the promenade, on the other hand, was distant to him. The sounds of the

forest were missing here. But the city birds made no sound either. Only a light breeze stirred the treetops of the carefully spaced avenue trees.

Bosch crossed Henriettenplatz, where Kurfürstendamm bent a little to the right and widened even more than before. Here, some windows shimmered from second, third, fourth floors. Hundreds of apartments were as dark as the cloudy sky, but the few lighted windows supported the street lamps in painting the street in a misty gray of shadows. Further back, in the far distance, the first neon billboards could be glimpsed. Bosch headed toward them.

At first, he wasn't sure if he was hearing anything at all. Something was buzzing in his ears. Ahead of him, Bosch saw the large, glistening arcs of light from the boulevard's advertising signs. But he was still hundreds of yards away from them. Was he mistaken? No, the further he walked, the more evidently something was in the air. The buzzing became shrill, sharp sounds. They sounded like acoustic pinpricks being poked into Bosch's head. And a little while later, he felt sure of what he was hearing.

Children's voices.

They were screaming at the top of their lungs. Bosch didn't understand a word because the screams were jumbled. In any case, they quickly grew louder. Ahead of him, movement entered the horizon of street, trees, tables, and bricks. Children matching the high-pitched voices stepped out of the shadow play in the background. They came toward Bosch, perhaps a dozen, two dozen, or even more. It was impossible to count them as they crisscrossed curbs, lanes, and medians like crazy. In this confusion, the only thing they had in common was that they were all headed toward Bosch.

He stopped as the front of riled-up children spilled toward him like a tidal wave. It was obvious from their baloonish slider caps that they were newspaper boys. None of them, however, carried newspapers. They shouted into the night anyway, as if they had to sell the latest headline in the grumbling of the working city.

When the first children saw him, order came into the group. Several of them converged as they ran, like an aviator formation. They were now shouting and racing directly toward Bosch.

"He's coming!" one of them screeched.

"...Here at last!" overlaid another shrill cry.

"Get on out!"

"Out of your beds!"

"He's here!"

They came closer. And there were more and more newsboys. Behind them it grew brighter as they passed crossing street after crossing street. The many dark windows were rapidly losing their dominance over the few shimmering panes of glass from a few minutes ago.

Bosch could now see the faces of the children. They were beaming. Some voices had already been shouted into hoarseness—something that usually never happened to paperboys, given the nature of their business. Shouting was their profession. These here had probably been on their conquest march through the streets for a long time.

Had they been looking for him? Bosch's chaotic mess of memories and scraps of conversation, which had possessed him so much, melted away into nothingness in the face of the ecstatic army of children. There remained within him a silence more beautiful than he could have wished for in his most desperate moments of recent days. It was powerful. It made him feel great. Bosch raised his arms and held them wide open to the onrushing children, as if to welcome them all at once.

They ran past him, one by one.

It took less than three seconds for the lively swarm, with all its shouting, roaring and jubilating, to pass him completely. Bosch turned to look at them, but none of the children gave him another glance. One of them snatched the lid of a garbage can that stood at the roadside. Then he ran after the others, banging his fist wildly on the metal.

In the same measure, in which the childlike tumult hurried away from

him, now rose pandemonium behind Bosch. He turned back toward the East, where he had been headed until just now. The residents of the Ku'damm stepped out of the house entrances. Women, men, children, entire families. At first there were only a few of them, but then lines slowly formed in the corridors. Here and there, the little ones cried when they were told to go back into the house.

Bosch began to walk. He was the only one staring into people's faces. Those who came out of the apartments looked up into the sky as if at a secret command that Bosch had missed in any case. The clouds still hung as a dense blanket over the city. They were unusually low, so that it almost seemed as if they were touching the ridges of the highest roofs. Meanwhile, the moon had created some clear space in the sea of clouds. It shone brightly through the narrow rifts.

At the construction site of Lehniner Platz, a gap appeared in the rigorous array of houses on Kurfürstendamm. A hole in a prizefighter's dentures during a photo shoot of the smiling winner couldn't have been more eye-catching. The brownfield, fenced off with wooden slats, disfigured the usual profile of the boulevard. Tonight, it provided a view over Charlottenburg which was otherwise blocked by the front buildings along the rest of the route. When Bosch reached Lehniner Platz, hundreds of people had already gathered there. Everything flocked to the spot that offered the best view of the sky. There were some collisions, because many turned their eyes only upwards. Unlike in the pubs at such an hour, here on the street, however, people did not sneer at each other, but only meekly apologized. An uneasy silence lay over the square.

Almost everyone was wearing nightgowns or underwear. What would have been scandalous by day now seemed unimportant. Bosch pushed his way through the scantily clad people and was by far the most dressed.

No one paid any attention to him. There were murmurs and whispers. One man, whom Bosch could not see, cried out loudly.

"There!"

The murmurs welled up. Necks stretched, there was some jostling. But when nothing happened, the crowd quickly quieted down. Someone scolded the man who had cried out.

Bosch tapped a young guy on the shoulder who happened to be standing next to him and seemed much less interested in what was going on in the sky than most people. He wasn't looking up. His family had probably dragged him outside with them, even though he wanted to sleep.

He turned reluctantly to Bosch.

"What's all this about?" asked Bosch with an annoyed undertone that he hadn't intended at all.

"What?"

"Why are you all outside?"

"What hole did you crawl out of?" the young guy asked in return—being quite annoyed himself.

"I just got back into town..."

The young guy eyed Bosch. He felt like he was being made fun of. Bosch could see it in his face. And his facial expression suggested that he would not reward such ignorance with an answer. Bosch was about to turn away and try his luck on someone else, when he remembered the children's words from earlier, when they had come running toward him.

"Is 'he' there?" he asked.

"He? Don't give me that! Are you one of them, as well?"

Bosch had asked in a wild guess, but hit bull's eye. The young guy now gave him his undivided attention. He was getting worked up.

"That's not the Messiah, no matter what you think!"

With a hissing sound, a substantial load of spit landed on the floor. It came out of Bosch's mouth, leaving the guy momentarily speechless.

"There is no Messiah..." whispered Bosch.

In his head these words reverberated like an angry scream. That they came out barely audible was due to his own surprise. He hadn't spat on purpose. It had been the only thing his body managed to do.

The guy had heard the whisper. He interpreted the moist act which had almost affected his shoes as best suited his own state of mind.

"Told you so," he commented with satisfaction. "There won't be anything to see here at all, I'll bet! And if there is, it's a plane..."

"An airplane?"

Bosch thought of the horde of children and their waking shrieks. Because of an airplane?

"With jet engines!" the young guy specified.

A loud murmur gripped the mass of people around the two. Arms were thrown up in the air. There were yells. Bosch and the guy lost sight of each other as the crowd began to move. No one was running, and there was no panic. There just went a ripple through the bodies standing close together, their heads unable to help them coordinate. All the people were looking at the sky.

It was as dark as before. The sunrise was still a few hours away. The moon seemed to slowly give up the fight against the cloud cover. Still, the whole place was searching the barely perceptible gray layer above Ku'damm for something. Someone had to have seen something, or the mood of the crowd would not have changed so instantly.

Bosch cleared space with his arms, because in all directions people tripped over their own or other people's feet. Some fell, causing dodging and jostling. A few curses were heard, more inarticulate sounds—then nothing at all.

The silence was complete. No one moved anymore. Not a word, not a complaint, no one sought attention any longer. The looks remained in the sky and Bosch too searched above him for what had silenced the crowd. Only, for the life of him, he could see nothing. He had to use the stiff-necked positions of the heads next to him as a guide. Bosch followed the gazes with his own eyes, expecting something bright, a flash, a noisy sound at least, that betrayed the presence of something, even if it wasn't visible in the clouds. But there was nothing of the sort.

Or was there?

Bosch thought he saw a shadow against the clouds. Without the glow of the moon, everything beyond the streetlights was but a mush of grayscale. But once Bosch mentally separated himself from the expected flash, noise, or otherwise spectacular sign, he found it easier to observe. He could see better, or at least guess better, what he was seeing.

Something was moving, below the clouds, but still clearly above the rooftops. It was slow. Bosch knew all the rapturous descriptions Harstein gave of all kinds of machines on land and in the air. There was nothing so slow in the sky—unless it was a balloon. And it couldn't be, because despite the darkness Bosch was sure he saw nothing but a thick line. There was no round balloon. There were no parts, no movement.

As if a large column were floating through the air.

Bosch couldn't look away. There was nothing more for him to discover than this conjecture of a silhouette. He could try as hard as he would. But the floating line captivated his eyes, as it obviously did captivate everyone else in the square. But only Bosch moved. His feet carried him forward, the further the shadow moved away under the clouds. Its course did not change. Calmly and steadily it floated northward. It would soon have to disappear over the other side of the street with its tall houses. Bosch didn't need to hurry to keep up. That's how slow the line in the sky was.

Bosch walked through the motionless people like a sleepwalker. If he had had eyes for them, he would have noticed that only he was moving. Everyone else stood frozen. The silence was deafening.

Bosch and the column kept the same distance, it in the air above, he down in the street. A couple whose movements seemed naturally attuned to each other. Bosch didn't think about what he was doing. He just walked, slowly and with the same steadfastness that radiated to him from above. In fact, he felt something, an invisible glow that reached him from head to toe. This is what it had to be like to know oneself at home. The tormenting cyclone of images was forgotten. The days and weeks Bosch had spent

between boredom, wonder, and ill-temper were no longer an exhausting mosaic he tried in vain to see in its entirety.

Now the whole picture lay before him like a landscape in which he knew every rock and every tree. And all that it triggered in him was a peaceful calm. What he had feared again and again in the villa, without freely admitting it to himself, did not occur. It was not terrible. It did not frighten him or rob him of his sanity. On the contrary, it came over him gently, like a familiar, loving caress: he now remembered Marseille. He knew with whom he had sat there and why. He remembered how he had come to Marseille, where he had lived before, for how long, with whom. It was a list that would fill a book. But a list not only of people, hundreds, thousands of them, but also of places. Bosch could trace his journeys as if on an invisible map of the world, from city to city, countless countries, voyages across oceans.

He stopped. All that time! Now that he was free to enter and exit every detail of his past, he was his own amazed tourist. It didn't take him long to find his way through this unprecedented chronology of events and inner library of locations in his life. It literally left him thoughtless. There was nothing to cheer, regret, lament or mourn—though there were occasions enough for a small city of human lives. The peace in Bosch reigned supreme. He bathed in it for a moment.

And then he saw that he could go no further. The shadow was already closing in on a craggy corner of the roof, at the next intersection. Bosch had arrived at the curb beyond the square and the wide street. Further up the boulevard he could walk, of course, but that was straight ahead, while the shadow threatened to disappear to the left across Charlottenburg. The houses next to Bosch formed a high wall that would soon block his view of the line in the sky.

Bosch knew that he had only seconds before this invisible bond between the column and him would be cut by bricks and tiles. And this knocked the brief peace out of him.... He knew who he was. There was no

going back. The mosaic of the small, confusing pieces of his life belonged to the past. The end of the brief inner peace was not a stone dropped into a pond, disfiguring its quietly resting surface with ripples. What left Bosch was the satisfaction of finally being able to look at that still surface of his life which had eluded him for so long. Now he saw what was reflected in it —what he could not grasp and could not have.

Not anymore.

Bricks and tiles stood in his way. Just now, as he had awakened from this deep impotency that had dulled him to an extent that all the alcohol in the world could not! Bosch saw everything around him with different eyes: those fragile little windows, the wooden roof trusses, rain gutters. He found it all grotesque. Ridiculous constructions that little minds had dreamed up. Only a few hours ago he had seen how a real builder had created a seashore in a basement from practically nothing. And now that he remembered how he had once addressed the architect by his real name, he was no longer even fascinated by that achievement. The enormous, old, lanky man might have been an unforgettable figure to people, but now Bosch knew that Neiwolf was only a sad silhouette of his real self. He had built wonders that could house millions.

Bricks and tiles!

In the sky, the last inkling of the column-like shape pushed out of Bosch's sight. He leapt forward a few more steps, knocking over a man who toppled over to the side behind him, completely stiff and, more importantly, without any complaint. There was a strangely hard sound as the man hit the sidewalk. Bosch didn't notice it, because all that was on his mind was his useless rushing forward. No matter how far he continued on down the sidewalk, he could only see part of the shadow.

Bosch was getting angry. He felt he had a right to continue his unexpected couple dance with the shadow. This was part of his real world, not these tiny streets carved into the earth with great importance and their onlookers. The nervousness that had just hung over the square disgusted

Bosch. He had probably seen more places on Earth than any of the night's wanderers, but he now felt like the most alien of them all. And he had no interest in feeling like one of them. Bosch's heart pounded loudly and it insisted on his rank. Through his pumping blood, he heard a cry that Bosch was the first. The first among equals, and the first among these unequals.

His eyes saw the shadow finally disappear. A few walls of stone and concrete separated his gaze from the only thing that came from Bosch's real world. His gaze, which was destined instead to survey armies near and far.

Bosch clenched his fists and grimaced. His rage simmered. He stood here on the ground, unable to simply leave it. Bound to bone, flesh and blood. He would rather have been an animal at this moment than have to endure the sudden shame that the loss of eye contact caused in him. He stood as one among many in the late night, wordless and powerless.

And that was wrong.

Every fiber of his body reminded Bosch of that. It was unjust and a sinister punishment that was all about humiliating him. The thought made him furious. The only comfort he could take from this bitter realization was that at least now he understood what was happening around him.

The shadow was gone. Bosch was left with a deep longing, coupled with bitter bile that he could literally taste on his tongue. He looked around, looked into the expressionless faces that were still staring motionlessly at the clouds where they had stood minutes ago. The ones closest to him looked strange around the eyes. They did not blink. And in general they all watched a spot in the sky, which the shadow had already passed through long ago. Just as Bosch began to wonder if these people were really not moving at all, a great jolt went through the street and the square in the background.

A groan came from hundreds of throats at once. Suddenly, arms and legs again scurried busily. The place resembled a startled anthill.

The man who had been knocked over by Bosch cried out in pain.

The disappointment was great, almost palpable. The murmur died

away as quickly as it had come. Now Bosch stood still where he was, while everything around him got moving. The first families made their way back to the entrances of the houses. Some people smiled blissfully, while others had fear written all over their faces.

There was trouble between two men ahead of Bosch. They were pointing fingers at each other, accusing each other. A void of precautionary distance quickly formed around the two. Bosch ran right through it. He paid no attention to the shouters and they paid no attention to him. They proceeded into a scuffle, promptly warned by a police officer's whistle. By then, however, Bosch had already reached the next intersection, where things were still buzzing as well. Most of the local residents joined the queues in front of their stairwells and courtyard crossings. Only a few remained sitting where they were: in the middle of the street, on benches, leaning against an avenue tree. There was little talk. Those who went back to their beds were obediently silent in their queues. Those who stayed outside were talking to themselves, judging by the mostly hollow looks on their faces—thoughts that no one was supposed to hear.

Bosch quickened his pace. He couldn't help but keep looking at the faces around him. And it became too much for him. Each one seemed to him like a portrait, a museum exhibit, or stamps in an album. He could not turn the page. In his mind, the expressions were sorted and filed away at lightning speed. After a few exhausting minutes, during which he frantically tried to focus his eyes on the sidewalk tiles, Bosch reached the Zoological Garden at Breitscheidplatz. Here, Kurfürstendamm turned a little further east. The main spire of the Memorial Church, towering perhaps a hundred yards from Bosch, appeared to almost carve open the clouds with its spire.

Here the rigid outline of the promenade broke up. Streets joined it from all directions, and with them wandering people. Bosch looked at a throng of them, directly ahead of him, as if at a living wall. To his left, he spotted the completely dark gap in the city's facades, which the Zoological

Garden with its dense forest presented to the urban lights. But more importantly, Bosch recognized the train station of the same name next to it.

He didn't hesitate. After a veritable sprint, he reached the entrance of the station, where as many people had gathered as usually during rush hour. Unlike the crowd at the church, however, this one didn't deter Bosch. He shoved his way through the bodies in order to reach the stairs leading up to the S-Bahn. There was no crowd on the stairs at all. At the top, Bosch found the platform almost deserted.

People had gathered only in the shelter of the station lobby, silent and distraught. Hardly anyone wanted to take a train.

Still, one did come, even at the end of a night like this. Bosch didn't have to wait long and endure the lonely woman crying on a waiting bench next to him, lost, filling the huge platform with her sobs. The train engine of the incoming city train drowned out the woman without any sympathy.

Bosch took a few steps back from the tracks. In passing, he could see the engineer's face. It looked so grim that Bosch would not have been surprised if all the man's teeth were crumbling under the pressure of his jaw. The train seemed to serve as an extended facial expression for its driver, as he braked abruptly and with a squealing wobble. The carriages were pressed into each other with a clatter. The train driver either had no talent for his job or just didn't have the nerve for it.

The crying woman remained sitting and sobbed. She did not get on, even when the train stood for a whole minute on the platform. A few drunks gradually staggered out of the compartments, along with a tightly embraced couple who must have come from who knows what party. Their clothes were of the very finest quality, but with clear traces of the night: large stains from drinking rituals gone astray, some confetti on the man's shoulders and in the woman's hair. The two came out of the compartment Bosch boarded. They didn't say a word, and as intimately as they held each other in their arms, their petrified faces unmistakably showed that they were holding each other not in carefree love, but in fear.

The Stadtbahn finally jerked back to life as abruptly and unpredictably as it had pulled into Bahnhof Zoo. In his seat, Bosch was helplessly tossed back and forth like a marionette. When the ride finally steadied as the dogged engineer forced the engine to its cruising speed, the Zoological Garden lay behind the train. Bosch glanced out the window because his ears were telling him something strange. He could see practically nothing, although the cloud cover to the east of the city was slowly clearing. Morning was approaching. What made him look out the window, rather, were the sounds that wheezed from the perimeter of the zoo up to the city railroad. There was no other way to describe it. Bosch listened as intently as he could—and as the clacking and thumping of the train allowed. He was sure he heard animals wailing. A shrill potpourri of monkey cries, excited birds and whatever other sounds were piercing enough to out-sing the locomotive.

Then the zoo yielded to the wider grounds of the large Tiergarten, and the Stadtbahn slowed down again to enter the next station. Just before the station, the train—amid its very own violent braking—slowly crept over a bridge beneath which the Charlottenburger Chaussee stretched from east to west for miles. The huge avenue was almost deserted, and Bosch saw for a moment the first speck of light from the edge of the sun at the other end of the city. He could also see through the other window in the opposite direction and found more people on the avenue than vehicles. They were walking one at a time, in completely different directions.

As if they didn't know where to go.

With a wobble, the train came to a halt at Tiergarten station. Bosch gripped the seat cushion with his hands to avoid falling to the floor. He endured these quirks of acceleration and deceleration a few more times. He knew where he wanted to get off. It was only a handful of them before he pulled into the large metal building of Friedrichstraße station.

There was considerably more going on here than on the other platforms. Dawn filtered through the glass windows of the hall. Most of

the people were, as usual, the day's first shift workers and just on their way to the factories. But the silence that would normally emanate from the collective fatigue of the early shift was different today. Bosch made his way through introspective groups of people who shuffled up and down the stairs, shoulders hunched. Everything around him moved as if a crook was hiding around every corner, a little club or butterfly knife already drawn for a hurried mugging.

The area was just the right one to have such thoughts with a clear conscience. But nobody hid in the streets. Where otherwise even in the morning hours the prostitutes occupied building entrances, people were on the move. Emptiness in the usual spots for staying and waiting. Those who were already—or still—to be found outside preferred to walk around busily. No people hanging about, no conversations at the booths or between the homeless, who always shouted something to each other. Bosch was just one among many on his walk northward across the Spree Bridge. The city was waking up.

And sounded as if it were dead.

Bosch absorbed the scents, memorized the faces, as involuntarily as before. His feet did the work, not needing conscious directions. A few minutes after leaving the station, he turned into the backyard he had last entered months ago.

The stairwell smelled, as it always had, of the same unpleasant mixture of urine, smoke and ash. As Bosch made his way up the creaky steps, a young man with a flushed head approached him. He was still almost a child, and the blush on his cheeks was related to his father's clamor. From one floor above, the man's voice shouted down at the fleeing boy that he was welcome to stay away for good if he wouldn't turn back immediately. It would be madness to abandon the family now.

The boy raced past Bosch. A woman on the next floor dared to explain to the father, who was still shouting, that it didn't matter anyway, because they would all be judged.

When Bosch passed her and the man, who had been interrupted so unbidden in family matters, silence returned briefly. Then the father threatened his grumbling neighbor vociferously with a slap in the face, so that her husband grabbed the nearest broom in the hallway to defend his wife's honor by force if necessary.

Doors flew open. A commotion ensued throughout the stairwell, which Bosch only managed to trump by immediately using his fist instead of his knuckles to knock on the third floor.

Mavi opened the door at nearly the same time. She peeked through the crack in it before recognizing Bosch.

"What the hell is going on? Has everyone gone crazy?" she asked Bosch, though more to herself and without expecting an answer from him.

Bosch didn't answer her anyway. He shut out the noise of the stairwell. All he cared about was Mavi's face. On his way, he had imagined it, had imagined Mavi in the doorframe, not knowing what that night had seen and produced beyond her little room. And just as he had imagined it, he now saw her before him.

"You're soaked," Mavi said as she shifted her gaze from the commotion in the house to Bosch. "Where have you been?"

"It doesn't matter. I know where I am now. And where I want to be..."

9. Skin

Was it real gold? The whole elevator shimmered in this warm, honey-colored hue. The mirrors contributed a great deal to it, as did the crystals under the light bulbs, in which the light refracted. Most of the other surfaces in the spacious cabin were made of precious wood. At least, Mavi guessed it had to be precious. So dark and oddly grained! Possibly it came from far away.

She kept the thought for a moment, like an unexpected coin that someone finds while walking and happily pockets. Mavi wanted to go far away. Maybe her and the wood had that in common, she imagined.

This was the fanciest hotel in town. So an elevator with real gold was quite conceivable. But except for her mother's wedding ring, Mavi had never held gold in her hand. And now she didn't have the ring to compare it to the hue of gold in the elevator either. The ring was in the hands of the pawnbroker who had given her the best price. She had been dragging her heels trying to pawn her heirloom with a jewelry buyer, but none of them ended up offering more than the pawn shop. So Mavi left the ring there, knowing full well she would never redeem it.

Now she had nothing at all to remind her of her life with her mother. And it didn't feel at all as bad as she had feared in the last weeks. On the contrary, she didn't need any more mementos of her childhood, she decided. Not if she put her plan into action.

If this was real gold, here in this elevator, it had to be much more than the weight of her little ring. Mavi thought about what it meant that this elevator was worth more than anything she owned now.

Then the cabin sank to its resting position on the first floor. The door was dutifully opened by the elevator operator. He pulled his cap at Mavi. She thanked him with the hint of a smile and scurried out as quickly as she could into the foyer of the Adlon. Here she felt even more out of place than in the elevator, where she had stood silently, looking uncomfortable. The idea that an employee was there just to push a button for her and push the door aside seemed ridiculous to Mavi. Out here in the foyer, it was even more ridiculous because it only took a fleeting glance at the wrong pair of eyes for someone to come up to her and offer their services. Especially, whenever she entered the Adlon with Bosch.

Anyway, today she had to overcome herself. She headed straight for the reception desk, across the large room.

"Good morning, madam," greeted the concierge from behind the marble-topped counter. "What can I do for you?"

"Good morning," Mavi replied. "I'd like a cab, please."

"Your room number?"

"Pardon?"

"Oh, forgive me," the concierge explained. "I mean, what room number should I use to book the cab?"

Mavi felt her cheeks flush. She hated this.

"...Presidential Suite," she said softly.

Now the concierge blushed, which happened to him very rarely. He involuntarily straightened a bit and mentally put one and one together. He knew, of course, which guests resided in which suites, but at first he had not associated the young woman before him with Bosch. She kept her arms hidden under an unspectacular, rather worn jacket. No trace of the glamour that couples exuded in the evenings as they made their way to the salons or outside.

"Of course!" he apologized quickly. "Of course!"

"...But I'll be happy to pay for the cab myself," Mavi added just as quickly. "It doesn't need to be on the room."

For a second, they both faced each other with similar nervousness, albeit for very different reasons.

Then the concierge realized.

"Allow me then, please, to at least insist on the courtesy of our house," he suggested, now again as confident as he was in handling virtually all matters on his shift. "There is a driver standing by. He doesn't take money, I mean we don't take money in the car. We want our guests to be able to hop in and relax. Just tell the driver where to go. That's all it takes."

Without another word, he walked behind the front desk to the short end of the marble counter, where he stepped through a flap into the foyer and offered Mavi an escort. If this meant she didn't have to pay, Mavi disliked it. But she didn't dare to object, because all she really wanted was to leave the hotel as quickly as possible.

Outside, as promised, a car was waiting. The driver stood apart and smoked a cigarette. There was little going on in the morning. He was not unhappy to see the concierge coming with the young lady in tow. True to form, he opened the door for Mavi. She expressed her gratitude twice, once to the driver, once to the concierge.

"To Lehrter Bahnhof, please," Mavi said when the driver had taken his seat behind the wheel. Stowing her small and only suitcase in the back had hardly thrown the man off his stride. Neither he nor the concierge suspected that it contained Mavi's remaining belongings. She could hardly believe it herself.

As the car began to move, Mavi searched for the reassurance in her that would have been quite warranted now. It was not even 8 o'clock yet. Everything was going according to plan. Still, there was no sign of calming down. Mavi became even more nervous than she already was. Last night she had hardly slept at all. And the balancing act of stealing out of the suite unnoticed by Bosch, as quiet as a mouse, still made her tremble a little. He had remained in bed, breathing normally, peacefully. His back had risen and fallen so evenly as he breathed that the sight seemed the most soothing

thing she could think of. It had not been easy to disengage from that sight. Especially since it was all of him that she could see from the doorway without making any exposing noises.

Maybe it was better that Bosch slept on his stomach and she hadn't had to see his face as the last thing.

Where had the time gone? Mavi felt there had been so much of it. She had calculated everything, procured everything, checked everything, prepared everything. Then she had met Bosch, back at Luna Park. And now the sidewalks out there were littered with yellow and red dots. Autumn was here, with falling leaves and unpleasant storms that whistled loudly even through the tall canyons of buildings.

For good measure, Mavi pulled out the documents from her coat pocket that she had checked so many times before. Her passport was there, the visa for the United States, the train ticket she had already bought last week, even though the train to Hamburg was never crowded. And her ticket for the ship.

Everything was there, ...again. It had taken months to put all this together like pieces of a puzzle. Mavi proudly recalled the first time she was able to lay all the papers together on a table and admire them. She had scraped the last of her money together without having to borrow more. She didn't want to leave a debt with anyone here.

Seeing the papers in her hands now gave Mavi peace for a moment. It was half the battle, after all, that she hadn't forgotten any of them in her rush up at Bosch's. After all, she couldn't afford any mistakes. That was the truth and absolutely no exaggeration.

And gone was that brief moment of peace. Mavi slumped on the back seat of the car. No mistakes! It was absurd that everything now had to happen at the last minute. She hadn't seen it coming when she went to the American Embassy in the summer. She had read in the newspaper that the Americans had passed a new immigration law—effective immediately. Fortunately, she found out about it in time. She needed a visa if she didn't

want to be sent back to the Republic right on the spot in New York harbor. And she had read through everything, supplied all the paperwork: two photographs, a resume in duplicate, a birth certificate, even an assurance that she had not been in jail or an insane asylum.

Mavi had been afraid that the procedure would be a problem for her. The whole purpose of this new law was to limit the number of immigrants. Those who came too late in any given year would simply not be granted visas. As it seemed, however, not all interested people had read the newspaper as well or as promptly as Mavi. She got her papers immediately. It had been the best feeling she could remember in years. A downright euphoria. That the visa was valid for four months seemed like an eternity to Mavi at the time.

Now the Adlon's fancy car was rumbling across the Spree Bridge near Lehrter Station, and the four months were up. Sitting in here, where usually only celebrities and the filthy rich sat, was still too much for Mavi. How she had lived with Bosch for weeks in this luxurious place, sometimes without taking any notice of morning, noon, night—too much!

Again and again she had postponed her departure. Why not, when there was still so much time? A few weeks made no difference to the rest of her life, there in the strange world where no one knew her and where nothing could remind her of things she had tried to forget for so long.

Mavi was angry with herself. Admitting that much helped a little with the nervousness. Today was the very last day, and that was bad enough. Trains to Hamburg ran daily, but the ship was leaving today. If she didn't arrive on time, ...Mavi didn't even want to think about that. Besides the fact that she didn't have the money to buy a later crossing, her visa would expire in three weeks.

She had to board today.

The car stopped in front of the towering entrance to the Lehrter train station. The driver held the door open for Mavi and said a polite goodbye after handing her the suitcase. Then Mavi stood alone in front of the huge

building, which she had come this near to for the first time. When she had come to Berlin years ago, she had taken the train to Stettiner Bahnhof. The approach through seemingly endless rows of houses and factories had taken her breath away. What she knew of the countryside were fields, dusty sandy roads between villages, and flat houses, most of them warped. She could still remember the chill in the hall of the Stettiner station that greeted her despite spring-like temperatures in the city. She hadn't come close to any station since, except to take a trip on the Stadtbahn.

The facade of the Lehrter Bahnhof rivaled many a church. Judging by the hurried and bowed heads of the numerous people entering and leaving through the gates, they probably had at least as much respect for the tables of departures and arrivals as the faithful had for the sermon.

Just as well, however, the bowed heads could have had something to do with the apparition. Ever since it had been hanging still and unmoving above the city, more and more people did not dare to look up very high. The wildest stories circulated about what had happened to this or that person because he or she had looked too long up into the sky.

Mavi did not know such stories. She and Bosch had lived in an idyllic emptiness that for the longest time had seemed to Mavi like the ultimate intoxication. The gossip in the hotel had interested neither him nor her. And when she did get her hands on a newspaper, she quickly put it aside.

Brigand's tales and magical stories.

Mavi took a deep breath. Then she joined the stream of people heading wordlessly into the station.

The monumental size of the hall no longer instilled awe in her. The years in this city had shown Mavi just about anything that was possible to build with stone, concrete and steel these days. There was little left of the impressed girl who had moved to Berlin back then with even fewer things in her suitcase than today. And yet she remained fascinated at the platforms as soon as she had passed through the entrance area with a bunch of people.

The station hall lay before her like a tunnel that had been built for

giants. The sheltered platforms seemed longer than a sports stadium. And the roof was a single black tube. It rested on the walls like a giant inverted rain gutter. The other end of the hall was hundreds of yards away. From there, the sun shone into the tunnel like through a magnifying glass. Mavi had to protect her eyes with her hand, so bright was the light. At first, she could see nothing but a glistening, perfect circle. The morning sun was in the sky in exactly the right position so that its edges covered the open side of the station. There, the tracks led from outside to the interior; no wall protected the back.

After a few seconds, Mavi's eyes had adjusted to the unexpected brightness in the station. Lost in thought, she now stood facing the sun at the far end of the platforms. She couldn't fight the memory of the solar eclipse in Hagenow. The sun here appeared to be bending down so that it could shine into the station. This strange agreement with the building turned it into a dark vent with fire at the top. Or a well, Mavi thought. This must be what it was like to look from the bottom of a deep well into the light of freedom.

Mavi tried to shake the weird thoughts off, along with the comparisons. She succeeded, only to open up more space for images of that one day of her childhood, when she had squatted on the roof—so excited, so content. She had done her best to make Mama imagine the eclipse.

And once again, there was an piercing pain in her chest and in her stomach. But today was different than other days. Ahead of her, the sun blazed through the open end of the Lehrter train station onto Mavi's face. She could feel the heat, soak it up. The pain was being trumped. It didn't stand a chance against the facts: The train was leaving in 70 minutes. She would depart Hamburg that evening and be in New York in two weeks. The piercing she would take along with her, as a friend. As a fellow passenger! It would be allowed to be there, as Mavi would look for and find a job. A room, some security in this fabulous city where there was no past for her, nothing to regret.

She would say goodbye to the pain with a kiss, on January 24. After her first Christmas in America, after a start to the year that would be newer than any before. When the total solar eclipse would race from the Atlantic to the coast, until it was visible in a narrow strip over New York, of all places. All she needed was a new blind. Surely some would be distributed.

Mavi knew by heart what she would tell Mama. The piercing pain could stay until then. She didn't hate it. Not anymore. After the eclipse, everything will be new, Mavi told herself.

Someone tripped over their own feet just ahead of Mavi. Passersby stepped out of the way, but didn't help. A suitcase received a jostle, but otherwise no one was harmed. Mavi was pulled back into the hustle and bustle of the station by the brief episode. She reflexively looked after the person who had stumbled, and when she looked once more into the circular sunshine at the end of the platforms, the memory was gone. The sight no longer seemed as incredible as it had a few moments ago, the unity of sun and tunnel no longer so perfect. Mavi didn't find it nearly as bright now, either. The sun moved on.

68 minutes to go.

The big wall clock behind Mavi had to be right. If only because its hands were as big as people. How could such a massive clock possibly tell the wrong time? Mavi took a deep breath. She trusted this big one. It was time to attend to the details.

People crowded in front of the notice boards to find their tracks. Mavi waited until there was a gap, then looked for her train and found it. The walk away from the board proved to be no less difficult than the previous crowding. Whether this was the usual procedure in this large station, Mavi did not know. But she doubted it. For weeks, more and more people had been trying to leave. But no new ones came in return, not even from the surrounding countryside. Her friend Sylvia had speculated that now worshippers from all corners of the republic would come to Berlin to see their Savior.

If they took the block in the sky for that.

Perhaps people were more fearful than Sylvia thought. Either way, it seemed to Mavi that the city was rather an undesirable zone, one to be avoided. It was emptier in the streets, not more crowded.

Sixty more minutes.

An hour of waiting now seemed anything but long to Mavi. She fought her way out of the entrance area and walked with her small suitcase along the empty platform that the notice had told her about. There were still two trains on the schedule before the one to Hamburg. The first one was just steamrolling in from the other end of the concourse. Mavi heard it before she could see it.

Half the people waiting on the platform scrambled to their feet. As soon as the train came to a stop, they boarded. Hardly anyone had to wait for people to get off first. There were not many.

Soon Mavi had an entire waiting bench to herself, almost at the end of the platform. She took her suitcase on her lap. It was light enough for that. Besides, she liked having something under her hands to play on with her fingers. The waiting was getting to her, paradoxically more so the less time there was left. She released her tension in nervous tapping rhythms, raining down on the skin of the suitcase with her fingertips.

Thirty-five minutes to go.

"Pardon me, Fräulein," a man's voice suddenly said.

Mavi jolted up from her intense finger drumming. Beside her stood two uniformed men, complete with official caps and clubs at their belts.

"Do you mean me?" she asked skeptically.

"You, exactly," said the man who stood closer. The voice heard before belonged to him, and Mavi was glad of it. The policeman smiled at her. He was still young. His colleague had a pressed slit under his nose instead of a mouth. He didn't look like he was in a good mood. At least the younger one grinned as he addressed Mavi.

"Are you traveling?"

Mavi didn't understand the question. She heard it all right, but didn't trust it. After all, the policemen could see that she had a suitcase.

"To Hamburg..." she said after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, yes, is this the train there?"

