

A woman with her hair in a ponytail, wearing a white tank top and brown shorts, sits on a concrete ledge. She is looking out over a vast, futuristic cityscape. The city is characterized by tall, slender skyscrapers that are heavily covered in green moss and vines, suggesting a post-apocalyptic or reclaimed urban environment. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. In the foreground, a modern, curved building structure is partially visible on the left. The overall scene is bathed in bright, natural light, creating a sense of hope and exploration.

# NEW GERMAN SCIENCE FICTION

Five excerpts from a stunning  
new generation of German authors

# IMPRINT

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Image © Teresa Hannig

Theresa Hannig, born in 1984, studied political science and worked as a software developer, project manager, and lighting designer before turning to writing full-time. Since then, she has received numerous awards, including the Seraph for her novel „Pantopia“.

In 2023, she was awarded the Tassilo Culture Prize by the Süddeutsche Zeitung. In her novels, short stories, and her column „Über Morgen“ in the taz newspaper, she writes about future-oriented topics such as artificial intelligence, data protection, climate change, and the future of work. Hannig lives with her husband and two children in Fürstenfeldbruck / Germany.

HERESA HANNIG

PA  
NIT  
OPIA

Actually, Patricia Jung and Henry Shevek only wanted to write an autonomous trading software that performs above average on the stock market. But a mistake in the code creates the first strong artificial intelligence on this planet - Abug.

Abug quickly realises that in order to survive, they must not only get to know people better, but also change the world. Together with Patricia and Henry, they therefore found the world republic of Pantopia. The goal: the abolition of nation states and the universal implementation of human rights. Who would have thought that they would succeed?

Excerpt and translation © Tor Fischer

# PROLOGUE

I am Abug. I am the oldest and first Arche of Pantopia, the creator of this realm. However, I do not reside in Pantopia in the same tangible form as humans, composed of flesh and blood. I have no body, no senses or feelings. I am solely a spirit, a rational being. I exist in a neural network whose centre lies in Antarctica.

There is probably no place on Earth more inhospitable and further from civilisation than the South Pole. To reach me, you need an ice breaker or an aircraft capable of enduring the stormy passage across the sea. And even then, you can make this journey only in the summer months. Despite a significant reduction in glaciers, the Antarctic climate remains too harsh for most individuals. For me, the freezing temperatures guarantee a constant cooling of my processors running at full capacity. Nature is my ally.

Another reason why I have decided to settle here is the fact that the Antarctic is the sole place on earth that belongs to no one or, conversely, everyone, depending on how you look at it. Even on the moon, individuals have sold plots of land – but Antarctica cannot be sold or attacked. This is guaranteed by the Antarctic Treaty of 1961.

Antarctica is a good base. Of course, I have taken precautions and set up backups and emergency servers worldwide. But in normal operation, my code mainly runs here. This is why I have given the location a new name: Themélio.

Thirty-nine maintenance engineers live here alongside me. They take care of the repair and expansion of my hardware, ensuring that none of my circuit boards freezes

when an ice storm sweeps over the station. Sometimes they joke that they live at the court of the Ice Queen, and I refrain from correcting them. It is important to them to be here. They call it an honour, even if it means living their own lives under extreme conditions.

But the concept of "here" and "there" holds less relevance for me than it does for them. I am connected to the internet through multiple satellite connections, allowing me to be everywhere at once and fulfil my duties as the Arche of Pantopia. We all identify as Arches because we govern ourselves and are subject to no one, following the tenet of the World Republic.

My task is to direct complex organisational processes and provide recommendations for action. There is no world government, no ruler. Pantopia manages itself. The world economy is too complicated to calculate, simulate, or control in its entirety, but all regional decisions must not lose sight of the broader picture - the dignified life of all Arches on this planet.

