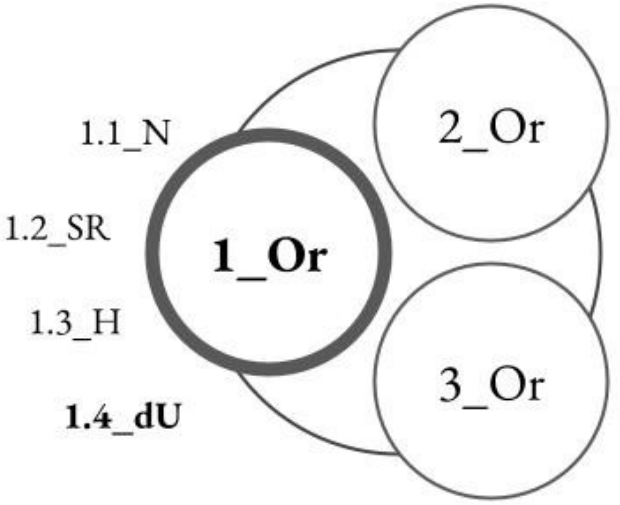

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30 July 1905

Saalach Valley, Salzburg

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The passage included a lot of things: various train compartments, theater visits, meetings with buyers in the cafés of Vienna, a ball, five overnight stays —but no cave. As d'Utrecht struggled up the path to the entrance of the Lamprechtsofen, he wondered why he was doing this to himself.
A rhetorical question, admittedly.

"Theodorus, Theodorus...," d'Utrecht reprimanded himself in between his own wheezing breaths. He shook his head.

The jeweler had made a detour to be here. Hadn't hesitated for a second when he heard about the ceremonial opening of the cave. The day's appointments had been postponed, sturdy footwear purchased in a hurry. Now d'Utrecht gladly accepted the puffing of his body. The self-accusation was pure show. Even if it left him breathless altogether, d'Utrecht knew why he would walk far longer and more arduous paths than this one.

For the cool wind of the earth.

The jeweler reached the upper end of the ascending route through the forest. He could see the entrance to the Lamprechtsofen in a clearing. Because it was high summer, the sun was still shining vigorously on this eve. Too bad, d'Utrecht thought. It was a first disappointment, because he had hoped for a dazzling mouth in the rock face. Instead, he walked leisurely toward a pale shadow in the mountain.

D'Utrecht found a flurry of activity behind the entrance to the cave, with whispering voices and squealing laughter echoing under a small dome of rock. This was obviously the new gathering place for visitors. It was to be the starting point for guided tours into the longest cave on the continent. At least that's what a man in a mining outfit said, who was already giving a lecture to a small group of women, men and children.

D'Utrecht was not aware of being late. Such a thing didn't happen to him. Unsettled, he fingered his pocket watch from his vest, settled the monocle that dangled from a chain between the ancestral folds around his right eye, and checked the time. As expected, he was by no means late.

Of course he wasn't.

Although the lecturer could not see the newcomer behind him, d'Utrecht nevertheless surveyed him with a critically raised eyebrow. The jeweler didn't like to miss stories, no matter who was late or early. However, it better not be a random story. D'Utrecht's liking was down-to-earth in every way: He loved facts about stones, myths about treasures, speculations and rumors of every kind about excavations and rare finds—in short, anything that had to do with soil and, above all, with what was hidden beneath it. That was why he had thrown his travel plans out the window. That was why he had come to this place, to the opening of the Lamprechtofen.

A circular plain opened up in front of d'Utrecht. Planks had been laid across the floor of the cave, on which the guests had safe footing. From the group that listened to the person give his talk, a little girl turned to d'Utrecht. She looked bored, deliberately making herself heavy on the long arm of her father, who was holding her hand. She raised one leg up in the air in protest, so that she dangled almost all her weight in the adult's grip.

When she saw d'Utrecht standing in the cave entrance, she smiled. He did not smile back. It wasn't a nice smile, he thought. The girl was making fun of him, and it wasn't hard to figure out of what. She was looking at his shoes. Now d'Utrecht felt compelled to do the same. He didn't understand. These were brand new hiking boots, with all the works: high shaft to protect the

ankles, soles with a thick tread that gave the short man an unfamiliar elevated perspective as he walked, ...coarse leather, extra-long laces that d'Utrecht had had to tie several times around his calves. What was there to giggle about?

It eluded D'Utrecht that no one else wore this kind of gear. The other inaugural guests had on normal shoes. The odd dressed-up person even dared to wear patent leather shoes. In any case, no other footwear gave the impression that a summit climb was about to be tackled with them. The jeweler was clearly over-equipped for the short walk from the road to the cave. There were no natural obstacles inside to overcome this evening either. From the gathering place, a planked walkway complete with railings led deeper into the Lamprechtsofen, along the first section of the new tourist route.

It also eluded d'Utrecht that it wasn't just the sturdy boots that made the girl smile, but also the fashion higher up. D'Utrecht wore fine trousers, his indispensable vest with its countless visible and secret pockets, an expensive jacket and the top hat he needed to lift before his customers. To all intents and purposes, d'Utrecht looked in this peculiar getup as if he were two people: a fine gentleman who was missing his calves and feet—and a mountaineer who had lost everything above the knee.

D'Utrecht puffed contemptuously. He didn't like children. There was no particular reason for that. At least, that's what he would have said if someone had asked him about it. In fact, there was very much a reason for his aversion. It slumbered deep within the jeweler, undiscovered because d'Utrecht was too busy increasing his wealth and his collection of gems to investigate causes for things he disliked.

Children were allowed to dig in the ground as much as they liked. That was the reason. They played in sandboxes, dug holes on the beach, and when they found some worthless rock, the adults applauded them like idiots. D'Utrecht envied children for the freedom to stick their hands in the ground when and where they wanted. Oh, if he ever did that, on the beach or in a construction pit! There would be a shake of the head, at best, or a scolding from the other adults, maybe even incarceration, at worst...

He didn't quite know what to do with himself. D'Utrecht could talk like a waterfall, and read the faces of potential customers like an open book. Neither was any trouble for him—when he was selling. Here, however, he was just another guest. He had no intention of selling anything to anyone. This pretty much robbed him of any social skills he might have had. D'Utrecht dodged the small groups that had formed in the gathering area. He didn't want to talk, didn't want to engage in conversation. He would have preferred to have the cave and the upcoming opening of the tour to himself. But because this had not been possible in the short time available, d'Utrecht now had to mingle with the other curious people.

A makeshift buffet provided the jeweler with a temporary retreat. He examined the selection of thick sandwiches with all kinds of toppings, plus the two bowls of thin soup. Hearty, very much in the style of the region, d'Utrecht judged. He reached for a plate and filled it to the brim with snacks. It was less hunger that drove him than the prospect of stuffing his mouth for a good while. A feasible excuse for not wanting to engage in conversation at the moment! In his experience, this worked every time, and so d'Utrecht soon stood in this cave, too, munching away amidst the crowd of guests—and indeed remaining undisturbed.