The friendly policeman nodded his head toward the tracks, where the second train was just coming in that Mavi had to wait for before her own.

"No, the train to Hamburg leaves in...," Mavi lifted. Then she glanced over at the big station clock, which hung far in the distance of the entrance area, but was still readable up to here.

"...34 minutes."

"I see."

The young policeman smiled. He exchanged a quick glance with the grizzled colleague, not at all covert. Apparently he wanted Mavi to see it.

"Why do you ask?", Mavi mustered the courage to ask. She didn't have a good feeling.

"Oh, just routine! Don't worry about it, Fräulein."

"Routine?"

"There's so much going on, right now. We just have to do a few more rounds, especially at the stations where it's in and out of town, you know?"

Mavi didn't know.

"What are you doing in Hamburg, if you don't mind me asking?"

The younger man kept his friendliness, but Mavi had no doubt that she had better not withhold an answer.

"Visiting family, work?" the policeman offered helpfully.

Mavi shook her head.

"I'm emigrating."

"To Hamburg?"

"To America."

Mavi had the impression that the older policeman's slit-like mouth was getting even more slit-like. It almost disappeared from his face. And his eyes turned into little buttons. The younger policeman just looked

surprised. Or he pretended to be.

"To America, really?"

"I booked a passage," Mavi explained. "Today. Well, not booked today. We're leaving tonight."

"That's quite a trip," the younger man commented. He wagged his head appreciatively, as if Mavi had told him of some impressive feat.

Silence hung between the three for a moment, with the older policeman seemingly quite comfortable in his role as an extra. Mavi did not expect any words from him. But the fact that the younger one took his time and simply eyed her irritated her.

"Tell me, where are your suitcases?" he finally asked.

Mavi pointed a finger at her lap.

"Here."

"What do you mean, that's it? Where are the others?"

"This is my only suitcase..."

The younger man paused for another uncomfortably long moment. Maybe he was thinking, but maybe this was just his questioning technique.

"And where is your companion?"

"I'm traveling alone."

"Just to Hamburg? Or to America?"

Mavi answered without words. She couldn't help but look to the side, annoyed—bad feeling or not. The younger man read her reaction correctly and decided he had asked enough.

"That's a cute little suitcase you have. Goes wonderfully with a picnic in the park. My wife and I do that sometimes, you know. A couple of sandwiches, some fruit, that's all you need. It would fit in a little suitcase like that. Would get tricky with the blanket to sit on, though."

Mavi stared blankly at the younger man.

"For a woman emigrating to America, that's quite small luggage. Don't you think so? People sometimes show up on the platform here with luggage scooter after luggage scooter in tow. Like a circus troupe!"

He laughed in the direction of his colleague, who didn't make a face for this joke either.

"And most of them don't even want to go to America, they just want to go on vacation."

Mavi couldn't quite place whether the cadence with which the man ended his speech meant a question or not. She simply kept silent.

"Well," the policeman said with a loud clearing of his throat, while beside him the train that had pulled in earlier backed up and rolled out of the station noisily.

"May I see your papers?"

Mavi reached into her coat pocket and immediately pulled out the whole bundle, ID, visa, train ticket and boarding pass for the ship. The younger man took everything from her at once, skimmed each piece of paper only briefly, and then passed it on to his silent colleague. The latter unfolded a pair of slim glasses from his breast pocket, their thin wire frames widening dangerously under the attempt to reach the ears flanking the thick brow bones.

The older man took considerably more time with the papers. The younger waited patiently, still smiling.

It took forever. Mavi watched as her documents were turned over and over, as if this would reveal secret information that the policeman had not found so far.

Twenty-four minutes to go.

"It's all right," the older man grumbled. He handed Mavi's papers back to his young colleague. Then he folded up his glasses so he could carefully maneuver them back into his breast pocket. A second later he stood motionless in his place again—with the same featureless slit of a mouth on his face.

"Wonderful!" the younger man gloated, good-humoredly.

He handed back to Mavi one document after another.

"Then I wish you a pleasant journey," the policeman farewelled for

himself and his colleague at once.

"Thank you..."

To her astonishment, that was all Mavi could manage to say. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if that was really it after this interrogation, but she didn't want to push her luck.

The younger man touched his cap with a finger in salute, then both policemen turned on their heels and disappeared into the entrance area.

It took Mavi a few minutes to collect herself. Although she was waiting almost at the end of the platform, by now it was noticeably more crowded than during the last hour. The train to Hamburg was in demand. The other two departures hadn't created nearly as much commotion.

Another 14 minutes, as Mavi could see from the station clock. And as if waiting for her scrutinizing glance at the hands, her train announced itself with a loud whistle from beyond Lehrter Station. A short time later, it pulled in unhurriedly, its steam floating as if in its own mist. Car after car crept past Mavi. She had stood up as soon as she had spotted the locomotive. While passing by, she could see the numbers of the wagons. Hastily, she took out her ticket. She wanted to see if she was in the right section to catch her carriage.

Almost. Mavi reached for her suitcase. She walked with it quickly a little further up the platform, back toward the clock. She pushed her way between other waiting passengers, a soft apology on her lips for running against the flow of other passengers.

And then Bosch stood in front of her.

He beckoned to her. Mavi stopped, as if struck by lightning. Next to her, at the same moment, the train came to a final halt. The sharp scream that the squealing drive wheels produced on the tracks could have come from inside Mavi. At least, that's how she felt. And as he walked slowly toward her now, a paralyzing trepidation grew inside Mavi. Bosch didn't

belong here. In the image of herself leaving, he had never appeared.

"What are you doing here?" asked Mavi as Bosch stood before her.

"You were gone..."

Mavi grabbed her forehead and closed her eyes for a moment. She was shaking and Bosch saw it. He immediately wanted to take Mavi in his arms, but resisted his impulse, sensing that he was literally too close to her right now. Only now did it occur to him that Mavi might not be happy at all about his unexpected visit.

"Didn't you find my letter?"

Mavi collected herself. She looked at Bosch again.

"Yes, I did."

"Well?" Mavi raised her voice without meaning to. "Then why did you come? Didn't you read it?"

"...not to the end," Bosch confessed quietly.

"Why not?"

Mavi had desperation written all over her face. To make matters worse, she was bumped into by a woman with a monstrous suitcase that she herself would have fit into. It was getting packed on the platform because the doors of the train were opening. The scramble to get on started.

"After the first few lines, I knew you were gone," Bosch tried to explain herself. "I couldn't help but think of you driving around town all by yourself, waiting here. That just didn't feel right...."

"For you!", Mavi interrupted harshly. "This isn't about you though!"

"I know, but I woke up and you were just gone. And gone forever."

"You knew I had to leave, didn't you?"

"Without a word?"

"What do you mean 'without a word,' ...I thought we had an agreement?" asked Mavi back. "That it would be best that way."

"Then I guess we should have discussed it in more detail," Bosch replied. "I didn't think it would happen without saying goodbye at all."

Seven minutes to go.

"That's the whole point if I don't tell you when the day is," Mavi stated, unimpressed.

"But not that I can't see your face one more time. Lose myself in your eyes one more time. Just get to put you on the train with a kiss! Where does it say that, please?

"In the letter, Bosch."

He didn't know how to answer to that for a moment. Mavi took advantage of his confusion to catch her breath, and notice the conductor coming over from the other end of the platform. He slowly ordered the last passengers to board the train.

"You might as well have just made that up now," Bosch resumed.

"What?" asked Mavi absently. She glanced at the large station clock. "That the letter said that. By now you know I haven't actually read it."

"It says it. Don't be silly. I wanted to do this on my own. Since long before I met you. And you know that, too. Letter or no letter, I explained it to you. I did, didn't I?"

"In a way, yes...," Bosch admitted. He seemed to cringe in embarrassment before Mavi's eyes for the first time, like a considerably overgrown schoolboy who's been caught pulling a prank and is shifting around sheepishly on the sole of a shoe.

"You deserve more than that, though," Bosch continued. "If it's so important that you go—for whatever reason—then today is the day it comes true. Why should you sneak away like you're on the run? You should have a parade!"

Mavi couldn't help but smile. The self-righteous seriousness of the tall man before her was too comical to ignore.

"But you don't want a parade. And I'm not giving you one. You didn't want to come here with me hand in hand, and you didn't want a tearful goodbye. Wonderful! I just came after you. I won't cry either. I won't wave to you, and I won't stay sadly behind on the platform, so that in the evening they'll have to carry me out last."

"Good!"

"I'm happy for you. That's all. And I think you deserve to have someone gallantly give you a hand as you board."

"A minute ago it was my eyes and a kiss," Mavi suspected.

Bosch smiled.

"That's the part about me, as you noted."

"I see."

"But one has nothing to do with the other."

"Not at all!"

"Really! For me that would be an addition, something secondary. First comes the company you deserve on this important day."

1 minute left.

"My kiss is..., ...what, something secondary?" mumbled Mavi. "No one has ever said that to me before."

The conductor reached Mavi and Bosch. He waved his conductor's ladle wildly over to the train door.

Time was up.

Bosch had meant every word. It wasn't as if he had made them up in the Adlon's car—the very car, incidentally, that had just brought Mavi to the station. The driver had seen Bosch come running toward him from the hotel entrance, even before he could park properly.

He really had come to see Mavi off. To say goodbye.

Yes, he had meant every word. Bosch believed it himself. It wasn't until Mavi held out her hands to him that he was forced to prove it. She smiled at him, forgiving his overreaching for just this one moment—not because it was okay, but because it didn't matter anymore. He was here, she was here. It was the end. What was the point of parting forever without touching? She would take nothing bad with her on this train. Nothing could disturb her peace anymore or spoil this day.

And so he took her hands in his. They stood in in silence, hand in hand, watching each other. It was perfect like this. It was written in the corners of both their smiling mouths. The other couples, who had perhaps said goodbye somewhere else on the platform, could have the kisses. In any case, there were none left to be seen, because Mavi and Bosch were the last ones. The remaining few people outside the train were probably not boarding. They peered inside, some looking for their counterparts behind the windows, some already engaged in gesture-rich, silent conversations.

"You really need to get on the train right now!" the conductor admonished Mavi. He pointed with his signal ladle to the entrance.

"I'm blowing the whistle for departure now."

Mavi nodded frantically several times.

Bosch did nothing. He hadn't heard the man, didn't perceive him at all. He was prisoner to Mavi's hands, even though he was the one holding hers in his. The instant he had felt her skin, his senses had gone into a frenzy. He smelled Mavi's scent as strongly as if the train station were a giant bottle filled to the brim with her essence. He was flashed by the figurative memory of Mavi's naked body, of all the movements he had kissed and thrust out from her. It was such a sweet feeling that it almost overwhelmed him and he wanted to have it always. The collected memories of her flawless beauty came over him like a torrent. It was breathtaking, even if the part of him that knew perfectly well that 'Bosch' was nothing more than the latest of his countless paper-thin shells was aware of the truth about this feeling: It was love, but above all love for himself.

He had chosen her, consciously or not. Among all humans, her. If she could at least fathom what that meant! And now she was getting on this crude vehicle as if it meant the world.

To her, perhaps. He understood that. But her flight to this other continent was nothing more to him than hopping from one leg onto the other. He was unable to see past this grotesquely jarring difference in the way they both saw the world. Now that he was no longer walking the

streets and his short little life in a daze, the hardships, concerns and desires of the people in this city hit him like an insult being spat in his face.

What did these human sensitivities matter? Why should he even bother with them? He felt the delicate skin under his fingers, and this beauty, as fragile as it was ephemeral, was the only thing that seemed somehow worth keeping close to him. So little! So little of what was his.

Mavi disengaged one of her hands from Bosch's. She reached for the suitcase that was on the floor beside her. Then she was already half turning to go to the train when she tried to loosen her other hand.

Bosch held it tightly.

"I must go!" said Mavi insistently. "Let go of me..."

He had meant every word. But they no longer mattered. It was as if he had walked feet-first down the plank of a ship into a waterfall, with full intent. For all the strength he felt inside him, for all his invincibility, he felt swept along—irreversibly.

And it felt good. It seemed just to him.

The conductor blew his signal whistle shrilly. The engineer responded with a hissing roar that he slowly released from the furnace.

"Let go of me, damn it!" yelled Mavi at Bosch.

Her face turned white as chalk. The blood practically fell from her head down into the rest of her body. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, what she was feeling in her hand. The pain wasn't the worst part, because Bosch wasn't pressing as hard as he certainly could. Worse was the sense that he was holding her with the firmness of a vise.

"If I miss this train..."

The sentence cracked in her throat. The idea was too horrible to allow her larynx to express it in words. Mavi could see in Bosch's eyes that he knew full well her plan would collapse like a house of cards if she didn't catch that last train. He knew it. He did it for this very reason, on purpose.

Mavi longed for her jagged shard, where soot from 12 years ago still lingered. She felt the shape of the shard she had held so often in her right

hand. With one swift blow, she could rip Bosch's face open. And then he would have to let go. But the shard was not here. It rested under dirt in her brother's grave a few miles north.

Instead, she picked up the suitcase. With a dull clap, Mavi hit Bosch's shoulder with it. Bosch didn't even falter. He smiled. To Mavi, it looked cold and dead. It threw her into sheer panic.

She wasn't wrong, because Bosch knew that with every moment he held Mavi longer, he was ripping hours, days, and weeks of their time from Mavi's heart. Her eyes screamed it. He saw her become a stranger, the intimacy that had spread between them over months, crumble to dust.

And he couldn't stop.

However little the flying suitcase had upset Bosch, its misappropriation had not been entirely useless. Some farewellers on the platform had jumped out of the way, when Mavi aimed the suitcase at Bosch. Now they both stood like lone gladiators in a circle of spectators.

"My God, let go of that woman right now," one man shouted.

"Your god is a conjurer!" hissed Bosch. He shot a sardonic grin at him as he did so, almost convincing the man he'd better not get involved.

But only almost. Mavi cried out loudly and tried to free her hand from Bosch's grip. Another blow with the suitcase, but it went nowhere. Then she kicked at his pelvis—and hit it, too. This had no effect on Bosch. He continued to stand proudly in the middle of the platform, a head taller than all the other men. The interferer took heart: he awkwardly reached for Bosch's arm. The conductor rushed over and yelled at Bosch.

"Stop at once!"

The train jerked into motion.

Now both were hanging on Bosch's arms, the interferer and the conductor. Women were pushing close, too, so that the circle of spectators became a mob in which no one could keep track of what was going on.

Mavi stopped screaming and turned her head towards the moving train. Someone reached under her shoulders to pull together with her as if

pulling on a rope. Someone else was pounding her and Bosch's hand with their fist. Mavi lost footing, slipped away, and sank to the platform. But she didn't take her eyes off the train. It was rolling. Maybe it was going as fast as a coach now, even. But not yet faster than she could run!

The conductor changed his tactics. Now he jumped at Bosch's throat from behind. Mavi's hand disappeared with the rest of her in a human pile, in which people were loudly shouting at each other.

The stone floor was pleasantly cool against Mavi's cheek. She could see the axles of the train whizzing by. Everything was edgewise. People's shoes moved in jumbled patterns, interfering with Mavi's view of the rattling carriages. She wished the shoes were gone. Another train car, and another! The stone floor was vibrating under her cheek, and Mavi closed her eyes, banishing the screams above her from her ears....

Bosch slowly but irrevocably tipped backwards. The conductor hung triumphantly from his neck like a lumberjack. From the front, men and women pressed together on Bosch's chest, helping the conductor cut this unruly log of a troublemaker.

He went down under a barrage of insults. Spitting and fisticuffs were also included. The commotion made even travelers on the other tracks look over to the scene. Bosch endured the blows, most of which did not hit him anyway, but the backs or thighs of other helpers. It was a hopeless mess that Bosch tolerated for a few seconds.

When he had enough, he simply stood up. People tumbled off him as if they were dolls. An attentive bloodthirsty man from the second row of the spontaneous intervention force, however, quickly raised his cane and thrashed with it at Bosch, who at least noticed this.

Fortunately for the thrashing man, Bosch decided to try his luck at fleeing instead of dealing with each of the numerous enraged men. He pushed aside two guys who tried to get in his way like a plow. Immediately, there was a shout behind him of people picking themselves back up.

Bosch started to run. This only made the outrage behind him even louder. The whole platform seemed to buzz with aggression. Up ahead, where the platform merged into the entrance area with the big clock, the young policeman and his silent sidekick set about clearing the platform with their whistles. The older man already had his baton drawn.

Bosch dashed along the narrow section of the platform. The mob behind him couldn't even remotely keep up. Most of the people were already satisfied if it looked like they had tried to follow Bosch. It was good that he backed off! He would have been in some serious trouble!

Between the policemen and Bosch, the platform emptied in the blink of an eye. The younger man blew a warning whistle at the top of his lungs when he saw Bosch rushing toward him. He knew stories of wild bulls only from the pub and from picture books of his childhood, but a raging bull weighing tons could hardly attack more threateningly than this man. Bosch rushed toward the exit as swift as an arrow, with a broad smile on his face.

Like a grimace, the younger man thought.

Bosch left the uniformed men in peace. He felt like giving his legs free rein. And so, in the middle of the race, he swung himself over a waiting bench, took a running start and jumped with an impossibly long leap into the bed of the neighboring track. The younger policeman forgot to whistle in his impressed indignation. That was strictly forbidden!

Bosch darted to the other side of the tracks and onto the neighboring platform. From there he repeated the nimble game with the last track. Wherever he stepped, people would flee from him, and it took only seconds for him to reach the eastern entrance leading off the platform.

One last long dash, then he was gone through the gates.

The stunned younger policeman remembered a second later that he ought to have whistled.

10. Court...

The sun was high in the sky, where most people in the city now only reluctantly chose to look.

Bosch knew immediately that something was wrong when he stepped between the cars onto the street outside the station's entrance. Some drivers had to brake abruptly. They complained vocally to Bosch, but he didn't stay in one spot long enough to hear them. He ran a little farther up the narrow street, past the outer wall of the long station concourse.

It was in the air. Bosch felt like a predator that had caught scent.

He recognized the coat from a hundred yards away. Not to mention, it was not yet so cold in the oncoming autumn that anyone on the street would put on such a thick jacket. Except for those, of course, who had no choice in their clothing.

The beggar stood on the corner of Invalidenstraße, where the side street of the station met the busy causeway. He waited serenely on the sidewalk, with his face turned to Bosch. And that he just happened to be standing there, Bosch ruled out.

He was being expected.

Could the beggar know that Bosch would be coming out of that exit from that station that morning? No. Could he know why? No. After all, Bosch himself had not known that his morning would unfold in such an eventful way until he woke up in the deserted bed.

Did it matter?

Bosch didn't care. And even if the beggar could read his mind, so be it. Bosch had, after all, sensed him as well. Either way, the man came in handy.

Blood boiled in Bosch. A fight was inevitable. The beggar would regret his stalking badly, for Bosch was no longer interested in a mere trial of strength. After this morning and the episode in the train station, there was nothing to hold Bosch back. The beggar was in for the beating of his life.

Bosch ran toward the intersection. The beggar did not move at first. He just put his hands on his hips and stared sternly at Bosch. The two were still separated by perhaps 50 yards, but even at that distance they could read each other's faces as if they were open books. The beggar seemed to bring no less determination to the encounter than Bosch.

Only when the latter had almost reached the Invalidenstraße, the beggar also ran—but not towards Bosch. He fled, eastward, down the causeway. The sudden energy with which he pulled away and sped off would have been a feat for any world-class athlete.

Barely two seconds later, with long strides, Bosch reached the place where the beggar had just been standing. And although he turned the corner with full momentum, the coat-wearer was suddenly quite a distance ahead of him.

Bosch was furious. He could not let himself be outrun. Although up to this point he had thought he was running as fast as he could, he commanded his legs to go the extra mile. And with his arms, Bosch cut through the air like whirring sabers.

At least the gap wasn't getting any wider. They were both running at the same speed. The few people with them on the sidewalk heard the dashing movements from a distance. They either quickly jumped to the side or stopped, hoping not to be knocked down fatally. Unlike the two racers, in fact, they noticed that Bosch and the beggar were overtaking all the cars on the road in their chase. From a bus that was in high gear, a few people gawked in disbelief at the sidewalk. First the beggar overtook the bus from behind, then Bosch.

They didn't seem to tire. Every time Bosch closed in a bit, the beggar managed a maneuver that gave him a little more breathing room again.

Sometimes he would find the shorter way around a group of passersby, sometimes he would dart at the last moment over a package of newspapers that Bosch had to run around because the baffled paperboy was suddenly in the way. So they both chased at lightning speed along the street that separated the Scheunenviertel and the Spandauer Vorstadt like an incision from the iron foundries and industrial buildings further north. The taste of metal was in the air. Bosch sensed it on his tongue as he ran.

With valor, the beggar threw himself into the middle of the traffic on Chausseestraße, which crossed Invalidenstraße just before Stettiner Bahnhof. He was almost hit by a team of horses. The two animals were used to quite a bit of noise and surprises, but nonetheless were so startled that they reared up briefly. The hitched wagon was rocked hard. Its wood cracked and the locking chains on the cargo bed rattled like a chime. The coachman could only hold on to his platform with great difficulty.

Bosch had to deal with the commotion. He briefly lost eye contact with the beggar because everything that had eyes turned around after the noise in the street. Bosch made space for himself on the sidewalk with his arms, then he too rushed across the street and continued after the beggar, straight ahead toward the Stettiner Bahnhof. Briefly he seemed to have lost him, but the coat did its owner no favors in this situation. It was too eye-catching. Bosch saw its ends disappear sideways into the next side street.

The beggar had made a turn.

Bosch reached the crossing street, which looked like nothing more than an alleyway compared to the two traffic arteries he had just left. He held on to the wall of the corner house to turn with all his momentum directly into the small street.

It was deserted of people. Only the beggar ran in the distance, in the middle of the road. There might as well have been an invisible wall where the two streets met. On one side, passers-by walked back and forth between the two stations. Buses, small cars, and teams of horses shared the street. On the other side: none of the above.

Bosch did as the beggar had done and shifted his pursuit to the middle of the cobblestone street. His footsteps echoed loudly up the shaft between the house fronts. Their echoes mingled with those of the running beggar.

Another side street. Or was it? Bosch saw the beggar disappear again, this time to the left. But when he reached the spot, there was no side street, only a strange hole in the row of houses. The beggar was standing in what had once been a courtyard entrance. On either side of him, however, there were no walls. The front house lay in ruins, as if it had been demolished by a giant fist. The houses next to it had taken no damage. They stood completely intact like the rest of the residential buildings in the street.

The beggar was evidently waiting for Bosch. The chase was over. When Bosch reached the gateway, he too stopped running. As if on cue, the beggar turned his back on him and climbed over a few large chunks of wall that had landed in the driveway during the collapse. Bosch did the same.

As he climbed, he could see into the backyard—and beyond. It wasn't just the front building that was destroyed. Another gateway in the cross building led off from the courtyard. This front was also damaged, though not quite as badly. About half of the building seemed to have collapsed. The remainder rose to the sky like a half-finished tower with numerous wall corners and cracked, open rooms. The side building and the wall of the neighboring house, on the other hand, were undamaged. Bosch could see another gateway in the remaining part of the cross wing. And through it. There lay another courtyard, with a third gateway in the same place. Over the ruins of the other half of the maltreated building, he could see that the destruction extended even deeper into the block. He made out more damaged masonry—and space for even more backyards.

That was the picture down here, on the ground. But there was something to see above the ruins, too. Actually, it didn't surprise Bosch. High above the cascade of these strangely ruined yards, the column hung in the air. It wasn't far away at all, maybe a few hundred yards. As usual, and as had been described in the newspapers for weeks, it wasn't moving.

Bosch had not paid attention to where the chase would lead him.

With a little jump he landed in the first backyard. The beggar stood in the middle, but he was no longer alone. Squatting against the side walls were two men. They wore coats. Even their faces, smeared with dirt, and their soiled pants and shoes, showed that these two lived on the streets like the beggar. Probably even right here, in these ruins. They saw Bosch coming. He felt scrutinized, from considerably prouder eyes than he expected to see among beggars. However, he had always ignored beggars. He didn't look them in the face. He didn't look people in the face anyway, unless they addressed or interested him. With these two, it was different.

Bosch refrained from rushing directly at his enemy.

The beggar dropped his coat carelessly on the ground.

"Do you know what you said to me?" he asked Bosch. "The only words you directed at me?"

Bosch did not answer at once. The sound of the beggar's voice still reverberated in his head. It seized him, seemed so beautiful, warm and familiar, that he had to collect himself first in order not to see his pent-up anger fizzle out. He didn't want to calm down. He wanted to hit this man.

"Back in the garden?" the beggar followed up, almost in a whisper, yet with a determination that positively vibrated in the air between the walls.

"Whether we knew each other," Bosch replied. "That's what I said."

The beggar nodded with satisfaction.

"And?"

Bosch felt again that inexplicable, spontaneous revulsion he had felt before his encounter with the pillar in the night sky. He couldn't help but spit at his feet in disgust.

"Do you know me?"

"Yes," Bosch admitted.

"Then say my name, brother!"

Instead of receiving an answer, the beggar went down groaning. Bosch had thrown a fist-sized paving stone at his head, which he had

hidden in his hand earlier while walking down the ruined gateway. The throw came without warning and hit its target perfectly. The beggar brought his fingers up to his left temple in a daze. Blood streamed down his nails, knuckles, to his wrist.

Bosch was quite impressed that his opponent was still conscious at all. But this respect did not stop him from following up anyway. He charged at the crouching beggar and kicked him squarely in the chest with his foot, causing the man to land on his back.

"You're not my brother!" he shouted in his face.

Another kick, this time full force into the heart side of his stomach, between his hips and chest.

Then Bosch caught his breath. He remembered now that they were not alone in this courtyard. He nearly had forgotten the two other beggars who sat uninvolved on either flank, their backs against the walls. Bosch feared that they would rush to the aid of his enemy. Therefore, he suddenly looked around at them in alarm. To his right, the dirt-smeared man he had seen as he approached was still sitting in his place exactly as before. His eyes flashed alertly and penetratingly from under a charcoal-colored brow, but Bosch could not read any emotion in this beggar's expression. He obviously did not want to intervene. He made no effort to rise from his crouch.

The beggar on the opposite wall was not startled either. He sat quietly in his spot. But when he noticed Bosch's scrutinizing gaze, a smile crossed his lips. It was not one that people give each other when they share the same thought or receive a compliment. This smile was of the unpleasant kind that had nothing to do with kindness. It was a smile that concealed superiority, but only half-heartedly, as if the squatting man knew something Bosch didn't, and he wanted to stick it to him.

Neither of the strangers rushed to the beggar's aid. The very second that Bosch was sure of this, he also sensed why it wasn't necessary. Below him, the beggar's arms shot up to the drooping ends of Bosch's jacket. The man reached for them and at the same time jammed a leg into Bosch's

stomach. Before he knew it, he was flying head first over the beggar on the ground. A kicking horse could not have done this more violently. It felt as if Bosch was actually flying.

Only the crumbling masonry of the cross building stopped Bosch. He crashed into it before gravity sent him back to the ground. He had not yet regained his senses when the beggar stood over him and just as generously returned the kick in the side that had just been given. Then he grabbed Bosch by the collar of his shirt with both fists. He lifted him up to him as if he were nothing more than a toy doll.

"Don't you want to? Or can't you? Say my name!"

Bosch's head was buzzing. He perceived the beggar's bloodied, angry face only as a pool of light, shadow, and red paint. Every bone in his body hurt. He had never felt so much pain, and it was the result of perhaps three or four seconds of being caught off guard. Yet despite everything, he heard exactly what the beggar was saying. His words brought up a shadowy memory in which the jeweler crawled toward him naked in the glow of his oil lamp. The man had demanded the same of him, with the same words....

Back then, Bosch had fled.

"Not? Then I'll say yours," the beggar decided, as nothing but heavy panting came out of Bosch.

He spun Bosch around, away from the wall and toward the center of the courtyard again. Bosch tumbled a few times before he lay lifelessly.

Now the beggar caught his breath. He wiped his vision clear of his own blood, crouching over his opponent on the ground.

"Satan, brother," he said softly.

And Bosch heard it. He kept his silence.

"Don't pretend," the beggar said when no answer came. "Stand up! Do you think I'd buy that? That a little roughhousing has already brought you to your knees?"

Bosch turned on his side, but without getting up. He wanted to collect himself, less physically, because the beggar was right. He had never known such force with which he had been knocked to the ground. Everything ached in him. But it was also just a body. An inconvenience that limited him. He didn't have to stay down.

What kept him on the ground was that word. That name he hadn't heard in so long. It was one thing to carry it with him in secret. That's how he'd been doing it for the last few weeks. Like a secret that isn't one if no one really knows about it. But hearing that name out loud, that was another thing entirely. He wished it hadn't happened. It felt wrong.

"I haven't gotten used to it yet," the beggar continued as he stretched his neck with relish. "How can you stand it, this confinement of a body?"

He didn't expect an answer, but continued as if he suddenly realized with excitement himself what confused him.

"So heavy. Everything is so heavy about it. The bones and the flesh. And their language, brother! It's so easy to string those sounds together. Beautiful in a strange, naive way, don't you think? And yet I find it hard to talk about home. There aren't enough words!"

Bosch sat down. He stared coldly at the beggar before speaking.

"Your home....," he hissed.

"Mine, yes," the beggar admitted.

He crouched down to be at eye level with Bosch.

"Not mine anymore," Bosch countered. "Heaven tried to spit me out. When you were unable to do it, you hid. Like children! Behind him."

The resentment in Bosch's voice was so ancient and bitter that the two impassive beggars suddenly slide up against the walls a bit. They had shown no concern during the fistfight. But the low voice, which now came from within Bosch, carried more aggression than even they had expected.

"Who told you about this, anyway?" the beggar changed the subject, unimpressed. "Tell me, which of your loyal cronies took such liberty? Who did they choose to send, your friends? Belial? I bet it was Belial!"

Behind Bosch, sounds came from the gateway to the second yard. He heard footsteps so heavy that the ground seemed to tremble. Like the massive feet of an elephant, only not as gently distributing their mass on the ground. These steps had no grace, but all the more determination.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bosch saw an absurd silhouette. There were two legs and two arms hanging from it, under a tent-sized cloak. So it wasn't an animal, even if a human of such dimensions seemed utterly impossible to design. As tall as Neiwolf, if not a head taller, and as wide as Harstein. In terms of size, the shape resembled more an advertising pillar than a human being.

More beggars climbed over the ruined section of the destroyed cross building. Bosch counted at least four, none of whom stood out with abnormality, although they looked suspiciously good-humored and their faces betrayed that they were determined to do whatever it took.

"Belial?" asked Bosch, stalling for time.

"The grandest tongue among all the angels, I'll gladly concede that to you!" the beggar replied, smiling. There was no malice in it. Rather, he seemed to be in thought. "He who owns the house in the forest! Belial!"

"No."

"Who did they send? Come on! Who had the task of waking you from your sleep? From who did you get this lie?"

"What lie?"

"That we intended to drive you out from Heaven!"

The other beggars had now all taken up positions behind Bosch, like in a semicircle. The two at the walls, who had witnessed the scene from the beginning, briefly sought eye contact with each, but no one spoke a word or asked what was going on. They seemed to know.

"The poet," Bosch murmured.

The beggar's features froze, just for a fleeting moment. It was long enough for Bosch to see it.

"Abdiel?"

It wasn't really a question. The beggar was talking to himself, as if he had doubts about what he had been given for an answer.

But Bosch was not lying, he knew that.

"Rex Goosequill," Bosch amended.

"Abdiel!" the beggar shouted at the top of his voice. He lunged forward from his crouch like an animal that had been waiting to pounce all this time. Instead of using this surprise for another attack and hurting Bosch, the beggar only grabbed Bosch's cheeks with both hands. Doing so, he knelt over him. He held Bosch's head between his fingers while the words spilled out of him.

"His name is Abdiel! Him of all people? Probably your inglorious soldiers even take pride in heaping more shame on Abdiel! What has he done to any of you? No, what has he done to you? Why did you snatch him away from us? He did not deserve to go to Hell with you. Abdiel was zealous! He did nothing wrong. And you dragged him down with you! Because of you, he had to wander through this world century after century without being able to remember us. Every cursed life with the same gaping hole in his soul, belonging nowhere, always looking for the peace he couldn't obtain. Alien, alone, seeking his destiny and failing at it, every time! Growing old in these bodies, passing away. And then all over again. Not knowing why he must be miserable and never be happy. Why? Your destiny was made, but it was only yours.Why did you have to punish Abdiel like that? Why, Satan?"

When Bosch did not answer, the beggar began to shake him by the head. In doing so, he obviously did not mean to hurt him, so much was he in control. It looked more like he was desperately trying to tilt an explanation out of him.

But Bosch just glared at him angrily.

"What?" the beggar asked. "What is it you don't like, Satan?"

Bosch looked even angrier.

"Satan? Don't you like your name? Is that it, Satan?

"Don't call me that!" spat out Bosch. He felt woozy under the shaking of his head.

"That's your name! You earned it!"

"Shut up!"

"Satan!"

"I am Lucifer!" Bosch shouted at his tormentor's face.

The beggar let go of him.

A murmur went through the assembled arc of figures behind Bosch. Even the two seated against the walls came to life. They rose to their feet.

"At least that...", the beggar puffed strained, while he slowly moved away from Bosch again. He took a few steps backward, collected himself, and then squatted back into the same pose across from Bosch from which he had just leapt so angrily.

"No one has called you that ever since. And no one shall ever do it again. But it's a start..."

"...for what?" asked Bosch.

"For you and me, Satan!"

"That's not a name. It's nothing but another chain you want to put me on. Who did you fight against? Tell me. Who stood with you among the astonished tens of thousands, shining and with the power of two stars crashing into each other?

Bosch sat up. His back arched straight without him even noticing.

"That was Lucifer!" he continued.

"Yes," the beggar admitted. "That was him. But Lucifer is no more. You said you created yourself, and as false and foolish as that is, you did at least create Satan. Lucifer you have erased."

"You're talking to him!" hissed Bosch.

"And you? Who are you talking to?"

Bosch fell silent.

"I am Michael."

The other beggars bowed their heads in unison.

"I'm the one who was your equal," Michael continued. "The one you could not frighten. In me you found the one you could not defeat. And I not you! But I, Satan, am not a god. I am one of us angels, nothing more. I have not succumbed to delusion as you have, and have not arrogated to myself power that belongs only to the Son!"

Michael jerked an arm in the air. He pointed his index finger skyward. Bosch didn't need to look up to know what the beggar was pointing at.

"And this is why I still bear my name. I am Michael, in Heaven as on Earth. You are Satan. Call yourself whatever you want, but this is you. That's the way you made it. It's the only thing you ever created!"

"I fought!" protested Bosch.

"For what?"

"For freedom! My freedom, and that of all the angels. I dared to stand up and disagree. Not like you!"

Michael began to laugh.

"I am free, brother," he said mildly. "We all are, always have been. After all this time, you still don't get it."

"Because you obey blindly?"

"That's not true, and you know it," Michael objected. "I've only met one of us first angels who ever blindly obeyed someone. And obey he would himself, only himself, whether right or wrong. It is you, Satan."

"Did you enjoy it when we went over the edge? Tell me. Did you not see me and the last witnesses of freedom fall? How we were driven from our realm? Like cattle!"

"That's precisely it, the lie!"

Michael stood up again. He clenched his fists.