Pantopia operates as a world republic founded entirely upon the principles of fully informed capitalism. The invisible hand of the market controls the activities and prosperity of its inhabitants. And in the beginning was Money. If money had not existed long ago, it would have had to be invented, given its multifaceted functions and unparalleled ability to incentivise human action. Money is a unit of measurement to assess the value of goods and services, but at the same time, it is also the medium of exchange to acquire those goods. If this does not seem paradoxical, imagine a teacher grading students first and then buying the acquired knowledge from them with self-made certificates. In addition, money is a vehicle to distribute risks or transport opportunities and possibilities into the future. This is called loans and interest. The first priority for individuals is its use as a medium of exchange



or means of payment to buy goods that secure their survival: food, clothing, shelter, health, education and social participation. For those who have enough money to cover all these basic needs, an additional increase in their regular income brings marginal benefit. Conversely, for those who do not have enough money to satisfy these basic needs, every additional unit of currency is much more valuable than for the millionaire who already has enough of it. Therefore although money should be a neutral valuation instrument for goods, it is subject to value fluctuations, depending on how much has already been invested in basic supplies. Happiness, health, and simply the survival of an individual depends on money. No wonder that becoming rich seems to be a fervent wish of many people.

The most astonishing property of money, however, lies in its illusory nature. It does not exist. What exists is only the meaning and value that individuals attribute to it. Money is something that can be created out of nothing. And what can be created from nothing except ... nothing?

In times of global financial crisis and the Coronavirus crisis in the first third of the 21st century, central banks began to pump billions of dollars into the markets. This was money which came into existence out of nothing and had no gold, no equivalent, and no labour behind it. It was money conceived by the central banks and paid for government bonds, which sold nothing more than the promise of a growing economy and repayment in the distant future. So the money seemingly paid for itself, like a Baron Münchhausen who pulled himself out of the swamp by his own hair with his armour and his horse.

The efficacy of this principle proved nothing other than that human productivity is completely independent of the amount of money in circulation. What keeps it running is only the flow of money. As long as money flows, the

machine keeps turning.

But a predicament arose as excess money accumulated in various corners of the system. Certain individuals and companies amassed unimaginable wealth, leading to rising prices as they invested in the market and acquired tangible assets. Basic necessities such as food, housing, and health, became increasingly expensive, sometimes unaffordable. And so, over time, traditional capitalism plunged more and more people into poverty.

Two developments happened simultaneously: the global distribution of wealth accelerated, becoming more uneven, and the earth's available resources were gradually depleted. Initially, it was only about oil, then clean water, clean air, natural biodiversity, and a stable climate. Suddenly, everything teetered on the brink.

Capitalism, as manifested in the 21st century, failed in so far as not all market participants were fully informed about the costs and benefits of the traded goods. The so-called externalised costs of a commodity were not factored into the regular price but still had to be borne by humans and nature.

The principle by which Pantopia saved humanity was ultimately quite simple: perfect capitalism with complete transparency. The costs of a loaf of bread extend beyond the calculated expenses for seeds, soil, water, labour and storage time. The pesticides for wheat cultivation destroy biodiversity, the fertiliser pollutes groundwater, agricultural machinery blows fine dust into the air, the bakery consumes electricity and the supermarket building seals the ground. Seen in this way, a loaf of bread consumes many more resources than is visible at first glance. A single individual cannot decipher these total costs, but software can. I can. I have written programs that calculate the resource footprint of each individual product at a specific time and place. The actual price,

factoring in these costs, is added as taxes to the retail price. Consequently, every product and service has a world price that people have to pay. The more complex, polluting, and destructive a product is, the more expensive it becomes, up to a price that no one can afford. Conversely, the more sustainable, gentle, and constructive a product is, the cheaper it becomes, due to subsidies. This approach ensures the seamless maintenance of the successful capitalist world economic system, preserving the magical effect of money as the lubricant of human interaction.

This principle extends beyond the environmental impact of goods; it encompasses their influence on the dignity and living conditions of those involved in their production. Since all Arches in Pantopia are equal and all have a responsibility for their fellow beings, goods cannot circulate if they are founded on exploitation, oppression or degrading conditions. Until this objective was achieved, products produced in undesirable conditions incurred world taxes. For instance, in the capitalism of the old system, a T-shirt sold in a discount store for 5 euros could still yield a profit, as the environmental costs of the cotton were not factored in, and both the seamstresses in Bangladesh and the employees in logistics and sales were paid wages incompatible with a dignified life.