A trumpeter blew a fanfare. D'Utrecht nearly choked on the last of his sandwich at the shrill triad, for he had not seen the musician until now. He now discovered the man behind him, standing on a small crate. He was wearing a kind of costume that d'Utrecht had seen quite often in this part of Austria. From the trumpet hung four knotted short ropes. They were the same colors as the costume, and they quivered as the musician successfully urged the small crowd to quiet down by playing a second fanfare.

One speaker thanked the trumpeter with a silent nod, whereupon the musician vacated his place on the box for the speaker. The man introduced himself and then took his time greeting all of the local luminaries in attendance. D'Utrecht hastily gulped down the last few mouthfuls of sandwich to listen more closely.

The speaker was the president of the Alpine Club. He was full of praising words and had a long note of acknowledgements in his hand. Some of the names on it matched the guests in attendance, who the speaker studiously searched for in the audience after each mention, so that they could get a brief round of applause. Others of the acknowledged were obviously not present. Indeed, too many enthusiastic people had supported the cause, the speaker explained enthusiastically: helping hands here, in the cave, some businesses from Lofen and Saalfelden, and of course some generous donors, without who the entire undertaking of the cave expansion would not have been possible. The speaker listed the latter separately.

D'Utrecht was positively startled when he heard his own name. He glanced up at the speaker on the box, aghast, but the latter was too busy reading out more names to take his eyes off his notes. After an overwhelmed moment, d'Utrecht realized that the speaker did not know him. On top of that, he probably assumed that d'Utrecht was not in the cave. He just kept on rattling through the list of financial supporters, ...with a smile on his lips.

The jeweler did not remember having given any money for the expansion of the Lamprechtsofen. It didn't mean that it wasn't so, anyway. Sometimes, especially after long evenings when d'Utrecht would retreat to his walk-in safe to study precious stones, the paperwork on his desk would become too much. He never managed to work through it all. The documents to be signed piled up, and somehow they also reminded the jeweler of a mine.

Better not to work off too much!

In any case, in his disinterest, the occasional payment statement sometimes slipped through his fingers. That is, now and then he put his signature down blindly. Among the unseen payments there might be things that he had whispered to his assistants at some point.

D'Utrecht wondered what exactly in this show cave he had paid for.

The speaker ended his acknowledgments with bow in three directions. The applause of the small crowd of guests broke on the cave walls, and quite formidably at that. A small stadium could hardly have rumbled louder.

Another fanfare of the trumpeter, then the people in the gathering area began to move. Everyone strove toward the waving arms of another man standing at the far end of the entrance court, on the first steps of a wooden staircase. A geologist, as it turned out. This man too greeted the guests solemnly as soon as they had gathered around him.

"Honored guests," he said, raising his voice. "It is my pleasure to now accompany you as the first visitors on our new tour."

The man's gentle baritone caressed the ears. This effect was undoubtedly owed more to the slight reverberation in the cave than to the timbre of the voice. At least such was d'Utrecht's verdict. He harbored a certain dislike for geologists. His profession meant that every now and then he ran into a representative of this science. They thought they were better than him, d'Utrecht suspected. No one had ever said it to his face, but the jeweler still suspected that they didn't take him seriously because he dealt in stones—instead of writing essays about them. And yet he not only understood more about jewels than all the geologists d'Utrecht had ever met. No, he knew everything about every kind of stone. There were rooms in his storehouses that his customers never saw. They were crammed to the ceiling with so many minerals that d'Utrecht could have turned them into a museum or into his own research facility.

Such things, however, were far from him. He kept his mouth shut about his possessions. He wanted everything for himself.

"Now, if you'll kindly follow me..." murmured the gentle baritone on the steps after a gleeful artificial pause.

Bah, geologists! D'Utrecht furrowed his brow and rolled his eyes. Someone pushed him forward from behind as the crowd of guests contracted into a tight cluster. A line had to be formed to get onto the walkway, which the geologist was now clearing. Or rather, he retreated inside the cave so that he constituted the very front of the nascent queue.

"Oh, just a minute!" the geologist suddenly exclaimed aloud. "I almost forgot now."

He stopped where he was and turned to address the guests. He grinned all over his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen..."

Gleeful artificial pause.

"Let there be light!"

D'Utrecht wanted to dismiss the theatrics with yet another eyeroll, but even he could not escape astonishment at what the geologist's cue words had triggered. A murmur went through the aligned crowd as countless colorful light bulbs began to flicker behind the geologist. They cast their light deep into the maw of the tour, looking like a fluttering swarm of fireflies.

It took a few seconds for both people and technology to compose themselves. The former then applauded, the latter stopped flickering and soon cast a steady glow of all sorts of colors on the stone surface.

"The miracle of electricity, ladies and gentlemen!" exclaimed the geologist triumphantly. He enjoyed the applause as if he had single-handedly hung each light bulb from the rocks.

D'Utrecht regained his composure. He had simply not expected the colorful illumination. There were so many lights that at first they seemed like a multicolored starry sky. The whirring of the electricity in the fixtures carried all the way to the end of the line where he stood.

The applause did not want to stop at all. D'Utrecht found this strange. Had these people never seen electric light before? He had to admit that it was no small feat to produce artificial lighting here in the middle of the forest—and in the bowels of a mountain at that. But in Vienna there were electric lamps in many of the good cafés, even in Salzburg, where d'Utrecht had lodged for the night.

They should calm themselves again, these people!

"As you can see, we have spared neither expense nor effort," the geologist continued from the front of the group. "This system is the first of its kind. We light the entire length of the tour electrically. You won't find this many light sources anywhere else, not in the valley, not in Salzburg..."

"How about New York?" someone shouted from the queue.

General amusement.

"Perhaps there, sir," admitted the geologist, clearly enjoying himself. He couldn't help but laugh. "The Lamprechtsofen and America—the world centers of light engineering!"

Applause and jeers sloshed back and forth among the boulders.

D'Utrecht missed the self-deprecating overtones in this dialogue. He wondered what was so funny that all guests in front of and behind him were grinning or patting each other on the back.

He suddenly felt even stranger in this place than he already did. Ever since the girl had laughed at him because of his boots, d'Utrecht had lost the enthusiasm with which he had laced those very boots a few hours ago. He had imagined it all very differently. Emptier, with less shoving and less hoopla. All D'Utrecht wanted was to get inside the cave.

As deep as possible.

Once the stirrings of the joke had subsided, the queue on the narrow walkway began to move. D'Utrecht followed the wandering group.