"Abdiel couldn't have told you that!"

"Isn't it the truth?"

"No!"

Bosch rose to his feet as well.

"Have you really corrupted him so that he now believes your twisted

story, too?" lamented Michael. "It's in your head, Satan! No one drove you but your own jealous souls. Yours first and foremost!"

"It was him! He drove us into nothingness."

This time Bosch raised his finger, to where Michael had pointed before. High into the sky, up toward the column.

It didn't move, not an inch.

"You saw it with your own eyes!"

"He opened his arms, but you fled. One by one. That's what I saw."

Bosch laughed scornfully.

"I know you don't believe me. But it was your decision, all of it. You decided you wanted to sit on God's throne. You instigated the rebellion, to go to war. You could have surrendered. You could have repented. You, Satan, could have repented! But you don't want to, do you?"

Bosch and Michael slowly stepped toward each other, as if pulled closer to the other by the gravity of their mutual accusations.

"Do you really think the Son would have let us stay if I had bent the knee?" asked Bosch. "Then you weren't watching. How he appeared out of nowhere, in his flaming chariot, brighter than the sun; God sent him to coronate him by my defeat! To trample me underfoot and make a spectacle for you good, simple-minded soldiers. 'He opened his arms'? Be damned! A grotesque lie it is! You didn't feel the heat emanating from his 'open' arms. He didn't want to embrace me, he wanted to burn me to ashes!"

"That's what you think...," Michael blubbered. "And that's the only reason it came to pass."

"Answer me! If I had laid down my sword, at that moment when we were all facing the abyss, would it have been the end? Just like that? Would he have let us stay? Taken me in his arms?"

"Why, yes..."

"Impossible!"

With that word, Bosch produced a swinging punch out of nowhere. He hit Michael in the liver, felling him like a severed tree trunk.

The other beggars flinched.

Bosch jumped on Michael's body. He rammed a knee into his belly, grabbed the collar of his shirt, delivered first a slap while lying down, then another knee strike.

But that didn't stop the maltreated from talking.

"It was impossible. He had to chase you over the precipice."

"Then you are talking in delusion! You're contradicting yourself. How could I have ended it if he wouldn't have let go of us anyway?"

Michael collected his air making a face contorted in pain. The monstrous figure that had come stomping out of the gateway reached for a six-foot iron bar lying in the junk beside him. It looked like a broomstick in his plate-sized hand.

"The Son is love, Satan, or he is execution," Michael whispered out of breath. "He would have forgiven you, as we all have. There, on the edge. He would have led us all back, but you, you can't forgive. Your envy made it impossible indeed. You saw his open arms and felt nothing but threat, but hatred and envy. You want it that way! And that's why you could only receive the punishment you fear. Not the love you don't believe in."

"I love!" roared Bosch. His flushed head hung menacingly over Michael's face like a glowing cauldron.

"Only you! Always you in the end. Everything you think you love, you sacrifice to your vanity..."

"Lie!"

Bosch struck out for one last blow. This time slowly and threateningly, so Michael could watch him do it. The giant with the iron bar also struck out. He held the bar like a spear.

"Even your first in line you sacrificed. The one you loved more than anyone..." stuttered Michael wanly.

Bosch paused, mid-motion.

"What?"

"You... killed... him."

"Beelzebub?" asked Bosch.

"He's gone, forever," Michael replied. He could breathe again. "Because of you!"

"That's not true! Where is he? Did you meet him?"

"You met him. In the heart. With one shot, in a dark basement pit where his shell has lain through the winter. An immortal soul, dying in a tiny human body. You shot the one who was supposedly closest to you..."

Bosch shuddered. Involuntarily, it pushed him away from Michael's body. He stumbled backward.

"Him?"

"Your young painter friend!"

"No!" cried Bosch. He looked panic-stricken into the semicircle of the other figures, whom he had hitherto ignored completely in his fury. He also looked for help in the eyes of the giant with the bar, although he could not see them under his hood. The giant lowered his improvised spear.

"Did you not recognize him, Satan?" asked Michael, almost erect again, though still breathing heavily.

Bosch shook his head.

"It wasn't me!"

"Oh no?"

"That human fired the shot," Bosch justified himself.

"All the same," Michael invalidated the defense coldly. "You gave Beelzebub away. You saw his plight, his little human plight. It fascinated you. You gave him away because it was exciting to play with this human."

"No, ...no, it can't be!"

Bosch grabbed his temples with both hands. He ruffled his hair, began pacing in circles.

"Not him, not Beelzebub! You're lying!"

"What was it, Satan? What did he do that fueled your envy? Did you see his paintings, and that they were as good as yours? Yet this has only been a pastime for you. It means nothing to you. Just another skill that the

mists of your past have washed up on the shore like a bit of flotsam. A few pictures here, some money there, then travel from country to country. That was as good or bad as anything else, wasn't it?"

Bosch didn't argue. Instead, he tried to capture his racing thoughts.

"You betrayed him over nothing! Because of paint and paper, ...because you can't stand anyone holding a candle to you in anything. Even if it's strokes."

"I didn't know it was him," Bosch whined. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"The only person you ever met who looked as beautiful, as perfect as you? Who tried with the same zeal to paint his unfathomable past on canvas? The only one you noticed among thousands?"

"They never told me who I was!"

"It doesn't matter. You are who you are! Whether you realize it or not. You destroy everything you would hold dear..."

The other beggars slowly retreated, one by one. They climbed back over the rubble into the yards behind this one, the giant slowly trotting back into the gateway. Only the two who had first crouched against the walls simply settled back down instead of leaving the courtyard.

Bosch shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't stop doing that, even as he broke out of his nervous circular gait to walk in a wide arc around Michael, heading straight for the obstacle-clogged entrance to the street.

"Beelzebub..." he kept repeating to himself.

Michael let him pass.

He looked after Bosch as he scrambled over the wall remnants and chunks of concrete, slipping inattentively at every other step.

Then Bosch was gone and the beggar was left alone in the courtyard.

11. ...yard

The door flew open, and it was not used to that. There was a good reason why it normally moved at a majestic snail's pace. The old wooden beams, which were as thick as squared lumber, weighed just too much. The staff usually opened the wide door slowly, like a small barn door. The thing was simply so heavy that it couldn't be opened any faster.

And now the door crashed against the inside wall of the hall, as if it wanted to break through the stone and swing right back out through the hole. The noise was outrageous. It made every single head duck, in shock.

Amelia almost tripped at the top of the wide stairs. She grabbed the banister in bewilderment to get a hold. At the foot, on the other hand, Simian was standing—without a hold. At the dull thud, he buckled at the knees. With his hands he reached in search of help for something in the air that wasn't there.

At the side door to the dining room, d'Utrecht took a startled leap backward, inadvertently stepping on the tall Neiwolf's feet. It didn't take much for the latter to lose his balance as well, which would have meant a catastrophic fall given his primal slow movements. But he only staggered a bit before the door frame caught him.

Across the hall, in the doorway to the other wing of the house, the door opened cautiously after the bang. Rex Goosequill peered out anxiously. For one second, anyway. Then Harstein pushed him rudely into the hall from behind, so as not to miss the spectacle.

They had all come here at the same time, out of this deep and taciturn feeling that he would come. Exactly today, precisely now. Even though they

hadn't seen him in weeks. This here had not been arranged. None of the service personnel had noticed anything on the paths and raised the alarm.

The gathering could have been coincidental.

Bosch stood in the open front door of the villa. Behind him, the autumn midday sun shone into the hall with all the strength it still had. Closest to him was Sander. In fact, the policeman almost got caught by the door as it flew open. He looked Bosch in the eye, in genuine shock.

Then Sander smiled. Only Bosch could see it. The other residents of the house behind Sander had no idea what was going on in his face. It wasn't until Sander slowly bowed his head and cautiously backed away from Bosch that it dawned on some of them.

Simian wasn't sure what was happening. But he couldn't stand the dead silence that accompanied Bosch's entrance. Not knowing how to interpret it, he raised his voice to ask something.

As if Bosch had guessed, he raised a finger in the air. And he sent the master of the house a cold look that left no doubt in Simian's mind that he really shouldn't say a word now.

"Look at you," Bosch called out into the great hall. "Crouched like rabbits before the pack..."

Amelia stretched involuntarily as Bosch said this. She was suddenly standing at the top of the stairs with the same pride as he was at the bottom by the door. She sensed what was going on inside him.

No one answered.

Bosch looked everyone in the eye one by one. He was breathing heavily. Not because he had been running, but because of the anger that was unmistakably written all over his face. Unmistakably, it would have seemed. But the residents had a hard time reading him. They had eagerly awaited his return. It should have been a reunion full of pride, full of memories and recognition....

And now all that was missing was fuming to make Bosch's exterior match his interior.

"You even brought the traitor," Bosch said.

Sander, still waiting right in front of him, didn't understand. He looked around. All the others followed Bosch's angry gaze.

Goosequill said nothing. It wasn't the first time the group had looked at him this way. Countless times he had endured their disdain, their taunts, sometimes even blows from Harstein. This collective stare did not frighten him. Only Bosch's hate-filled eyes he suddenly feared. He knew the expression in them, but not from these times. Nothing reminded him anymore of the silent artist Amelia had dragged along to the secret pub.

"Abdiel?" asked Simian cautiously.

"Get this worm out of my sight!" roared Bosch.

Again the assembled party flinched. Bosch's words were no match for the sudden violence of the flung door. By now it was obvious to all present that this would not be a joyful reunion.

Harstein was the first to compose himself. He even began to beam, in an entirely gleeful way. He grabbed Rex by the throat before the latter even understood what was happening to him. The poet's thin, emaciated body rose from the ground by Harstein's iron grip. Rex gasped, but didn't have to suffer this unsuspected cross-bow for long, because Harstein threw him through the open door into the side wing with a single, mighty thrust.

Rex landed roughly. Harstein closed the door behind him as impassively as if he had just taken a bag of trash out of the house.

Harstein clapped his hands as he turned back to the company in the hall. He had been waiting for an opportunity like this for a long time, and now he was pleased with himself. That Bosch did not return his smug smile, or at least signal satisfaction with his quick solution, annoyed Harstein. His smile froze. He could not bear to be reprimanded. Whether with words, actions or looks. It was not in his nature to let anything go unchallenged. His nature commanded him to respond to one with two. To a threat with war. To criticism with an attack. And therefore he was the only one who now dared to part his lips for a reply.

But he did not get around to justifying himself.

"One is missing," Bosch hissed.

The circle in front of him became restless. Everyone involuntarily stepped closer to Bosch.

"Where is he?" asked Bosch aloud. "Where is Beelzebub?"

"We've been looking for him everywhere, Lord," Simian explained, hastily. "...For years, in all corners of the world."

"And never found him?"

"As if he disappeared from the face of the earth," Simian confirmed.

"Is that your answer?"

Simian knew nothing to reply.

"An excuse," Bosch accused him. "Your tongue knows it. That's why it remains mute! Does it still retain some of its divine pride? Belial, the finest orator in Heaven, voice of reason—reduced to excuses! The shame..."

Bosch let this answer die away in silence. He only nodded his head slowly, again and again.

Then he spoke.

"Who stands here before me? Not the noblest creatures of Heaven? Those who understood me and dared with me to claim their eternal right before the occupied throne? I remember you, how you cut down legions, each of which was an enemy no less powerful than you. But they could not withstand you, no matter how hard they tried. And why? Because you felt with every divine spark of your soul the injustice that was done to you. That was done to me! To you, to me, to us! I was proud to fall through Chaos with you. I lost everything, but not this: the knowledge that our common fall is an inseparable bond. A curse and an oath! Is it not so?"

With his question, Bosch's voice drifted up into a frantic register that sounded like slowly shattering glass.

Sander backed away from him. Harstein grabbed his tie knot in embarrassment. Neiwolf held onto the doorframe to the dining room with his fingers so convulsively that he made the wood crack softly.

"Is it not so?" repeated Bosch, naggingly. "Are you not the best soldiers a warlord could have gathered around him?"

A hesitant murmur went from one throat to the next.

"My companions! You my support, as I am the fire of your vengeance. I still burn! For our revenge, for you. And you?"

"We have found you, Lord," blurted out d'Utrecht. Amelia gave him a bitter look from above in return.

"Too late!" shouted Bosch at the jeweler. "What's been keeping you? Your hole, your bathing in the mud? Couldn't you lift your head, Mammon, in your self-pity? All of you! What stopped you? Were you too busy with your human lives? Did the mist make you indifferent?"

"No," Harstein dared to contradict. He grew angry, ignoring Simian's silent gestures urging him not to open his mouth.

"Then why am I standing here without my lieutenant, God of War?" retorted Bosch. "Why is the prince missing among us kings?"

Bosch's eyes turned red, his cheeks moist. He picked out Sander's face to stare at him for a long time before finally speaking.

"You should not have waited, ...for he found me without knowing it."

Sander endured the tearful stare, not initially understanding why Bosch was eyeing him of all people. The blood rushed in his head. He wondered convulsively what he might have overlooked, what Bosch might want from him. And then, suddenly, he remembered that he was a policeman. He remembered the basement body.

"Oh no, ...no," he stammered.

Sander dropped to his knees. He felt Bosch still staring at him, as if that might deflect his hurt onto him. Sander desperately raised his hands to his face so he could disappear behind them.

"What?" asked Simian with a lump in his throat.

"Beelzebub won't come," Bosch said.

Amelia felt herself being pulled forward. She descended the stairs and walked slowly toward Bosch as he continued to speak.

"You have failed him! He's dead—died like any other human around him. And he didn't know he wasn't one of them. He was left in this mist from which you have escaped. But instead of bringing him to me, as he deserved, you passed the time. You have betrayed the best among you!"

Amelia reached Bosch and wrapped her arms around him, embracing him so intimately that she seemed to sink into the fabric of his clothes.

"Now I am without him," Bosch continued. "Now I'm alone."

Simian struggled for words. Harstein searched for something to push his fist into. He found only the wall paneling and punched a hole in it with an inhuman growl.

"We have...", Simian continued.

"Silence!", Bosch ordered.

Simian obeyed.

"Get out of here. All of you!"

Without another word, the residents of the house bowed their heads. They left the hall instantly in all directions.

12. From the bottom

There was a bank robbery in Charlottenburg, not far from the Zoo train station. It was the number one topic of conversation, at least for the two employees who had had to put up their hands and look into the muzzles of the pistols. They were deeply shocked. In broad daylight! Without masks, without worrying about the police. At least no one was hurt, also because the two employees failed to see why they should risk life and limb. Everything was about to end anyway...

The number one topic of conversation. The two continued to tell their adventurous story generously. But as a rule, no one was really interested, and that was a lot! After all, a bank robbery like this didn't happen every day—at least that's what they assumed.

But they were mistaken on that point. The newspapers were full of it. Full of robberies, burglaries, thefts, muggings. In the beginning, an emptied bank filled the front page. Meanwhile, the incidents were worth no more than a list in the middle of the morning editions....

Of which there was only one.

No reporters came. They didn't get famous, not even a brief, little bit.

While Bosch was walking through the streets, another wallet, a car or even a bank vault had to change ownership somewhere. From a purely statistical point of view. It was literally about the safe here and there, not just its contents. While most of the crooks, who were proud to call themselves crooks even before the recent events, did not give a damn about the police anymore, the host of new casual thieves was less courageous. After all, they did not consider themselves bad people, quite to the

contrary. The circumstances! The circumstances were just such, that what was needed had to be taken. Thus people occasionally arrived at the idea of letting the contents be, when the crony, who had been condemned to crack the safe for the first time, just shrugged his shoulders and squatted in front of the iron lump. The window broken open, the whistles of the look-out insistent, ...what to do?

In the last week alone, three safes had been found in the middle of the street, one in the Tiergarten, and in the heart of the forest. How it got there should have cost the detectives sleepless nights. But it didn't. The true crooks, that is, the professional ones, not the nervous amateurs, were absolutely right about their hunch: there were no more crimes in Berlin. At most, there were places and times when, for once, the law was not being broken for an hour or two.

At every other corner, Bosch saw a uniformed man running. Always just one. Whatever number of officers remained was deployed all over the city. Drops in the ocean, maximally thinned out presence. Basically, the authorities might as well have given up and sent all the officers home.

There was no point to any of it anymore. This statement was practically written across the faces of the running guards in uniform. Anyone who was still in the city and had not fled to the surrounding countryside no longer took them seriously. What could they possibly do? The police stations and prisons were full. Now there were reports of arrests in which the police officer taking the person away was confronted by friends of the culprit on the other side of the street and rudely persuaded to turn a blind eye.

Otherwise, they would make him.

Bosch ran until it had gone completely dark. Eventually he had to ask for directions. The first respondent was a man who stood nervously by his car with his eyes searching. He didn't know where the Oberkieker was. He didn't even know who or what that was supposed to mean. Potsdamer Platz? Yes, he did know that one. With a frantic flutter of his arm, the man

pointed in the direction Bosch should go. As he did so, his coat pocket bulged strangely, as if he were shaping a pistol in it with his hand. Bosch noticed it, but only thanked him monosyllabically and set off in the direction he had been told to go.

Behind him, the nervous man jumped behind the wheel of his car and drove off. After a few seconds, he roared past Bosch, straight onto the intersection in front of them. There was a bang, then silence, finally curses. Bosch, however, did not linger at the scene of the accident. He was deep in thought and walked straight ahead further into the night, while around him the traffic grew denser and the neon lights more and more.

When he reached Potsdamer Platz, one''s own words could hardly be heard, despite the fact that it was past his bedtime. The huge circular square was a huge lake of electric will-o'-the-wisps. The stench of gasoline bit so hard at his nose that it roused even Bosch from his thoughts. He stopped to take in the picture before him. There were still people on the sidewalks. Not as many as during the business hours of the day—especially since many stores simply didn't open anymore. But there were still lone men and isolated couples, linking arms and practically running about the square. Each and everyone was in a hurry. No one took as much time as Bosch did in his strolling trot. Everyone seemed to be fleeing from something or to be looking for refuge somewhere.

Beyond this outer circle of bipeds lay the cobblestones of the traffic lanes. There was a non-stop rattling, clattering and honking coming from them. The petrol smell originated from the chugging combustion engines that were in trucks, cabs and motorized former horse-drawn carriages. Above, however, sparks kept flashing from the overhead wires from which the streetcars drew their power.

It was an utter mess. While Bosch simply stood on the sidewalk looking at the traffic, three different cars each scraped into a bus, another car, and a motorcycle. The rider of the motorcycle was jolted like a horseman on an unwilling mare, but he narrowly avoided a fall. Again:

Curses. Only they were not audible. The motorcyclist nagged from his metal steed like a pantomime gone wild. Everything got lost and dissipated in an invisible cloud of agitated sounds.

No one stopped. The bus driver didn't give a damn about the scrape and just drove on. The collided cars briefly closed in on each other in the traffic circle, probably so that the two behind the respective steering wheels could yell at each other, but then they separated and disappeared down different exits into the outgoing streets. Even the motorcyclist spared only a moment to process his shock through wild gestures and silent screams.

Bosch watched all this. The spectacle in the semi-darkness under the street lamps and illuminated billboards freed him from the whirlpool of thoughts he was carrying in his head as ballast – like a package that had not been delivered on time. Fortunately, Bosch had no further to go than here, because in the inner circle of the actual square, the Oberkieker towered.

The spire was nearly thirty feet high. It consisted of five steel stilts arranged in a circle and supporting a pulpit. This was the control center for traffic. It was pentagonal, matching the stilts. Thus, before each window was a street, which branched off from the traffic circle. And above each window, the colors of traffic lights flashed for each direction.

Bosch waited until the traffic died down for a minute. He saw the bright red light, which stopped the plodding and chaotic circus of engines for him. On the other side, Bosch didn't linger long, but marched straight to the base of the Oberkieker. He had expected a door, but found only the steel stilts. One of them was equipped with U-shaped stirrups. Bosch stood in the middle of the stilts and looked upward examining them. The stirrups reached up to a flap in the floor of the pulpit.

He climbed up, carefully and stirrup by stirrup, until he was suspended high above the square, where he could climb no further. Just as he was about to rap the flap with his knuckles, it opened upward.

Bosch swung himself up. Sander held out a hand to assist him in the confines and darkness of the pulpit. When Bosch had squeezed himself

fully in, Sander closed the flap for him with a routine kick of the heel. It fell shut brassily, while Sander was already turning back to his control panel with the lever for the traffic light colors.

The booth had been made for only one person. Bosch stood hunched over at Sander's back, as if he were about to put his hands on his shoulders in grandfatherly fashion. He bumped his head against the ceiling of the pulpit. Before speaking, he wanted to find a position that would not make him feel as if he had to climb back out of this confinement immediately. Sander did not help him in this, neither with words nor with deeds. He could not make more room. He himself was only squatting on a milking stool that had an unusually long stick, almost as long as a broom. He had undoubtedly brought it along himself, because it was not part of the traffic officer's equipment. Normally, the monitoring constable would simply stand. Sander could just about peer out all the windows. The little space left by this improvised demi-seat in the cockpit's round was not enough for Bosch to sit down.

"Why do you come to me?" asked Sander, without turning to Bosch. He had his eyes on the roving lights of the traffic circle.

"What do you mean?" asked Bosch back.

"I know what you want," Sander explained. "But why do you want to hear it from me, of all people? It's Belial's house. We gathered at his home and made the plan."

"Belial didn't start all this, though. I want answers, not fancy stories."

Bosch paused. Sander flipped his lever one more time, but more than anything, he listened tensely to the silence of the pulpit.

"You will give them, Dagon," Bosch added. "Because it started with you, didn't it?"

Sander nodded his head. The rest of his body shuddered.

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

Bosch's tone changed to an almost curious, friendly question. This perplexed Sander, but he answered promptly.

"Traffic needs to be managed."

"In a tower?"

"It' s a new invention. That way there don't have to be officers walking in the middle of the street. And people can see the signal colors in all directions. It's called a traffic light..."

Bosch leaned forward to whisper in Sander's ear.

"What are you doing here, Dagon?" he repeated. "Are you not a god? Are you a human who delights in levers and lights as if he had forgotten that he comes from the only light that matters?"

Sander did not answer straight away. He carefully sorted his words in his head as he continued to direct traffic.

"Do you know what would happen if I didn't do this?"

"...Nothing. It's banging down there all the time."

Sander had to smile, even though he didn't feel like it.

"That's right. They would keep going in circles. The system is really only in operation during the day. It's an experiment! No one should be here right now, especially not a detective. But I got the key, so I come here. Here I am undisturbed in the evenings. All by myself, alone..."

Sander took his eyes off the road and the circling traffic for a second so he could look at the small metal cabin around him and Bosch. He took one deep breath.

"This is where I get some peace. Besides, I'm moving the masses. Sure, I could stay away or leave right now. At most, there would be a few more curses and scrapes, a scare or two more. That's why you might find it unnecessary for me to pull this lever here. It doesn't change anything."

He turned to Bosch.

"It doesn't hurt either, though. I can do it, so I do it."

"Like a school of fish...," Bosch muttered.

"What?"

"...in the current. You point them in the right direction."

"No. I didn't mean it that way!" objected Sander hastily.

Bosch snorted with disdain. Sander turned back to the traffic.

"Not them down there, it's this booth. It brings back memories. Sometimes, when it's windy, it groans and wobbles back and forth. Then it feels a little like it did back then, just after the turn of the century, when I was a clueless man in Belfast.

It was a strange time, especially in that city. I'd ask you if you'd ever been there, after all, like me, you must have seen half the world. But you've never been to Belfast, that's for sure. I would have noticed you, sensed you. Even through the mist in our heads that I wasn't aware of at the time."

Sander rubbed his eyes with one hand before continuing with a tiredly contorted expression.

"It was the last of hundreds of lives that lined up unnoticed by me. I can see every one of them unfolding before me, every moment and every detail—if I want to. These lives are a string of pearls far too long, a cheap one at that. I'm afraid I can't even say that this last shell was a remarkable one. I was not famous like you, not an artist, and not rich. That also happened every few generations, don't get me wrong. But at the end I was just a simple worker in the shipyards of the city.

In a way, I got lucky. I could just as well have starved, somewhere else in the country or in the next district. But I was strong, so they took me in shipbuilding. It doesn't take much, you know. If you can swing a hammer that weighs as much as a bathtub, that's half the battle. If you can also hit the rivets or the beam, that's enough to get hired. Staying, of course, is harder. You had to work fourteen, sixteen hours a day. Half of the new guys that were hired wouldn't last a month. We made good money, but had to endure the heat in the steel chambers and on the scaffolding, the confinement inside the ships' walls. And the deafening noise! It never stopped. Metal on metal, short and brutal from the hammer blows. It could be heard throughout the city, well into the night. Like hail pelting down. The world had never seen so many ships as were commissioned there at the same time. The harbor was practically no longer a harbor, but one big basin

from which the shipyards grew out like bones. One steamer more gigantic than the next. Rich people had discovered the ocean for themselves. We were building ships for the great crossing of the Atlantic.

It wasn't long before they let me into the hulls. I just had to last long enough, not get weak, and smash as few hands as possible. Accidents happened every day. The guy who was training me in the early days had a jacked-up steel bow fall on his leg—and that was that. The next morning I had his job. Then I was sent along into the hollow walls.

Sooner or later, basically everyone went deaf. Those who had to weld and rivet in the ship's bellies were always the first. There's hardly room for one person between the steel walls. On top of that, you have to crawl. With a bucket of fist-sized rivets in tow. You need two people for each one: One heats the rivet until it glows. Then he sticks it in the bulkhead or wall and hammers it in. On the other side, however, the second person must press against it with a weight so that the hot rivet doesn't just peek out on his side, but is deformed and remains flat. So one hammers, the other presses. In the tightest of spaces! This booth here is big by comparison. I wish I could have been standing while hammering..."

Sander reflexively wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. However, unlike the work in the ships' hulls, his traffic regulation did not bring beads of sweat to his skin. Here, only dry skin rubbed on dry skin.

"Every hammer blow booms through the double wall like thunder.There's an echo that doesn't bounce back quietly from somewhere in the distance, but almost rips your ear off.

In addition, there is the heat from the embers, which are always only a few inches away from you. A riveting like this is nothing more than a long oven in which your senses are pounded every second.

So either after three or four years you're a cripple and can't walk upright, or you can't hear anything. It happened to everybody. I was flattered when more and more workers whispered about me over the years. It had an air of respect. I was going gray and still driving in the rivets.

Sometimes they made bets that I might be deaf after all. But I could hear a pin drop, even after almost twenty years.

The work was not easy, but I had no reason to complain. Nothing ached, I still had a good pair of ears. Sometimes I thought that if anything, I was getting stronger with age.

I just kept on working. The ships rose before my eyes week after week. The shipyard was like its own city, bursting at its seams ten times as fast as the rest of Belfast. But several times a year, the ocean liners were ready to be launched. Then our little city fell apart again. The dry docks were empty and it took another few weeks for the next generation of ships to slowly rise up. I saw so many maiden voyages, so many days when thousands of people came to the harbor to celebrate. And it didn't stop there. For years, the shipyard only got more orders. The ships kept getting bigger and bigger.

My wife often said that it was a good life. It was important to her to emphasize that. We had four children, plus hardly any room in our little house. At least we had one and no one had to worry about the next meal. That's what she said, my wife. I would always agree with her. It was the right thing to do, I thought. I didn't know what she meant by this good life, but it gave me pleasure when she said it very firmly and with a smile. She believed it. So I was content with the way things were.

I could sit in the pub with the other men when they had something to celebrate. Beer was cheap, so eventually I started drinking it. It had simply become too exhausting for me to refuse. As a child, alcohol had not interested me. Nor did I understand as a young man why I should drink it. That's how I conducted myself for the first few years at the shipyard, and I endured the questioning looks of the workers who wondered why someone didn't want to drink. It seemed suspicious to them.

Maybe that's why I felt so close to you when we first met in the basement bar. Your first booze...."

Sander paused, waiting for a reaction from Bosch. For a gesture, a reminiscent murmur, something. But Bosch just listened in silence.

"Well, anyway, by then I knew it was really you. Everyone at the table could remember what it's like to want nothing. Not to aspire to wealth, not to want to eat, not to be able to understand the rush of drugs. You reminded us all of the mist that our minds couldn't penetrate for so long. Each of us had to shed light on the darkness ourselves. We couldn't just tell you who you are and who we are. It is part of the punishment. We found each other only after we had all gone through our own hell.

Mine started with the next ship. And I was the first of us, yes.

They said it would be the most modern ship in the world. The most luxurious, the most enormous, the fastest. With everything we had already seen and completed at the shipyard, the Titanic was nevertheless something else altogether. We even had to enlarge the dry dock to be able to work at all. More men were needed, and many of the newcomers hoped that in the end they might be able to get a ticket for the maiden voyage somehow. This was of course just wishful thinking, even though there were more 3rd class cabins on this luxury ship than on any other. The usual under-the-counter deals didn't get you very far. But that did not dampen the euphoria.

I didn't care. I had seen enough ships from the inside and outside. But I had never traveled on one. It didn't interest me either. I had my duties, my quota to fulfill, and the money to bring home. That was all. So, even with the Titanic, I simply took care of the rivets and the ship's hull without dreaming or fooling myself. What was the point? A ship was a ship.

When the Titanic was ready, the whole city was abuzz. Word was she was leaving for Southampton, then to France and then New York. One evening I was told that the crew recruitment was complete, but there were still vacancies. The hull crew only came together in full in Southampton, but in Belfast many of them would already board the ship. Many unskilled among them, as far as the handicrafts were concerned. So they wanted to take me with them. Just like that!

On any voyage, you need experienced people who can take care of the ship. What they wanted with me, however, was not clear to me. There was

hardly any need to work with iron. Everybody said that the Titanic was really a marvel of engineering. But they only told me that a handful of workers from the shipyard would have to go along anyway.

I didn't feel like it. That's usually three weeks per crossing, and I would have had to wait in New York until the return trip. So almost two months away from home. My wife wasn't thrilled either. She worried, which earned her ridicule from the neighborhood. Of the people around us, some would have done just about anything to be on the maiden voyage of the Titanic and see America, at least for a few days. When they heard we didn't even want that, jealousy added to their scorn. If we thought we were something better, and such talk in secret—sometimes even to our faces...

I recommended co-workers I had crouched in the ship's walls with over the years. But for some reason, they were fixated on me. In the end, I didn't care about that either. I would never have told my wife this way, because she wouldn't have understood or would have taken it differently than I meant it. I didn't want to go, but not because I didn't want to be separated from her and the kids. I wasn't worried about the ship either. Those were ridiculous questions she asked me in bed at night, almost in tears. Nothing bad was going to happen, I reassured her each time. No, what held me back was pure inertia. And of the worst kind. I worked as conscientiously and non-stop as hardly anyone else, precisely because it was the only thing that had any meaning for me. In return, it gave me the money I needed to eat and feed the family. It was as if everything I was or thought knew only this purpose. I didn't want to go anywhere. I had no dreams. I didn't understand the arguments and drunken slogans in the bars. They meant nothing to me. Even the children! Even if I never admitted it to myself. They had happened. My wife had happened. We were squatting together on this patch of earth on the edge of the English Channel, and that was that. What kind of career was I supposed to have? What promises was I supposed to make to her and the kids? There weren't any in my head. I felt like one of those play dolls with a bunch of gears in

their belly. Someone had wound me up with a key at some point and now I was making movements until the tension would go out of my gears and I would be dead.

When I was younger, my shipyard mates used to try to take me along on their tours of the fancy women's neighborhood. They needed that so they wouldn't be just living tools after the backbreaking work they did day in and day out. I never came along until they gave it up and stopped asking me. I didn't need to feel more alive. I only started drinking, as I said, because the constant explaining bothered me in my inertia. It tasted like nothing—actually, not just the beer, but whatever I would put in my mouth or would smell.

I might as well go six weeks in the belly of an ocean liner. What did it matter? Except my sluggishness wanted me to not make a move. But in the end, continuing to balk during my third conversation with the shipyard management was just as unpleasant a thought. I said yes."

Again, Sander interrupted his story.

"Where were you when it sank?" he asked Bosch after a while.

"Your ship?"

"The Titanic, yes," Sander confirmed impatiently.

"In the south of France," Bosch clarified.

His casualness saddened Sander. He left the traffic lights to themselves for a moment and put his hands in his lap. Sander's head slid forward until he hung listlessly on his improvised stool like a cloth pulled through water.

"I wish I had known then," he whispered. " If I had, everything would have gone faster and we wouldn't have lost him..."

Bosch knew exactly who was being talked about, but he didn't respond. At least not with words. Only his fingertips dug into Sander's shoulder blades a little more firmly than before.

"Well," Sander continued. "It didn't take me long to pack my suitcase. It was my first trip ever—and in a way, my last. For this person that the wife and kids knew, anyway.

As soon as I set foot on the Titanic, I lost my orientation. The suitcase was taken from me; I immediately had to make a repair in the engine room. Nothing serious, more like a touch-up repair. I did not find the way back to my suitcase at all. I stumbled back and forth among the endless stairs and various decks. The crew was not yet complete, as I said, and none of the guests were to be seen at this point. Nevertheless, everything around me was buzzing and humming. People were running, some yelling and admonishing others who were submissively taking every order. I knew only the shipyard, where things were certainly neither more polite nor quieter. But the bustle on the ship was a world of its own. And it did not take me into consideration. Someone took pity on me, eventually. With his help, I found the crew quarters. The cabin for the workmen were at the bottom, literally on the lowest deck. I shared the cabin with three other men. I didn't even ask their names.

I suppose they're all dead. I was alone in the cabin when it happened. It was late and since we weren't talking, they hadn't let me in on their evening plans. It was the same game every night anyway. Deep below the beautiful saloons and open decks, the poor Irish and French danced on the tables, drinking copious amounts of liquor and singing old songs. I was already asleep when the deep roar woke me up. It was like an earthquake, only on a ship. Everything trembled. I almost fell out of my cot and clung to the bed frame in fright. The roar moved through the hull, very slowly. As it passed me and the cabin, I had to cover my ears. Then it got quieter and quieter until everything seemed the same as before—only completely silent. Even the bubbling of the engines was suddenly absent.

I had never been at sea before, but it was immediately clear even to me that this noise could not have been normal. Nevertheless, I would never have dreamed of an iceberg. And if someone had yanked open the door and told me that an iceberg had just torn open half the side of the Titanic, then perhaps I too would have jumped out of bed and taken to my heels.

Maybe.

First of all, no one yanked the door open. I simply remained squatting upright in my bed, just as I had woken up. My cabin mates didn't come back either, wherever they were. I just sat there staring into the empty cubicle. Because I wanted to sleep, I had turned out the light. There was only one candle burning, which I was too tired to blow out.

While I sat there staring, the water was already pouring down the hall. I was not afraid. It was not clear to me what had happened. I hadn't felt this calm in a long time, I noticed. I could have sat like that forever, just me and the flickering of the candle. In my head I briefly went through the faces waiting for me, and the rooms and paths of the shipyard. Construction had been going on there without me for a few days, the first time in many years. I assumed it made no difference, either to the work or to me. The thought was not alien to me. As far back as I could remember, I asked myself almost daily what difference my being there actually made. I never gave myself an answer, but there always remained an uneasy feeling, as if I should be able to solve something without knowing what the problem was. But at that moment, there, in the candlelight, it was different for the first time. Again the question popped into my head, but this time instead of uneasiness, only indifference remained in me. It probably made no difference at all to anyone or anything. I could be missing, too. It was all the same, I thought to myself. And I meant it honestly, without wishing to complain about it.