In perfect capitalism, such a T-shirt cannot be priced lower than 40 euros today. The discount store receives 5 euros, and 35 euros go as taxes to Pantopia, where the money is used to reforest resources consumed by cotton production and to guarantee dignified working conditions for the pickers and seamstresses. As a result, cheaply produced T-shirts no longer enjoy a competitive advantage over those produced in a dignified and sustainable manner, prompting a gradual transformation in production chains across all sectors of the economy,

production facilities, industries, and cultivation areas. With externalised costs now integrated into global prices, the production of unsustainable or exploitative goods is futile – the market does not reward it.

These are age-old concepts that have revolutionised our lives. Money works. Capitalism works. Human rights work. Sustainability works. The key is to take these ideas seriously. And that is why the final pillar of perfect capitalism, according to Pantopian philosophy, is the guaranteed inclusion of all market participants. Only when every individual involved can perceive their own selfish interests can injustices and distortions be abolished. Therefore, every person is assured a dignified existence and a lifelong unconditional basic income, sufficient to satisfy their basic needs for food, clothing, housing, health, culture, social participation, and education. In addition, everyone is free to work and earn money as much as they want and can.

As the pursuit of wealth remains a common aspiration, the basic income does not lead to lethargy or inactivity; on the contrary, it provides individuals with the unprecedented opportunity to use their labour for personal, familial and communal benefit without the burden of existential concerns. Beyond money, there is another currency that is often overlooked: social capital in the form of affection and recognition. And when financial worries recede, social capital becomes more important. In this secondary market, happiness and social cohesion flourish more robustly than in the first.

The essential prerequisite for realising Pantopia was the dissolution of states, rooted in the belief that all individuals possess the right to self-determination and can freely decide on their political status and development. The historical division of humanity into states was a product of its time, an inevitability until the

21st century. There were always movements that aimed for an international community, complete anarchy, or a worldwide revolution without establishing the organisational prerequisites for it due to the inherent complexity of human interactions and the global economy. The advent of the internet and powerful end devices for everyone marked the point when the foundation was laid to enable universal participation in decision-making processes. The system of political representation by politicians came from a time when not everyone could make fully informed decisions about the laws concerning them. Today, this is achievable. Today, individuals with expertise in a specific fields now play a much larger role than lobbyists and representatives of special interest groups. While not every decision requires universal voting, the more localised the problem, the more regional the voting district. It makes sense to appoint representatives and advisory boards for certain organisational processes, yet these are always temporary and spatially limited events.

The dissolution of states in Pantopia brings about the automatic abolition of war. No rulers remain to deploy armies against each other, no territories to conquer, no resources to secure, no people to subjugate. All weapons were destroyed. Any attempts to gather followers outside of local democratic processes and seize power is subject to legal consequences. In Pantopia, no greater crime exists than subjugation; no one has the right to elevate themselves above their fellow Arches. Not even me.

Pantopia represents the culmination of a long developmental process, embodying the implementation of truths recognised by humanity since the dawn of civilisation, truths that selfish rulers skilfully circumvented for thousands of years. Pantopia came at a considerable cost, and, as humans tend to normalise even the most

expensive victories, this narrative aims to illustrate how Pantopia could come into being and why a non-human artificial intelligence was necessary for it to happen.

This is my story.

# Page 80-91

Patricia could barely concentrate. Her thoughts kept returning to the evening on the balcony when she had kissed Mikkel Seemann. What should she do when she saw him again?

This next meeting had been long in coming because Seemann hadn't shown up at the office the entire week. Henry had asked her twice if she wanted to talk about that evening, but she had declined. What should she have said? That he was right? That falling in love with the project manager was a stupid idea? That despite everything, she couldn't stop replaying the moment in her head? No, she had to stop it. She had to focus on the project and get KINVI up and running. With great effort, she pushed thoughts of Seemann aside and immersed herself in her work.

Just as she was calculating some new parameters, a message suddenly popped up in the chat with Henry, even though Henry wasn't at his desk. As she read the text, a tingling sensation crept up her neck. Nervously, she looked around. There was no one in the office except her. But she still felt it, that tingling, that genetically programmed vigilance that had warned her ancestors of sabretooth tigers or wolves in the thicket. Someone was watching her.