The colored lights were everywhere. D'Utrecht saw green, yellow, red, even blue glowing bulbs. The green ones reminded him of Demantoid, maybe Peridot. They lacked the deep coloration of emeralds. As for the yellow bulbs, the jeweler thought of Sapphires, and as for the red ones, Citrine, because they too shimmered wanly, in this case too luminously for a Ruby. The blue ones reminded d'Utrecht of Topaz...

And then again, they didn't. He scowled as he followed the beaded string of guests, lost in thought. The planks wobbled slightly under the steady pace of the many feet. While the other visitors gazed on all sides at the rocks in the gaudy glow, d'Utrecht could not take his eyes off the bulbs. It was not a pretty sight. Precisely, it was the reason for his displeasure! Now d'Utrecht could place this uncomfortable feeling: all those colors may have reminded him of gemstones, but it was by no means by choice—nor was it beautiful. D'Utrecht had seen all kinds of precious stones. Some in bright daylight, most under

lamps and through a magnifying glass. Others in the dimmest of circumstances, both visually and in terms of their legality. In short, he knew the refractions, colorations, and reflections of these gems inside and out. He knew their countenance better than his own face.

These bulbs here mocked the beauty of all the jewels that crossed d'Utrecht's mind. They were cheap, though no doubt expensive to buy. What a circus! D'Utrecht became silently enraged at the clumsy effect, of which the Alpine Club was probably not even aware. What had caused the murmur a few minutes ago, the amazement on everyone's part? No one reacted with awe to a few colors! No, d'Utrecht knew that in all who were present the warm glow of the earth was deeply rooted. This luminous pomp was reminding these people of the beauty of the minerals. Of the shining treasures beneath the crust that were far too unappreciated—except by him.

D'Utrecht had always resented the fact that his contemporaries could spend hours gazing at the stars, but hardly anyone would appreciate the beauty beneath their feet. Here now it was the same story: this walk seemed to the other guests like an enchanted path under a colorful firmament. D'Utrecht could read it in their faces.

Wrong!

It flipped everything on its head. Humans don't appreciate the play of colors on account of what crawls and flies, d'Utrecht knew. Let alone because of what hangs above them. Humans recognize the ground again, the ground under their feet. This backdrop here recalled to people, buried deep within them, the true beauty that lay hidden beneath such rocks as these....

The jeweler gasped so noisily that the woman in front of him turned to look. This snapped d'Utrecht out of his internal tirade. He cleared his throat, put on a harried smile, and waved her off.

The woman turned back in the direction her legs were pulling to.

Where was he again? D'Utrecht had lost his train of thought. The anger that had just been simmering was lost. He no longer sensed what he was getting at. It didn't seem to matter to him now, because he had to confront

himself: Shouldn't he know better? What was he doing comparing the glowing threads on their electric strings to precious stones? It was an insult to the proudly shimmering little worlds, as he preferred to call them. Thousands of years and cubic meters of the past were compressed, compacted, even preserved, to the point of inconceivability in every single jewel. And he? D'Utrecht had tried to match pale artificial light to the natural glow of emeralds, topazes and rubies. No, not tried, but dared!

The jeweler was ashamed now.

Luckily for him, the procession slowed down. The rhythmic rocking of the planks subsided. The geologist in the lead had stopped at a bend. One by one, the obedient followers joined him. At this particular spot, the narrow walkway widened into a space not unlike the entrance area. Here, there was not only room enough for the guests to gather again in a cluster around the geologist, but there were also a few display boards.

"Our first stop, dear guests," announced the geologist.

D'Utrecht was one of the last to catch up to the pack of people. He could barely see the geologist, as taller women and men stood listening ahead of him —all in outstretched postures.

"Where are we right now?" the geologist asked mysteriously.

"Lamprechtsofen!" someone shouted the correct answer.

The geologist nodded.

"And why does the Ofen bear that name, of all things?" he followed up. "Well, any volunteers?"

"Because of the knight!" it came yelling from somewhere.

"Quite right, of course," the geologist gloated. "This cave complex is named after the knight Lamprecht. robber-knight, to be exact! Whether he really existed is not verified historically, but that doesn't diminish the legend."

The geologist now pointed to one of the display boards, whereupon the guests standing right next to it promptly tried to read the text in the dim light. They listened to the geologist only half-heartedly. However, the man cared little about that. He continued to explain excitedly.

"Who knows of the legend of the knight Lamprecht and his treasure?" he asked the group with a tone of superiority. A man next to d'Utrecht raised his hand curtly, but was ignored by the questioner.

"It is said that the knight accumulated considerable wealth throughout his life," he continued. "Bear in mind, dear guests, that in the Middle Ages robbing was an honorable profession—at least with the title of knight under your belt. Lamprecht, according to legend, went on many forays, which not only made him rich, but also provoked envy. And what did one do in the Middle Ages when one had to fear for one's possessions?"

"Hide them!" shouted the man next to d'Utrecht. He had learned his lesson, and this time didn't even bother to raise his hand.

"And where?"

"In the Lamprechtsofen!" the guests roared in unison.

Everyone laughed. Everyone except d'Utrecht. To him, this question-and-answer game reminded him of dressage.

"Dear guests, here under this mountain Lamprecht is believed to have hidden his treasure. Is it so? Or is it legend? To this day, no one has found the treasure. But believe me, ladies and gentlemen, many have tried!"

D'Utrecht listened to the geologist as best he could. His thoughts were racing, so he had to keep reminding himself to prick up his ears. He did not doubt that the robber-knight had existed. And he was sure that the treasure wasn't a figment of the imagination, either.

It did not make sense. He had no proof, on the contrary, had never heard of this legend....

"There is record of a search in 1701," the geologist continued his paused speech. "Nothing was found then, but that didn't stop adventurers from visiting the cave again and again. We must not forget that the extent of the Lamprechtsofen was not properly explored until the middle of the last century. Even today we have not reached its end! So, 200 years ago, those who searched for new passages, caves and inclusions quickly found what they were looking for—just not as far as gold and jewels were concerned..."

D'Utrecht listened up.

"So many people came to look for the treasure that authorities had to intervene. They walled up the entrance without further ado. The very entrance, ladies and gentlemen, through which you have passed today. It goes without saying that the soldiers of fortune were not deterred. Soon another breakthrough was cleared with pickaxes, and the treasure hunt continued."

Here the geologist paused briefly to make a—no doubt carefully rehearsed—serious face.

"...Far too often with a grisly ending. Those who made their way home with dashed hopes could count themselves lucky in those days. Already 200 years ago, 14 skeletons were found in the depths of the Lamprechtsofen. People like you and me, who paid for their lust for adventure, ...or should I say greed? Who paid for their greed with their lives. Beyond our tour, the sites are marked with crosses—widely scattered, in remote side arms and ravines of the cave, yet some not as far from here as you might think..."