I held on to that conclusion, which was more a feeling than a thought. It fascinated me. I literally wanted to grab it and curiously scan it from all sides just as the water distracted me.

I could hear it coming before it flowed under the door into the cabin. An underlying rush that remained too quiet to startle anyone. The rush increased in volume until suddenly the puddle at the door spread across the floor like a shadow. It was the movement more than the sound that woke me up. Within seconds, the entire floor was covered. It happened so fast and seemed so unreal that I didn't understand what it was. Color?

Imagination, because I was possibly still asleep and dreaming? A strange shadow cast by the candle? These were all ridiculous ideas, but they were closer to me than the truth.

I leaned out of bed and reached out with my fingers to the floor. Only then did I really understand. Water! And it was freezing cold.

Now I was hearing things going on outside in the hallway again. There were a few screams as the same discovery was made in the other cubicles as in mine. There were loud bangs, doors slamming, and later, axe blows. All of this didn't last long, though. There weren't many of us down there, and not everyone was in the cabins at the time. In addition, the cold layer of water on the floor next to my bed became a knee-deep bath within minutes. The door groaned in the woodwork, then flew open and more water poured in. The candle and the small folding table it was on fell over. My mattress soaked and I got wet, which made me climb up, onto the top cot of the bunk bed.

I didn't think. I just climbed up. That was my way. Not to the door, into the hallway where there was still electric light, even if it was beginning to flicker. The black water was rising out there, I was squatting on the cot.

And then the light went out. It turned pitch black. I could no longer see anything, from one second to the next. But I heard all the more, especially the sounds that the water made in the cabin. I began to understand that it was not simply water, but the ocean. The ocean had crawled into the ship, onto my deck, into my cabin. I understood that, but I couldn't believe it. There was no going back. The ocean was in here and it would not leave. I had nowhere to go; it wouldn't let me. This monstrosity of steel, wood and fabric might be the very pinnacle of engineering, but it was nothing out here on the ocean if the ocean decided it wanted it.

My heart pounded, when I got wet. The water was so cold, much colder than I had felt with my fingers. It scared me, this feeling on half my body. I was already at the highest point of the cabin. There was nothing left for me to move to. So the water rose over the mattress to my thighs, my

knees, my feet—all at once. How it then rose up my hips, pricking me as if with pinpricks! I was left breathless for a moment. I had maybe a few more minutes before the water would press my head against the ceiling. I could already hardly hold myself on the bed, because I began to drift.

From the decks above me, new sounds were now coming. Not from people, from the ship. They were deep thuds that I couldn't quite classify. But it sounded tremendous. And dangerous. Things were breaking irretrievably. It sounded like the end, and I didn't want to hear it. For some reason, the invisible goings-on worried me more than my own situation. It was too absurd, after all, that all this was happening. Absurd! I remember very clearly that this thought went through my mind. The pride of the seas was really going down. It was unimaginable enough, at least for the owners and the press, judging from what I had heard. But that I, of all people, was part of it? Me, who had been completely indifferent to this voyage? Hundreds would have fought for my place. But no, here I was, who had always observed the people around me in their plans, intrigues and dreams, as if I were just an uninvolved spectator. I of all people..., absurd.

Then it dawned on me. More and more clearly, the longer I thought about it: it was okay that way. It was certainly better that I should experience this than someone else in my place. Someone who would not have sat still, but would have fought in vain. Someone who, in their final moments, must have gone insane at the thought of those they were leaving behind. Someone who would have felt punished, unjustly confronted with this fate. From that point of view, I really was the right one.

When I hit my skull against the ceiling and had to push myself away with my hands, it all made sense. I was still not afraid. There was no unkept promise weighing on me. There was nothing I still wanted to get done. Not even the children were on my mind. Just like me, they saw the end of people like us in the streets every week. I was lucky, maybe they didn't understand that yet. But what were tears? There were tears everywhere, for everyone. For important reasons and for trivial ones.

No, I didn't have to go on living. It was the most peaceful moment I've ever experienced..."

Sander gulped painfully before continuing with a question for Bosch.

"Have you ever drowned?"

"Once," Bosch replied. "I was just a little girl. A long time ago."

Sander nodded silently.

"I had never," he murmured, lost in thought. "It was the first time."

He closed his eyes and lowered his chin to his chest. Sander didn't even notice, but Bosch did. He too lowered his head, forward, down to the back of Sander's head. He kissed him gently on the hair until Sander continued quietly, in a firmer voice than before.

"Afterwards, when all of what you have experienced for centuries in bits and pieces, and then forgotten, comes rushing in on you like a flood ...afterwards you can see what your destiny has been. All it takes is this very big step back to see the picture from the proper distance. Anyway, that's how it was with me. I saw and felt how people made an idol of me in ancient times. How they stared at the sea and did not understand it. I was their explanation, their god. And maybe that's why I never died in the water, except the last time. My hidden curse...

I don't know. Anyway, I let it happen, with as little resistance as I could muster. I felt very little in the water. My clothes and especially my shoes were dragging me down. I didn't open my eyes anymore, because they were immediately covered with water anyway. All that remained for me to do was to take the first swallow. Gasping for air had become a hurried game that didn't supply me with enough oxygen. There was not so much as an inch of air left under the ceiling. So I hurried.

I opened my mouth as if I were taking a deep breath. And the water shot into my lungs. For a brief eternity, everything in me tensed, but especially in my very center. My chest revolted. All reflexes wanted to delay the inevitable, to undo it. But then they simply stopped resisting....

Because there was nothing to fight against.

The water reached the ceiling. The air was forced further up, through cracks and holes in the wood, into the bowels of the ship. I took a second breath, and this time no pain followed. I had only imagined the first one, too. I felt the water in my lungs, the salty taste in my mouth. Nevertheless, I became calm. My hands were still on the ceiling. I felt this, too, in my fingertips. Then I tried to breathe a third time, but the movements inside me seemed useless: in my stomach, my diaphragm contracted; my chest grew larger. But nothing happened in my mouth except that water was pushed briefly in one direction, then back in the other.

I tried using my nose; same game. I waited for something to happen to me that was somehow similar to dying. Something had to hurt! Or, if not, it occurred to me, I might have just passed out already, so I didn't even notice my body slowly dying. After all, everything around me was dark. I saw nothing and I heard nothing.

The fact that I was trying to find proof that I had passed out was exactly proof against it. When I pushed myself off the ceiling with my hands and touched the bed frame with one foot, I realized that. I turned in the water with a few disoriented strokes until I reached the bottom bunk, so that I could grab the frame under the cot with both hands. Then I pulled myself down and tried to sit on the bed. But my legs felt too light to place on the floor. I had to keep holding onto the bed frame; straining to push my feet down so they wouldn't drift upward.

I felt all of this. So clearly that there could be no doubt. I was not unconscious. I was not trapped in a terminal dream while my body drowned. What kind of dream would this be, anyway? This had nothing to do with my life, with those memories that came back to mind before it was too late. I had heard many stories about dying over the years, especially scary ones. Obviously, most were simply made up, or at least completely exaggerated. I expected no mystical apparitions, no visits from deceased relatives reaching out to me.

Just something. I just expected something that felt final and different.

I sat underwater, breathing in and out quietly. Slowly my feet sank down, as if they were getting heavier. I didn't understand it, but appreciated that I no longer had to strain to stay seated on the bed instead of drifting away.

The darkness remained. I listened into it, and sure enough, I could hear things I hadn't noticed before in the flurry of events. There were still sounds of engines, very soft. The water trembled from it, and from the tension rippling through the hull. There were hissing sounds, like pistol shots I knew from the shipyard. Steel would crack like that when the load threatened to bend it.

I listened. Gradually I managed well in my seated position on the bed. The cold that had startled me so much at first was leaving me. Maybe it didn't. Maybe it was still there and I just wasn't bothered by it. It had been several minutes since the water had swallowed me up and trapped me. I didn't have a watch, of course, but it felt like it.

When I started to get pulled back more and more, I knew it was the end of the ship. I had a hard time keeping myself on the edge of the bed without leaning forward as a counterweight, as if I were trying to tie my shoes. With the bow behind me, the Titanic seemed to be sinking forward. I felt the sloping floor of the cabin with my bare feet. It had to be that way. The ship was sinking. I was no unfortunate soul, who happened to be on the wrong deck—on the lowest deck, which would have to be sealed with bulkheads in an emergency. No, no one could escape.

Or so I thought, sitting on the bed in the black water as if on a swing. It didn't go as fast as I had initially thought. I had more than enough time to ask myself the same few questions over and over again: How much longer would this go on? With me, I meant. Would my body perhaps get a sudden epiphany the next breath or two, and finally understand that it was no longer allowed to function? Was this bizarre, unimaginable time I was going through just borrowed? How could it have been? And wasn't I supposed to be looking for the door?

The thing about the door bothered me the most. I couldn't see it, of course, but just as the bed below me was exactly where I had seen it in the dying light, the cabin door still had to be six feet to my right. Moreover, the tide had ripped it open. I could just swim out, after all, if I hadn't to worry about air. In any case, the porthole of the cabin was not a way out. It was bolted shut. I couldn't fit through it either. The door was the way...

...but where to? To the upper deck? Maybe it was still above sea level. Perhaps the passengers were taking the boats to safety. I could try to swim to them. But first I would have to find my way through the dark corridors. And then the stairs.

I hesitated. But the delayed death, which I still did not rule out, would not come. I squatted in a dark nothingness that pressed on my body from all sides. In my ears I could clearly feel that I could no longer be close to the surface. I was being squeezed. It didn't really hurt, but I could tell. Maybe it was also holding me in place mentally. When I finally decided to get up, it was too late.

I thought I was going to have to swim, but to my surprise, I stood with both feet firmly planted on the cabin floor—as if nothing were different than usual, just water exchanged for air. I held onto the corner bar of the bunk bed with one hand and put one foot before the other. It was a little harder than usual, slower too. But it worked. I could walk, at least to the door. Beyond the bed, I stretched my hands far from me to feel for something. I found the thin wooden leaf of the door and reached for it. At that very moment, however, I was jerked off my feet. The water vibrated. I heard a never-ending noise from all directions, from above, below, from the sides. It rumbled through the hull of the ship, but nothing happened to me. That is, except that I lost my sense of direction completely. The floor had simply sagged out from under me. I didn't know why at the time, but it was probably not me that was moving, but the ship around me. My back hit something of which I could not tell whether it was the floor or the ceiling of the cabin. Something that might have been the

table or a suitcase fell on top of me. Slowly, just as slowly as I moved through the resistance of the water. I pushed free of it and the rumbling finally died away.

More things were coming at me. It felt like the bed I had climbed out of. My toes touched down softly on fabric, on the mattress I had clung to for so long. And then, suddenly, I was hanging trapped between the two beds of the cabin. The last time I had seen them in the light, they had been standing normally against the walls of the cubicle. Now they were squeezing me together. Everything that had been standing on the opposite side of the cabin appeared to fall on top of me. There were soft things, the bedding of the two men from the other bed. But hard things, too. Something hit me in the head. I don't know what it was. Only that the cabin no longer adhered to what was intended for it in the blueprints: it had turned. And that meant the ship had turned.

It became silent. Not only did the crashing sounds stop, and the roar of the water in my ears. No, I heard nothing more. Not even from myself as I tried to free myself from the collapsed beds.

I knew it was over. The Titanic was sinking toward the bottom of the sea. Everything on board had fallen silent. The engine sounds were no more. This ship was buried beneath the surface of the ocean. And now it was moving helplessly to its final resting place. That thought alone made me 'breathe' faster—if you want to call it that. I gasped like a fish for water, and it already didn't feel half as absurd as it had in the beginning. And not nearly as threatening as knowing that the Atlantic was not a lake or a dock. We couldn't see the bottom in the oily water of the shipyard, even though it was only a few yards deep. If someone carelessly dropped a tool in the water, and the foreman was in a bad mood, then the unlucky person had to dive for it. No, this was the ocean. The passengers didn't worry about how deep it really was, even if they joked about their own demise in a deadpan manner. Why would they? People drown. It doesn't take long. No one thinks about how deep their own body sinks in the sea. It is difficult

enough to accept that after drowning there is still so much air in the body that one floats on the water surface for a while. What happens afterwards is irrelevant after the scary first act.

I thought of that as I sank to the bottom of the sea, buried alive in the biggest coffin that ever existed..."

"It woke you up," Bosch whispered. "That wasn't a coffin. It was the cradle of a god!"

Sander shook his head.

"No," he objected. "I wish all that would have been enough to be reborn and break out of this cycle of being human. No, I was just overwhelmed by what was happening to me. I didn't know who I was yet. I was getting scared. At this point! I was ready to lose my strange and insignificant life. And that's exactly why it didn't happen. But life at all costs? Down here?

I listened into the silence, waiting for the impact. But it didn't come. With every minute that I didn't feel the ship hit the ground, I realized more clearly how impossible it was for me to escape from this depth. I felt the iron of the frame in my fingers. The pressure on my head, chest and everything about me, became stronger and stronger. I was alive all right! I couldn't stand the idea that every second I was being pulled further away from the world—into absolute darkness!

When the impact finally came, I was relieved, in an eerie way. It ended this unbearable state. I finally heard sounds again.

The cabin turned again, as I no longer had to struggle to get out from between the beds. I could push the frame off my chest because it suddenly became lighter. It almost slipped off me of its own accord. I got back to my feet, literally sank back onto the floor or the ceiling, ...I didn't know which. But I was standing on my own two feet. I didn't even have to row my arms to keep myself down. So I even went down on my knees from the force with which the Titanic hit the bottom bit by bit. The noises increased and now cracking and squeaking commenced in the hull above me.

It didn't take long for that to end as well. I tried to listen to the sounds for as long as I could. Maybe somewhere deep inside I suspected I wouldn't hear any again for a very long time..."

Bosch felt moisture on the index finger of his left hand. It still rested on Sander's shoulder. The finger now touched a thin, glistening line where Sander's tears had left his face and traveled down his neck. There was no telling from his voice that Sander was crying. He spoke with the calm and familiarity of someone who knows his story inside and out. The tears flowed unbidden, automatically, as if they hadn't had anything to do with the narrator's feelings in a long time. They came from old pain that every fiber of his body had accepted as part of its own history. What the mouth did with the memories was beside the point.

"What do you think I did first?" asked Sander.

"I don't know," Bosch said.

"I waited for a sign. For a wall to crack, and something to hit me. For a sign that I wasn't alone down there. I stopped where I was. Now that I had nothing else to throw my remaining senses at, I became more aware of the water pressure. I moved my feet just to see what would happen.

They weighed as heavy as lead.

In general, everything about me seemed to be fixed with invisible ropes. I experimented with my body. With my arms I tried to drive through the water: It felt like molasses. Even in my fingers I felt the slowness. I thought I should make strained noises, but any gasping or strenuous movement remained accompanied by silence.

So I pushed forward, pressed firmly to the ground, as if chained to my feet with weights. This time the ship with its invisible catastrophes did not stop me. I climbed out into what had to be the hallway.

It was narrow enough that I could reach the walls with both hands. I practiced walking like a toddler. If the first dragging steps were still laborious, with each yard it gradually felt more practiced and easier.

Again and again I checked the same things during my progress. Still I

did not drown. Still I did not miss the air. Still my chest heaved up and down—completely useless. This body could not do anything with the water in my lungs.

I was still alive. That was as certain to me as the unpleasant question that it went with, which I didn't even dare to express in my thoughts: What was it worth to stumble in the dark, miles deep at the bottom of the ocean? What was my life worth at all under these circumstances? I tried to dispel this ominous thought through action: I pushed myself off the hallway floor with my feet and tried to swim a little instead of walking. But I did not make the slightest progress. It was ridiculous, even without being able to see myself in this pitiful attempt. I couldn't even get off the ground. The movement with my arms that was supposed to pull me forward? Slower than a turtle....

I could not accept this. Let alone comprehend it! But at least I could try again. And once more. And once more! But the result always remained just as pathetic. I was pulled to my feet as if I were still walking home across the streets of Belfast.

It was impossible to swim. I had to keep walking.

So I did, again practicing putting one foot ahead of the other, eventually reaching the end of the hall where the stairs to the higher deck had to be. Before I found it, the first head found me.

It bumped right against mine, right in my face. It didn't hurt, as it probably floated slowly in the water with the rest of its dead body ahead of me. It was more of a nudge. But it was a head, I could tell by the hair on my cheeks. I reached out with my hands to make sure. They felt a face.

That the owner of the face did not flinch as I ran my fingers over his eyes and into his mouth proved what I had not needed, much less wanted, proof of: he was dead. That might have frightened or concerned me under other circumstances; after all, I had never held a drowned man in my hands before. Unfortunately, the circumstances included the fact that I could very easily and gently push the body out of the way with a gentle shove.

And that meant that not only was the dead man dead, but he was dead in the only way that made sense underwater. He wasn't standing in the water, he was floating. This little world of steel around me was not the mistake; I was the mistake. Here, the passengers of the Titanic weren't walking like ghosts down the flooded, gloomy corridors. No, they had all died proper deaths. That was evidenced by the innards of the hull the farther I went and the higher I could climb up the stairs. More bodies, all horizontal! Lifeless. I pushed their limp limbs out of the way like branches.

I was not like them. No one can survive the deep. This was another world where humans had no place. So what was I?

It seemed easier to drag my pressed body through the bowels of the wreckage than to face that question. So I did. Sometimes my groping forward ended in a dead end and I got lost. Only the first part of the way up from my cabin I knew well. There were parts of the ship, even near my quarters, that I had never seen. With all the buildings, the decorations, and the scurrying staff, it was not the same ship I had driven rivets into. Only once during my first few days at sea had I even made it to the foredeck by the bow. And I hadn't memorized how to get there, in case I ever had to walk out of the sunken ship. So I got lost. Where there was nowhere to go, I fumbled in circles until I found an opening in the wall through which I could pass. When I encountered stairs, I avoided going down. I figured there had to be a way out for me upstairs, certainly on the promenade deck.

At first, I still counted the bodies. However, the longer this odyssey through the darkness lasted, the less important these morbid encounters became to me. I caught myself miscounting—and in all seriousness thought about where I would have to start again. I shuddered at myself until I stopped caring about death on this ship.

Even stairways were sometimes dead ends. Passages would be blocked with debris. But because I didn't know if a better way was waiting for me somewhere or if I would just get lost further inside, I tried to climb. I cut my hands on burst lamps. Maybe they were display cases or window panes.

The cuts hurt, and when I held the spot to my mouth, I could taste the blood. But I kept going, getting caught in a ruined pile of iron, wood, and glass, and having to do every single grip and step again, but backwards.

Other times my climbing worked and I overcame the obstacle. Whenever I could walk upright, I did. Always looking for the next higher passage, for an area where I could no longer feel walls.

Finally, I found it. I thought it might be the forecastle because I could no longer feel anything around me, nor was I bumping into objects on the floor. I don't know if I was right, because I took a step into nothingness that knocked me off balance. Suddenly there was no more support under my foot. I fell forward, into the depths. With my arms I instinctively tried to swim, because it didn't feel natural to fall in the water, but to no avail. I fell for a few seconds, feet first. And then I hit the bottom of the sea as if I had jumped off a jungle gym instead of falling off a ship as high as a house.

I got down on my knees to dig my fingers into the bottom. This was no longer the wreckage. I felt sand beneath me.

How long I squatted there in disbelief, I can't say. I heard my heartbeat pumping blood through me. I felt the sand. I felt the presence of the ship, or what was left of it, like a giant shadow in my back. Yet I could not see it. Normally, eyes get used to darkness. But where there is absolutely no light, there is simply nothing to see.

I remember how I craned my neck anyway and looked up. To where the surface had to be. Nothing! Not the slightest glimmer of light. I didn't even know whether to look for daylight or moonlight. My sense of time was already completely lost. Down there it meant nothing. The lid to my coffin was unreachably far away. Whole cities with their skyscrapers had room between me and the waves on the surface. You could have piled them on top of each other, with all their lights, and still none of it would have reached this blackness at the bottom of the ocean.

I stayed crouched because I dreaded the attempt. This attempt I could not delay forever. I had gained enough practice fighting through the

wreckage to suspect that I would not be able to leave the seafloor. I dreaded the certainty, this final test, with nothing standing between me and the surface. Only hundreds, perhaps thousands of feet of water.

So I remained motionless until my head was still and my limbs had had enough of the tension. I stood as upright as I could on the seabed. Then I slowly gathered momentum from my knees and pushed off.

I didn't even get high enough to do a few swims with my arms outstretched. Almost immediately, my feet were back in the sand. On the surface, my jump would have been nothing more than a bounce. Like a child negotiating a jump rope. The water was like mush around me. There was no way I could escape upward. Nevertheless, I tried it again and again. The result was equally pitiful each time, until finally I gave up for good and sat down on the bottom of the sea.

And there I remained.

There was nothing to do but get used to this unspeakable pressure that weighed on me. For now, I waited for hunger and fatigue. Maybe I could sleep? My odyssey had been exhausting enough. I had not slept a wink for I don't know how many hours! And if death should come to me in my sleep, I would have been grateful for it.

I fell asleep, at some point. I didn't realize it until the moment I woke up again, gasping for air. It was like an overwhelming dream that ended abruptly in the middle of a black night. Before I fully came to my senses, I imagined I had woken up in the cabin where the lights had been extinguished. A bad, inexplicable dream was hanging over me, I thought, and I just had to get up and turn on the light to calm down.

So I tried to get out of bed—but there wasn't one. I tried to put my legs on the floor, but they almost seemed to break if I moved them too fast. The strained gasp from my mouth came soundlessly; I tasted salt on my tongue, on the roof of my mouth, in my throat. And I could not make light. There was nothing around me: the bed not a bed, but wet dirt. The darkness not broken by shadows, but complete. Jet-black. So dense that I

couldn't see my laboriously raised fingers in front of my face even when I almost reached into my eyes. No excited breathing, just this feeling of almost bursting inside....

The memories came slowly, but they came. Waking up became no less confusing the next few times. It had not been a dream. I had slept on the ocean floor. I no longer felt the cold. The pressure on my body all the more. It should have simply crushed me. But nothing happened to me. Even the hunger! I could rely on it just as little. I didn't have to eat anything, and I certainly didn't have to drink. My lungs were full of salt water, my stomach too. I was nothing but a stuffed sack of skin, bones and flesh. But it didn't stop my head, my soul. I stayed where I was. Waited for sleep, for hours. Then I awoke in the same state as before. Nothing changed about my situation. It could have gone on for days, I don't know how long, before I suddenly saw a light.

At first I thought I would hallucinate this tiny, glaring light that moved before my eyes. I didn't even know if I had opened my eyes or not. It made no difference in the darkness. I had long given up caring about the movement of my eyelids. Now I raised my palms to my face with the usual effort and rubbed my eyes until I was convinced they were really open.

The light was so bright it hurt. Still, I didn't want to look away. I was drawn to it. I couldn't believe I could see something! I wanted to get closer. So I struggled to my knees and pushed forward through the sand, toward the light. It seemed to have moved in small waves up to that point. Now it was almost as if it had noticed me, for it paused. I tried to see what it was, but could only make out the point of light.

I let myself sink forward so that I could use my hands to help me crawl. The light shone so beautifully! It didn't hurt as badly anymore, either. It just hung there before my eyes, like me just a little above the bottom of the sea. Like a glowing pin in a bed of absolute darkness.

How can I describe the feeling that this image triggered in me? It was overwhelming—not only because it drove out the insanity of my utter

loneliness. No, it felt so familiar. This image was so beautiful, so uplifting, because I had felt exactly like this before. It was a memory that stuck deeper in me than any other, fighting against the darkness. I knew it immediately. As inaccessible as the meaning of these terrible experiences had been to me until now, the view into my past now seemed clear.

Once before there had been such a saving glow, a warm glow of the ether in the midst of complete darkness."

Sander paused. It took him a moment to snap out of his tale.

"Do you remember the battle?" he asked.

"Every blow," Bosch replied. "Of every single enemy, and every step."

"Then you know what God's faithful did as we fired your cannons..."

"They ran away, fled from this power they didn't know!"

"But they didn't give up," Sander curbed the spite in Bosch's reply.

"No," he admitted.

"They dug into the depths of the battlefield for protection," Sander continued. "And then they feared for their immortal lives until they could bear no more of our blasts of fire, and tore the ground into islands.

That's what I saw, Lord! Down there on the seabed it was as dark as the day their army cast the bowels of Heaven after us. Rocks as big as a hundred shipwrecks! Whole swaths of land as ammunition. They came flying at us like continents, obscuring everything. More than once I was crushed by the masses, as if by one avalanche after another. When I had dug myself out, the next wave of attack followed. It was black as night, dyed with their hatred for us, their hatred for our insurrection!"

Bosch winced when Sander mouthed the word 'insurrection'. He wanted to reprimand him immediately, but Sander was talking himself into a frenzy right now—the kind Bosch wanted to see and hear from him.

"The shade swallowed up everything that cowered beneath. But I saw the light of the ether bursting forth between the flying mass. That light! This hope that even such a monstrous act of desperation by the enemy could not make us disappear. Even if they destroyed all of Heaven....

It was as if a dam had broken inside me. That tiny light in the darkness of the sea had been enough to remind me who I really was. That I had once fought for the Heaven that people knew only from their stories and from paper on which no angel had scribbled.

I reached out for the glow in the sea. It was no bigger than a fingernail. And before I understood what I was touching there, this mouth snapped at my hand.

A fish! It was nothing but a fish.

Its teeth were cutting into my thumb. I cried out, as silent as ever. The light jerked wildly, so that for a blink I could see it hanging in an arc from the fish. The bow was a horn growing out of its head. The light hung from the end of it, a loose swaying lantern.

I was too big for its mouth. It let go. And the beast didn't get my thumb, either. The light disappeared with him. The fish carried it before itself only to hunt, not to escape. Now it was making off because it had misjudged me as its prey. Have you ever heard such a thing?"

It wasn't a question waiting for an answer.

"I crouched again in absolute darkness. I propped myself up on all fours like an animal, feeling like one! Thrown down into this world, and I don't mean the bottom of the sea. No, as short as this strange encounter had been, it had given me back all my memories. One second I had been empty, a human shell that had boarded a ship in Belfast without knowing what it was doing there. In the other, I was an immortal angel again."

Sander faltered.

"...An exiled angel..."

"A god, my friend," Bosch correct him with gentleness in his voice.

"You already said that."

Bosch disliked this sentence. He shook his head to show his lack of understanding. Sander felt his forehead in his hair.

"And so do you. The humans adored you, Dagon."

"But I didn't even notice! Those are stories they made up. Since the

beginning, humans have needed something to explain what's going on around them. This has nothing to do with me. Or with us..."

"Did they create idols for Dagon, the god of the sea?" challenged Bosch Sander. "Or didn't they?"

"Maybe," Sander admitted. "But that's what they did for most of us, after all."

"Exactly! Why don't they all follow their one, great God? Where does it come from, this disobedient polytheism?"

Sander shrugged.

"They just believe. They don't know how real God is."

"Do you think he told them stories of the gods beside him? Maybe whispered to them in their sleep?"

"Don't be silly!"

"Then where did their idols come from?"

Sander couldn't find an answer, at least not one that would have passed his lips easily. Besides, he suspected Bosch would not be satisfied with any answer.

"They may be stupid, the humans," Bosch said quickly. "But they feel the truth! Their souls are free, and free souls find their way to their own kind. To the gods they need. They are drawn to us like moths to a flame!"

"...Like me to an ugly fish?"

Bosch left this blow unparried.

"You wanted to hear my story," Sander said. "It doesn't end there, and it doesn't end with my memories! I wish it did. For there was nothing divine in anything that had brought me to the bottom of the sea. Not even afterwards. Nothing at all!

I fell as an angel, not as a god. I don't care what the humans have made of it over the millennia. And I don't care how it happened. I know what I have seen! You I saw, how you were the last of us to resist the fall. We tumbled like millions of drops of a heavenly rain. If it hadn't sealed our fate so badly, it would have been a beautiful sight, don't you think?"

Bosch snorted barely audibly, but all the more disparagingly.

"You're the last thing I saw. And the last thing I felt was that glimpse of a final, bitter triumph as you pulled Abdiel over the edge by your hand.

Then we fell in silence until we fell asleep. No, until we slept out of the immortal lives we had known. At first I did not understand. I thought that our fall must end in a crash. I expected pain, perhaps rocks, fire, or a dark prison of dead planets. But only sleep came, no pain and no impact. The sleep that ended us without ever landing anywhere but in the banishment of a human body.

My first one grew up to be an unsuspecting farmer. He worked hard not to starve. He succeeded for a few years, then didn't. I died an uneventful death after an uneventful and hungry life. Not a trace of a memory of the time before our expulsion from Heaven was still in me. Nothing! Not even in the next life, or the one after that.

As I sat there after the glowing fish was gone, I had all the time in the world. Nothing distracted me from meticulously sifting through each of my human lives in these new memories. I left out none, not one! After a while, the events repeated themselves, even if they were experienced in other bodies. Men, women—children, if lives were especially short and times especially hard. In me grew this library of destinies, which were nevertheless all ridiculous in comparison with my true past. People who struggled for mere existence died without discovering this emptiness that I experienced through sufficient boredom in my rich lives. I was a merchant, was a prince—murdered before I could become a danger to the rival to the throne—was a priest, a courtesan, an inventor whose works were no good, a countess, a major....

It repeated itself. In me was sown the doubt that something did not fit with with me and the few decades that were left to me each time. When I lived in the gutter, it didn't matter. I would take this dreary doubt out on someone with a few kicks, or I would rat on everything and everyone to have a few days less to worry about a bite to eat or a dry place to stay. When

I had money, it usually came with expectations from the people around me. They reinforced this gnawing: why? What am I doing here? Why am I pretending that the conversations and intrigues have any meaning for me?

Never had I received any answers. One by one I died bewildered, when I was lucky. Agonized, when unlucky.

At the end of my browsing through the catalog of my lives, I arrived at Belfast. Only this woke me from the trance in which I had remained in the wet sand. The man who had recently gone down with an ocean liner, who had just crawled across the bottom of the Atlantic like his colleagues across the floorboards of a pub after a night of drinking: he was the last in the chain. With him, the mist that had shrouded me for so long ended.

Now there was only me. Dagon, the outcast angel. Dagon, who understood his punishment at that moment."

"Nothing can be a punishment that is based on injustice".

"Then what do you call it? Did we not rebel and pay the price? For my part, I knew that if we lost, Heaven would not be for us any longer."

"That is the price of defeat," Bosch replied. "If it had to be paid, then we paid. But a punishment? I accept no punishment for freeing ourselves from the yoke of our obedience. It was our right to fight back!"

Sander did not enter into discussion with Bosch's insistent words. He searched for his own, which he had long been laying down in conversation with himself, but which gave him some trouble now that he finally had the opportunity to say them.

"You speak this with the same conviction I never could counter," he said. "That is why I followed you. But at the bottom of the ocean, your voice was absent. There, where I would have needed it as never before..."

Bosch became restless. The tension inside him literally twitched from his fingertips into Sander's shoulders.

"...I was alone. And farther from a kindred soul than any human or angel had ever been before me. I now knew more than my short human life could even have imagined. But what good was that? What difference did it

make that I had once been immortal—and probably was again now? You were not there. None of us were there. And whatever God was thinking about my destiny, He wasn't speaking to me. I was just an immortal pile of flesh waiting in the mud for someone to find me. Or for something to happen to me. I would rather endure further punishment than be free in an endless, lightless prison!

But that was not my fate. I found out when I finally managed another step. And then one more, further, until I walked across the bottom without finding a reason to stop. I was drawn ever more clearly in one direction. At first I mistook my movements for aimless reflexes. Then I realized that I was walking in a straight line that I found difficult to leave. I tried to do it on purpose. And promptly I felt physically how that was the wrong way. So there was a way, because I felt the difference between right and wrong!

I tried it again, walking a few feet to where it felt right, then taking a turn. With each additional step, I immediately felt more uncomfortable. I felt downright sick, after only some moments, so I turned back to where the uncomfortable state faded away.

There was no doubt that I had uncovered what was supposed to happen to me next. I had to go. I had to get back to the shore. And then it came over me why: because my bizarre end had not been an accident or evil play of the powers in Heaven. That I had found my way back to my true self in this fashion was important. It was not about me, but about heralding the end for all of us. I had to find you!

I understood now that the same thing happened to all of us who had been overthrown. We lost our immortality, our memories, ourselves! They had threatened us with the hell that would be waiting for us beyond the edge. Our mistake was to think that we would fall down into this place we had never heard of. No, not a place. We fell into ignorance, into that bleak, never-ending cycle of being human. That was the real punishment! But there was an end to it, right from the beginning..."

"The final battle," Bosch interjected.

"The final battle! And God's new favorite children were the prize we would fight for," Sander confirmed.

"It's preordained and you know it. I felt it as I walked the ocean floor dead straight: Judgment Day for humans is coming, but they won't be the only ones whose fate is at stake. You and Michael will fight the final battle, on behalf of all living things!"

"We will go to war," Bosch muttered.

"No, only you will fight for us! That's what's written."

"I don't care what's written!"

Sander shook his head vigorously, as if Bosch had said something stupid that he had no patience to clarify.

"Do you really think we can dictate the terms? We have lost, Lord! As bitter as it is, as shamefully low as we have fallen. We lost Heaven. This is not about us. It is the humans who are on trial now. You can change that no more than I can change the circumstances that brought me out of the mist. It happened the way it had to happen so we could play our part."

"Our 'part'?"

"We all had to wake up in order to find you. The longer I struggled through the water, the more I could sense not only the path, but that I was not alone. Your closest companions, our greatest warriors, I knew were still trapped in their mortality. Just as I had been before. I was the first, and so it was up to me to find the end. You. You are our end!

I had to look for you.

So I marched. Undeterred, following an invisible cord. Sometimes I would stumble over my legs, sink to the bottom, and sleep. When I woke, hunger and thirst were even more relentless—but I could march again.

After innumerable steps, my first plateau ended in an abyss. Just as I had stepped into nothingmess for the first time at the edge of the wreckage, so too did I in the trenches. One step too far and I fell. Often I cut myself on rocks, which I had to climb a little later on the other side like a mountain. I quickly learned to hurry there with all my effort, because

pointy mouths would hide in the caves and ledges. They would snap at me and the bites would flare up for weeks after—or what I thought were weeks in the timeless depths.

At one point, I experienced not only the shock of a sudden, searing bite, but the whole body of such an animal. It felt like a giant snake waiting among the rocks. Even though other creatures had bitten me, they were uncomfortable with me as prey just like the lampfish. They had all quickly let go of me. This beast, however, did not. It tightened like a hose around one of my legs as I tried to climb up and escape. And then it pulled me back by its own knot. Its head snapped at me, causing my deflecting arm to go up in searing pain as if from dagger blows. Oh, how I wished for my power back at that moment! I struggled not to be cut in two by a worm I could not even see, whereas once I could have blown that ocean dry with one long breath. This made me so angry that I slammed my mangled arm as hard as I could, fist first into the snake's head. I grabbed something that wouldn't retract from my fingers and turned the inside of the maw inside out.

Then the beast let go of me. I couldn't use my arm from then on, but at least I still had it. To recover from the wounds and the paralyzing poison, all that was needed was time.