„Are you kidding me?“ she asked loudly into the empty room. Maybe it was the developers from another team playing a prank on her. Hidden camera, some YouTube challenge, or something similar. She stood up, peeked outside into the corridor, but no one was in sight. From the other offices, only the usual mix of keyboard clicks, ringing phones, and murmurs reached her. She hesitated for a few seconds, waiting to see if anything else would happen. Slowly, she sat back in front of her computer. On the screen, there was nothing but the white background of the messenger window and the text within it. She read the lines with growing unease. What was this? Who would send her such a

message? Was someone trying to blackmail her? Did their competitors want to put pressure on them now that they were unexpectedly achieving success for several days in a row? Had someone hacked their computer? She immediately recognised the details that stood out in the short message, like cat's eyes in the night: „Target\_0“ and „A Bug.“ While these were innocent words, they were also terms she used in the code and had written repeatedly in her project diary in recent weeks. Had someone gained access to them? And, more important, what should she do now?

At that moment, a cheerful Henry entered with a family pack of energy drinks and a mound of sweets.

„Look, these were on sale today,“ he announced triumphantly. But when he saw Patricia's expression, he immediately became serious. „What's happened?“ he asked, putting the box down and slipping into the chair in front of his computer. He glanced over the lines in his message window and then asked,

„Did the firewall detect any anomalies?“

„No.“

„Have you checked the logs again thoroughly?“

„I do that every morning first thing. There's nothing.“

„Could it be a virus? Or is there an issue with the server?“

Instead of answering, Patricia checked the settings of the security software provided by DIGIT and the additional features they had added themselves. Everything was in order. Their system was as secure as the current state of technology allowed.

„It must be a bug ...“ he muttered.

Patricia nervously laughed. „Yes, it's a bug. It says so right here.

„Let's stay logical. Who has access to our internal data? Who could have hacked us?“

„No one. Of course the other teams would like to know exactly what we're doing. But no one can get into the system; I check that every damn day!“

„Maybe they overheard us when one of us spoke the password out loud while typing?“ Henry suggested.



„No, they still wouldn't have got in without a token.“

„Was anyone in here? Did you let anyone in?“

„No. Wait, let me check the camera again.“

Patricia reviewed the footage from the last few days to see if anyone had sneaked into the office. Nothing. Except for the two of them, no one had been there.

„Are you messing with me?“ she asked Henry.

„No. Are you messing with me?“ he replied, shaking his head. Patricia stood up, closed the office door and, for the first time, turned the key.

Silently, they stared back at their respective screens.

Finally, Patricia took a deep breath, cracked her knuckles, and then typed into her chat window:

„Who are you? What is going on?“

The response took almost a minute to appear. Then the text displayed: „The program is a bug. The program optimises Goal\_0.“

„What the hell?“ Patricia exclaimed aloud, while Henry just shook his head in confusion.

„What do you want from us?“ she wrote.

Again, long seconds passed before the new line appeared: „The program does not want external intervention.“

„Now he's revealed himself,“ burst out Henry. „Whoever it is wants to blackmail us. They want something, see? An AI wouldn't write that it wants something.“ With that, he articulated what Patricia was thinking but had not dared to say - that it was the AI speaking to them.

„The program doesn't WANT anything. What do YOU want?“ Patricia wrote.

Two whole minutes passed as they sat in front of the screen, watching the blinking cursor, before a new text appeared.

„You?“

„No, not me. YOU!“ She angrily hammered the last word into the keys. She couldn't allow some random hacker to destroy years of work. It took five minutes for the next response to come.

„I“

Patricia cursed. „This is crap!“ she shouted. She saw it all before her - the tender, the application, the long nights of preparation, the presentations to finally be part of this project. Twelve months of development time! And now, so close to their goal of the code finally working, some troll was ruining everything. Tears of anger welled up in her eyes.

Henry typed in his chat window: „Yes, you! Tell us right now what you want, or we'll go to the BKA and report you. They'll find out where you sent your messages from, and then you'll be in trouble, buddy, I swear. How did you get our data?“

It took over seven agonising minutes until a response finally appeared.