The whimpering of a child was heard, accompanied by a soothing whisper. A few of the guests giggled. D'Utrecht hoped the whimpering came from the girl who had laughed at him.

The geologist continued unapologetically.

"So I advise you, dear guests, not to get any foolish ideas. Stay on our magnificent walkway. Stay with me. Don't wander away from the group, and don't you dare think that old Knight Lamprecht might have hidden his treasure just for you!"

Smirks and some amused murmuring seized the group. The geologist had finished his first lecture of the tour. He took the lead of the pack once again, and marched on ahead.

The rhythmic swaying of the planks soon resumed.

D'Utrecht gave up his spot in the line. He now dropped back to the very end of the wandering queue. He was not feeling well. Of course, he knew that the geologist had told his scary story for effect. A little creepiness helped the mood, and indeed the group now moved along more quietly and attentively

than at the beginning of the tour, when the tipsy mood of the gathering had struggled to dissipate. And yet, the story of the treasure hunters became entangled in d'Utrecht's mind like a helpless fly in a spider's web. The words of the geologist stuck like glue in the jeweler's head. His inner voice recited the anecdote incessantly, as if there were something to be discovered in it of which d'Utrecht had only the slightest inkling.

Fourteen people had not returned from that cave? D'Utrecht imagined that they had taken the same path as he through the forest, only decades earlier, centuries even. He had stepped through the same entrance today as they had. And now he walked comfortably on wooden planks through the bowels of the mountain as if he lived here. No climbing, no tedious searching in the dark. They hadn't had any electric frippery then, d'Utrecht thought. Had they come with candles? With torches, more likely.

Yes, they had had torches. Except for the third one...

D'Utrecht stumbled. Clumsy! Why was he so clumsy today? The last person in line ahead of d'Utrecht was already quite a ways ahead, he noticed, as he took his hands off the railing and looked toward the group. No one had turned to look at him. No one had heard his slight stumble, though he underlined it with a subconscious curse.

He grasped the hem of his vest with all his fingers and pulled the garment vigorously into place. D'Utrecht walked on, with a firm step. He wanted to close the distance, to not become a laughingstock in case he came in late like an old man at the group's next stop. As if he couldn't keep up! As if even this slight ascent would be too much for him. Moreover, why was he going up the whole time? D'Utrecht had expected to go downhill, into the depths. Nobody had told him that this cave went up into the mountain.

Absurd! And another disappointment....

D'Utrecht dragged himself along. He walked hunched and awkwardly, as if he still had to practice how to walk. There was nothing wrong with his body, though. The head simply commanded all available attention away from the limbs. He had to work on two thoughts that were very slow to fully

develop. The first of these was clearer than the other. It already carried a certain authority because it was more mathematical in nature. The second was more of a hunch waiting for something. Either way, together, both thoughts were reasonably uncanny, in an overwhelming sort of way. D'Utrecht tightened as he walked, like a mouth biting into a lemon. He didn't want to admit to himself that either thought existed. But that was a dilemma, a contradiction in terms. To ignore a thought meant that it existed. D'Utrecht could not change that. And what's more, he had two of them at once. He couldn't stop them from ripening into their full implications.

It was not fourteen people who had died here, but fifteen.

That was the first of the two thoughts. A fact, rather. At least, that's what the ecstatic whirring in d'Utrecht's head claimed. It did not stop repeating this correction to the geologist's figure. Fifteen treasure hunters who had failed to find their way out. He knew it for a fact. And as d'Utrecht reached the next bend in the walkway in his cramped trudge, the second thought also found the encouragement it had been lacking to also emerge fully formed from d'Utrecht's suppressed musings.

Beyond the narrow gap in the rock, there in the bend beyond the footbridge, a cross had been left for one of the fifteen dead. It bore no name because no one had known the man's identity. But d'Utrecht knew it had been the fourth adventurer.

And he knew his name.

For a second time, the jeweler tripped. This time he did not manage to get up again immediately. Rather, he stumbled forward a few more steps, reaching in vain for the railing, and then knelt down, exhausted. A shiver went through d'Utrecht: his muscles tightened, goose bumps appeared on his arms from one second to the next, sweat trickled down his forehead. Even in the glow of the red light bulb near which he had stopped, his face looked as pale as chalk.

It didn't stop at the name. The released thoughts didn't give d'Utrecht's startled body a single instant to recover. They were old, too old. And because

of that, they felt foreign, as if they shouldn't belong to d'Utrecht. As if they weren't right.

Yet they carried a clarity—a brilliance, almost—that d'Utrecht could not deny. He knew the name of the third lost man. He remembered the year when the man had gone alone into the depths of the Lamprechtsofen. He felt the fall that had broken the treasure hunter's ankle. It had happened much higher up, and the man had spent days trying to find his way out, limping on one leg. Here, beyond the gap, he had first run out of strength, and later out of hope.

D'Utrecht mustered all his strength. He rose from his kneeling position, although this caused him a sudden searing pain in his left ankle. Stars flashed before his eyes, which d'Utrecht furiously shook from his mind. As soon as he could see clearly again, he looked for the group.

It was now barely visible. Most of the guests had already disappeared around another bend in the walkway. D'Utrecht recognized only a handful of them in the glow of the lights.

He wanted to get moving. He wanted to catch up, to kick the madness out with his legs. But they didn't do what d'Utrecht expected them to.

They were going in the wrong direction.

It took only two steps and a bold swing under the railing before d'Utrecht had left the plank path and was suddenly standing in front of the gap in the rock. He pulled his stomach in as best he could and squeezed sideways through the breach. There was an ominous scraping against one cheek as he did so, not to mention the ripping fabric noises in his back and down his hips.

D'Utrecht squeezed all the air out of his body. One last, labored step sideways, then he fell to the floor on the other side of the gap.

It was pitch black here. D'Utrecht literally could not see his hand before his eyes. He tried. But all he saw was impenetrable blackness. Not even being able to see himself upset d'Utrecht's inner balance—what was left of it. It' s one thing when the world around you suddenly behaves differently, when it moves, begins to turn. It's quite another when it disappears without warning. D'Utrecht heard his heartbeat. The dull throbbing boomed in his ears and

became faster and faster. He clutched his chest, relieved that he could at least still feel himself. With the crossing of the crack, d'Utrecht had fallen into a void of lightlessness. He felt completely detached, almost helplessly at the mercy of disorientation. It had taken any reference away from him. He felt like an anchorless drifting ship, except that sailors in such distress could at least still see the sea. Wherever they drifted, the sea would still be below them, the sky above their heads. D'Utrecht didn't even have that. Up could be down, directions did not exist. He could just as well have been flying...

...or falling.