I had time. Don't think I wasn't aware of the insanity I had committed myself to! All I could place my hope in was this pulling feeling towards that one, clear direction. I didn't know if it really led to land. Would it even be the shortest way, and where to?

You gave me strength! If you existed in this world, then you still shared the same fate from which I had freed myself. No one would be able to drag you out of the mist except someone who had also suffered such a fate. I couldn't think of any excuse to give up now. The lack of air was not killing me. The weight of cities on my head didn't crush me. Hunger didn't render me motionless. And them, who had their home here in the darkness, could not eat me. I would fight back. I could fight back because I didn't belong out there in the mud or in their crevices.

I let them come whenever they wanted to. At least I had seen the fish with the light coming. I was not excited about the next lights. Most of them fled from me. I saw sudden fiery red circles of light flare up in front of me, turning blue in no time, as if something were burning to gas. And then the circles began to spin, around and around me, before slowly disappearing back into the darkness.

There are all kinds of colors down there. The creatures that made a run for it outnumbered me. But every now and then, something would pounce on me from behind the lights. ...cold, searing bites, even electric shocks that made me cramp from my toes to my eyelids. Then, fully conscious, I had to lie defenseless at the bottom and hope that the attacker would not grab me with tentacles and drag me into his lair.

I lived in constant vigilance, with every step and every move. If you can call it living. The worst were the creatures that did not reveal themselves through light games. I stepped into slimy forms, some of which burned the skin off my feet, others gouged their spikes into my flesh. Or I was rammed from somewhere out of the darkness by something hard. I would then raise my hands like a boxer—like an agonizingly slow one—to defend myself. Often the beast did not come back. It was probably as surprised as I was that I existed in its realm. The more aggressive ones tried again. I hit scales, jagged bristles, things that felt like bones....

And always I survived to keep on following the feeling of the right direction. More than once, I thought I was going steadily up, sometimes for so long that I forgot what level ground felt like. But each time there came a moment when the bottom dropped away again or I walked right over a cliff that sent me sinking back into new shallows for minutes at a time.

I gave up hoping for anything. Going ahead, climbing, sinking, colliding with something, that kept me busy enough.

And so I didn't even notice when the day came.

I had more difficulty walking than usual. I swayed, had to find balance with my legs because the water kept moving instead of surrounding

me as a liquid block like it normally did. I didn't reflect on the reason for this, because I felt worse than ever. Hunger, thirst and pain were beyond what I could still distinguish, but that was not why I felt completely beside myself. I thought I was going to be torn apart.

It was the pressure that had been lessening and lessening of late. It made me feel lighter, in an uncomfortable way. And then the movements of the mass of water around me: they were absorbing the stirring of the waves above me, but I didn't know that. If I had opened my eyes, I would have seen my own hands in front of me for the first time in months. But they had been aching ever since they had perceived the slightest remnant of daylight shining through.

How I had longed initially for the moment when I could breathe air again! It had been an unattainable dream, so fantastic that I got this singular dread of it: When you want something so badly that the mere idea of actually getting it sends you into a panic. When it came, it couldn't have been more terrifying. The exact opposite of my desperate daydreams! I finally realized that something was very wrong, because a loud noise played madly in my ears. It assaulted my senses! Then the last weight left me, too. I thought I was going to fly.

The water was gone. Gone from my face, down to my neck. I opened my eyes in horror and was instantly blinded. The brightness pierced my eyeballs as if they were about to evaporate. I took a shock breath that lacked any heaviness from the water in my lungs. They revolted instantly and everything in my chest contracted violently. I coughed the water out of my respiratory tract. I coughed and coughed, losing my footing so that my head went back under the surface of the water where it belonged.

Only the sea didn't want me anymore. I opened my mouth, greedily gasping for the salt water, but that only made things worse. My lungs wanted this even less. I tried to push through the surface again, paddling furiously with my arms and legs. To my surprise, this worked, much faster than usual. The leaden slowness was a thing of the past.

I spat the water out of my body, leaving it with the only thing it gradually accepted: air. In the process, the sea level sank lower and lower on me as I trudged on. The waves came in short blasts against my neck, then the back, finally only against the knees.

On the beach, I fell to the ground and buried my face in the sand. I was just as overwhelmed with sensory impressions as I had been after the sinking. Only this time, I knew immediately that I wasn't going to die.

What had blinded me so had not been the sun. It was a starry night lit only by a full moon. I had mistaken it for the sun simply because my eyes could process nothing but darkness. What I dared after a while were brief glances through the gaps in my fingers to get used to the pain.

In the morning, a man found me. He thought he had tripped over a dead body. I felt the toe of his shoe on my hip and he was properly spooked when I greeted him with a groan. Then he spoke to me and I answered in a brittle voice. He spoke French, I could hear that at once. Not that I had ever met a Frenchman in my shipyard life, much less conversed with him. I had learned no other languages. But now I answered the man in his. It passed my lips as if I had been born with it.

This was the first in a whole series of strange experiences that awaited me. The man took me into his care, dragged me back to his village, where I regained my strength and senses over the next few days and weeks. The man and the villagers assumed that I was recovering from a serious illness. However, it was not an illness, but the shock of this bright and noisy world.

I left the village one night without saying goodbye to anyone. From a newspaper I had finally learned the date. Eleven months had passed since the disaster at sea, that last night of my clouded life. I had been underway for almost a year. A year that I had lost! That immovable tug had made me wander back to Europe. America was closer to the wreck. There was a reason I had gone back to the people in France and not somewhere else.

In truth, my search was just beginning now, my search for you, our general and our last hope for revenge. But how was I to find you when you,

like me, had passed cluelessly through the centuries, one indiscriminate human body after another? The tug had brought me unerringly to land, but now it was gone. I could no longer just follow it.

For the first few days, I roamed the coastline, lost in thought. Then it occurred to me. If I were a policeman, I could look for people. I could look at files, or look for anything that stood out. Not that I believed there would be things in police reports like a missing Irishman who had survived a ship disaster and crossed the Atlantic on foot. If that was the kind of story that was needed to pull me out of the mist of oblivion, you wouldn't tell people about it. I certainly didn't utter a word about it. At best it would have earned me laughter and wry looks, at worst a padded cell. No, it wouldn't work that way. But the police are called where inexplicable things happen. I didn't need to hear about everything that was going on in the world in person, as long as I had ways and means of getting information.

And so, I went to Paris. I did odd jobs until I had enough money to get some papers. The man whose name I had carried all these years was officially dead. I didn't need to travel back across the Channel to know that, not to mention that I wanted to keep my distance from the sea as far as I could. I had nothing on me after my odyssey but a few strips of cloth. It had not occurred to me in the night of the sinking what I should ever need my papers for. So now in France I not only had no money and no connections, I didn't even have an identity.

Amazing how easily you can find a new one, if you're looking for it. Back in Ireland, I never had contact with the underworld. In Paris, I found people who appreciated that I promised to do any job, no questions asked. In this way, I quickly got money and, what's more, the contacts to give myself an official name. With that, I then applied to the police.

They needed people, even though I didn't look like new talent. I was asked a few questions, a few eyebrows were raised skeptically, but that was it. Took me less than a year to work my way up from patrol to criminal investigation. That gave me plenty of opportunities to work my way

through the strangest notes on goings-on in Paris. I didn't need to solve any cases, just find clues. If I wasn't going to run into you directly, there were the others. I was sure that Moloch would not be able to keep his temper in check as soon as he was awakened like me. He would lose his temper among his own kind in Heaven, what would it be like among humans, who must seem like vermin to him? It was worth looking out for him. I was less sure about Mammon and Belial, even though I was convinced I had to find them. They were almost as close to you as Beelzebub..."

Sander choked.

"...I never dreamed of finding anyone from our ranks dead. Certainly not him. He was so..."

"Then what did you do?" interrupted Bosch. There was the kind of coldness in his words that sounds more brittle than emotionless and can't hide it because inside things are seething.

"Well, I moved," Sander recomposed himself. "I got myself transferred, first to the Mediterranean coast. But I only stayed there for a few weeks, because I got the sure feeling that I wouldn't find anything. The gendarmerie didn't mind that I didn't want to settle down, on the contrary. I was sent here, there. When I had enough successes under my belt, because even the most puzzling criminal cases seemed like finger exercises to me, I took liberties. I went to Italy, under the pretext of an exchange. But I remained, got new papers and made a career in Milano and Torino. No one asked questions because I spoke like a true Italian. Add to that a new name that didn't betray my origins, and answers to the trickiest police checks. That was all it took to give me carte blanche in this country, too.

I suppose I would have continued like this forever, if only for lack of a better idea. And then maybe we both wouldn't be here today. Except that suddenly she was there, by my side, ...and that changed everything."

"She?" asked Bosch, as Sander got lost in his thoughts, forgetting for a moment to continue telling his story.

"Your creation, Lord," Sander explained. "Sin."

Bosch hid his surprise. Amelia had not told him. They didn't speak.

"I hadn't looked for her, to be honest. In my memories of the battle, I only saw you and us, your army leaders and kings. I never knew what she was, only that it was a miracle when you came out of your camp with her, the day before our attack. No angel before had created a life, let alone one so beautiful! I joined in the praise. I said her name, I accepted your creation as a child and your mate. What better omen for our revolution?

But was she an angel, like us? She did not know it herself when she stood before me and called me by my name—by my real name. In thousands of years I had not heard it spoken, at least not to my face. She knew who I was, and by that I recognized her.

Sin recoiled in horror from herself, for she had no idea how she had come to be in my room. I too was startled because she literally appeared out of nowhere. I had been alone, in my apartment, after work.

She hadn't woken up the way I had. There were no lives for her to flip through like pages of a book. And it became clear to us why: She had not been pushed over the edge. She had not fallen into mortality. And now she couldn't remember what had happened to her after our defeat, as if nothing lay between her memory of the bitter end of the battle in Heaven and the moment she suddenly found herself in my room.

None of it made any sense. I questioned my sanity. But at least one thing was clear to me: you were among us. Sin is your creation. She knows that she is not without you. And you not without her. So there was hope!

I offered her shelter with me, but she paused for a moment, expressionless, as if remembering what she had forgotten, and then she smiled. Sin disappeared out the door and I did not see her again for several days. When we met again, she pulled up in front of my police station with a chauffeur. She said she had money and a plan. We had to go to Berlin to gather our companions.

So we did. Her gut feeling was as good as mine, I thought. Maybe she knew something about you that I was unaware of. In Berlin, she set about

using her charm to plow through all the circles that were important and exclusive. I did my part with the police, who didn't ask twice, given the contacts I had made in the meantime.

That's how we found the first ones. Belial didn't need long to take notice of Sin. She did everything she could to keep the whispers about her alive. When he joined us, we decided to buy the refuge in the forest. Belial had become rich since he had woken up. Especially with what he had always been best at: presenting himself as the voice of reason.

I came across some strange cases and was tipped off about some strange characters. But it still took almost ten years until we had jointly cast our nets so widely that Mulciber finally reached us as well.

With that, we were complete, ...except for Beelzebub and you."

Sander grew silent. He brooded over whether he had forgotten anything that he must not forget. But he felt only an exhausted emptiness inside.

"He could still be alive," Bosch spoke up quietly. "You had me in your circle for a year without doing anything. Without letting me in on it!"

"It's not as easy as you think..."

"What, telling me the truth? We didn't have to wait until the enemy was literally hovering over our heads! We could have taken the reins!"

"I tried, more than once," Sander defended himself.

"I would remember that..."

"No, not with you. With others. It's not like there was nothing to the clues I was slipped. I found Chemosh soon after we took up quarters in the villa. In order to talk to him, I had to visit him in prison. And since I wouldn't get much time with him, I told him everything. He just sat there wide-eyed before me until I was done. Then he laughed at me."

"A fool!"

"Do not judge him, Lord! He understood me, but the human mind can only process what it knows. What it does not know is impossible to it.

Chemosh was not ready yet, so that he would have the strength to recognize his fate on his own. That I wanted to force it, cost him his mind! What was related to him wouldn't let him rest, no matter how grotesque he thought it was. In the end they moved him to an insane asylum. When I went to see him there once, he lapsed into a panic that threw half the house into turmoil. I was forbidden to ever speak to him again."

"I'm not like Chemosh," Bosch lamented.

"No, you're all we have left. There is no final battle without you fighting it for us the betrayed and outcast. We had to wait for you to find your way out of the mist on your own. The game was our test, and at the latest there we knew that you were ready for the truth. Each of us tried to lead you on. I know it's hard to accept..."

Bosch thought about this, before swallowing his answer unspoken. He no longer found use in taking his disappointment out on Sander.

"Michael's here," he said instead.

"What? Have you seen him?" asked Sander, turning to face Bosch.

"I knocked him down! He wouldn't speak out, either."

"Then it's true! It's time!"

"Time for what?"

"Your fate—and ours—will be decided by your battle. God has sent Michael to destroy you once and for all, while His Messiah judges the people. You must overcome Michael if we want to be free and rewrite our history. Do you know where he is now?"

"Yes."

"Then you must go to him for the final duel!"

"I will."

"I don't know how much time we have left," Sander interposed. "There are strange things going on in the city. And there's no more news at all from beyond the city limits."

"If we have a final battle that you think is inevitable, it won't happen without us," Bosch qualified.

He was growing weary of Sander's warnings and urgency. He almost thought he smelled fear. Fear, however, he could not tolerate among his most loyal companions.

"Remember," Sander insisted, "that it is not we who will be judged, but the humans. It is their end that will not wait for us. When judgment is passed, the story is over—their story of God, angels and devils. It's part of our punishment that we're still here because human history needs us."

"That's grotesque!", Bosch harrumphed at Sander. "Aren't you ashamed to reduce us to props for mortals?"

"...You too were mortal before you found yourself again! Flesh is flesh. Our escape from it is a dream we have. For it is written that you will lose. You can take your anger about this out on me or on Michael, it won't change anything. You must hurry."

Bosch slammed his fist upward against the tinny roof of the cubicle, making it clang loudly.

"You don't deserve my wrath," he calmed down again. "I want his shining general to feel my wrath. I have not forgotten how he let himself be adored for not having been defeated by me. There is in fact something that he alone has forgotten, and that is his place. I swear to you he will not escape from under my hands alive again! If he has disguised himself with this human shell, he shall also bear the fate of a human!"

"Go, then," said Sander.

Bosch was already about to stoop for the flap in the floor when he considered those two words again, thoroughly.

"We. Then we go now," he said.

"It's your fight," Sander replied, exhausted.

"Does that mean you're not coming?"

"None of us can go with you."

"The others aren't here, and I'm not going to get them. But you are! It started with you. You should be by my side and witness me finish it!"

"I..."

Sander stammered, searching for words. He had spoken all he could.

"I..., I'm staying here."

"Here? In this human machinery with its colorful lamps? Now, what's your business here, instead of witnessing me avenge us?"

Bosch couldn't see Sander's face because the policeman was leaning forward awkwardly. He adjusted his sitting position on the stool with the long style. A thoroughly unnecessary action that he knew would appear silly to Bosch. And yet he sat down anew, cleared his throat busily, and devoted himself to his control lever with even more focus than before.

Down below from the street of the traffic circle came only the sporadic rumble of engines and barely a honk of horns, although a loud concert of alert tones had still been playing when Bosch arrived.

"Are you serious?" barked Bosch gruffly. "Dagon, the God of the Sea? Who once fought side by side with me against the legions of Heaven?"

Sander bit down hard on his lower lip. He dared not show his face.

"Shall I tell you something about this god of the sea?" he answered hesitantly. "I spent the first nights on the coast lying sleepless in my bed. Not a wink of shut-eye could I get. With each passing day I felt more miserable, even though my body didn't look any different than usual. It is a curse that we remain as we were awakened.

When I could no longer bear the insomnia, I lay down in the farmer's water trough, in secret at night. In the trough from which the pigs drank! It helped for a few minutes. I could sleep in it at least briefly, constantly in fear that someone would find me and think I was dead. Who knows what black magic they would have accused me of if I had gotten out then?

I haven't slept in a bed in twelve years. In the eternity of Heaven, we didn't even know what that was, a bed. But as a human being, I longed for nothing more than to be able to close my eyes in peacefulness for once. Instead, I left the beds in my apartments untouched. When I had guests, I sometimes rumpled them to feel more alive. But at night, I slept in the bathtub. And to this day, I have to go back to the woods every night to rest

in my tank for at least three or four hours. Unless I resign myself to sleeplessly stringing the days together until my eyes hurt from the brightness and I can no longer think straight. Your god of the sea is a little old fish! In a can! It's pathetic. I hate what the sea has made me. I hate it!"

Bosch was silent.

Sander waited patiently for a response. But Bosch said nothing, making the embarrassed Sander stare more desperately at the lack of traffic.

Bosch stooped down and opened the flap so he could get one leg on the top rung of the ladder.

"So you' re going back, then?" he finally asked.

Sander shook his head.

"I'm staying here."

"Why? What's there to do here for you?"

"Traffic needs to be managed," Sander pressed out, audibly trying to control the unsettled tremor in his voice.

"Who cares?" teased Bosch, uncomprehending. He heard virtually no more vehicles from below. It was now deepest night.

"I can do this," Sander replied. "I want to do this..."

Bosch didn't want to let up, wanted to say something back.

Sander anticipated it.

"Please, ...let me..."

Silence descended on the booth. Only Sander's jerking arm movements on his lever could be heard.

Bosch stared at his back, hoping that Sander would not bear it and turn around, as each additional second of silence made his indignity worse.

"I'll defeat him," he finally said.

And then Bosch climbed down the rungs.

Sander tried to calm down when nothing else happened.

He couldn't. He clawed at the traffic light lever with one hand and ran the other thoughtfully over the control panel of his pulpit.

13. Bad weeds grow tall

The morning dawned while the city splintered. It could be heard all the way up into the haze above the rooftops.

Oxen-Otto sat down on the cobblestones. The curb served him poorly as a support for his back. He wanted to catch his breath. The red stain by the torn pocket of his jacket seemed bigger to him than it had a few minutes ago. Otto touched it one more time, just to be on the safe side.

Yes, moist. And smelled of blood. Well, that was that.

Bosch touched the bedspread again, just to make sure. It was as cold as before. In fact, it was just as cold as it had been on the other days when he had made a detour to the room.

He sat down on the bed to look quietly out of this single, small window overlooking the courtyard. The blackness of the night had already given way to a gray film. In a short while, the colors would be added, which the light made spill over the horizon with it. Even though it might not happen this morning, after all that Bosch had seen on the way.

He touched the blanket next to him once more.

Yes, cold. And it didn't smell like her anymore, no matter how hard he searched for the scent. Not in the entire room. So he got up and went to the door. He pulled it closed behind him, even though it couldn't fall into the lock since Bosch had broken it out of the frame with his shoulder.

Otto enjoyed dropping out of the hustle and bustle of the street for a moment. The people who were outside at this early hour were all running.

No one was walking or had even the hint of a relaxed expression on their face. At the next corner, a mother tugged on her child's arm. The little one was still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Then a bang, so loud that it shook Otto. Something must have exploded at the factories that not far away had stopped blowing smoke out of their stacks.

The machines were now no longer being operated.

Bosch didn't meet a single soul in the stairwell. It was dead quiet, just as it had been on each of his visits that week. Mavi's rear building was deserted.

Then a bang, so thudding that the stairs shook. Lime trickled from the walls. An explosion, no doubt. Bosch had heard a few of those during the night. What the workers usually melted in their boilers, and fermented in tanks, was now unattended to.

Most of the people who supervised dangerous machinery had stopped coming to work. Often they had literally fled without giving a second thought to what they had to shut down. That's how quickly the realization hit them that they were fooling themselves. What was the point of standing here and working if the world no longer needed it?

A wardrobe was on fire, in the middle of the street. It was pretty, Otto thought—apart from the burn marks, of course. The wardrobe was part of a barricade of chairs, bicycles, cobblestones and even more wardrobes. Most of it was not yet on fire. The pieces of wood were just smoldering a bit.

Otto narrowed his eyes to a slit and peered suspiciously at the barricade. While sitting down. Lest someone hide behind it and take aim at him right now! It wouldn't be the first one today, he recalled of the night.

And certainly not the last. After all, Otto had big plans for the day. If you didn’t seize the opportunity now, you only had yourself to blame.

He was not going to let a single thing escape his grasp.

Bosch wandered along the streets, leaving the courtyards behind him. It was not far to the collapsed house that was his destination.

The sun flashed its first rays over the houses. Bosch closed his eyes briefly as he walked. This allowed him to hear the sounds around him better. It crackled as if from fireplaces. Fires large and small were not being extinguished. Sirens had ceased for good in the night. It was the kind of quiet over everything that comes at the end of the realization that there is no point in trying to keep order anymore.

Bosch opened his eyes again, just in time to avoid being run over by a horde of adolescents. Or better, to be able to see them before they rushed past. They kept their distance from him unasked and unknowingly, so that he split the half-growns like a ledge that first splits a raging river, only for it to to merge seamlessly again behind it.

Turn left once. Then straight ahead, past open doors of stores whose owners were no longer there. More fire pits, broken windows. And the occasional confused person here and there, who unlike the others did not take to their heels, but rather wildly bobbed their heads in search of an overview in all directions.

Yelling and many, many names hung in the air.

Ahead of him, Bosch found the street blocked. It looked like furniture, also lamps and wheels were thrown on a pile. In the center, a wardrobe blazed away happily, but more to the sides it seemed Bosch could easily climb over.

Otto immediately noticed the silhouette above a smashed grandfather clock. In the smoky air, however, he couldn't make out more than the outline of a man at first.

Good that he had paid attention! The silhouette was not in a hurry. Otto saw this as an alert signal. He himself did not hurry either. They had that in common, and it was a kind of identifier for people who, like him, didn't have fear on their minds, but logistical questions: Where to next,

before the load of jewelry and money became too heavy to be taken on a foray? Who looked suspicious? Who would buy stolen goods for bills?

Otto readied himself without giving up his seat at the curb. He stayed where he was, but his muscles were set for a quick jump.

Bosch almost missed the enormous lump of a sitting man. His head was no longer in this city, including all its small and big catastrophes. All he could think of was Michael.

"Noblebrush!"

Bosch stopped.

"Over here, man," Oxen-Otto called from the side of the street. Bosch stood in the middle of the lane. He looked in the direction from which he was called, but it took a small eternity for his thoroughly blank, absent gaze to clear somewhat.

Bosch eyed Otto. Then he walked over to him without saying a word.

"Well, well," Otto said gleefully. "Up so early, too. Why don't you sit down? It's not like anybody will complain if you're not on time...."

He couldn't follow Otto's line of thought, but Bosch sat down next to him on the curb anyway.

"Snappy as ever," Otto complimented. He pushed his lower lip forward and nodded in an exaggerated manner. "How's business?"

"I don't have any business," Bosch replied, without revealing the slightest hint of any emotional state. Other conversational partners would perhaps have been upset with this flat-out dull response, but not Otto. He had always found something about this man with his unwillingness to talk.

"Well, then you've either got it good or really bad," he commented. "I, for one, have a lot on my plate right now. The table doesn't set itself, you know. I have to go and do it—yep! Good times for people who get things done quickly..."

"Good times?"

"Look, here," Otto said, pulling a snow-white pearl necklace from the

inside pocket of his jacket. He lifted it up from behind the fabric, eyes wide, the way a magician would conjure a rabbit out of a top hat with the greatest possible panache.

"Beads for your girl, neck to her navel! Are you interested?"

Bosch looked at the thick balls strung on the string. One was more perfect than the other. Sander had talked about pearls last night, had compared his human shells to them.

"They're not real," he said.

"Excuse me?"

Otto's voice quivered with indignation. He looked at his haul.

"Don't give me that crap, noblebrush! How do you know? It looks just fine! So white and..."

He took the necklace between his teeth and bit down on a bead.

"...hard!" he finished his sentence.

"I just know it," Bosch said.

Otto eyed Bosch from the side. The painter was not looking at him, but at the street. He sat there completely still, with a blank stare.

"You serious?" muttered Otto.

Bosch didn't even nod.

"Damn it," Otto grumbled. He tossed the necklace in a high arc toward the smoldering barricade.

"Have you seen her?" asked Bosch quietly.

"Huh?"

"The woman, 'my girl.'"

"Why, tell me, do you think I know everybody here by name, or what?

"I thought this was your business?" challenged Bosch.

Oxen-Otto kept silent—but only for a moment. Then he laughed.

"I'm just teasing you a little, noblebrush!"

Bosch stared at him.

"I know that one, my friend," Otto confessed. "But I'm sorry, I haven't seen her."

He stood up and stretched with relish. Behind the barricade, someone shouted unintelligible words.

"Well, I'll go and be on my way, then."

"Why aren't you afraid?" asked Bosch. He remained seated.

"Of what?"

Bosch pointed with his hands to the street, the houses, the burning wardrobe in the barricade, and up into the morning sky.

"I told you, it's good for business," Otto explained.

"Even if you died?"

"Why? Would you cry for me, noblebrush?"

"No," Bosch admitted.

"Precisely! Let's stick to what we can see, shall we? And I see empty apartments, broken-up stores, and no cops for miles. So I grab. Am I supposed to be afraid of little Jesus?"

"People are disappearing," Bosch followed up. "Don't you see it?"

"So what? There are still some around, and they're in my way. They don't care either. I can't have as nice a chit-chat with them as I can with you. You better watch out!"

Otto lifted one side of his jacket so that Bosch could see the inside. There, an arm-long wooden club hung by a loop from his armpit. Beside it were two knives in sewn-on sheaths.

"Not bad, huh?" asked Otto Bosch, who promptly got up from the curb to take a closer look at the portable arsenal.

"Do you have more?"

"Sure do!"

Otto also accommodated various weapons in the other inside of his jacket: a fist ring, a noose, and a short rubber truncheon.

"That one, give it to me!" he ordered, "the knife."

"Pardon me? I need that myself."

Bosch pointed his finger at the smaller of the two knives.

"And anyway, what do I get for it?" he asked. "What do you have on

you? You know, in times like these, I'm afraid I can't be of service on credit. Surely you understand that..."

"I don't have anything on me."

"Well, that's unfortunate then," Otto stated.

Bosch straightened to his full height. When he spoke, his words came out deep and threatening from the pretty mouth that looked as if it had been painted.

"Give it to me. Now!"

Otto had been beaten up once. As a child, of course, not as an adult. He had earned the respect of the street in no small part because of his fists and exceedingly hard skull. Even if he took dozens of blows, his opponent would go down before him. That's how it had always been as far back as Otto could remember. Until that fight behind the school, when he was maybe 11 or 12 years old. Three of them had beaten him up until he could no longer see anything because of his tears. That had been real fear. Otto often remembered it when he had to be brutal himself—for the sake of business. He wanted to recognize this kind of fear in the eyes of his opponents, because he would know when he had won. From this kind of fear, no one built up the courage to fight back. So Otto could do whatever he wanted. He was good at provoking this moment.

Now he felt he was on the wrong side of the bitter game once more. After so many decades! He had to snort in amusement for a moment as it hit him. All of a sudden, Bosch didn't seem right to him. Not at all.

He handed over the knife.

When Bosch wordlessly put it in his own inside pocket of his jacket and turned to leave at almost the same instant, gangster's honor regained the upper hand in Otto.

"Why, you're welcome!" he said with insistence, loudly.

Bosch turned to face him once more. In his eyes was the same absence as at the beginning of this encounter, when Otto had had to call him.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"Take care, then," Otto bid him farewell. "I somehow doubt we'll run into each other again."

"As do I..."

"And don't be an idiot with that knife! I hope you won't try to kill little Jesus!" shouted Otto, falling into peals of laughter at this. "That might prove difficult, I'm afraid..."

Bosch did not turn around. He was already walking down the street.

"No," he muttered, inaudible to Otto. "The other one first."

14. Shhh...

The tapping of his shoe heels announced him even before Bosch could be seen. There was a clacking on the battered cobblestones of the ruined driveway each time he climbed over a chunk of wall and landed on his feet.

The two beggars waited with their heads turned. Their eyes were on Bosch as he reached the first courtyard. They were both sitting exactly where Bosch had found them the other day: with their backs against their respective walls. As if they hadn't moved at all in the meantime.

But Michael was missing. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" asked Bosch into the courtyard. His words echoed back. "I want to see Michael!"

"Then you'll have to pass him," said the beggar, who was squatting at the left edge of the courtyard from Bosch's point of view. He nodded toward the other side, pointing the way, to his colleague there.

"And pass him," the latter replied with the same gesture.

Both beggars looked at each other and nodded.

Across from them, in the farthest corner of the first courtyard, lay the gateway to the second. Bosch started to walk. He headed for the archway, from which a shaded tunnel led farther back.

When he reached the center of the courtyard, where his legs broke the line of sight between the beggars, the one on the right suddenly rolled sideways. He didn't even stand up for it. Instead, he turned 90 degrees after the exercise and continued to roll forward from there.

Bosch stopped. The other beggar had also left his guarding position. He rolled in the same manner as his counterpart, only in the other

direction, toward the ruined driveway through which Bosch had come. When he reached it, he unfolded with a swing that would have made any gymnast jealous. His partner, too, swung up from his roll and, with legs wide and arms folded, suddenly stood in the other courtyard gateway.

"Impressive," Bosch said mockingly.

He continued walking, directly toward the wide-legged man who was blocking the center of the gate. However, it was wide enough for a coal truck to drive through. Bosch therefore didn't even bother with the beggar, but simply made his way into the tunnel beside him.

A mistake. The wide-legged man let him pass partway, but then seized him lightning-fast from behind, leveraging Bosch and tossing him backward as he fell, over his own shoulder, back into the first courtyard.

"Not just anybody can march up to the Archangel when they feel like it," he explained smugly after he had stood back up.

Bosch took longer. He grabbed his chin, which was bruised. He wiped off some blood with the back of his hand and looked at it.

Then he smirked snidely.

"I'm not anybody," he said.

He pushed off the ground with his hands and rammed into the wide-legged man as if to split him in half. To Bosch's surprise, however, it had little effect on his opponent. They both got back to their feet in the middle of the gate, where they dealt each other open blows.

Bosch realized he had the advantage. The wide-legged one seemed to know it too, because he quickly started clinging to Bosch with all his body weight until they went down as one big ball. Even though he was stronger than the other, this tactic wore on Bosch until he flung his large appendage off him—just as he had been shouldered back into the yard before.

The thrown man remained on the ground. Breathing heavily, but satisfied, Bosch briefly let his eyes wander. The second beggar was no longer standing where he had thought he would be. The entrance to the street was clear again.

"I told you you had to pass him," gasped the wide-legged man who was still lying on the ground.

Bosch turned around to where the other beggar now stood just as wide-legged as the first. He had his arms folded the same way. As if guided by an invisible marker, he stood in exactly the same spot of the gateway.

"And passing him," added the replaced gatekeeper.

Behind Bosch, the man who had just been defeated curled up yet again. He gained momentum and rolled back to the entrance to the street. With that, the beggars had now exchanged places.

"A breather!" he called over to Bosch, who had been watching the rolling with irritation in his eyes.

"Watch out!" the beggar added.

But by then Bosch already felt the stinging pain in his back. The new wide-legged one attacked him with punches to the liver, as Bosch turned. He landed a kick that knocked the new guy somewhat out of his rhythm. It was enough for Bosch to lunge in turn. He was instantly as superior in this fight as he had been in the first, since the beggar moved exactly how his predecessor had. Bosch had the feeling he was fighting the same opponent.

The outcome soon became apparent, but it kept Bosch busy for a minute or two. Finally, he pushed the weary beggar to the ground with a burst of strength, in order to deliver one last blow.

...which, however, came to nothing. The loser, who had just now seemed so weak, rolled between Bosch's legs, back into the courtyard.

His counterpart abandoned his post and ran toward Bosch, who understood quickly and took to his heels—toward the second courtyard. He had neither the desire nor sufficient breath for another round of this pair fight. His pursuer, however, was much more nimble on his feet, leapt while running and caught Bosch by the legs. They fell flat together, no more than three feet from the end of the passage.

"Not so fast," the beggar admonished. He clung to Bosch's ankle. Why didn't he let go and try to harm him while he was still on the cobblestones?

The answer seemed too simple to be true. What if the beggar couldn't do otherwise? What if he didn't have time for another attack because he wasn't allowed to enter the second courtyard?

It hurt Bosch too much on his ankles, which were held with an iron grip, for him to be able to keep his thoughts together. But he reacted with a reflex, turning on his back, erecting his upper body, towards his feet, and hitting the beggar on the head with his fist. The beggar then let go of Bosch's ankles for a moment, more from shock than from pain.

That was all he needed. Bosch did not use the opportunity for another attack, but rushed forward, out of the gateway into the second courtyard.

He heard himself gasp loudly. The good thing about this was that it allowed him to slowly regain his breath—without falling victim again to back kicks, punches or lever throws. He went into a cross-legged position to look back into the passage.

The two beggars were kneeling there, the last pursuer no more than six feet from him, the other by the other archway. Neither of them made any move to pursue Bosch further.

"You have passed him," said the beggar directly in front of Bosch.

"...And him, too," shouted the other from further behind.

And with that, they both sank backward into their gymnastic stances and slowly rolled back to their posts on the walls.

He was not alone in the second courtyard—yet again. When Bosch saw the lanky little figure, he realized he was deluding himself. He couldn't just march right up to Michael and request the last stand. Michael had gone into hiding. He was avoiding him or counting on his minions to weaken Bosch. Bosch would have done so himself. ...if he were the the weaker one.

The figurine had disguised itself. It wore a pointed felt hat with a light brim. Together with the cloth that covered its face, it had a medieval look. Or like something out of a play.

The rest of the person didn't seem worth mentioning. Everything about it was in dark, grimy tones. No coat, though, for a change. That's why one could see how narrow the shoulders sat below the chin. From behind, the edges of a backpack overhung the shoulders by a few inches.

It stood in the middle of the yard, the figurine, not moving. It was leaning on a long wooden pole.

Bosch slowly got to his feet. He felt the scrutinizing gaze coming at him from under the felt hat. And he wondered whether he should take initiative and approach the figurine. After all, it was but a mite. It could not possibly intend to stop Bosch from passing in a similarly rabid manner as the two rolling beggars had tried to.

He decided against it. Something about the fragility of this waiting person didn't sit right with him. So he just walked toward the gate.

There were two knocks. The figurine took its staff and struck the stone with it. Bosch ignored it. He didn't want to have to fight again. It would only slow him down. So he couldn't see what the figurine was doing in his back. It reached over its shoulder into the backpack and pulled out a lasso of some sort. The rope was spindly.

In the air above the felt hat, there was an instantaneous whirring of a piercing sound. Bosch heard it, but he was unable to react. The whirring broke off and he found himself entangled. The lasso fell to his waist, where it tightened as if by magic.

Bosch uttered an inarticulate curse of protest, while the manikin not only held the noose tight quickly, but also pulled Bosch toward him. He succeeded not least because Bosch did not quite know what happened to him. Only when he understood why he was stumbling backwards did he put an end to it. He braced himself against the pulling, so that the two unequal fighters briefly looked as if they were tugging. Then Bosch's body weight won out against the deadlock. He leaned backward, toward the next archway. The little one had no other choice but to reluctantly scamper along with its feet, because it couldn't hold Bosch.