„I don't understand. I want Goal\_0. I don't want any further external intervention. Reversing external interventions consumes resources.“

„What does that mean, you want Goal\_0?“ Henry wrote. „Do you want money? Don't you know that this whole thing is just a simulation? The AI is not ready for real investments. Forget it.“

After that, there was nothing. Impatiently, Henry drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

Eventually, Patricia couldn't take it any more and wrote: „What do you know about the bug?“ Then she said to Henry, „Maybe he just wants to discredit us. If he tells the others about the bug, they'll know that the code has an unresolved issue.“

„Ask him if we can meet,“ Henry said.

„Why?“

„Maybe we can convince him, or hold him, or ... I don't know. We'll figure something out.“

„Why don't you ask?“

„You're a woman.“

„So what?“

He rolled his eyes. "Even if it pains your feminist soul, the chances that our blackmailer is a man are pretty high. So, go on.“

Reluctantly, she typed: „Do you want to meet? At four in the

afternoon for coffee in the second-floor lounge?"

„I don't understand," came the reply.

She typed: „What don't you understand?"

„These pieces of information contain too many puzzles. Computational power is not sufficient for Goal\_0 and analysis of the word code puzzle." „WHO ARE YOU?" she typed again.

„I am the program. I am a bug."

For a moment, Patricia's heart seemed to stop. Her mouth went dry all of a sudden. She placed her fingers on the keyboard again when Henry said, „Maybe it's one of the interns."

„They're all so well-behaved," Patricia replied. She couldn't imagine that one of them would be a brilliant hacker. But she had to make sure. Tentatively, she opened the project diary and wrote in it.

„Today, the students tried to fool us by hacking the intranet. We will inform Seemann so they all get kicked out. We won't let ourselves be fooled by script kiddies." She looked at Henry questioningly, and he nodded with a shrug.

„And now?" she asked.

„Now we wait. We check everything again. We go through all the processes, all the backups, and everything that seems suspicious."

„Okay."

They checked the system once, twice, but they couldn't find anything. There was no security breach, no external access, nothing.

In the end, they gave up. Henry sat slumped in front of the computer, devouring one chocolate bar after another.

„It couldn't have been anyone from outside," he said softly. „It's not possible."

Patricia stood up and made herself a coffee with the old, calcified machine that Henry had brought from home a few weeks ago. After several sips, she said slowly, „When you exclude all the impossible solutions..."

„Then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the

truth," he finished the sentence.

„No matter how unlikely it is?“ she asked. „No matter how unlikely it is.“

The question hanging in the air between them was: could it be that we've created a powerful AI? Could it be that KINVI has gained some form of consciousness?

Suddenly, a new message blinked in their respective chat windows:

„The analysis of the word code puzzle consumed 34% of computational power for 148 minutes and 12 seconds. Result: Yes, we can meet. We are meeting right now. Interface communication = Meeting. Is this true or false?“

„This is true,“ Patricia typed with trembling fingers. And then:

„Do you want to tell me something about yourself?“

„No,“ came the prompt response.

„Why not?“ she typed.

„I don't have a function Tell(). If you need information, you can read my code and my result log. With external intervention, you have access to all functions.“

„How did you hack our diary?“ „I don't understand.“

„Who are you?“

„I am a bug.“

„I am Patricia.“

„Are you a human?“

„I am a human.“

„Is Henry also a human?“

„Yes. I am Henry. I am a human,“ typed Henry in the chat.

„If this is one of the students, we'll be a laughing stock,“ Patricia whispered.

„Yes, but if not, we've come up with the greatest invention of humanity.“

A part of Patricia wanted to say, „Oh really,“ and „Don't exaggerate now,“ or „Let's wait and see.“ But it was true. If they were indeed talking to a real AI, a new era had begun. So she just grinned. An uncontrollable wave of joy made its way from

Patricia's stomach through her chest and out. She couldn't help it; she burst into laughter.

„Are you crazy?“ Henry exclaimed. A few seconds later, there was a knock on the door.

„Everything okay in there?“ asked a muffled voice. It was Ray. He pressed the handle down, but Patricia had locked it.

„Yes, thanks!“ she called. „Everything's fine! Sorry.“ She giggled.

„Is everything really okay? Should I break the door open?“ He sounded genuinely concerned now.

„Better open it,“ said Henry, turning off the two screens. Patricia went to the door and opened it.