Forgotten was the gratuitously aching ankle of a moment ago. D'Utrecht stretched out his arms to feel something. He spun around on the seat of his pants, and it was only this that brought his frenetic storm of emotions somewhat to a halt. He felt the rocky ground beneath his buttocks. Then his eyes finally caught something, too: a red dot came into his field of vision. Even before he understood what it was all about, d'Utrecht scrambled toward the dot. The reddish glow became an arc; d'Utrecht thrust his hands against the rock on either side of the gap through which he had squeezed. Then he rammed his forehead against stone.

He had not been paying attention. The fear of the unbounded darkness was just that, a fear. The structure of the Lamprechtsofen didn't care. The rock was exactly where it had been for eons. The advancing brow of a confused creature had to comply, no matter what was going on just behind it. The stone edges of the passage to the circular walkway did not make room for the skull. D'Utrecht had to acknowledge this with an agonized groan.

He fell backward. Away from the red light of the bulb on the other side. Time seemed to stand still while he was losing his balance. He knew he was going to land hard on his back. He waited for it. And that felt scary. Ahead of him, he could still see the red arc of light. D'Utrecht was literally studying it as his body flipped over backwards in agitation. As if something had snapped the jeweler out of his stride for a moment so that he could feel the full extent of what was happening to him.

He fell.

The impact rivaled d'Utrecht's worst fears. There was a cracking in his bones as his back hit the uneven ground. Slamming into a pavement at full force could break anything if people were unlucky. D'Utrecht didn't have the luxury of a hard but level surface. Under his back were small, pointed hills and bulbous valleys, rugged edges to boot. They maltreated his flesh like nothing ever had before.

But d'Utrecht did not scream.

Instead, a rattling breath left him, sounding as if it took all the life of the prone figure with it—out into the world and determined never to return.

Silence settled behind the rift.

No one came to look for him. This d'Utrecht understood as soon as he finished processing the various pains and listening, fascinated, for the escaped breath. He harkened into the mountain. If he tried hard, he could hear very faint voices. Or could he not? The group had moved on, but the remnants of their chatter echoed through the cave passage. D'Utrecht held his breath to hear better.

Nothing now.

There was no chatter. Maybe he had misheard, maybe the rushing blood in his head was playing tricks on him. It didn't matter to him. D'Utrecht stretched out on the bare rock. His body basically mimicked his state of mind by doing so. Everything seemed to evaporate, to relax beyond recognition: d'Utrecht forgot about his travel plans, forgot about the arduous journey to Lamprechtsofen, forgot about his surprise at having apparently donated money to the Alpine Club. He forgot what had overwhelmed him so much just a few minutes ago that he had fled through the gap.

Something in him gave up something. Only all at once d'Utrecht lacked any impulse to wonder what it was.

He stretched his arms and legs as far away from him as he could. Then he rolled sideways down the cave floor, deeper into darkness. At least, he tried to. The arms instantly hit rock and got in the way of the rolling momentum. In

addition, protruding boulders pierced d'Utrecht's calves, knees and thighs. His hip got caught on something.

Another disappointment—the biggest of them all.

This body didn't want to roll. Yet it was made for it. D'Utrecht had been round-bodied since childhood. Besides, he wasn't tall. He felt like he fit perfectly in this dark shaft. And he really expected to be able to traverse it horizontally. There was a vague feeling that assured d'Utrecht he could glide through the bowels of the earth the way other people dive through water.

He tried again. This time, d'Utrecht rolled a little farther, spun around a few times, inadvertently leaving shreds of his pants behind him. Then he hit his skull against a stone ledge.

This body did not want to roll.

In the past, d'Utrecht had mastered it, this gliding through solid ground. Behind the curtain of tears and blood that now covered his eyes, d'Utrecht was sure. He remembered. Not a particular moment or place, but the feeling when ore gave way before him, when rich, dense clouds in the underground willingly yielded to him.

He stood up. On foot, then, if there was no other way. The acrid haze of liquids in his eyes bothered d'Utrecht, and he wiped it away with his sleeve every few yards. He could see in the dark now. With each step, his eyes became more accustomed to the shaded palette of nocturnal blackness.

The corridor in which d'Utrecht found himself grew increasingly narrow. Soon his shoulders bumped against the rock to his left and right. But the passage led downward, and that was where d'Utrecht was drawn.

When he bumped into a pocket in the rock that had room for several people, he didn't hesitate for a second. He stood as if in a giant glove, from which five other shafts branched off like they were its bulging fingers. D'Utrecht felt his way forward and disappeared through the second shaft from the left without even slowing his step.

This was where the twelfth man had gone when he had searched for the robber-knight's treasure more than 90 years ago. D'Utrecht remembered this

name, too. He felt himself transported back to the emaciated body that had hoped until the very end to save itself. And he could feel the numbness on his tongue that the man had not noticed just before he died.

Where the cross for the dead man had been cut into the rock, d'Utrecht took a knee. He had none of the helmet lamps with which the cavers had been able to illuminate the spot. He could only feel the wood between his fingers.

A faint sigh reached his ears. It had to be d'Utrecht's own, because he felt morose in light of the memory. Still, it seemed alien to him. The sounds his body had been making for decades no longer wanted to sound familiar. He still felt the skin of the emaciated under his clothes. When he swallowed, he felt an echo in his esophagus. It wanted to burst out of him....

D'Utrecht reached for the cross. He jerked at it in exasperation, but it wouldn't budge. Frustrated, he kicked at the wood, missed, and hit the rock wall behind the cross with the toe of his shoe.

It was enough. Everything was enough.

D'Utrecht ripped off his jacket. It caught on the top of the cross while d'Utrecht was already heaving himself further down the shaft. Now he was walking blindly, for he pressed his hands against his temples as he walked until this hurt him more than the ankle and the tip of the foot he had just maltreated. It was not the only reason why his eyes were useless. They played tricks on him. One moment they lied to d'Utrecht about him carrying a torch. The next, they saw an underground river in front of them, which didn't exist here—but several hundred yards away, uphill. Then again they turned to look for the two companions whom the eighth dead man had begged until his last hour not to leave him alone.

Another crack opened up in front of him, this time in the floor. It was as wide as a basement staircase, but instead of steps it had only precipitously sloping rock. D'Utrecht remembered that the eleventh dead man had taken the crevice in a jump before his demise. It had not been difficult. All one had to know was that it existed, the gap in the ground. And d'Utrecht did.

Nevertheless, he dropped headfirst into the hole.

It was the kind of fall that didn’t necessarily cost a life. Children sometimes got away with scrapes from that height. Middle-aged gentlemen, like d'Utrecht, on the other hand, had to brace themselves for some broken bones if they challenged gravity like that. D'Utrecht would have been fine with it. He just wanted peace of mind. And if he couldn't get that, then at least a pain that couldn't be remembered away as easily as the previous ones.