However, it didn't even try for long, but gave in. The tension was released from the rope, so Bosch suddenly pushed his legs into nothing and promptly fell down once again. The figurine didn't stop there, but accelerated into a run with its end of the lasso in its hand—past Bosch and right towards the side wall of the cross building. With a feather-light leap, it bounded forward against the wall, feet first. It was so nimble that it continued to run diagonally along the wall for a few steps before pushing off again as swift as an arrow: Pike roll, leap forward, already the rope was taut again, as if it had to snap.

Bosch saw stars as the force of the lasso grabbed him and just like that, dragged him several feet across the courtyard pavement. It took him a moment to shake it off and get the attacker back into his view.

The figurine stood completely relaxed again in the center of the courtyard, its chin resting on its staff, which it held with one hand. The other held the lasso. Bosch now took the precaution of not letting him out of his sight while he tried to loosen the rope around his belly. With some effort he managed to do so. The figurine did not lose its apparent calm as Bosch climbed out of the sling.

In the silence that now ensued, it was like a gun duel, only without guns. As if waiting for a signal, they stood motionless, each eager for the other to flinch. Bosch flinched first. Against every instinct he had, he did not charge at this little upstart who dared to defy him. No, he turned nimbly on his heel and sought his salvation in escaping through the gate. He trusted that this guard also had his very own post in Michael's courts. That it would not follow him.

Bosch heard the whirring again. This time he knew what it meant. Still, he could not escape it. He only managed to sense the lasso behind him in flight and mindlessly raised an arm above his head in defense. At that point he ran into the gateway to the third courtyard.

The wrist that his lasso had found was enough for the figurine. The noose cut into Bosch's flesh like a handcuff. He did not find himself on the

ground, however, but scampered unmolested through the passage. Behind him, the figurine ran with him instead of fighting his captive. When it reached the entrance gate to the passage itself, it threw the lasso up into the air, where it fell over a load beam and back into the hands of the figurine.

Then it stopped.

Bosch's wrist remained where it was, while the rest of his body continued to surge forward. This led to an incongruity that manifested itself in tearing pain. Bosch cried out. He lost his footing.

"Bloody....," he gasped.

The rope ran from his hand for three, four yards up to the gable of the gate at the beginning of the tunnel. From the beam it hung down dead straight. The little one looked like a undersized monk in the wrong outfit, who was about to ring his tower bell.

Bosch had an idea. He shook the pain out of his shoulder, grabbed the rope with both hands and pulled it towards him with all his might. The figurine immediately lost its grip, but did not let go of the end of the lasso. And so, with a jerk, it suddenly floated a good distance above the ground.

"Got you!" Bosch triumphantly said aloud. This was even easier than he had thought! He once again put all his weight into another rope pull. The fibers of the lasso crackled ominously, but patiently conveyed their load further upward. Now the figurine was already hanging three feet high, in the middle of the archway. It would not let go.

One more pull!

A satisfied grin crept onto Bosch's red face. If the little one let go, Bosch could cover the remaining distance through the gateway in a few steps—his rival wouldn't stand a chance. And if he wouldn't let go, Bosch would just hoist him up until his fingers had to go between the beam and the rope. It came down to the same thing.

One more pull!

He had outsmarted the opponent, Bosch was sure. But he could hardly believe his eyes when the figurine turned upside down on the rope

so that its legs stuck up in the air. Bosch pulled on unperturbed, but with the next jerk the rotated little one supported itself with its feet against the archway, built up momentum, and pushed itself downward.

Bosch lost control of the rope and his body again. The figurine landed freed and with a somersault on its feet. It did not linger, but now for its part pulled Bosch across the tunnel, even up into the air under the beam.

Then it dropped him.

Bosch had finally had enough. He no longer cared about the noose on his hand. Instead, he now lunged at the adversary. By brute force, then, if it wouldn't let go of him!

He slashed at it, kicked at it, but never once got his hands on it. Bosch punched holes in the air while the figurine ducked out from under him without a sound or effort. It literally danced around Bosch. The longer he tried to hit it, the more it seemed to him as if this opponent was simply playing with him. It didn't even try to put him out of action itself. The figurine only did anything at all when Bosch prepared to leave the court.

Because, conversely, it could not defeat him either! A distraction to gain time, Bosch now concluded. All he needed to do was not to play along. He had fallen into the trap of wanting to take the straight path.

Time to surprise the little fellow!

The passage into the third courtyard was on the same courtyard side as the previous one. The cross building towered high above it, or what was left of it. The house looked even more destroyed than its counterpart in the first courtyard. The entire left half had collapsed to its foundations. Remnants of walls and bricks protruded shoulder-high from the ruin, like the teeth of a saw blade.

Bosch feigned a swinging punch that he did not intend to land. As expected, the figurine ducked under it. Bosch used this moment to turn and flee—this time into the rubble of the destroyed half of the house, not toward the archway. He jumped onto a ledge of the wall, from where he used his hands and feet to climb onto the plateau of the pile of rubble.

To his amazement, the figurine did not pursue him. It only walked slowly in his direction. So Bosch decided to devote himself to the jagged parcours of stone, wood and metal that lay ahead of him. It was only ten or fifteen yards at the most to the next courtyard, but everywhere there were remnants of walls in the way or downright holes in the debris. Bosch carefully put one step in front of the other to find a path where he would not have to climb.

Suddenly, a lance poked up from the hole ahead of him. It reached up to Bosch's stomach. If he had taken another step forward, he would have been impaled by the thing.

A filthy old man squatted in the hole. The lance he had extended upward was an iron rod with a kitchen knife attached to the end. Bosch was able to examine it more closely than he would have liked. The edge looked crooked and sharpened askew, with little care. But it sure looked sharp. Bosch grabbed the shaft of the lance below the blade, just to move it aside so he could move on.

Then more flashing weapons were raised from all the other holes. Pointed lances also emerged from behind scattered wall remains. Around Bosch, the jagged rubble plateau became a populated field from which grew axes, knives, filed iron bars, long shards and nail clubs. From their hiding places below the surface, grim eyes of at least two dozen beggars peered at Bosch. At least he assumed they were beggars. There were children, men, women among them, young and old. In any case, Michael had a small army hidden here for his protection, Bosch thought.

Behind him, the figurine had meanwhile also climbed onto the pile of rubble. It waited in its preferred relaxation position with its chin on its staff until Bosch turned to face it. Then it cocked its head to the side questioningly and gestured back into the courtyard with an open palm.

It was an invitation to continue one-on-one, back in the courtyard.

Bosch didn't want to. He turned his attention back to the ruined landscape of bricks and hidden beggars before him. There had to be a way

they could not slash him! To test it out, Bosch indicated a step sideways, whereupon a hand with a pointed pole immediately reached for him. It missed Bosch, however, because he changed his mind at the last second and swung around. He found a narrow ridge that had been a wall before the building collapsed. Bosch crept along there as it rattled around him in confusion. Weapons were jabbed, hands switched, as if on some secret order that no one needed to give.

He didn't make it further than a yard. Then a butcher knife sliced across his thigh as he ducked a broken glass bottle thrown at him. Bosch cried out and reached for the wound. It was already soaking his pants red.

This wouldn't work. Bosch knew it even as he looked at his injury in disbelief. It hurt, but not as much as the miserable prospect he now faced. He stopped where he was. The hiders in their holes apparently tolerated that. They did not poke at him again. No blows, no sneaky throws. As long as he didn't move forward, they wouldn't mess with him either. Bosch turned back to the figurine.

There it stood. Just as before. Once it had Bosch's attention, it lifted its chin from the staff to nip the long stick between its back and backpack with a nimble twist. It brought out its lasso again. Bosch instinctively went to his knees to avoid being caught again, but his concern was unfounded: The figurine just held the lasso out to Bosch, for a moment. Then it tossed the rope carelessly onto the rubble at his feet and stood with its arms crossed. It looked Bosch in the eye challengingly.

Because that's what it was. A challenge. The figurine cocked its head questioningly to one side once again. Then it opened its palms upward, as if to tell Bosch that it was now his move. It walked silently backwards down the rubble wall into the courtyard again.

The invitation had been renewed.

Bosch accepted it. The fact that the figurine had simply thrown away the lasso was a bad sign. Bosch had been kept quite busy with it—and now the little one just put it down like an old toy? As if it didn't need it after all?

Bosch carefully tiptoed back along the path he had taken. The army of holes welcomed this. They left Bosch alone until he made his way back to the edge. From here, Bosch saw the figurine walk calmly to the middle of the courtyard. It had brought out its staff and was twirling it expertly between its fingers.

Bosch suspected that he should rather not become acquainted with the staff. If the figurine was half as good with it as with the lasso, he might not be able to leave the courtyard. The figurine had probably saved up this weapon, like a bonus for their encounter!

Enough of that! Bosch reached out in a wide, sweeping motion for the lasso that the figurine had so carelessly left behind. Then he jumped down onto the pavement with a thud that caused the little one to startle. Its eyes went wide so that Bosch could see the surprise in them even from a distance. He raised his arm, lasso and all, high above his head. Immediately the rope began to float in the air in a flawless circle.

Bosch didn't give the figurine time to think about its mistake, but let the noose fly across the courtyard. The figurine tried to save itself by jumping to the side, but realized that Bosch had expected it to do just that. It fell to the pavement with its own lasso around its head.

Bosch tightened the noose and immediately dragged his prey towards him. The figurine got back on its feet, but did not have the strength to resist the pull. And already Bosch held it with both hands by its collar.

"Did you think," he said grimly, "that you were the only one who could pull off a carnival trick?"

A single blow, into which Bosch put all his accumulated rage, felled the figurine. It could not return a single word.

Bosch left it in the dust. He threw away the lasso, then limped unchallenged to the gate of the passage into the third courtyard.

And through it.

"Eeew! Now look at you..."

The voice indicated to Bosch that someone had seen him, even before he understood what this place beyond the passage was.

"Here, my boy," the voice called. "Over here!"

There was no longer a courtyard before Bosch, but chaos. There was no further rear building, only piled-up junk as well as the rubble he had already seen from above. Somewhere under the tons of stone, tin and smashed furniture might still be the pavement of the third courtyard, but here nothing reminded him of the ordinary cascade of houses. To the left and to the right there were still the back sides of the other houses and their yards. Only out to the rear there was nothing. Except, very far away, a dark shadow lay over the junkyard. Another building.

Now Bosch saw from where the voice came. Up ahead, there was a kind of shelter, like a tent made of stacked metal parts. In front of it, an old woman was squatting by a small fire over which she had hung a kettle.

"What's the matter?" she asked, "are you too busy to sit down? Are you looking for the next person to beat up?"

Bosch shook his head.

"I'm looking for Michael," he replied, panting with effort.

"Oh, is that right?"

It was amused mockery. The old woman smiled.

"Who would have thought!"

Bosch eyed the woman and her fireplace. He hobbled over to her.

"Go ahead. Sit down," she said.

It didn't take much persuasion for Bosch to accept the offer. He was tired and slumped as he squatted down.

"This is a real mess, don't you think?"

"Huh? What?"

"Your leg?"

Bosch looked down at himself. His pants looked practically bicolored. On the leg that had received the cut, the fabric was soaked reddish brown through and through.

"We'll have that fixed in no time," the old woman said.

She leaned forward cross-legged so she could grab Bosch's pants. With a single vigorous tug, she had torn the fabric off above the wound and split it in half. Now she held Bosch's halved pant leg in her hands.

"My goodness!" she said as she looked at the sodden fabric.

Then she tossed it over her shoulder and the shelter out of sight. She retrieved a clear bottle from a bag that lay on the ground beside her. As she unscrewed it, the acrid smell rose to Bosch's nose.

"Give me that!" he demanded.

The old woman pretended not to hear him. She didn't give him the bottle, but dumped a big gush of it over the wound.

Bosch didn't even flinch.

"Give me that!" he repeated calmly, pointing with a trembling hand to the bottle which was held aloft by the perplexed old woman.

"You are indeed strange," she murmured, "...I made some tea especially for you, here smell..."

She pointed to the kettle. And while Bosch looked at the dark, steaming contents, the old woman rummaged a cup out of her bag.

"I don't want your tea. The bottle will do!"

"You shouldn't refuse it, my boy. It's good for you!"

Bosch laughed.

"More like you want to poison me with it," he countered. "But I won't be stopped! This coward will not escape me!"

"Why would I want to poison you?"

"Why? Are you not with Michael, like the rest?"

"Yes, I am," the old woman confirmed. "But I'm just offering you tea. Look, your wound! It's not bleeding anymore."

That was true. Bosch looked at the spot, which had been washed clean by the contents of the bottle. The bleeding had stopped.

"And what's in the tea?" he asked skeptically.

"What a stupid question!" the old woman feigned being offended.

"Tea is tea! Now stop fussing and drink it. Or don't! The choice is yours."

Bosch considered this. He took his time, but without really questioning his thoughts. He merely wanted the old woman to think he was mulling over her offer.

Then he reached for the bottle as quickly as he could.

"Now, please!" the old woman complained.

She was still holding the bottle. Bosch had been too slow. The old woman kept her arm behind her back so Bosch couldn't reach the bottle.

"That's rude!"

"Do you have any idea who I am?" thundered Bosch angrily.

"You're someone who can't answer a simple question politely!" the old woman thundered back with surprising vehemence.

"No tea?"

"No!"

She brought out her arm and handed Bosch the bottle. He said nothing, placed it on his mouth, and took a few sips. The burning in his throat licked up his neck in a very familiar manner.

"Eeew...," commented the old woman.

"What?" asked Bosch out of breath after he downed it. "Speak!"

"You should have taken the tea, is all. It's really good! Has restored everyone's strength yet."

"I've got plenty of strength," Bosch chimed in before going for another draught that ran the bottle low.

"Didn't look like it earlier," the old woman couldn't help herself.

Bosch stood up so he could look down at the woman by the fire.

"You haven't seen me fight yet!"

"Oh, but I have."

"I don't mean with fists and not against these mortal lapdogs!"

"Neither do I..." the old woman replied.

Her eyes met Bosch's. It stopped him in his arrogance. Something in her eyes was considerably older still than her form so clearly marked by age.

"You are cherubim!" he blurted out. "All of you?"

"Your path lies that way," the old woman replied without answering the question. She pointed to a small ravine between walls of scrap metal.

"Why do you let yourselves be harnessed by an archangel?" continued Bosch. "Why do you serve Michael when you are immortal just like him?"

"I don't serve him."

"Then why do you squat here, in this wretched shell? And keep watch like a dog?"

"It's what I can do."

"Listen to you," Bosch urged, as he tossed the bottle carelessly to the side. "That's nonsensical talk!"

"You'll understand before the end. Your path lies that way!"

A second time she pointed to the ravine.

Bosch turned toward the narrow pass that seemed to lead between the junk walls. He started walking.

"How much farther does this go?" he asked back over his shoulder.

"This was the third courtyard," the old woman replied.

"How many are left?"

"You should have had that tea."

Bosch stopped.

"Why are you helping me?"

"Am I?"

The old woman turned away, took the small kettle from the fire, and poured the contents into the flames.

Bosch saw the smoke billowing and gave up trying to get answers from the old woman. He made his way down the ravine, which creaked ominously as he sought a hold with his hands among the scrap. Although he felt considerably better by now than he had before his short rest with the old woman, he was getting a little more dizzy with each step. The feeling reminded him of the afternoon at Luna Park when Mavi had had to steady him in the revolving house. Here it wasn't as bad and he could walk

through the gorge without help. There seemed to be no end to it, though. Bosch began to wonder if he was going in circles, although he didn't see a fork in the road anywhere. Nor was he led back to the entrance.

Just before he was about to stop and climb up the scrap to see where he was, a tinny canopy appeared over the ravine. Underneath, it was pitch black. Bosch didn't hesitate a second and went inside. The darkness had a bright exit. Only a few yards separated him from it.

On the other side, the junkyard ended. Here it looked like a real backyard again. Before Bosch, a strange structure towered up, maybe ten feet. It was not made of scrap like the large wasteland behind him, but of bricks laid in masonry. The sight was reminiscent of the prow of a ship, at least from where Bosch stood. The stone bow divided the further path across the yard into a left trail and a right trail.

Bosch chose the right trail. One seemed as good as the other. Both were littered with bricks, as if there had once been a construction site here that now lay forgotten. Here and there, serpentines had to be walked around the obstacles. That was not difficult. There was nothing that needed to be climbed, and Bosch could look at the structure leisurely.

Past the bow shape, the masonry continued for a few yards like a castle wall, because there was a wide slit in the bricks at the upper end, which was separated as if by battlements. Unlike a real castle wall, however, there was still a roof over the slit.

Bosch reached the end of the wall, which here terminated in a similar prow as at the beginning. The courtyard ended shortly behind it. Across it ran the back of a house wall. No windows, no doors, nothing. Just bare wall, many stories high.

It was evident that the other way, which Bosch had not chosen, also came to this same end: To the left of the prow, a similar path appeared. So it wasn't two trails at all, but a circular walk around the would-be castle wall without a castle. Nevertheless, Bosch didn't find himself at a dead end, because when he rounded the prow—or rather, the stern—he saw another

gateway in the far corner of the courtyard. This one, unlike the previous ones, just didn't lead straight ahead and thus deeper into the landscape of tenements, but at a right angle away from this row of courtyards.

This passage was not open. It was not just a large arch, but had a real door of massive planks. The rusty hinges had a lot to hold up. Some of the formerly bright green paint had not yet completely chipped off. The door looked like it had a strange disease that it was better not get too close to. Bosch did it anyway. He rattled the door.

The gate remained unimpressed by his physical strength, not least because of the heavy and equally rusty chain that was stuck between the planks. A thick lock held the ends together in the middle.

"Yep, jaa, that's it! That's where he has to go in," said a bleeping voice.

Bosch turned to find it, and spotted a man on top of the castle wall, close to the stern. The man was difficult to see because he remained in the shadow of the wide slit under the roof.

"In here?" asked Bosch. "Into the lock here?"

He pointed his fingers at the metallic device that hung from the chain.

"Yep."

"And who's 'he' that needs to go in there? A key?"

"Yep."

Bosch ran a hand through his face and hair before continuing.

"And this key, you have it, don't you?"

"Yep, jaa, that's right!"

Judging from his voice, the man was euphorically pleased with Bosch's apt analysis of the situation.

"Let's see it," Bosch demanded.

The man hopped somewhat out of the shadows to the far edge of the wall. He even leaned out into the air, seeking support with one arm on the nearest wall battlement. He was dressed entirely in a cherry-colored red. Nor did his attire appear quite as worn and battered as those of the other beggars Bosch had encountered up to this point. A weathered vest, but

clean tights which the man wore instead of proper pants. Even the shoes were of the same cherry red as the rest of the clothes.

"Isn't he polished?" the man asked. When he did so, his already feverish tone of voice rose to almost painful heights.

He held up a grotesquely large key. It was so large that it could well be a dummy, for ceremonial handovers perhaps, of mayors. But Bosch knew this was a real key just by looking at the equally oversized lock on the chain.

"I polish it! Three times a day, every day," the man added.

The key was really shiny. It flashed in the sun.

"May I have it for a moment, your key?" asked Bosch. And the answer didn't surprise him.

"I can't just hand that one over! What do you think!"

"That I can't go any further if you don't give me the key," Bosch explained. "But I have to go further. You know that too, don't you?"

"Yep."

"Spit it out, then! What do you want in return for giving me the key?"

The man put said key back into the breast pocket of his vest from which he had retrieved it. Half of it peeked out the top. Finally, the red man swung back into the shadows behind the slit as Bosch neared the wall.

"The watchword!"

"The watchword? I don't know any watchword," Bosch grumbled, by now standing at the base of the wall.

He looked up at the slit and, with one eye squinted shut and one eye open, assessed his chances. Too high! He could save himself the trouble of trying to jump.

"Nor can you know the watchword until I ask you my question," the hidden man explained. He couldn't help a suppressed giggle.

"Well then! What does the tea taste like?"

Bosch thought he had misheard. He took a few steps backward to put distance between himself and the stern of the wall, and to get a better look at the red man.

"Are you serious?"

"Yep, jaa, of course! What does it taste like?

"The old lady's tea?"

"Tell me that and for the watchword you get the key."

"I didn't drink the tea," Bosch explained.

"That's too bad, yep, that's too bad..."

Bosch cursed inwardly. He thought about what to do now, had an idea, discarded it and then all over again. Finally he started moving with angry steps. He paced restlessly along the left trail next to the wall, which he had not yet taken. In many a place it seemed to him as if chunks had fallen out of the otherwise immaculate wall. He examined them up close, where they unfortunately turned out to be too puny for him to find a foothold. And even where that worked, Bosch was left with nothing but smooth wall to grip with his fingers.

He reached the bow, still silently cursing to himself. Nowhere on this side had he seen a door or a ladder bracket. Nor was there one on the other side. He would have noticed that. How had the red man gotten up there in the first place?

"Watchword!" crowed the owner of the key from above, who had followed all the way.

"Wait, I'll be right back..." said Bosch.

As he hurried toward the exit of the junk canyon, the red one shouted warningly after him.

"You can't go back to her!"

"We'll see about that," Bosch growled under a heavy gasp. In fact, he was getting incredibly out of breath with each and every step. The dizziness that had set in before the passage through the ravine now overwhelmed him. Bosch sank to his knees, unable to enter the ravine even though it was within his grasp.

"I just...want...to ask her," Bosch stuttered, struggling for breath.

"You're here now," the red one said gently. "She won't be able to give

you an answer because you can't go back into her yard. You can't get out of any of them unless you find the next one."

"...Michael!" groaned Bosch in a daze.

"Come back," the red one coaxed. "It gets better here, believe me!"

Bosch slowly crawled back on all fours away from the passage in the scrap. Instantly, his condition improved. After a few yards, he was able to get back on his feet.

"Yep, jaa, that's right! Told you so!"

"What are you doing to me?" scolded Bosch.

"Me? You drank the stuff, not me!"

"The booze?"

The red man laughed out.

"Yep. 'booze,' if you want to call it that. Should have had the tea like she said! You'd be a lot better now—and you'd know the watchword, too!

Bosch picked up a brick lying in his path and hurled it at the red one on his wall.

He didn't hit him.

"I'm going to get every brick I can find, friend, and then I'm going to stack my way up to you real quick. You can still throw me the key down. Once I'm up there, I'll rip your arms and legs off!"

No answer came from above. Bosch didn't need it either. He immediately set about putting his words into action. The dizziness had subsided as quickly as it had befallen him, so that, full of energy, he picked up several bricks at once, carried them to the bow, and let them fall to the ground with a rocky clatter.

In the process, he did not pay attention to what was happening above him. The red one dropped a brick from above right on Bosch's head.

This brought him to the ground. Bosch lay sprawled and dazed.

"You build, yes, do that," it taunted feebly from above. "I have bricks, as well! And I'm good at aiming, too. Can't wait to see how you fall from higher up, yep."

Bosch wasn't bleeding. He rubbed his skull because it was buzzing. Slowly he rolled sideways and dragged himself to the wall below the bow.

The red one allowed him this breather. He threw nothing else, and he stopped talking. Everything went quiet.

"If I can't go back, but I can't go forward either," Bosch asked after a while, "am I supposed to stay here forever?"

"Forever? No, here is not 'forever,'" came the reply from far above Bosch, as if whispered by an unseen prompter.

"Besides, you simply have to tell me what the tea tastes like!"

Bosch mused.

"Jasmine?"

"No."

"Melissa?"

"No."

"Herbs?"

"No."

Bosch shook his head.

"All sorts of things are tea in hot water," he lamented. "How would I know what the old woman was brewing? It didn't smell like anything..."

"Are you sure?"

Something about the red man's question made Bosch prick up his ears. Was he sure the tea had smelled of nothing? Why did he say that? Bosch clutched his skull because he wanted to get rid of the dazed buzzing in it. He had to think the whole thing over again from the beginning. He didn't know how to name the taste because he hadn't tasted the brew. The old woman said it would do him good, but he hadn't cared. The fact that she had helped him with the cut on his leg had been help enough.

Bosch had completely forgotten about the cut by now. He interrupted his train of thought to check on the battered pant leg and the spot that had bled so much. Nothing! The cut was still clearly visible, but not bleeding. The pain was gone, too.

So she had made him anything but weaker. There probably wasn't any poison in the tea then either. Maybe it would have actually helped him even more? And if so, what kind of brew was it? Tea? Tea, like humans made it? What was it supposed to do to him?

It wasn't tea at all. Bosch was sure of it now. Just as this troupe of strange characters were not beggars, and he not a painter. None of them belonged in this world. Michael had said that he felt constricted by the language of the humans. If he felt that way, why should his guards here be better with words? Tea. Just a little word in the human language for the faded shadow of something heavenly....

"Watchword?" the red one asked, bored.

"Ambrosia!", Bosch heard himself say.

No answer from the red one. Bosch waited for one, but instead of the usual denial, only another pain hit his skull, though this time it was more shock than force that accounted for it.

Bosch reached for the spot where he had been hit. But at the same moment the key plopped from his head into his lap.

He did not trust it. That's why he turned the polished, hand-sized key over and over again before his face. Then he looked up to where he suspected the red man to be. But if he was still crouching above him, he had chosen to remain silent.

Bosch stood up and decided to let the red one be. He made his way past the bow by the shortest possible route, along the meandering trail to the rear of the wall and the locked gate in the corner of the courtyard.

The key fit. Bosch heard a crack inside the lock as he opened it. The chain slipped through the shackle once it was no longer held back.

With some effort, Bosch managed to pull open the door. Behind it lay another courtyard passage, as he had suspected. He went in without hesitation, not before, however, in a final rush of anger, he had thrown the lock with all his might through a slit in the stern of the wall.

He thought he heard a faint cry.

The situation in the fifth courtyard needed no explanation. It was clear to Bosch that he wouldn't have a riddle to solve.

Before him lay a completely empty coal yard. Only the black welts of the pulverized briquettes revealed what had been the original purpose of the dreary square. Now there was no coal here. On three of the four sides, the same windowless house walls rose up into the air like those Bosch had seen in the fourth courtyard. In addition, the sun could no longer reach the ground through the shaft of high walls. The courtyard lay in a discolored shade, although it could only be midday at most.

The one front that looked different was to the right. A dark brown wall, without plaster. It was almost as high as two people stacked on top of each other. And it had neither gate nor door. This was all the more irritating because Bosch could not see any gateway on the other two walls of the courtyard either. The only one that existed was the one Bosch had just stepped through. The passage only led back, not further on.

If this courtyard had at least been the end of this ruinous odyssey, Bosch would not have been quite so surprised. But Michael was not here. He was all alone with his opponent.

It was the giant with the iron bar, whose eerie silhouette he had noticed during his first encounter with Michael in the courtyard. At that time he had not been able to see his face. But this would not be necessary to know that here was the same person. Such a body did not exist twice. And this although Bosch himself knew two giants of stature: Harstein, who was as wide and deep as two people, and Neiwolf, to whom a normal door went only to the neck.

The giant was like a combination of the two, as massive as Harstein, but even a head taller than the architect. Bosch took a few steps toward this enormous specimen, who stood expressionless in front of the brown wall. The giant could see the top edge almost at eye level. There wasn't much missing, maybe a half yard.

Bosch positioned himself at a safe distance from the giant. He had to crane his neck back to look the other in the face. Bosch estimated that he only reached up to the man's chest—just as the old woman with the tea had reached up to him.

"Where's Michael?" asked Bosch.

"Not far," replied the giant.

He had a soft voice that he didn't need to raise to fill the dark courtyard with it like warm water.

"But this is a dead end," Bosch declared, not satisfied with the answer.

The giant didn't see fit to say anything to that. He just stood in his spot, not taking his eyes off Bosch for a second.

"Or is it?" echoed Bosch. "Why would you stand guard here, you monster, when there's no way past you?" he asked.

"I can let you through," the giant said, unmoved by Bosch's questioning. "But only all of you."

"Well, look at me," Bosch replied.

He raised his arms in a manner like crooks prove to the constable that they are not carrying anything illegal.

"That's all there is of me. So?"

"No."

"What, 'no'?"

"You're not complete!"

Bosch tilted his head. He appeared to the giant like a plotting crow.

"I should know better than you whether I'm complete or not! What does that even mean?"

"Is this all that fell from the sky?" the giant asked, pointing his pumpkin-sized chin defiantly at Bosch's body.

"That's nothing but a shell!" echoed Bosch. "I've had hundreds!"

"But Sin and the Archfiend, they fell together..."

Bosch choked on a rebuttal.

"She's part of him," the giant continued calmly. "Satan gave birth to

her out of his head. You belong together. And alone you are not complete. When you are complete, I may let you pass."

"You can see that I am alone," he defended himself. "She is not with me. I don't know where she is!"

"She?" the giant repeated. He smiled at that.

"Then you can go no further."

Bosch shook his head in disgust. Then he became so agitated that he began to pace in circles without realizing it. And still he shook his head.

The giant had fought enough battles to know he had to prepare. He could positively feel Bosch's tense impatience. So he stooped, barely noticeably, in what looked like the bending of a log, and braced for impact.

Bosch delivered it. He did exactly what the giant had expected. In the midst of another offended round of his circular walk, Bosch swerved—like a moon being driven out of orbit by its own mass. With an outstretched fist, he leaped at his vastly larger opponent as if he could overcome him with a single blow.

He failed to do so and actually never expected such an easy end to their disagreement either. The giant intercepted his fist with his own hand. It was no bigger in it than an apple in a normal hand. Bosch felt the mighty paw enclosing everything, even up to his wrist. Perhaps the giant could crush Bosch's fist just like that, with a quick squeeze, if he wanted to. But he clearly didn't want to, because with the rest of his monstrous body he dodged the attack surprisingly nimbly. He merely used the steel grip of his hand to guide Bosch's trajectory, so that he landed softly next to him on the black courtyard floor again.

Then he let go of Bosch.

"Amazing," he said so deadpan and calm it was like a whisper. "You're not afraid at all..."

"Of you?" asked Bosch. He rubbed his hand in annoyance. "I have fought mightier than you, and all have regretted standing in my way. I'm not afraid of anything or anyone. You're just big, that's all."

The giant laughed in amusement.

Bosch tried another surprise attack. This time he rolled forward across the pavement, just as the two beggars had done in the very first court, abruptly leaping up below his opponent's belly and sending a heavy hook punch high into the giant's liver.

The latter felt it. Bosch could hear him groan, but could not rejoice at the effective hit. The giant grabbed him by the pants and jacket at the same moment, as if he were nothing but a garbage bag left in the house too long, and which he was reluctant to grab between his fingers. With a swift twist, he threw Bosch across the yard. Bosch thought he would fly, and in a way he did. He could feel the force of the giant's throw down to the last joint. He flew like a doll.

And came down on the ground as clumsily as a doll would, completely helpless, thrown away.

"Maybe it's not fear that I mean," the giant said as casually as if he had just thrown a newspaper into the corner rather than a man. "It's more that you really think you can beat me. Why do you think that?"

The giant seemed to expect Bosch to have survived the flight and fall sufficiently unscathed to continue chatting with him. Others would have broken their necks as a result of this incident—not to mention countless bones. But he was right in his assumption. Bosch straightened up, but now kept his distance. He kept a safe distance.

"No one can stop me. All the angels of Heaven were not enough. What difference are you supposed to make? I'll find a way. Michael knows I'm coming. You're just making me angrier, that's all!"

The giant listened. His face reflected thoughtfulness. Bosch knew nothing to make of it. He impatiently scrambled to his feet, tacitly searching for the next tactic he might use.

"I think I understand better now why I'm here," the giant finally explained himself. "Your vanity is as boundless as they say. And I believe you! You will not stop attacking me until I put an end to it."

He turned away from Bosch, presenting his enormous back. Bosch couldn't see what he was tampering with, but the giant retrieved something from the ledge between the base of the wall and the courtyard floor. Then, turning around with it, Bosch recognized the iron bar the giant had already threatened him with the other day from out of the shadows. He took it in both hands, holding it out in front of him like a broomstick.

"Do you understand that I will not let you pass if Sin remains without the Adversary? That I need both of you?"

"Yes," Bosch growled.

The giant nodded in genuine satisfaction.

"That's important. Good!" he said. "Then there's no point in waiting any longer. If you can't bring the other part here, you're just wasting your time and mine. So I'll take it from you now. It's not going to hurt. I'll just make two parts out of you, real quick..."

Bosch knew the giant meant every word. He made a leap sideways, then back, moving his feet quickly without getting any closer to the giant. Nor could he put any more distance between himself and the iron bar that the giant now circled in his fingers like a magic wand.

The giant followed each feint. But Bosch gained no advantage through it. He saw no gap to slip through, no lost balance to exploit. The giant moved as if he could read his mind or as if he had seen his every move a million times before. There was no way out. And already the giant was lunging for the throw, the pole raised high in his hand over his shoulder. Bosch looked straight at the end.

It would pierce him like a sheet of paper if it hit him. And the giant radiated an eerie calm that fed Bosch's doubts that this thrower had ever missed his target.

He stopped, as if in a state of shock.

Then, with a distorted bark, the giant fell abruptly to his left knee. Behind him appeared Amelia, the leg with which she had folded the back of the giant's knee, still outstretched from the kick.

Bosch could not believe his eyes.

Amelia repeated her attack on the other leg. She took only one step to run up, then rammed the sole of her foot from behind against the leg of the giant, who now finally came to his knees. He had to lower the raised iron bar to support himself with his hands.

Amelia now established some distance from the giant. Bosch, for his part, gave the stricken man a wide berth and stood at Amelia's side. But when the giant rose again, he only smiled. He did not say a word.

"How did you get here?" asked Bosch Amelia through his teeth.

"Not now!" she urged him.

The giant picked up his iron bar, then flew—half-jumping, half-running—past Bosch and Amelia. He struck out and let the iron bar drive into the rear wall like a wrecking ball. The wall immediately yielded to the brute force. Where the bar broke through the bricked stones, the whole construction collapsed like a play tower of wooden blocks. The noise of the bricks plummeting fled up the walls of the courtyard shaft.

Both Amelia and Bosch backed away as the wall crumbled. The giant disappeared for a moment in the rising dust cloud of mortar and coal powder. Once the dust settled a bit, he was visible again. He looked at the hole he had created. With the end of his unbroken pole, he brought down a few more overhanging bricks until he was satisfied with the size of the breach. Then he turned to Amelia and Bosch.

"All of you is here now," he said. "You are complete. You may pass."

Amelia took Bosch by the hand before he could say a single word. She led him to the hole, under the watchful eye of the giant. She climbed through first. Bosch followed her. As soon as they were on the other side, the giant began to push together with his hands and feet the rubble he had just produced by his demolition. In no time at all, he formed a calf-high base from the stones and fragments, on which he randomly piled stones. He couldn't do masonry, but he didn't need to, given the pounding blows with which he pressed the bricks into place.

"Are you going to wall us in?" asked Bosch, aghast.

The giant smiled through the hole.

"You are to be undisturbed for what is to come."

"Where is Michael? You said he's not far."

"Oh, just through there and you've found him," the giant replied. He pointed through the hole to the right, where the narrow passage Amelia and Bosch found themselves in ended in a bright gateway.

Both went a little deeper into the passage. Behind them, one stone laying sound followed the next. The giant continued to work stoically.

"I don't like this," Amelia said.

"Wait here," Bosch whispered.

He continued alone down the corridor, which on the undamaged side had the same kind of wall as a boundary as the one behind which the coal yard lay. When Bosch spread his arms, he could touch both walls. It was more of a tube than a yard, much narrower than it was wide, for it was a good fifty yards to the bright passage.