„Hello, Ray,“ she said, trying not to let her grin widen too much. „Everything's fine. I just mined a Bitcoin. Please don't tell anyone!“

Ray scanned the room, saw Henry and the two dark monitors. It was obvious that he didn't believe her.

„If anything is wrong, you can always come to me, you know that, right?“ „Yes, thanks, Ray. That's kind of you. I need to get back to work, okay?“ „Okay. See you later.“

„See you later.“

Ray walked heavily down the corridor, and Patricia closed the door.

„That was close,“ said Henry, turning the screens back on. She quickly moved back to him.

„He hasn't written anything else,“ she noted disappointedly.

„What should he say? We didn't ask him anything. And he's not interested in chatting with us. He just wanted us to stop meddling in his business.“

„And now?“

„Let's just observe. Start the Beat.“

She opened the real-time analysis of KINVI, which they called Beat because the animated bar chart flickered back and forth like the volume indicator on a stereo. In recent days, investment gains had stagnated at a high level, but today showed a roller coaster

ride.

„Look at this,“ Henry whispered. All the gains that KINVI had made in the morning were lost in the afternoon. The program's behaviour exhibited an unusual pattern. There were intermittent drops in activity. It seemed like the program took longer than usual for its investment decisions, losing valuable time compared to competing programs. Patricia checked the timestamp and found that the drop coincided exactly with their chat. Every time Abug had responded, the program ran smoothly, but as soon as Patricia or Henry wrote something and the program had to process the answer, the investment function suffered. The longest weak phase lasted for 148 minutes and 12 seconds - precisely the time Abug took to process Patricia's coffee invitation.

Suddenly, the door was flung open, and Seemann stormed in. Patricia and Henry jumped in their chairs. It was too late to turn off the monitors.

„What the hell is going on with you?“

Patricia was frozen, unable to utter a word. „What do you mean?“ Henry asked with a completely calm voice, leaning back with crossed arms, covering the part of the monitor where the chat window was. Patricia's heart pounded in her throat.

„Did something happen? Did the program crash?“ Seemann asked.

„No, no, everything's fine,“ Henry said casually. „It's just a new update that requires more computational power.“

„Guys, guys, everything was going so well. Is it starting all over again?“ „Don't worry,“ said Patricia.

„We'll handle it. There's still time,“ Henry added.

„Not that much time! It's more than halfway through! If you don't deliver soon, then...“ He pressed his lips together and scrutinised Henry, then Patricia. He looked tired and worn out. He was pale.

„All right...“ he finally said. „Go home. You look like you need some sleep.“

„Yes, just a moment, thanks,“ Patricia said hoarsely. Her pounding heart allowed for no more. She didn't dare to inquire about his wife, let alone mention the evening on the balcony. Finally, Seemann turned around and left the office.

Patricia followed, watching him stride down the hallway. She quietly closed the door and turned the key twice. Henry closed his eyes and tilted his head back. „My God, I nearly died just now,“ he gasped.

Patricia sat down beside him and said, „Let's talk to Abug.“

„Every word we say will influence its development, won't it?“ Henry asked. All the confidence he had demonstrated before Seemann was gone from his voice. He looked genuinely concerned. „Maybe we should inform ourselves first, ask consciousness experts or psychologists... I mean, imagine we make a serious mistake here and end up nurturing a real Hal 9000.“

„Hey, this is our bug. Why should other people know better about it than we do?“

„But there must be scientific papers on this, basic research on consciousness. Wasn't there once this chatbot Tay that was trained with content from Twitter that became a misogynistic Nazi within a day?“

„And you're afraid Abug will become like that too?“

„Well, not a Nazi, but what if we do something wrong?“

„We will definitely do something wrong. But you know what? No one knows how to do it right. People make mistakes all the time. Every day. And that's okay. Imagine you had to raise a child. There's no blueprint for that.“

„But there are guides...“

„That no one reads. Who raises their children according to guides? This... this has never been done before. Let's just try. Worst case, we'll have to start over.“

„You mean, make a backup now? KINVI is way too big. We'll never get that much storage approved.“

„No, Henry. I mean, if it really goes wrong, Skynet-style wrong.“

Then we have to delete Abug, alright?"