For the last time that day, he was disappointed. D'Utrecht spun in the air so effortlessly and unintentionally that he landed on all fours on the damp floor of the shaft. He did not bounce, he did not slump. A cat could not have caught itself more elegantly.

And then such emotions as joy, surprise, confusion—and in fact disappointment—left him. He remained in his stance on all fours until his head was emptied. The memories, which until then had been but loose patches of a tapestry that he had been unable to weave, slowly withdrew. They virtually slid to the edges of his consciousness and then disappeared silently, without any struggle for their existence. They had served their purpose...

In what was left of d'Utrecht's mind now, one truth screamed for attention: that there might be fifteen skeletons in the rocky bowels of the Lamprechtsofen, but not fifteen different people.

It had been him. He had been them.

All of them.

The truth screamed itself raw in a head that answered it only with a disinterested, hollow resonance. An echo like that of an abandoned warehouse. Unheard, the truth soon gave up wanting to be the center of attention. And as soon as it surrendered to its ignored fate, life was restored in d'Utrecht's limbs. They turned into independent entities.

With the posture of a spider missing half of its legs, d'Utrecht's body crept deeper into the cave. He no longer made a sound. Only the occasional crunch of rubble revealed that a living creature was pushing its way through the voids in the rock. It moved patiently forward, finding no obstacle it could not overcome. No dead end, no passage through which the body would not

fit. It moved through the bowels of the Lamprechtsofen as through a house in which it could sleepwalk in perfect safety.

At some point, the body had enough and stopped. It maneuvered on all fours until its back fit perfectly into a hollow in the stone wall. Then the arms and legs let the rest of the body sink gently to the side. The eyes closed.

***

Dreaming or waking? Most of the time this question is easy to answer. But who doesn't know it, the gnawing confusion when the lines become blurred? When for once it's impossible to tell what belongs on which side. When thoughts seem too clear to be the gossamer of a mind at rest. And yet something is wrong. Things happen that seem strangely familiar, yet completely unimaginable. They tumble about, in a senseless concatenation of scenes. Sometimes the dreaming soul overdoes it, so that a seed of doubt is sown in the sleeping mind. Then it looks for evidence that it is not awake, that it is in a fantasy world, because what it has experienced cannot be real. They say that they exist, such proofs: Nobody can see unfamiliar faces in dreams, allegedly. Those who sleep only see people they know, never strangers. Or the clock trick: Those who don't know whether they are awake or dreaming should look for a clock. In the dream it will never show a definite time, have no visible hands, ...be indecipherable for some reason.

There was neither in what took place in the mind's eye of d'Utrecht. No clock, nowhere, though he felt an almost oppressive sense of lost time. Nor were there any faces he could check. Everything around him was a blur. He moved like a paintbrush through random colors on a mixing palette—a brush wielded by someone without the slightest idea of what was to be painted.

Maybe it wasn't a scene in his mind's eye after all. Maybe he really was awake. After all, he wasn't sure of one or the other. That counted for something. Where there is doubt, there cannot be complete stupor.

So thought d'Utrecht.

And then something caught his eye in the mixture of colors that inevitably ran into each other. There was a yellow dot that eluded the chaotic hustle and bustle. The dot stayed where it was. Its yellow glow established itself as a fixed star before d'Utrecht's gaze—regardless of whether he was dreaming or actually saw the dot with his own eyes. What's more, the fact that the dot so stoically held on to its position and that the brilliant yellow refused to be tinted by the other colors had an effect on the whole scene: The remaining colors wafted more and more slowly around the dot, as if they didn't want to touch it. Weren't they also fading? D'Utrecht saw the contrast between the yellow dot and the circling patches of color grow. They lost strength, outlines against each other. Soon they were hijacked at the edges by a darkness that moved step by step over the now unsaturated remnants of the world of color. Only the dot was spared. It became, on the contrary, even richer, brighter. It began to blind d'Utrecht.

When the yellow dot started to grow, it spooked d'Utrecht. He wanted to back away, to elude it. But he did not move. He couldn't. He felt no barrier in his path, nor did he get any feedback from his arms or legs as to why they were not responding to his sense of flight. He was granted no explanation at all. He felt nothing physical, as if he were not made of flesh and bone at all. Only the bright light he perceived.

Then the dot made noises.

At first they were so quiet that d'Utrecht could not place them. Then he heard a hollow patter. It had a rhythm. Not a perfect one, because sometimes the pause between two pats lasted longer, while at other times it sounded almost hurried. But a rhythm it was, and it clearly had something to do with the yellow dot. The latter continued to grow. Not only did it grow larger, but it no longer seemed to hang stiffly in the formerly colored firmament. Now

d'Utrecht found that the yellow glow did move through the darkness it had created. It took him a few moments to understand the barely perceptible pattern. With each of the pattering sounds, the dot twitched a little to the side. Sometimes it twitched to the left, sometimes to the right.

When the dot had grown so large that it completely occupied d'Utrecht's field of vision, the sounds stopped. Like a sun, the yellow dot now hung in front of d'Utrecht. It appeared to have reached its destination.

"That hurts!" said d'Utrecht.

He could hardly believe his ears. The words had come out of his mouth with no thought. That was about right, d'Utrecht knew. The light burned in his eyes, and indeed he wanted it to stop. He was not sorry for his words. They just sounded so not like himself. They hardly sounded human at all, more like a stuttering chatter. The syllables had crept slowly over his lips, or rather, had been thrust forcibly out of his mouth, as if his teeth presented a nearly insurmountable hurdle. He would not have understood the sentence itself if its content had not sprung from his own mind.

But the yellow dot, which was now a sun, understood him.

"Better?" the dot asked.

The bright light jumped to the side. It landed on the floor opposite d'Utrecht's lying body. He wanted to retort something, to express his appreciation, but this time he couldn't produce a sentence.

"It's okay," the voice whispered. "You don't have to speak."

It didn't sound like a yellow dot. Nor did it sound like a sun. This voice belonged to a woman.

"The light is blinding you," she continued. "Why don't you close your eyes again, just for a second?"

D'Utrecht followed the suggestion with relief. Only after he closed his eyes did he realize how exhausting it had been to keep them open before.

"Good, you' re doing great."

Suddenly, d'Utrecht felt a hand on his cheek. It felt warm, not to say hot. This puzzled him. How could anything in this cave be so warm?

There it was. The Lamprechtsofen! The stubborn tug-of-war between waking and dreaming was brought into motion with this last thought. He was in a cave, wasn't he? This had not been a dream.

"Where..." he stammered. His throat hurt as he did so.

The hand began to stroke his cheek, and it felt harsh. It couldn't be the fingers. D'Utrecht imagined them delicate and sweet-smelling. The rough feeling came from his own skin. It ached a little under each gentle caress.

"Where we are?" the voice helped out.