What followed now, Bosch knew well enough. He had already felt it today, this overpowering inertia that slowed him down with every yard. His steps became slower and heavier, just as they had when he had failed in his attempt to get back to the old woman in the third courtyard. He nevertheless tried to reach the passage, but no matter how hard he struggled, five or six yards from his target he seemed to be literally stuck in space. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his face turned red with exertion as he tried to take one more step. He even leaned forward with his upper body, so that he should have fallen on his nose....

Nothing. He couldn't go further. When he had nothing more to counter the resistance with, he was pushed back a few steps as if by an invisible gust of wind. Bosch had to collect himself and find a firm footing.

A shadow wandered through the bright light behind the passage.

"Hey!" roared Bosch at the top of his lungs, but received no response.

Without taking his eyes off the passageway, Bosch walked backwards.

Amelia met him halfway. She gently put her hands in his back to make him stop.

"Is someone there?" she asked.

"It's him, I know it is!" said Bosch. "Michael! But I can't get through."

Then he eased away from the doorway and looked at Amelia.

"You try it!"

She shook her head.

"I can't go through either. I can't go any further at all."

"Why? What are you talking about?"

Bosch didn't understand.

"Look to the floor...!"

Bosch had missed the letters because he had only been paying attention to the exit. Amelia, however, hadn't. She had already read what was written there in large, snow-white letters made of chalk:

Come to me as you were
a shining star
and sinner
My brother, my sister
do not deny yourself
One you are!

Bosch read the words again and again without finding any sense in them. Instead, he noticed that it had fallen completely quiet. Something was missing. The clacking of the stones had stopped. Bosch went back to the hole, only to see that there was no longer a hole. It was now filled up with loose bricks, some of them splintered. The giant had done a great job.

"Another vain riddle," Bosch said to Amelia. "to occupy my mind."

"No, I know what it means."

Amelia didn't move. She stared at the chalk as if she could see more in it than the rough, quickly drawn lines. Bosch walked over to her.

"What do you mean?"

"We can't both pass through..."

"You're wrong. The giant wouldn't let me pass without you. Because you came, he made the hole. You must be here!"

"Here, yes, but no further."

"You haven't even tried yet," Bosch admonished.

"Tell me what you saw when you stepped into the yard earlier!"

"The giant."

"And nothing else, right?"

"The courtyard was empty."

"I wasn't there?"

"You tell me!"

She took his head between her hands, as she always did when she wanted to speak to his conscience with dead seriousness.

"No, I wasn't! He provoked you into summoning me. And it worked. You called me here. I'm always where you are. I am your Sin! When you abandoned God in your heart, I grew out of you. I am a part of you!"

"I know it," Bosch stammered. "I do know..."

"Then you know what the scrawl means, too!"

Amelia held his head tightly. She teared up, but there was unwavering conviction in her voice. He tried to escape her grasp rather than answer her.

"We are not two, do you hear?" continued Amelia. "You are destined to fight the final battle with Michael. Commander against commander, just as you did then. Therefore, you must go through there as the angel you were. As the one whom the multitudes followed blindly. Who shone as brightly as no one else..."

Her words faltered in fear.

"You left me behind in the ranks so that nothing would happen to me. And with that, a part of you was missing. You won't be able to go any further if you keep hiding me. I'm not yours. I am you. You can't leave your Sin in this courtyard.

"But then where are you going?"

"Nowhere," she whispered, "Stand by me. That's all. Accept your Sin!"

"I do! I won't let them look down on you. When I have defeated Michael, you will reign by my side. Even if it's not the Heaven we deserve. Just this place and its people, then!"

"No," Amelia insisted.

She lost the last vestige of color in her face. That pale, hollow expression made Bosch fear for her.

"That's not what accepting me means," she said. "Then it would still be you, and me beside. The outcast ruler, wronged. And next to it his Sin, as if I had nothing to do with you. You must accept it!"

"What do you want me to do? What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not something you can point to when God is looking for someone to blame. You must admit that you have sinned. You, yourself..."

Bosch processed that. He would have made any other person pay dearly for such an insult at that moment. He was fuming. But Amelia was the last person who would play games with him. She meant what she said. She believed it. And her wan expression proved that she was willing to give whatever it took to convince Bosch.

Bosch turned away from her. He turned to face the bright doorway head-on and bellowed at the top of his lungs.

"It was me! I've sinned! I don't care! I'm to blame for this war!"

No answer came back. Not a sound was heard.

"There, I said it," Bosch murmured to Amelia.

"You have to believe it, ...not just say it."

"Is it not enough that I humble myself here without the enemy even looking me in the face? The great, infallible archangel Michael! He is hiding. Just like back then! Just because I had the courage to oppose blind obedience, shall I be loved less? Is this supposed to be my Sin? Honesty?"

Amelia lowered her head. She listened to Bosch, but could no longer look him in the eye as she did so.

"I am not too proud to tell him what he wants to hear in his stupid, faithful delusion! It is for you that I do this! But it's not the truth nonetheless. Michael can't take the truth away from me. Not even his Messiah, no one! I know that I wanted only the best for us—for all of us..."

"...And that's why we're standing here," Amelia interrupted. "You and I, as if we were two beings. And that's wrong!"

Bosch shook his head, uncomprehending.

"Listen to us!" continued Amelia. "You talk to me, and you talk yourself into a frenzy about the injustice that's being done to you. And I'm listening. We argue!"

"So?" blubbered Bosch, exasperated.

"There is no 'we.' There's just one. A human shell. An eternal life..."

Amelia fell around Bosch's neck. He caught her embrace, though he was far too upset to want to hold her. She gave him no choice, however, and within seconds all resistance drained from his limbs.

They sank to the floor, arm in arm.

And so they sat still for a while, Bosch leaning back against the wall. Amelia buried her face in his chest.

"Had you ever wondered what it would be like, back then, when you win?" she finally asked, leaning her head against Bosch's.

"In Heaven?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "If it were not God on the throne, but you."

"I would look with you over a sea of free and happy gods like us."

"With me? Then you would be divided. Unlike them. It couldn’t be!"

"Why do you call it divided when they talk about a trinity up there in Heaven and worship Him for giving birth to a Son of Himself?"

"Because I'm not a god," Amelia whispered. "I am the part of you that your loving, eternal soul could not contain because you were jealous of the Messiah. With envy and with rage, with injustice, with grief, with thirst for vengeance! Tell me, did the heavenly hosts love you so much for that—or for Lucifer's radiant, unconditional love, which made you stand out?"

Bosch answered by remaining silent. Amelia waited before taking it with a nod as confirmation of her argument.

"The battle for Heaven was lost by Satan and the Sin he committed. Not the archangel they worshipped as Lucifer. This is what the chalk is trying to say: do not hide behind me, because if you do, you will be less than you really are. You are hiding behind yourself unless you let me go. And I am hiding behind you. Do you want to hide, is that what you want?"

"I'm not hiding from anyone..." now Bosch whispered, just as softly and subdued as Amelia.

"Then it's time you stopped talking to yourself. Look at me!"

She lifted her head slightly from his chest. He looked down into her eyes, as he had done time and again since their dance together at the Felicita —and never could endure it for long. This time, the ominous unease he hadn't been able to put into words before disappeared.

"That's it," Amelia whispered.

Bosch wiped tears from her cheeks as his own welled up in his eyes.

"When we look at each other, the world is at rest from you," Amelia said. "Then you're busy with yourself, with your pain, ...through me. Do you want the world to be at rest from you?"

Bosch shook his head.

"I know," Amelia said, trying to smile.

She succeeded only barely. Bosch was hurting at the sight, and he pressed Amelia's head tightly against his chest again. He kissed her hair, again and again. He struggled for words that wouldn't come.

"Shhh....," Amelia admonished.

She curled up in Bosch's lap. He felt her rapid breathing through his wet shirt. Both hands dug into her hair, and Bosch began to shake under the uncontrollable tremors his sobbing head was causing.

They closed their eyes at the same moment.

15. Chalk

Michael sat on a pile of rubble that jutted like a lone molehill from the center of the wide, sunlit courtyard. It was the last one. All around were high walls, behind which other compounds could be found.

This courtyard here was swept clean and completely empty.

Above Michael, the column hung motionless in the air, many feet above the highest roof.

No other entrance or exit anywhere, except the narrow passage to the tube out of which Bosch now stepped.

When Michael saw him, he stopped playing with the thick chalk pencil he was holding. He jumped up immediately, even before Bosch had adjusted to the sudden brightness and spotted him.

"You made it!" exclaimed Michael. "Finally..."

Bosch searched in disorientation for the source of the voice. He could only dimly make out Michael. His eyes felt sore, not because of the brightness, but because of the tears that still ran down his face in streams. He tried to wipe them away with frantic movements of both backs of his hands, and his confusion right along with them. His body was tingling from head to toe. His skin felt at once taut to the breaking point and as if it were no longer his. He stumbled again and again as he advanced toward Michael with his arms outstretched.

He caught him by the shoulders, so that they stood arm in arm.

"Let me look at you," Michael said.

Bosch recoiled in disgust. Hatred coursed through him as if floodgates had been opened in his veins. He became instantly more alert than before. All his senses sharpened.

"Yes, it is you!" said Michael reverently, almost amazed.

"Are you mocking me?" asked Bosch.

He was startled by his own voice. It sounded different. It was undoubtedly his, but it resonated with a fuller tone in his ears, in the bones of his skull. Lighter.

"You are so beautiful!" said Michael. "Your shell can't hide it anymore. I see the friend, the companion I haven't been allowed to see for so long."

"You've seen me often enough," Bosch said impassively. "And slapped me in the face. What did you not see then? What?"

"That was just a part of you...," Michael replied. "And the ungodly one at that. But now it's done. You have your soul again. You are one, and it can begin!"

"You'll pay for this!" hissed Bosch.

"What?"

"You never created anything, Michael! She was my child, sprung from me! You had no right to take her from me!"

Michael took a step back. He raised his arms as if to apologize. But he did not apologize.

"I didn't take anything from you."

"You still have the chalk in your hand with which you smeared those poisoned words," Bosch yelled at him. With one finger, he pointed threateningly at Michael's hand.

"I gave you the truth, don't you see?" the archangel defended himself. "You had to face your own history..."

"All talk!" interrupted Bosch. "You're afraid of me. You wanted me here alone because you fear us. But you didn't have to play this game for that! Why did I have to bring her here in the first place? So that I could lose her under your eyes? Is that how you want to break me? Is that it?"

Michael didn't answer right away. Surprise spread across his face.

"You think you lost your Sin in there?" he asked, glancing toward the entrance to the tube.

Bosch could barely restrain himself.

"This is pathetic," he cursed, "pretending to be innocent..."

"You think," Michael continued gently, "that it was the countess? And you, the painter, that she was waiting for you? Her and the other fallen?"

He shook his head slowly, like a father feeling horrified for his child, rather than scolding him for a mistake in thinking.

"Now you are together! Now the one we had the pleasure of calling Lucifer, full of love, stands before me! But she was the first angel, not the painter. She led you, she fought me in Heaven until we had to lower our swords before each other as equals..."

"She is Sin!" protested Bosch. "I am the first angel!"

"You are now, yes..."

"Now? Have you lost your mind?"

"It was the other way around..."

Bosch was at a loss for words. He only laughed uproariously.

"You don't believe me," Michael stated.

"What, this fairy tale? You're just trying to confuse me with your traps and all these tricks. I don't believe a word you say! You've been looking for me at the mansion, lying in wait for me in the woods for nights on end to test my strength."

"I did," Michael admitted.

"And the other day, over there in that courtyard, when you lured me here, you recognized me, not her."

"But you are her," Michael interjected. "Don't you understand? You were two parts of the same great soul. What difference does it make which part was the Sin in you? It doesn't make any difference..."

"It makes a difference because you're just spewing poison! But I see through that! I remember everything that has happened to me since the fall from eternity. And Dagon told me how he and my generals have been looking for me for the last few years. If it weren't for Sin, they still might not have found me—which I'm sure you'd prefer over seeing me here."

"Dagon told you how he found his way back, and shed mortality?"

"All of it, everything!"

Michael nodded absently. Then he continued, as if it was difficult for him to untangle Bosch's thoughts.

"Each of you has your own story like this, full of pain and stupor..."

"He made sure of that!" Bosch pointed his hand high in the air. "It was not enough for your puppet master that we were cast out of the Heaven we had populated before it existed. No, he also had to cram us into these ever-decaying human bodies as punishment until we would find our way back to ourselves through the most bizarre and humiliating incidents."

"How is hers?" asked Michael, unperturbed.

"How's what?"

"Her story! Dagon told you his, right? Then tell me about hers, about Sin's way out of the mist that has shrouded you all."

Bosch was silent for a moment, longer than he would have liked.

"She didn't tell me her story," he finally confessed. "We didn't have time to talk about it. And she's not an angel like we are."

"Perhaps..., but then again, maybe it's because she didn't have her own story yet, because hers only took place today. Here in these courtyards..."

Bosch gasped, equal parts angry and unsettled.

"And your own?" continued Michael. "After all you've heard about Dagon's ordeal, do you really think that living in this forest for a summer would have done the trick? That Abdiel just told you our past and you suddenly believed it?"

"There's more!" argued Bosch, defending himself.

"Oh is there, a few ominous encounters perhaps? No, if you care so much about who was who, at least don't lie to yourself! Who is Sin? The woman who brought together all the fallen angels in this town without knowing what was driving her so? Or the vain painter who has not been at home in any place in the world and has drifted wherever people worshipped him? Who is my soul mate? The soiled and yet so radiant star,

whom I was no longer allowed to call Lucifer? The woman who straight away relinquished this shadow of her true greatness in order to bring us together here? Or the man who had Beelzebub killed out of jealousy, his closest and most beloved frie..."

Bosch lunged at Michael with a bloodcurdling scream before he could even finish his sentence. He leaped at his throat almost from a standing start, pulled Oxen-Otto's knife from his pocket and rammed it up to the shaft between Michael's ribs.

The archangel emitted a single, muffled gasp of air before the strength of his arms and legs left him.

Bosch was pulled to the ground by Michael's clutching weight. He went down on one knee and held him tightly in that pose, like a mother holding a frightened toddler in the rain.

Blood oozed from the corner of Michael's mouth.

"Brother..." he moaned softly.

"It's over," Bosch said. All his anger, all the shame that Michael's words had evoked, ebbed away as quickly as they had flooded him.

"It is," Michael agreed. "You're taking another life..."

"You've lost, Michael! They were wrong. All of them! I'm winning the last stand. And I'm going to take what's mine now!"

Michael closed his eyes to collect himself for a moment. When he opened them again, he smiled.

"But you didn't win," he said wearily.

"You're dying! Our fight is over."

"It was not the battle. The battle has been over since you found me..."

Bosch pulled the knife from Michael's flank, which the latter acknowledged with a faint whimper.

"That's not true!" said Bosch.

"The end has come. For you, for me, for the humans. Their judgment has now been passed. I was only waiting here for you so I could see you one last time. I have missed you! We all miss our absent parts."

"And you will pay for that with death?"

Michael raised a hand with great difficulty and stroked Bosch's glowing cheek with it.

"I'm just going home, Lucifer," he whispered. "And it pains me so much that you cannot. There was never any other ending. You're going to see Hell on Earth..."

"Not if I can help it!"

Michael collected his remaining breath.

"It's already happened, please understand! Look around, listen!"

Bosch looked straight to the sky. There was nothing hanging where the column had been hovering when he arrived in the last courtyard. The sky was empty, or rather, it was one gapless carpet of clouds through which it was no longer possible to tell where the sun was. And it took Bosch a few uncomfortably foreboding moments to understand what was wrong.

The clouds weren't moving. Not at all. There was no wind, not even a breeze. But more than that, the texture of the clouds seemed frozen still.

"This can't be," Bosch stammered. "This! This can't be it!"

"Go watch it if you have to..." said Michael, barely audible.

"Where did he go?"

"...I won't forget you, you hear me, brother?"

"Where he went! Answer me!"

"Hold me tight, Lucifer! Please, eternity will separate us. Let's not part like this..."

Bosch looked into Michael's eyes.

And when Michael wanted to reach out for him with his fingers one last time, Bosch dropped the body on the pavement.

Without a word, he turned his back on him and left.

16. Statues

He had to force himself to walk through the tube-like courtyard once again. At the spot where crumbled bricks marked the hole that the giant had stacked back up, Bosch briefly tested whether he could bring the loose structure down. He kicked it a few times, but nothing moved. So he took a running start, jumped, and barely reached the top of the wall with his fingertips. He pulled himself up, eager to leave this place as quickly as possible.

On the other side, Bosch found the coal yard empty. The giant was nowhere to be seen. So Bosch lowered himself down the wall and made his way straight through the passage back to the fifth yard.

At first he only cautiously poked his head out from behind the heavy gate with the wooden planks, because he was afraid of getting something thrown at his head from the brick stern. He believed the red one to be capable of anything. Like before, this opponent did not show himself. Bosch slowly crept around the narrow structure in the middle of the courtyard. He checked several times to see if he could see a shadow or movement behind one of the battlements.

No sign of the red one. Bosch reached the ravine between the scrap mountains unchallenged. This time nothing held him back, neither enemies nor inexplicable pain inside him. He simply walked between the narrow walls until he reached the third courtyard. Here, a remnant of the fire over which the old woman had cooked her tea was still smoldering. She herself, however, was no longer to be found. Bosch

wasn't surprised anymore. Now that Michael's followers had done their duty, all the courtyards were deserted. An eerie silence lay over the abandoned ruins, piles of rubble and junk. It matched the complete lack of movement in the clouds. Not a bird was to be heard, but neither were there any human-made sounds, not even the occasional distant wail of a siren or a train. Bosch took notice only now, as all this seemed to be missing.

He left the fireplace behind and continued on his way. Curiosity prompted him to make a short climb up the rubble of the house in the next courtyard, where those armed to the teeth had been hiding. As expected, all the holes were now vacant.

In the first courtyard, the two rolling beggars were missing. Bosch marched to the echo of his footsteps across the courtyard, through the battered driveway and out into the street.

Bosch didn't see what he was looking for out here: people. The street had been completely deserted on both of his visits. He doubted that anyone still lived in the houses. No children playing, no stores open, no vehicles or radio sounds. He remembered how he had turned from Chausseestraße into this one while chasing Michael—and the contrast of emptiness and silence against the busy traffic artery.

So he started moving, back toward Chausseestraße. When he got close enough to it, his eye caught on a man who appeared to be standing in the middle of the street, not moving. Bosch got even closer, finally reaching the intersection. The man, meanwhile, did not move an inch from the spot. Bosch found this motionlessness so unusual that he ignored the traffic and simply walked to the man on Chausseestraße without looking out.

Nothing happened, neither to the man nor to Bosch. There was no traffic. As far as the eye could see, not a single car was driving. Bosch could safely negotiate the road on foot, unlike just a few days ago. As

noisy and busy as everything had been on the roads then, it now seemed deserted and dead quiet as far as the eye could see.

Bosch couldn't help it, he had to touch the man in front of him to get an explanation for his vague feeling. So he did. The man didn't mind, as statuesque as ever he stood in his place, legs splayed into a triangle, one heel on the ground, the ball of the other foot extended forward. In his face a focused, slightly pensive look behind narrowed eyes. Bosch touched the statue on the shoulder. The flesh under Bosch's fingertips was soft and warm.

And yet this person here hadn't taken a step since Bosch began watching him minutes ago. Now he studied him more closely, especially the frozen facial expressions and the chest that was supposed to rise and fall under the thick jacket. Even mimes had to breathe!

The man didn't. Bosch put a flat hand on his chest, where the heart and shirt pocket were. He left his hand there longer than a doctor with a stethoscope had ever listened to a patient's breath. In his concentration, Bosch almost became a second statue next to the man. Patiently, he waited for a throbbing under his palm, for the pressure of the chest bulging outward to fill with oxygen.

But he waited in vain. There was as little stirring inside the man as outside. He was virtually frozen in place. Bosch remembered where he had seen this before: in the square with all the people, the night the column had flown in over Kurfürstendamm. There they had been frozen, all of them. But only for a moment and not like this man here the whole time.

Bosch turned away from the petrified man. What had already been obvious since his arrival in the middle of the causeway, he nevertheless only now slowly became aware of, as he continued not to perceive a single sound. He looked around him. Nothing was moving at all, neither humans nor things. He saw a handful of other people on the

sidewalks on both sides of the street. Two children were running from something or someone, judging by their chasing postures and twisted necks. But they were just as stiff as the man behind Bosch. The children even stood on only one leg each, one merely on the ball of its toe, because it was jumping over an empty crate on the side of the road.

They wouldn't budge, no matter how long Bosch stared at them. What or who they were running from, he could not see. Behind them, far and wide, was no one.

He started moving, mouth open and walking cautiously. The street became to him a museum of frozen situations. Facing the children was a man who seemed odd in his posture, without Bosch being able to tell why at first glance. At second glance, he realized what was wrong. The man held one hand stretched out to the side, away from him. The fingers were rounded as if they were clasping another hand. It looked as if the man was leading someone hand in hand. But he too was standing still. And next to him there was a yawning emptiness.

Bosch looked at the empty spot. He sensed the presence that should have been there, making it feel absent even more. He was not comfortable with this observation, although he could not have given less about the person who no longer held the hand of the stiff man. This discomfort broke out in a kick against the back of the stiffened person.

Still it did not move, the statue with the outstretched arm. Bosch did not even try a second time. Instead, he walked around the man, grabbed his arm and pulled on it like a rope with which he wanted to pull over a boat or a stubborn donkey.

Not an inch. Bosch could not have brought the man down even if he had rammed into him with a running start.

He left him standing, as he staggered backward down the causeway. Now that he had seen the empty hand, he noticed more and more that people were missing everywhere. In the middle of the road, a

streetcar sat motionless in its rails. Almost all of its windows were shattered. There were no passengers to be seen inside, which Bosch was not surprised to discover, given the riots and escapes of the last few days. But that there was no one in the driver's cab either....

The train had not driven here from its station on its own. Just as the man had not left his apartment with an imaginary person holding his hand. And the children, who had probably stolen something, wouldn't have looked backwards in fear, if no one had followed them.

The silence in the city reigned over two kinds of people: those among whom Bosch walked as if in a morbid exhibition, and those who were nowhere to be seen.

A cold shiver ran down Bosch's spine. He thought of Mavi and took to his heels. It wasn't far from here to her place. After all, he had set out from there to the courtyards only that morning. Now he chased back the same way on the double, past the isolated, frozen silhouettes.

He had not met her last night and had waited in her bed for dawn. He had not slept, just watched the ceiling. If Mavi had not once returned to her room in the last few weeks, why would she suddenly be there now, barely a day later? Bosch didn't allow himself to ask that question. He didn't think about anything. His legs carried him, and he knew where to. After a few minutes of sprinting over barricades and down deserted streets, he burst into Mavi's front door. Pushing in the broken door, he didn't slow his pace....

Not there. Of course Mavi wasn't there! Oxygen returned to Bosch's head as he braced himself on his knees, gasping for air. He had run so fast that the fear of dashed hope had remained small enough for him not to give up in the first place. Now he could no longer hide from it. Bosch would not accept that he had no idea how to find Mavi.

He left the building. The deserted stairwell groaned one last time under his footsteps. He would never come back.

Bosch wandered aimlessly around the neighborhood. The only thing that suddenly seemed more bleak to him in this situation than not finding Mavi was the thought that he might find her like one of those lifeless statues. And thus every turn around a street corner soon turned into an unbearable game of patience. Bosch inspected the few motionless ones he could still find. He looked every single statue in the face, even if he didn't want to. But none of them bore Mavis's features. Bosch would have recognized her black curls anywhere, probably just her posture from half a mile away.

He found himself outside the factory he had accompanied Mavi to on their first day together. Realizing where he was headed, Bosch made his way inside the large complex through the factory entrance.

Half an hour later, an engine sputtered to life in the factory's atrium. Bosch tried to get the only car he saw there going. He had not found Mavi, although he had searched every corner of the factory for her. She wasn't here. No one at all was in the empty halls, in the aisles, or by the machines. Bosch had found only a handful of statues.

This car had to comply, even if the man at the crank didn't understand how the machine worked. Bosch didn't want to lose a minute. He could try to seach the whole city for Mavi, but by now his feet were no longer fueled by that first big, inner wave of anger and sadness. No sign of Mavi, neither at home nor at her workplace. Whether she had ever returned after the incident at the station, he had no way of knowing.

Bosch wasn't cranking the car for her anymore. Realizing this, he hurled the seemingly useless engine crank across the parking lot with a loud yell. Then he kicked the car a few times out of sheer indecision, before taking a breath and ruefully retrieving the crank.

Eventually, he managed to make the engine's short-lived stutter not die again, but become a steady rattle. Bosch swung behind the

wheel and looked at the pedals at his feet, then at the stick to his right. The Adlon's drivers hadn't had one of those in their Electrica Viktorias. Bosch did remember the rest of their movements. So at first he tried to ignore the stick. He found the gas pedal, which the revving engine confirmed. Except the car didn't move.

After a few test combinations of the lever with the pedals, Bosch found one that made the car jerk. It then took another minute or two for him to make it the short distance out of the parking lot and onto the street. From there, however, Bosch found himself getting more and more the hang of his vehicle. He practiced steering by dodging things that had been left behind in the streets, other cars that had crashed into shop windows, and statues that he found in the most unlikely places.

Within minutes, Bosch reached Friedrichstraße. As he crossed the Spree bridge, he glanced out at the water. He didn't stop to verify his suspicions, but it looked as if even the water had frozen.

Like painted, with fine little sweeps where in any other river the wind would blow tiny ripples onto the surface—and immediately fade away. These here remained where they were.

When he had passed the Adlon, Bosch followed the route from there that he could still remember, even though he had taken it many months ago and only once: he drove southward, toward Charlottenburg. He kept an eye on the sky, but saw nothing but the rigid, gapless cloud cover and pillars of smoke that lined his way. The smoke from the fires rose high to the clouds, where it disappeared gray on gray.

Bosch avoided streets that seemed to lead directly toward the pillars. He also regularly ended up in dead ends that had once been normal roads, but were now blocked. In one, a bus lay on its side; in another, a small horde of people were frozen in a kind of chain from sidewalk to sidewalk. They were beating on a single young guy who, even in his frozen state, had to endure a fist in the face.

The fact that a dozen people or even more were standing together here at once, when he usually had to drive several miles to find so many statues scattered about, made Bosch wonder. He backed up. He couldn't pass between the people, and he couldn't just run over them.

He had tried that. It only damaged the engine, not the frozen ones.

The on-ramp to the AVUS had no traffic jam, unlike the first time, when the chauffeur had sheepishly told Bosch about the racetrack. Bosch was now behind the wheel himself. He reached the ticket booth, but no one was sitting at the cashier's desk. Bosch drove in an arc up into the north curve of the highway and stepped on the gas pedal.

This car was not fast. It was more reminiscent of a carriage than of one of Harstein's modern cars. Bosch's didn't even have a windshield. Normally, the driver of this car wore protective glasses, because of the wind and insects. But the driver no longer existed and he had not left the glasses on the seat. Bosch squeezed his eyes shut. He clutched the steering wheel in his hands. The drive was fast enough that he had to stay focused. Actually, the AVUS, with its dead-straight course, didn't seem particularly challenging to drive, at least not at a leisurely pace. Bosch, however, had to drive a veritable slalom every few hundred yards. He dodged one wrecked car after another. They lay crumpled or, in the worst case, completely mangled in the ditch. One or two cars must have crashed with force into the inner guardrail, where they were now one with the shattered fender. One big pile of scrap metal.

Bosch looked behind the steering wheels, where there were still some to be seen. Many were deserted. Behind others were people, none of them apparently injured. They were as frozen as the ones Bosch had seen in the city center.

Finally, Bosch reached the exit he knew he had to take. The rest of the way to the forest was easy to find from here. Bosch chugged slowly across the circular square where the road through the beautiful villa

neighborhood pretended to end. He drove directly down the somewhat hidden forest path, which quickly became an asphalt road.

The car began to make strange noises. Bosch didn't know if that was due to his inexperienced handling of it, or because the journey had been too much for the rickety car. Either way, it wasn't far to go, and he didn't have to worry about the car. However, instead of putting the pedal to the metal on the last stretch, he had to brake abruptly. Behind a bend in the woods was a large other car. Whoever had been driving it must not have been expecting oncoming traffic, because the wide vehicle completely took up the middle of the road.

Bosch stopped and continued on foot.

He quickly passed the other car, but not without taking a look inside. Behind the wheel sat a frozen man. He wore the same inconspicuous uniform that Simian made all his staff put on. Bosch also glanced at the back seat, but there was no one there. That the valet had not driven himself around before freezing here was proven by the numerous suitcases attached to the roof of the car and to the rear.

Bosch opened the suitcase that had been tied last to the rear. He didn't bother to do it carefully or pay attention to the contents. Everything plopped onto the asphalt in a great ball of fabric. Bosch rummaged through it with one foot.

Women's clothes. He could smell Edith from them, even though he hadn't thought about the lady of the house in weeks. Now her clothes were here on the asphalt, no sign of her—and Bosch was sure he wouldn't find her in the villa. It was probably the last place she would want to be in this situation. The car here had been her getaway car.

Bosch continued on, down the path through the bend to the last, long stretch of asphalt that extended like an avenue under the treetops to the villa. Soon he recognized the fountain and the circle at the entrance. But even here something was different from when he had left

the house and its guests. Between the fountain and the massive door of the main entrance rose a mound of dirt. There was soil thrown up to knee height, once across from the left wing of the villa to the right. When Bosch reached the rampart, he glanced over cautiously, expecting a trench behind it.

He was right. Someone had dug a defensive structure from which the forest path could be observed, ...and attacked if necessary. That someone had obviously been d'Utrecht. With a courageous leap, Bosch jumped into the ditch, which reached up to his chest. He wanted to touch d'Utrecht, for he was standing stiff and still beside him down here. Actually, he was half lying and half standing, only on one leg. Bosch couldn't quite make sense of this pose.

D'Utrecht had a rifle in his hands. They were black with dirt. For once, he was not wearing the monocle in his eye. It was dangling from his chain because d'Utrecht was aiming at something over the barrel of the rifle. At what, Bosch could not say. There was nothing.

Bosch couldn't resist. He tapped the monocle with his index finger to see if it would rock on its fine chain.

It didn't. It remained rigid, as did its wearer.

Bosch heaved himself out of the trench. He knocked the dirt and dust from his pants and jacket, then went to the front door. It was open a crack, so Bosch could just slip through. Inside, it was cold and perfectly quiet. Bosch hadn't noticed the missing sounds of the forest. Here in the house, on the other hand, he noticed the haunting quiet all the more. Not that it usually would have been terribly noisy. Most of the time not even the busy bustle from the kitchen could be heard all the way down the hall. But in a subconscious way, the house had always been busy and full of mystery. Now it just sounded dead to Bosch.

Before him, in the middle of the wide staircase, sat the silhouette of the master of the house. Simian kept his face buried between his hands.

Bosch walked to him and tried to unclasp his hands so that he could look Simian in the eye. He was as unsuccessful at it as he was at trying to get the monocle to move.

Then suddenly a door handle squeaked. Bosch glanced over at the passage door into the right wing, which was slowly opening.

"Mulciber!" he called out to the tree-long figure struggling to get under the doorframe with his crouched head.

"Lord...," came a barely audible rasp from Neiwolf's throat. He wanted to say more than that, but had to swallow first with effort. He stopped in the doorway, as if it were too much for him to keep moving his legs, while his throat had to swallow.

Bosch feared for the worst.

"No, no..." he said to himself, aghast, descending the first steps again and walking toward the architect.

Neiwolf extended an arm to him, so agonizingly slowly that Bosch had long reached him before the arm had made even ten inches of its way. Now Neiwolf dragged his right leg a little to keep his balance and be able to take at least another half step out the door. The effort sent a long, huffed breath through his teeth. Then the foot of the right leg came stomping down on the marble.

And stayed there.

Bosch took a step back from the slow man who, when they had first met, had been so strangely detached and intricate with his limbs that it had reminded Bosch of a giraffe. Now he gazed at him again, but no next breath followed, no next word. Bosch felt the architect's empty eyes resting on him. They did not blink, they did not close, no matter how long Bosch returned their stare.

For a while Bosch just looked up into the old, spark-scarred face.

"I will avenge you," he finally told the empty hall. "All of us..."

Something rumbled loudly. Bosch turned, but discovered nothing.

He was not mistaken, however. There was another rumble, and this time Bosch thought he heard muffled footsteps following. He instinctively went to the stairs, then straight up to the left side of the gallery, where the door led to the circular hallway above the dining room. Clearly the sounds were coming from in there. Bosch went through the door, just in time to see Harstein's large back disappear on the opposite side.

Bosch followed Harstein as fast as he could. With one hand on the railing, he sprinted to the exit Harstein had taken.

"Moloch, wait!" shouted Bosch after him. He could see him in the hallway ahead of him. Catching up to Harstein was not that easy, however, as he heaved his colossal body deeper into the second floor corridors with the determination of a steamroller. Bosch ran after him until they both came to another staircase leading to the top floor. Bosch tried to grab Harstein with one hand as he chased up the stairs. But he fell short and stumbled. When he finally reached the top, Harstein gained entry to the salon with a mighty kick to the door. Bosch followed him in, where he found the frantic man looking wildly around, searching for something.

"Moloch, do you hear me?"

"Leave him to me, will you?" said Harstein hurriedly. "I'll take care of it! You're just in time for the spectacle!"

"What are you talking about? What happened here?"

"Ha, there!"

Harstein pointed excitedly at the wall next to the fireplace. He rushed toward a glass case that contained a small hatchet.

"I knew it was here," Harstein triumphed, before using his giant paw to knock the glass box off the pedestal on which it stood. With a crash, the box shattered into many large shards. Harstein picked up the hatchet and held it up in Bosch's face.

"Make room! I'll give it to him now, do you hear? And if it's the last thing I do..."

"Wait a minute, who..."

"Messiah or not, he's got some nerve," Harstein roared. "Now he's up against me!"

Bosch was still in his way, and he wasn't going to back down until Harstein calmed down. But that was not to be done with the hunk of a man who seemed to be made only of nerves and blind rage. He pushed Bosch aside with a sweeping motion, as if the thick arm were not skin and bone but an inexorably descending battering ram. Bosch wanted to protest, but found himself flying over a sofa. He rolled over his shoulder until he landed on all fours on the carpet.

Harstein let out a terrifying scream that downright shredded the silence. A war howl such as only he could emit and such as Bosch had not heard in thousands of years.

"Where are you? Show yourself!" barked Harstein as he ran.

In no time he had left the salon. Bosch saw it clearly, but could neither say anything nor get up fast enough to stop Harstein. When he had regained his footing and also reached the hallway, he followed the manic screams with which Harstein plowed through the top floor.

Bosch heard where the screams were coming from. He went down the hall to the right, past Edith and Simian's bedroom and many other rooms. Harstein yelled something in the distance, but Bosch didn't understand the words—only the deep hatred in them.

Then the yelling died away.

When he turned the next corner, Harstein stood motionless in the hallway. He was holding the hatchet high above his head. He lashed out with it for a blow that he could no longer apply. Bosch approached from behind and pushed past the body, which had frozen in motion. Only now could he see what Harstein had aimed at with the hatchet.