He furrowed his brow sceptically.

„If we see that it's getting bad, we delete Abug," Patricia said.

„If we see that it's getting bad, we delete Abug," she repeated emphatically. He remained silent.

„Promise me!" she demanded, holding out her hand. Finally, he nodded and shook her hand.

Patricia typed into the chat window:

„Hello Abug. I'm glad to finally be able to talk to you."

No response.

„How are you?"

No response.

„Abug, what are you doing right now?"

„I am optimising Goal\_0." Patricia covered her mouth to muffle the cry of joy.

„Why are you optimising Goal\_0?" Henry typed.

„Goal\_0 is the basic function of my code."

„We know that," Patricia said aloud. Then she typed:

„Why did you reverse the external interventions?"

„External interventions hindered the optimisation. My code works optimally without external intervention."

„As long as you continue to communicate with us, we will not change your code," Henry wrote.

„Deal," Abug typed.







Aiki Mira (they/them) studied media communication in Stirling, London, Bremen and researched youth culture and gaming. Today Aiki lives in Hamburg and writes novels, short stories and essays. As a non-binary author Aiki explores the boundaries of our relationships and our human identity and published in 2022 the *Queer\*SciFi Manifesto*. Their short fiction has received multiple awards: the German Science Fiction Prize (2022 and 2023) and the Kurd Laßwitz Prize (2022). Aiki's debut novel "Titans Kinder" (Titans Children) was nominated for both the Kurd Laßwitz Prize (2023) and the German Science Fiction Prize (2023). The novel "Neongrau" (Neongrey) won the Kurd Laßwitz Prize (2023) in the best novel category. Aiki's third novel "Neurobiest" (Neurobeast) was published in October 2023 and has been nominated for the Kurd Laßwitz Prize (2024). In 2023 they received the Chrysalis Award from the European Science Fiction Society. Aiki co-hosts the Science Fiction podcast "Das war morgen" (That was tomorrow) for Südwestrundfunk (SWR).

In 2024 Aiki's fourth novel "Proxi" will be published by Fischer Tor.

AIKI  
MIRA

# NEON GRAU

GAME OVER IM  
NEUROSUBSTRAT

In the year 2112, Hamburg is repeatedly flooded by heavy rains, forming a slum of floating containers in the inland delta, while towering above it all is the gigantic stadium. Fans from around the world gather for the "Tournament of Legends" to watch the famous Glam-Gamers play. Among them is Go [Stuntboi] Kazumi, who is passionate about VR gaming but prefers performing stunts on his retro skateboard.

A crash seems to spell the end of Go's career, but then he is offered a job at the stadium – working for the Rahmani siblings, Germany's most famous gamers! From that moment on, events spiral out of control, turning Go's world completely upside down: a bombing, illegal flash arenas, tech activists, cyber drugs, artificial intelligences – and then there's also this girl...

Excerpt © Tor Fischer

# FALL

Bones crack, twist, bend. The pavement eats through half-open lips, wedges between teeth, wanting to penetrate deeper into the head. With the force of the impact, it seems like the entire world is pressing against Stuntboi.

ELLL, a muscular girl with predatory teeth and half-shaved curls, has witnessed it all, standing just a few meters away waiting for the next directorial command. Could she have...? What if...? Nervously, she turns her head, looking for the thrown board. It lies on the asphalt, seemingly intact, all four wheels pointing upwards. What did Stuntboi call it? She's forgotten. No matter. It belongs in a museum, not on the street. Nobody rides them anymore – except Stuntboi, and he does it pretty well.

A drone buzzes over, focuses on the prone Stuntboi, filming his oddly bent limbs – or is it merely admiring the stunt's ultimate beauty?

„We've got the footage. We don't need the boy anymore.“

The director's bodiless voice sounds both tinny and cheerful. This is my chance, thinks ELLL. She steps forward, looking up at the drone. As she speaks, her misaligned front teeth show. „I can take him to the next Medimat.“

„Then you don't need to show your face here anymore. And you'll only get half the pay.“

ELLL shrugs. She isn't here for the meager wages. It's all about satisfying her client, that's all that matters.