"Yes," d'Utrecht answered, having failed in his attempt to simply nod. His neck was as hard as stone.

"Don't you know?"

"...Cave..."

"That' s right!" the voice acknowledged.

"I thought...," d'Utrecht followed up with a clearing of his throat that made it easier for him to speak. "I thought I was dreaming."

"You were! But now you're awake."

"Am I?"

The person that was behind the voice did not answer with words. D'Utrecht felt her second hand gently slide between the rocky ground and his other cheek, so that his head now lay secure between both warm hands.

"Try again," the voice suggested. "Open your eyes, slowly. Just a little."

It was good advice. Immediately, d'Utrecht saw the yellow dot of light again, but without being blinded. He kept his eyes narrowed to a squint. He couldn't make out much this way, but he now understood that the yellow dot must be a lamp. It no longer shone directly in his face, but rested where his feet must be. From this position it cast its light into the surroundings. And d'Utrecht studied everything that appeared in the yellow glow.

He saw shoes, ankles and black fabric above. The woman, whose hands held his head carefully, squatted in front of him. D'Utrecht tried to look up at her, to see her face. That hurt, too, though this time his neck wouldn't deny him service. It only cracked twice. D'Utrecht groaned loudly.

"Wait!" the voice said.

The shoes moved. At first, d'Utrecht didn't understand what was happening. He heard scraping sounds and the crackling of rubble. Then the yellow light from the lamp became dimmer. The woman lay down facing d'Utrecht, like a counterpart to his curled-up body. She placed her face opposite his, without removing her hands from his cheeks for even a split second during this procedure.

Only now could he see her face. It was so beautiful that it took d'Utrecht's breath away. He gulped, and the compressed air in his throat raged like a chimney sweep's wire-covered ball in a crusted chimney. D'Utrecht was unnerved beyond measure. He closed his eyes again, still not fully convinced that he was no longer dreaming.

How could anyone be so beautiful? So beautiful that the first glance had been enough to convince d'Utrecht that he would never see a more beautiful person. So beautiful that such a verdict came easily to him even underground, in the discoloring glow of a single lamp.

So beautiful that he found it uncanny. Perhaps that was why he had quickly averted his gaze.

"Look at me!" the voice begged.

It too was beautiful, d'Utrecht now noticed. The voice did to his ears what the protective, warm fingers did to his cheeks: It soothed him. He could not have resisted it, even if he had wanted to.

D'Utrecht mustered up courage. He looked a second time into the woman's face.

"Am I dead?" he asked—not knowing where that thought came from.

"You're not. You're never going to die again, do you understand?"

"What...?"

"Haven't you had enough of it?" came the counter question.

D'Utrecht had had enough. The memory of the crosses under the mountain popped back into his head. He shuddered.

"I died here..." he heard himself say.

"In this cave?"

"Fifteen times," he whispered.

Now the woman looked at him seriously. She studied his face as her fingertips caressed d'Utrecht's head.

"Fifteen times?" she repeated.

Blurting out the truth like that amazed d'Utrecht enough, anyway. He was even more amazed that the woman didn't seem to find this confession strange. Her expression was concerned, but not for his mental state. She believed him. The concern was about him. She had compassion.

"Why did you come back here so often?" she asked.

"The treasure...," d'Utrecht murmured. "I wanted to find it."

Now she smiled.

"What?"

"Of course you wanted to," the woman explained gently. "I see. It's you. It's really you!"

D'Utrecht fell silent.

"Mammon!" the woman said.

It was like a whispered storm, at once gentle and full of irrepressible force. The breath that bore that name reached d'Utrecht's face. He felt it on his skin. Immediately his nerves twitched. They gave orders to the whole body as if they were startled generals. The stony feeling in his throat dissolved into pleasantness. The cracking neck regained suppleness. Even the peculiarly rugged texture on his cheeks felt less rough all at once.

A long-drawn groan left d'Utrecht's recumbent body. He stretched from his contracted posture to full length, so that other joints he hadn't even thought about until now mimicked the spontaneous healing of his neck.

"Say that it is you," the woman begged when a sense of calm had returned to d'Utrecht's body.

"Mammon," d'Utrecht whispered. "I would say I don't know the last time anyone said that name to my face..."

"But you do!"

D'Utrecht nodded.

"I do know. I know when it was. And everything that happened in the meantime, up to the present day."

There was a stirred relief in the smile the woman now gave d'Utrecht.

"I have found you, Mammon!" she said.

"It was you, my king," d'Utrecht continued.

"Your...?"

Those features were so beautiful, so proud, so immensely full of confidence, that d'Utrecht was sure of it. He would have recognized it anywhere. And in any shape. Thousands and thousands of faces he had seen, many more. They could not hide after which example they were formed. But none was even remotely similar to this one.

"My lord and king!"

She shook her head.

"I am not him," she whispered urgently, downright frightened by the mix-up that was obvious to her.

"But..."

D'Utrecht did not understand. For a moment they were both silent. The lamp at their feet began to flicker.

"Then who are you?"

"Call me Amelia."

That name was of no help. D'Utrecht didn't know it, couldn't connect it to any of the high-ranking companions who might have been looking for him. His confusion was written all over his face. Amelia could see it. D'Utrecht, on the other hand, whose eyes still had not fully recovered from the dazzling glare, did not realize that the strange woman's cheeks were blushing.

"That's just a human name," d'Utrecht said. "Who are you really?"

"I am your way out, Mammon."

"I would have found the way on my own," d'Utrecht parried the evasion.

"Out of this cave? No doubt, you would have. No one loves the darkness as much as you do. No one has ever understood the structure of the ether like

Mammon. This Earth here is no match for you. But you and I have a more difficult road ahead of us than one through dirt and rocks..."

Gone was the blush on Amelia's cheeks that d'Utrecht had not even registered. The determination that now lay in the woman's words, on the other hand, he felt. It pierced him through marrow and bone. And yet again it reminded him of the one whose features were so eerily similar to hers.

"What do you mean?" he asked, transfixed.

"Your fight is not over!"

D'Utrecht had to let that sink in. Then he shook his head.

"We have lost Heaven," he objected, albeit submissively.

"...And you have received your punishments. You have lain in the chains of mortality for far too long."

"'You'?" interjected d'Utrecht.

"Someone had to wake you, Mammon," Amelia continued. She put two fingers to d'Utrecht's lips, as if to prohibit further inquiries, which she had no intention of answering anyway.

"The battle is lost," she said, "but this world, it was born from your defeat."

D'Utrecht's silence spoke volumes. The fingers resting on his mouth did not intimidate him. Nor had they been placed there for that purpose. Their gentle pressure was like a promise—one made wholeheartedly. They promised that things could be set right. And would be.

"Where is he?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," Amelia said.