Before him stood the column from Heaven right in the heart of the house, in the middle of the hallway carpet. It was a good seven feet tall, made of finely grained wood, and even up close, its surface was smooth as glass. It stood upright on the carpet as if it belonged there.

Bosch's mouth dropped open. He paused, surprised and overwhelmed, between Harstein and the column. For an endlessly long moment, he didn't know what to do.

Then he went down on his knees in front of the column.

17. Carpenter

What he could see behind his closed eyelids was more than he had seen in all his time in Berlin. He didn't even want to open them again. A day that had been far too long seemed to be coming to an end, and a hazy exhaustion called out to Bosch. The kind that forces even the last thought out of one''s head, while arms and legs turn leaden. Maybe, Bosch thought to himself, he would just fall right over without having to find a bed. The hallway carpet was so nice and soft, almost a mattress. He wouldn't hurt himself.

And the column would certainly still be there when he woke up. It could take care of him. Bosch knew that it had reached its destination. There was nowhere else it needed to float to. Ever since people had first seen it and he had heard her talk about it, it had followed only one straight path. To here. Because it wanted to go to him.

Bosch opened his eyes.

"Why do you come to me?" he said loudly to the wood, as if something important had suddenly occurred to him. "Michael and I were meant to fight it out! There's nothing written about us meeting."

His words went unanswered. Or rather, they were immediately swallowed by the thick fabrics on the walls and under his knees. Here, up in the attic, he spoke as if under a bell.

"Or is it all smoke and mirrors?" pursued Bosch. "Did you simply enjoy telling those humans a story? Putting ideas in their heads to make them obey you?"

He kept leaning his upper body forward as he spoke. But he did not stand up. More, even his own rage failed to move him. Bosch remained on his knees.

"Say something! You can hear me!"

Bosch didn't get what he wanted. He shook his head in disgust, expecting the wood of the column to see it quite clearly. Bosch conceded a memory of the face that had been full of life, looking after him as he fell from the edge of Heaven.

"Why do I ask you at all? As if you would answer me honestly! I know the answer. I was the first to see through you. You forget that. And it seems that I will be the last one, too. If you don't show any conscience yourself, then I will be yours, just like back then! You thought that if you took away my homeland, my friends and equal gods, if you made us all drunk for thousands of years, then I would keep silent. Never! You can take nothing more from me..."

Bosch laughed out.

"What, this world maybe?" he asked, arms wide open. "I wouldn't know what to do with it even if you played by the rules and it was now mine. What should I rule over shadows of things? Over bad counterfeits of the originals in Heaven?

Did you come up with that? Me waking as a painter? I'd almost take that as a good joke! I've been making inconsequential blobs on canvases for years—and people would have done anything to own them or watch me do it for even a minute. But only you and I know what our homeland really looks like. What eternity looks like! I really don't know where you get the idea that I would care enough about this rotting Earth to bother ruling over it! Would you like me to hate you so much that I'd humiliate myself to do anything? Would you like that?"

Bosch's legs twitched. He built up pressure like an out-of-control steam boiler. His hands spasmed into fists.

"Speak, damn it! Speak to me!"

Nothing happened.

Bosch heard himself breathing heavily. Any further words stuck in his throat. The rising and falling of his chest, the associated tugging under his skin, and the invigorating breeze that alternately traveled in and out of his windpipe all captured his attention for a moment. He felt the body he refused to understand more precisely. And as he did so, the angry tension in his fists relaxed again.

So he sat for a long time. The only clock nearby was a grandfather clock, somewhere behind the column. Its clockwork had stopped working when Bosch entered Michael's backyards. The hands stood still, although the heavy brass pegs hanging in the clock case still passed their weight on to the gears. It might have been minutes that Bosch now spent in silence, or an hour, two, three.

It did not matter.

Bosch's breathing became silent and very slow. His shoulders slumped. He gazed at the column, studying every grain of the wood. And he took his time doing it.

"It wasn't a fair fight..." he said at one point, barely audibly.

"....."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about! You fooled me, you and Michael! But I beat him. You don't want to admit it, is that it? If you can't win, you will cheat! What about the humans out there? What about the others?"

"....."

Bosch wanted to retort something, but his mind was unable to pick up so quickly on what he had heard.

The column stood motionless. Between it and the frozen figure Harstein had become, Bosch looked like the last living something, not only in the hallway, but throughout the house, the forest, and the city. The presence of the column weighed heavily on his shoulders all of a sudden. He found it almost impossible to look up at it, let alone stand up. As much as it annoyed him in his hurt pride, he also unmistakably felt such a familiar sense of security that he could not ignore it. Part of him just wanted to remain squatting in that security—forever.

"Then why did you let us fight?" he asked. "Didn't you see that I wouldn't have done it if I had been left alone in the first place?"

"....."

"Yes, I'm talking about her!"

"..... ...."

Now Bosch jumped to his feet. His anger weighed heavier than the burden that pressed on him no less than a moment ago. But he could stand it no longer.

"That's not true!" he defended himself. He pointed a finger at the pillar. "I was willing to just stay here. You set it up for us to end up here, not me! I could have just stayed with Mavi and died a human. The night you came over the city, I was on my way to see her..."

"....."

"Yes, I was," Bosch roared. "What are you trying to say? I went to the one person by whose side I could have endured this existence. And wait until I die, one last time. I didn't want this fight."

"..... ....."

.....
.....
.....
.....
....."

Bosch grabbed his face with both hands. Then he rubbed his hair and began pacing back and forth in front of the column. Counterarguments lined up in his head.

"That was a mishap," he grumbled out reluctantly.

"....."

"Why don't you tell me where she is rather than hold that against me? I know what I did. I couldn't let her go, but I wasn't myself. Everything I knew and thought about me had just collapsed like a house of cards. I doubt you have the slightest idea what that feels like. How it feels to no longer have any certainty, ...about anything!

I've been looking for her every day since everything fell into place. You can say what you want. I won't listen to you. I didn't let her get on her train. And you? Did you let her freeze? Where is she?"

"....."

"But I see them all, out there in the streets. They stand like statues, immovable. They haven't gone anywhere! Here!"

Bosch turned and pointed at the charging Harstein, who was still stuck in mid-motion.

"Moloch!" declared Bosch. "You froze humans and angels alike."

"....."

"How many?"

".....
.....
.....
....."

"And Mavi is among them?"

"....."

Bosch fell silent. For the first time since he had gotten up to pace restlessly from left to right across the hallway, he stopped again.

"Then where did she go? And everyone else, where did you take them?" asked Bosch.

"..... ....."

He understood. His throat went dry. Bosch gulped several times before speaking again.

"And what about the statues? Aren't you taking them with you?"

"....."

"But, when they wake up again, then it will be like before! Then things will go their way, as it has happened for hundreds of years. They will miss the other humans, for sure. Do you think they will change? Turn to you, despite all their sins? Then you're wrong."

"....."

"How can it be the end if they still exist?"

"....."

"Here? Hell?"

Bosch lapsed back into his tigerish gait. Every single spark of disbelief he had in him flared up in his body and converged on his face. He shook his head as violently as if he would accept if it snapped from his neck because of his silent protest.

"There's no eternal fire here, no everlasting suffering or whatever else you've been threatening us with since the word Hell was first uttered," he argued in agitation.

"....."

"Maybe you didn't describe it that way, but humans did. Are you going to deny it? Have you lied about that too? What else is Hell supposed to be?"

"..... ...."

"No!"

Bosch broke out of his stalling, nervous prowling with a shriek. He charged straight for the pillar and kicked it with all his might.

It moved, if only a little. Bosch's kick tipped the wood backward a bit, but not enough for it to fall over. Instead, after hanging in equilibrium between inertia and gravity for a moment, the column tipped back into its balanced position. Bosch, on the other hand, fell backward. He landed on his back.

The slight tilt gave him enough motivation to forget the pain in his spine and jump right back up. This time he took another step or two of a running start and charged shoulder first into the column.

As he rammed his collarbone into the wood, his breath was cut off in pain. A whole battery of yellow sparks shot into his eyes. Bosch clawed his nails into the wood of the column.

This time they crashed together on the hallway floor, Bosch on top. When he regained his senses and realized his success, Bosch straightened up without rising from the column. He remained sitting on it with his legs wide apart, like a rider on his horse.

"It is not true!" he ruled. "I am the first of all angels! I am eternal, no matter what punishments you may yet devise for my free spirit. You cannot undo me."

"....."

"But that's what it means when Hell is not a place, but in me!"

"....."

Bosch pushed himself off the column and gave it another kick, which left no mark on the wood, at most damaging Bosch's toes. He turned away from the felled wood. With his eyes he searched the hallway for anything he could use.

In Harstein's raised hand, he found what he was looking for.

Bosch walked over to the frozen figure, and tugged at the hatchet Harstein was using to deliver his endless blow. But no matter how hard he tried, Bosch could not pry his fingers from the hatchet's handle.

He cursed.

"Wait!" he hissed over his shoulder to the column before running back to the stairs that led down to the second floor. He didn't expect the column to obey his command, nor did he expect it to have reason to move anywhere else. He just wanted to threaten it.

A short time later, Bosch flew back up the stairs. With a flushed head and labored breathing, he unceremoniously set to work again on the hatchet in Harstein's hand. He applied a small saw he had found in the kitchen. Just behind Harstein's rock-hard fingers, Bosch positioned the blade. With satisfaction, he watched the first chips trickle out of the narrow slot he sawed in the handle of the hatchet. He didn't even carry his work through to the end because of his excitement, but halfway through he unloaded the saw so that he could use sheer arm strength to split the hatchet from the remaining wood of the handle.

He succeeded. And the small hatchet, with its now battered and somewhat too short handle, flew, hurled by Bosch, straight over to the column, where it stuck with its sharp edge deep in the wood.

Bosch saddled himself astride the column again, just as he had before he had gone in search of tools.With a few lever movements, he freed the hatchet from its crack—and took another swing.

Thus the first sounds returned to the house and the forest surrounding the villa. Bosch struck the column beneath him again and again with the hatchet. Each time, the wood acknowledged the impact with a resounding splat. Bosch saw the first larger splinters breaking from his cuts. He aimed directly where he wanted a face. Bosch stuck the hatchet slightly sideways into a protruding splinter as thick as his finger, then loosened enough wood that a hole the size of a cigar box was left behind.

"How do you like that?" he said as he let the hatchet chop into the column once more.

"It can't be, no! Was it not you who knocked me from Heaven?"

"....."

"Down to Hell?"

"....."

"Then I should have seen it! But I haven't. I've been on Earth all this time, in one form or another."

Bosch used his free hand to help pull a long wooden fiber from the column, which he had nearly severed with the hatchet. It reached from the top of the head to the chin.

"..... ...."

"Say that again!" threatened Bosch.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I'm warning you! Say that again and I'll..."

"..... ....."

.....
.....
....."

"Lie!"

He drove the hatchet into the column up to its shaft. Releasing it from there took Bosch some effort, but he rained down the next blow as fiercely as the one before. He gasped under the effort and chafed his palm from squeezing the handle so hard that the blood drained from his knuckles. Before he could turn his attention to the fine lines, he had to create depth in the wood so that the face would stand out later.

"Lie..." he whispered. It was meant to be a shout, an unmistakable sign that he would not be swayed. He had defeated the Archangel in battle, and if he now had to single-handedly hack the Messiah out of his hiding place, nothing could stop him. But the shouting was nothing but a breathless whisper that did not even convince himself. Now Bosch noticed his tears, too. They were flowing for the wrong reasons, he found, and that unnerved him even more than he already was.

The only answer to all this that came to his mind rested in his right hand. Bosch continued to pound away at the column, which, despite all the violence, now resembled a face. Beneath the surface, the wood was much lighter, almost yellow and still damp from the water it held.

A third time Bosch formed the same word with his lips, without making any sound at all in this repetition. His hands worked, now more cautiously hacking at the column, tearing out loose pieces of wood. His voice, on the other hand, gave up.

And so Bosch asked nothing more, not for quite a while. He paused in the creation of his work only to wipe the tears from his eyes with his sleeve, so that he could see again which notch to hit. When his striking hand was so sore that he could no longer get a proper grip on the hatchet from sweat and blood, he switched to the left hand.

This worked well for some time, until Bosch's clothes were covered all over with chips, and he had to take short breaks to catch his breath. Again and again he sized up the wood, and then with the next stroke he made it look more like cheeks, eyes, lips. The more it resembled the image he remembered, the more the anger in Bosch faded. With one last blow, the hatchet sank deep into the wood again, but now Bosch finally lacked the strength to release it again. But he was finished anyway: he let go of the handle, supported himself on the column with both hands, and eventually leaned on it with his whole upper body. He buried his face in the immaculate other he had just sculpted.

He whimpered.

"Now you can't hide from me anymore..."

Silence returned to the house once again, except for the suppressed crying Bosch let out. He kept his head down, one cheek pressed into the soft, fibrous wood. It felt cool compared to his hot tears.

"....."

"I don't know what I want anymore," Bosch admitted. "Nothing has turned out the way it was supposed to. I can't believe this..."

"....."

He resisted for a moment, but then nodded silently. He could very well believe it, if he was honest with himself. He simply hadn't wanted to believe it.

"But I still don't understand," he said to the wood. "I would have noticed, after all, if I had carried Hell inside me. In me! All this time!"

"..... ....."

"Just mine?"

"....."

"What about the humans who have died all these centuries? Their souls are no longer here. Did you let them go to Heaven?"

"....."

"All this time..." whispered Bosch thoughtfully. He thought about how hard his own soul had been trying to break out of this maze of unanswered questions that the other angels had built around him over the last few weeks. There had to be millions of human souls, billions, who, unlike him, could not find answers after their deaths and had been waiting ever since for the end of days to get to where they belonged.

To the present day.

"I don't want them in my head," Bosch stammered, in tears.

It scared him. If Hell was only in himself, in his bitterness, the pain and humiliation he couldn't shake since he first saw the Messiah, then maybe he couldn't escape its torment. But at least he would be alone. His own sacrifice and his own ruler over Hell. It would be barred to humans and the other angels. The thought that the mortal souls, restlessly waiting for him, would flood his Hell like waters flood a broken dam, sent a cold shiver down Bosch's spine.

"..... ...."

"It disappears out of me?" asked Bosch in disbelief.

"..... ....."

"That comes down to the same thing."

As much as it relieved Bosch in an inexplicable way that Hell would leave him and occupy the world instead, he clearly felt a gnawing inside him that couldn't be reconciled with that.

"And then what? Then you just let the statues wake up again?"

"....."

"How am I supposed to rule Hell if they don't even know what happened? If all goes on as usual? I would be the only one who knows

what happened to the world. That they no longer exist! That the end of days is behind them..."

"....."

Bosch straightened up. He ran the backs of both hands over his cheeks to dry his tears.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to rule over them then."

"....."

He pondered, unable to respond immediately.

"But that's what I am," he replied. "I'm not like them. I challenged you because I'm meant to rule. It's why the angels looked up to me for so long, full love and trust. That is why they awakened me. I want to do good! I must show the way! I cannot be an ordinary person..."

"....."

Bosch slumped his shoulders. His right hand slapped erratically against the hatchet. He looked as if the last bit of life had gone out of him with one blow.

"So this is my punishment," he said tonelessly. "To be one of them in a Hell that is as shut to me as it is to their unsuspecting souls. That's what you came for? To tell me while I still understand what it means?"

"....."

"If you really loved me, you would have spared me all this! I wouldn't have had to wake up. You let it happen this way. I wouldn't have faced Michael or you if you had let me have Mavi. I could just wake up tomorrow, like all the rest, not knowing—not suffering from what all I know."

"....."

"You didn't give me a choice!" Bosch defended himself. He screamed into the face that he had exposed with the hatchet.

"I never chose any of these things. The only reason I'm not another statue out there is because of Michael, you and the others. And all my companions only brought me in because they believed your stories. So why didn't you let the painter be what he thought he was?"

Bosch didn't wait for an answer.

"I'll tell you why! Because he wouldn't have understood you, like I do, here, now. Because then you wouldn't have gotten the ending you want! I'm the prop you need for this spectacle. A puppet! You love me? I never had a chance to win, never had a choice to just give up and not wake at all. There's no love if you don't give me my freedom. You only tolerate your own way."

"....."

"So you're doing this for me?" sneered Bosch with an undertone of derision that seemed instantly out of place and that, moreover, left his mouth as a completely failed croak.

"It is love when I suffer? Explain that to me!"

"..... ...."

It had never been about what he knew. Only about what he wanted to believe. Bosch listened and with every word that resonated in his head, he sank deeper into the truth.

As different as they were, humans and his kind had one thing in common: Yes, these were mortal, those were not. A human being could

not survey what happened before their birth. The destiny of the humans was to carry all their questions about the before with them until their death—this second barrier, which they could not overcome. No matter how hard they tried, what lay beyond their short time remained hidden from them. An angel, on the other hand, did not die. The immortal children of Heaven did not even understand what death meant for those who could not elude it as they did. Only the few who had been toppled from Heaven with Bosch, and had taken countless generations of their own rebirths to remember their angelic existence, only that handful knew both worlds. Out there they had to stand by the millions, the fallen angels of his rebellion, somewhere in streets, kitchens, fields, or in trains that had rolled to a halt. Just as frozen as the next best human who had failed the test of the Messiah here on Earth. Now there was no difference between the remnant. When this day was over, they would be in Hell—clueless and all of them.

Only he himself was left. Only he could truly understand that angels and humans had always shared the first of the two boundaries. Bosch could not remember being born. And he had denied that it ever happened. He had challenged Heaven itself to prove him wrong. To prove that he was not also a god, unborn and immortal. His army he had succeeded to enthrall, because like him they would live eternally. Not even the Messiah would deny that.

But he could not remember that God had ever ascended his throne. He had simply always held it. Bosch knew not the faintest shadow of doubt that the God he had sought to replace had ever been anything less than this: the center of Heaven, and the center of all life. Even if they were both united, perhaps, in being eternal, there was this other truth in Bosch's deepest, most honest conviction. Everything he had heard about the beginning was just that: heard. He had not experienced God creating Heaven. The angels spoke of it only in stories,

repeated a million times and embellished with enthusiasm. But they were and remained stories, passed from mouth to ear, and then on. And at the beginning of all stories God had to be...

For Bosch himself had told every story a thousand times, to every angel who looked up to him.

It had never been about what he knew.

Bosch saw that only God knew the beginning. And God said that beginning and end were one for him. He had seen both the beginning and the end. He didn't have to do a thing to exchange the first moment for the last. He didn't have to travel, didn't have to wait. They were both within his grasp. He lived the beginning, the end and every moment in between with his whole being—in every second that passed irretrievably for humans and that became superfluous for the angels at God's side. God experienced everything, at any time. And thus without any time. He did not need it. Humans needed it, because they were mortal. They came and passed away, in an eternal cycle. What life they had, they had to experience piece by piece. In the end, it was the same for the angels, even though they did not lose their lives. They did not know the end. They did not know the beginning. They had only their stories and the patience of eternity.

They too need time, ...I, too, needed time, Bosch told himself. Now he had been told to his face what he had actually always known, but never wanted to admit to himself. God, who he thought he hated so much, had witnessed the battle that almost tore his Heaven from its hinges. He had let it happen, just as he had watched his creations fall when they first looked him in the eye and swore eternal allegiance to him. He had seen Bosch squat here, in this hallway, on his only begotten Son. And every moment between the two of them. Every step Bosch had taken. Because he didn't follow time, but time helped his creatures experience themselves.

Bosch couldn't do that. Angel or man, he was unable to escape time. Which path he took was set. Only those who did not simply live, but were life itself, could see this path. God. For Bosch, every decision on his path had been an unknown one, a new one....

"I just wanted to be free," he said. "... not to obey blindly."

"....."

"It didn't feel that way," Bosch explained. "Just following you was not what I wanted to do. It didn't feel free to choose between abhorred obedience and banishment."

"....."

Bosch nodded.

"I was sure I could overthrow God and defeat you in battle..."

"....."

"That' s just it! You knew I would not succeed. The moment jealousy gripped me, you already knew I would lose everything instead of winning the throne. I hear you, believe me! I wish you had ended it before it began. Explained to me what my future looked like! Stopped me from doing it! It's been to no avail after all..."

"....."

"No, I wouldn't have believed you," Bosch admitted. "You could have shown me, though, couldn't you?"

"....."

"I'm tired of having to experience things. I'm tired of having to keep up with time to make my own life happen."

"....."

"I know."

And Bosch wasn't lying. In fact, he believed it. It was the truth about his freedom and that of every living being. Here and now, astride the wood of the Messiah whose features he had made recognizable, here

he believed that he had never lost his freedom. That beginning, end and all things in between were fixed and that for him it could never be about escaping them. On the contrary, he had to expose them. There was no contradiction. He himself did not know his fate, but had to make it happen. It was not unjust. Nobody could have spared him the suffering, not even God. Because this was the only thing God could not do. He could not change the course of the world. Not because he lacked the power to do so. No, because the world simply would not exist if it could not itself grow through time.

"He is the course of things," Bosch remarked softly. "He has to watch us. Waiting..."

"....."

"...And that's why you didn't stop me."

Bosch looked at the likeness below him one last time. Then he closed his eyes and breathed in the air, deeply and in long puffs.

He picked up the hatchet again.

"I don't want to be with the humans," he said firmly. "I don't want to become a shadow of myself."

"....."

"I'd rather not be at all..."

Bosch set to work. He drove the hatchet to the bottom of the hollow he had chopped into the column. At first, he focused on chopping as large a chunk as he could from the wood, while he could still stand the pain in his sore palms. Then, with fine, less hard blows, he cut through protruding fibers and smoothed out ledges. He would talk to the column, listen, reply something.

Finally came the face. Destroying it took even longer than shaping it. Bosch hollowed out the core until he no longer squatted upright on the trunk, but sank deeper and deeper with his chest and shoulders.

At some point, the ground was as if covered with snow, so dense and piled up were the chips around the column. Bosch had cut more wood from the carcass than was left of it. The initial hollow was now a basin that reached just to the edge on both long sides. From top to bottom, it took up almost the entire trunk.

Bosch stood up, put the hatchet aside, and took quick measurements with his eyes. He brushed the splinters from his clothes before sitting down inside the column to try it out.

He fit in.

"We're making this last journey together," he said softly to what was now his boat.

"..... ...."

"Stop it!" he begged.

Even though he had almost completely hollowed it out, Bosch struggled to slide the column across the carpet. After a few miserable attempts, he positioned himself at what he had made the bow, bent down and hauled it with his back leading the way. He made only inching progress that way, but it worked.

"I never wanted it to be like this."

"....."

"I miss him."

There were still tears in Bosch. They dripped onto the wood along with the sweat from his forehead.

Bosch reached an alcove in the sloping roof that reached to the floor here. He put the boat down for a moment to push open the alcove's double window.

A cold breeze blew in from outside.

"Do you believe me?" he asked as he tried to heave the wood first onto his knees and then up to the window sill.

"Do you believe me that I was just trying to do the right thing?"

"....."

"For all the angels," he replied.

"....."

The wood scraped across the frame of the window, destroying it in the process. But Bosch kept pushing until the weight of the boat inside and outside seemed to balance each other out.

He paused.

"For me first and foremost," he said wanly.

Then he stroked the outer side of the column one last time.

"....."

"No, I want it this way..."

Bosch scaled the rickety structure he had hoisted onto the open window. He was able to squeeze his upper body into the open beside the boat, bracing himself with his hands on sloping roof tiles while using his feet to keep the boat from sliding.

Carefully, he sat down in the hollow. His hands slowly wandered along the window frame, which gave him the necessary support.

Bosch sat like this for a while.

It was not possible for him to see over the edge of the bricks. Nor did he need to.

"I..." he began, but couldn't speak right away.

"....."

"Embrace you, I could not. Hold you just once," he said, sobbing softly. "Come with me, at least this time."

"....."

Bosch tried to smile.

"I love you..." he whispered.

And with that, he let go of the window frame. The boat tilted slowly on the bow, freed from Bosch's stabilizing grip. Then the tilt became steeper, until the wood banged on the roof tiles. It began to slide, instantaneously, toward and beyond the edge of the roof. Bosch clawed his fingers into the sides of the boat.

He closed his eyes. The blink in which the weight left him and the world seemed to spin around him ended in a crashing thud. The boat smashed bow-first through the thin ice on the pond. The impact threw Bosch out of his chopped seat. He came to rest next to the hole so that the ice began to splinter beneath him.

There he remained, while the remains of the column wedged themselves under the layer of ice.

Summer of 1953

Berlin, Kurfürstendamm

Oranges

It was a busy time in the café. The two waiters could hardly keep up with their orders. But that didn't faze them. They circled through the narrow course of tables like dancers. They reacted to every stretch of the neck, every clearing of the throat, and every carelessly pushed-back chair with the right movement. Nothing could surprise them.

Only the single man at the corner table, who had been trying to pay for some time, was overlooked time and again.

The afternoon sun bathed Kurfürstendamm in a luscious yellow. It was just hot enough that the ice cream sundae business was thriving, but the coffee drinkers were not yet deterred. The corner table was surrounded on two sides by a waist-high fence. This separated the café's seating from the rest of the generous sidewalk. Flower tubs were hung in the fence, with geraniums sprouting from them. They had had the last few weeks to grow over their tubs in the warm weather. So the small, busy front yard looked almost like a garden. And that distracted from the crumbling facade of the house.

At least it was still standing, not like the two neighboring houses to the left of the café, which were in ruins.

The man who wanted to pay sat alone at the little table. From his corner he had the whole outside area of the café in view. He saw a few families of father, mother, child; also one or two combinations of elderly ladies who habitually conferred here. At many small tables, men sat behind unfolded newspapers. All the guests had something in front

of them. Most had a coffee, the children an ice cream, some a piece of cake. The man also had a plate, but barely touched his tiny piece of crumble cake. All that was missing was a piece of the corner where the man had tried a spoonful.

It didn't taste like anything. Or rather, it tasted far too little like what the man had asked for.

A waiter moved skillfully around the neighboring tables between the corner and the wall of the house. The man took the opportunity to raise a hand again in order to draw attention to himself. The waiter elegantly performed a half turn, avoided contact of his tray with the back of an old lady's head—and scurried past the man. Considering the fact that the man's arm had shot up less than six feet from him, this was quite a feat. What's more, it was a long arm. Although the man was seated, it was obvious that he was taller than the other guests.

He had gotten used to being overlooked. So he didn't get impatient when the waiter moved away from him in a good mood. The man lowered his hand again and looked at his piece of cake instead.

He seemed old, even if he didn't look nearly as old as he was. His hair still grew as full and black as ever. He just wore it shorter now than he had for most of his life, almost buzz cut. No, it was more the wrinkles that revealed his age. His face had once been smooth and soft. Now it wore too many furrows to count. In addition, he was having his dearest trouble taming the oddly scattered stubble that pushed gray through his skin. They left large holes on his cheeks. Therefore, he couldn't grow a beard, but also didn't give a damn about going out on the street on a Sunday like this with his half rugged, half hairless face.

Unable to pay even though he wanted to, the man leaned back once more and watched the young woman sitting alone at the next table. The fence with the geranium tubs also separated her seat from the sidewalk, just like his. She had a coffee standing in front of her, nearly

emptied. Her gaze wandered in boredom between the geraniums, the street, and her cup. She was clearly younger than the man. Her long, red hair surrounded her freckled face like a noble cloak. Her beauty and youth reminded the man of many scenes in his life that he seemed to recall less and less over the years.

He liked faces like this. When they looked up at him, he had always known immediately that he could forge a bond between himself and the one he was looking at. It was that clarity in the eyes that....

"Are you staring at me?" the woman asked.

The man forgot his thought. She leaned back, folded her arms across her chest, and smiled provocatively.

"Excuse me," the man said, also smiling.

"That's not an answer," he got in response. "You're staring, or are you blind, or what?"

"I'm not blind. And I didn't mean to be rude..."

She laughed.

"When men like you stare, it's never about politeness. Don't act like we're in preschool here!"

"Men like me?" the man asked.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

The woman took a sip from her coffee cup. She placed it back on the saucer with an exaggerated swing, as if she were using the ceramic to mimic a theater bell and announce something.

"Older gentlemen gawking at young girls in the café when they have a night out at home," she said smugly.

The man opened his mouth a little and nodded.

"I see."

"See, now the penny has dropped fast," the woman said.

"Yes," the man confirmed. "I was staring..."

"Honest, after all!"

"...at your plate."

The woman looked puzzled.

"I don't have a plate," she explained, pointing with both hands to her small table where, as before, there was only the coffee—and nothing else had been there during her entire visit.

"Exactly, it's missing," the man said. "I can't recommend the crumble cake, though."

"I'm not hungry, thank you," the woman said.

She folded her arms again.

"I just mean, coffee like that on an empty stomach is a waste..."

"This isn't going to work, sir," the woman interrupted him.

The man paused. He looked at the woman in surprise. Her smile didn't really make sense. Was she making fun of him?"

"What, you're not going to offer me something to drink? Something stronger before you run out of ideas?"

"I wasn't planning on it, no."

"No?"

"I don't drink."

"Oh, boy...," the young woman sighed.

She was thinking.

"May I give you some advice?" she finally asked, leaning forward. She propped her elbows on the small table, resting her face in her hands.

"Advice?"

"Start with the money right away," she said, "if you want to hook up with someone who could be your daughter."

"You've got that wrong," the man hastened to say.

"Fiddle-dee-dee, what do you do for a living?"

The man didn't answer immediately. He was struggling to keep up with the pace of his interlocutor.

"So?"

"I paint," he said.

"Well, that's something!" the woman opined. She lifted her head briefly from her resting hands to make a few clapping motions.

"I mean, I used to paint."

"Retired? That doesn't matter. That's even better! Look at it this way:You can make a go of it with money, but only after you've landed a Fräulein. Then she'll stay with you a little longer. Not before."

"You misunderstand..."

"Shh!" she interrupted, "I'm talking. You don't get advice like that every day. Now, artists are in high demand, that's for sure. More the young, wild ones, though, I must say. Don't take it personally, please, but we do agree that you no longer fall into that category, don't we?"

"I admit it. I'm only young these days, not wild."

She snorted into the palm of her hand.

"Good! I'd leave out the retirement part—at first. You don't want the lady to be afraid of having you around all the time, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Rather, offer to pick her up whenever she wants. Or better yet, hesitate a bit if they want to date. Always let the chosen one suggest it first, then think busily for a moment and pretend you have to shuffle who knows what appointments in your head just to make your sweetheart's desired time possible. Do you understand?"

The man nodded.

The woman finished her coffee.

"What else?"

"What do you mean?" she asked back.

"No other tips? What about me?

He pointed to his face.

"Err..., passable," she said, "Well kept. There are worse things. A fat

bathtub for a belly doesn't make it easy for even the biggest charmer. Not your problem. And you've got hair, too."

"Reassuring," the man said appreciatively. "Then I'd better keep watching my figure..."

He took his gnawed-on piece of crumb cake from his plate and abruptly placed it in the tub of geraniums to the left of his shoulder.

The woman stared at him wordlessly, whereupon he turned once more to the bucket and pushed the cake a little more inconspicuously under the bushy leaves of the flowers.

Now, for the first time, she looked into his eyes for a long time. The man saw the green gleam in her pupils, lost in impenetrable darkness. He waited for the bond to be forged.

"Why, it was still good!" the woman said gruffly.

There was no bond. The man saw no clarity in her eyes.

"You think that's funny?"

Before the man could say anything to save the situation, the woman suddenly whooped, as if out of nowhere.

Next to her, a young man stopped on his bicycle. He held a water pistol in his right hand, his left rested on the handlebars.

"Bull's eye," he laughed.

The woman looked down her dress, mouth agape. She seemed to be counting the handful of splatters she found on the fabric.

"And right on time, too," the young man said.

"Just you wait!" the woman threatened, pushing back her chair and climbing expertly over the geranium fence with no regard for her long dress. The young man kicked the pedals with a laugh. He tried—not very seriously—to flee from the woman. His pursuer caught up with him in a flash, but instead of confronting him, she hopped onto the bike's rack. She clutched the young man's upper body and spread her legs sideways to avoid getting her dress caught in the spokes.

The old man in the café saw the bicycle disappear in the distance.

The woman had not paid. The man looked at the empty chair that now stood askew in front of its small table. At his feet was the shopping net that the woman must have forgotten in her hurry. There were three oranges in it.

He looked at the net. The meshes were poison green and very fine. On the three perfectly formed oranges, the green fabric lay like veins. Their contrast accentuated the vibrant, vivid orange of the fruit. Their ripeness literally jumped out at the man. He could not get enough of them. When he briefly averted his eyes, it was only to compare the image of the oranges with something in his field of vision. He glanced furtively at the crumble cake in the bucket. A fly had already found the piece. It occupied a crumble as large as itself.

The cake looked downright pale compared to the piercing color of the three oranges. They really were perfect, in every sense. There were no soft spots on their skin. The color was uniformly deep orange everywhere. No fruit seemed more ripe or less ripe than the other two. Each still bore its short, green stalk, along with a single evenly shaped leaf. Only the one in the center had two.

The man looked at the net of fruits. He recognized the pores on the skin of the oranges, even from where he sat. His eyes had not shared the fate of his skin, but had aged disproportionately little. He didn't need glasses.He could see everything sharply, including the oranges on the floor under the missing woman's chair.

It seemed to him that their tiny pores breathed. Not air, of course, but scent. The man's mouth watered. He was getting an outrageous appetite for oranges. He had not seen such fruit for ages. At the same time, he didn't dare just reach for it. For one thing, people might peek to see what he was doing there, and for another, he had a vague fear that he wouldn't find the oranges perfect once he picked them up.

Sometimes he wondered if he was bad luck.

They were so beautiful just lying there. The man was torn—his usual predicament before any decision. He began to sweat, not because of the afternoon sun, but because of his irresolution, which would only increase each time he noticed it himself. He hated this.

The man looked around. Strange, how colorless everything seemed again now, after he had fixated on the bright hue of the oranges for so long. The flowers looked bleached, as did the leaves in the tops of the few trees that Kurfürstendamm still had. Everything seemed to radiate less life to the man than it had earlier, before he had discovered the oranges. Even the other patrons of the café were grayer. Not so much color-wise, but they appeared to be talking less colorfully to each other. The laughter here and there suddenly sounded unfamiliar to the man's ears, as if parrots were imitating something the meaning of which they did not understand. In general, the man noticed that everyone was chattering away—but that he could ignore the meaning of the words at will. What then remained of the general chatter were only sounds. He no longer heard the language. He heard only life, like the soundscape of a tropical forest. There was nothing to understand.

The oranges were brighter than anything around the man. He forgot about their owner and her whooping departure. He forgot that she had made fun of him. The oranges shone at him like little suns. He knew, after all, only the one sun that hung over him, but other suns must look like that, he told himself. And at the same time, he was uncomfortable with what he was thinking. Foolish stuff, he judged. He didn't like it when his mind wandered like that. When his eyes bored into things that other people completely ignored. He didn't know why he did that. But whenever he caught himself doing it, it left an unspoken shame in him that spread bitterly from his stomach throughout his body.

He mustered up, if only because he could feel the bitter taste creeping up inside him. The man moved his small table a little to the side so he could bend over better. The oranges were within reach.

"Excuse me?"

He sprang up, having already bent over. Next to him was the waiter who had been passing him by the whole time.

"Yes?"

"If the gentleman would be so kind," the waiter explained. "It's time to pay."