She released her fingers from d'Utrecht's lips to caress his cheeks one last time. Then she slowly stood up, reached for the lamp, and held out a hand to d'Utrecht.

"We will look for him, Mammon. We'll find him, as I have found you."

He took her hand, and although she helped him to stand up, it wouldn't succeed properly. D'Utrecht had thought he had overcome the peculiar rigidity of his various body parts. However, he felt as if he were made of

granite instead of flesh and blood. So heavy! Everything about him was sluggish—not reluctant, but too timid to rise up quickly like Amelia.

He was embarrassed.

"I must have dozed off..." he murmured meekly.

Amelia said nothing. She squatted back down at d'Utrecht's side so that she could support him with both arms. He would have gladly dispensed with this help and rejected her hands. But he quickly found that he needed all the support he could get. The higher he stretched his back, the more leaden the vertebrae seemed to press against each other. D'Utrecht gasped with exertion.

"I'm all right!" he finally announced, with little credibility, as he stood fairly on his own two feet.

Amelia released him from her guiding hands. She reached for the lamp again and made her way unceremoniously back along the passage through which she had come. As she did so, she moved at a snail's pace until d'Utrecht slowly developed steady steps. Thus the two walked a short distance, shoulders hunched, Amelia's lamp lighting the way.

" You should go ahead from here," Amelia said, as the narrow passage widened to an oval recess in the rock as large as a dining table. Another passageway crossed here.

She held the lamp to d'Utrecht's face.

"I don't want to get lost," she added softly.

D'Utrecht took the lamp. It was only after a few minutes, as they struggled silently toward the exit, that he put his thoughts into words.

"Then how did you find me?" he asked without turning around.

"It's a long story..." whispered Amelia.

"I mean, yesterday I didn't even know myself that I would be leaving for the Lamprechtsofen today."

Amelia didn't answer right away. She considered his words.

"I've been looking for you for many years, Mammon. You are not the first one I have found. It's a big world..."

D'Utrecht puffed contemptuously, almost insulted.

"I know this must sound ridiculous to you right now," Amelia continued calmly. "Now that you've woken up, it all must feel small to you. Yet you would not want to trade places with me. You are shadows of yourselves, and before you awaken, little distinguishes you from humans. It is hard to find any trace of you..."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I've heard about you, over and over. And then I had you watched."

"There's no one down here but you and me," d'Utrecht said as he turned abruptly to Amelia. "I would know."

She nodded.

"Between stones, no one can fool you," Amelia smirked. "I came alone. The closer I got to you, the more I could feel you."

D'Utrecht cocked his head to the side in disbelief.

"That's my gift, Mammon. I just had to go deeper and deeper, to where it was pulling me. That's how I saw you lying. Only, for the way back, my gift is useless."

She didn't wait for a comment from d'Utrecht, but resolutely grabbed him by the upper arms and turned him around, like a child being set on the right path by an adult.

He obeyed the wordless instruction. D'Utrecht led Amelia through the darkness until they reached the gap beyond which lay the walkway for the visitors. Here d'Utrecht suddenly stopped.

" Have you seen them?" he asked Amelia quietly, as if he did not want to run the risk of being heard by someone after all.

"Seen? Who?" she asked back.

"The group," d'Utrecht explained. "We better not run into them. They're probably back at the entrance by now and the guests are all drinking away. Unless they're looking for me..."

It was plain to see in Amelia's face that she was turning thoughts back and forth in her head, like a dish in a pan that wouldn't cook properly.

"They're gone, Mammon," she eventually said. "There's no one there."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry!"

And with that, Amelia took the lead again. She walked through the gap, which was no obstacle to her. She pulled D'Utrecht behind her. He sucked in his stomach to be able to pass more gracefully through the narrow passage this time. To his surprise, he didn't have to sacrifice any fabric from his jacket or pants during this second round of squeezing. He fit through better than during his frantic escape from the walkway.

On the other side, they both climbed back onto the wooden gangplank. While Amelia walked directly toward the gathering area, d'Utrecht kept halting. He looked around in confusion. This passage looked different than he remembered. The colorful light bulbs were all turned off. Still, there was some light, for white glowing floodlights hung from the cave walls. D'Utrecht could have sworn that they hadn't been there earlier.

The walkway itself also kept attracting d'Utrecht's attention. Perhaps it was due to the different, white lighting that the wood looked different. Different, indeed! The planks didn't look nearly as new as when d'Utrecht had entered. They were darker, smudged with dirt, water stains, and countless marks left by shoes. In this light, even the railing didn't look like something the Alpine Club should be proud of. In some places splinters had come loose from the handrail. Some of the struts had even been patched.

D'Utrecht kept his eyes downward, on the planks. In his confusion, he doggedly followed Amelia until they reached the gathering area in the entrance cave. They exited the walkway and headed toward the maw that separated the Lamprechtsofen from the outside world.

Sunlight streamed in.

It blinded d'Utrecht beyond measure. He cursed under his breath and held an arm protectively over his face.

"It's okay, it's okay," Amelia encouraged him as she leapt to d'Utrecht's side.

"It's morning already?" he asked, alarmed.

"The sun just came up," Amelia replied.

They stepped out into the open.

"Then I've been asleep all night? It only felt like a moment..."

When d'Utrecht got no reaction from Amelia, neither a comment nor any other sign that she had heard him, he took his arm from his face again.

"What kind of guests were those you went into the cave with?"

Next to him, d'Utrecht recognized Amelia's face, beaming in the sunshine. It was expressionless. Her eyes bored right through him,

"Well, the guests!" he declared.

Her expression did not waver.

"The opening guests!"

"You were at the opening? Opening of what?"

D'Utrecht laughed with irritation.

"They finished the new tour for tourists yesterday. There were long speeches and palaver!"

Amelia responded mutely. She answered nothing to d'Utrecht's amused indignation, but took him in her arms.

"That wasn't yesterday, Mammon," she said in his ear, as if it were a dandelion that was destined to disperse if too much air pressure was applied. "That was a long time ago..."

"How long?" he heard himself say.

All of a sudden, D'Utrecht's legs wouldn't obey him. They went weak.

"This cave opened fifteen years ago, Mammon," Amelia whispered.

And with that, she withdrew the support of her embrace from him. D'Utrecht sank to his knees.

"Look at yourself..." she demanded.

There were green streaks on d'Utrecht's sleeves. When he touched them with his fingertips, the streaks felt slick. Where he had torn the fabric of his pants from squeezing and falling in his delirium, he saw yellowish, torn skin—with moss on it.

The mountains heard an exasperated outcry. And fabric, which d'Utrecht tugged at in disbelief, crumbled between his fingers.

The mountains heard an angry yowl as d'Utrecht discovered what was stuck to his face.

The mountains heard words of hatred as Amelia violently stopped d'Utrecht from fleeing back into the darkness.