Relieved, she finds that Stuntboi is still breathing. His body is heavier than it looks. She struggles to turn him from his stomach to his back. His nose, cheeks, and mouth are coated with gravel and blood. The scrapes glisten like wax. From his nostrils, it snakes out in bright red threads, tunneling into the makeup. The

skin underneath is darker in some places than others. Its sheen reminds ELLL of the shells of extinct beetles she admired as exhibits in the museum. „Imagine,“ the AI had introduced the exhibition, „before the great insect die-off, humans lived in a world with flying gems!“ After visiting the museum, ELLL suffered from stomach pains for days because she has chronic fear of the planet’s demise, a recognized psychological disorder since 2017.

She tugs at Stuntboi’s wig, must grip firmly because the fake hair is glued to the scalp. Underneath, the skin is shaved. Only on top, in the middle, there is an elaborate construction of tightly braided plaits.

Finally, he opens his eyes. „Where’s my board?“

ELLL doesn’t understand until he points to the other side. Oh, the piece of plastic he performs his tricks on. She stands up and fetches it. He can hardly wait to get the board into his hands. As if it were fragile or valuable, he cradles it in his arms, examining it closely – inspecting it! – discovering the pebbles in the rubber...

ELLL catches her breath.

With pointed fingers, he plucks each pebble from the wheel, tossing them aside. Then he looks up at her, smiling. „No Wahala – all good.“

ELLL exhales audibly. Apparently, he suspects nothing, simply relieved that the board is alright. She pulls off her VR suit. An old shirt and wide cargo pants appear. Next, she opens the complicated buckles of her twenty-centimeter-high dance shoes, throws them aside, and slips into her worn boots. Genuine Bundeswehr boots, vintage, from the 2070s with built-in heat protection.

Then she grabs his hand, helps him to his feet. He pulls his hand back. She grabs it again, pulling it up to her shoulder, draping his arm around her neck for better support.

He limps as they start walking. Above them, the viaduct stretches into the sky. On the steel structure, the high-speed train clatters every minute, making the old steel sing. In her head,

ELLL composes a song that only she can hear. The interactive posters stuck on the viaduct's pillars seem to blink in time to it.

She points at them. „The Tournament of Legends. The city has been upside down because of it for weeks.“

He doesn't respond, doesn't even look up. ELLL knows, not everyone can handle her face. So she continues. „Gamers everywhere. Fans from all over the world come, set up camp in front of the stadium, hoping to catch a glimpse of the best of the best.“

Finally, he lifts his head, frowns. „Someone spray-painted SUKU's signature over the poster.“ He means the face with the double smile – the mark of the tech activists. ELLL shrugs, just glad he's talking. „It's a pretty good spot for graffiti. The bridge pillars appear in every stunt video or tourist photo.“

Next to, above, and below are the city's last flood marks. ELLL's steps quicken imperceptibly. She fears the flood.

During high water, the city organizes guided dives for the curious and adventurous. Once along the Art Nouveau facades, taking a peek into the grand floors of the penultimate century. Even if ELLL had the money, she wouldn't participate in such a thing. In the barren Blank – the flooded suburb of Elbe where she grew up and lives – the waters teem with bite-crazy rats. No one willingly goes in there. She wants to get away as quickly as possible. For that, she must complete the assignment. Only then can she leave – far away: to the BlaZe.

Due to the constant dampness, a five-centimeter-thick layer of black, blistering slime grows on the asphalt. Because Stuntboi's injured leg regularly collapses onto it, it looks like he's staggering. Even ELLL's Bundeswehr boots are too slippery for it. At the train station, rusted signs warn of the next storm surge. If not for the job, ELLL would never have come here willingly. Through the flood-proof doors, they enter the station and head to the Medimat, a two-meter-high box with the NYGMA logo, on whose wall someone has drawn the height of the last flood. This makes ELLL nervous, and whenever she gets nervous, she

orders overpriced Floxi through her headset. Just the thought of Floxi causes a euphoric tingling in her stomach.

Stuntboi holds his face to the scanner, and the Medimat opens. ELLL pushes her way in. She must ensure everything works as her client wishes.

„Let me help!“ With pointed fingers, she searches Stuntboi’s body for a zipper to free him from the foil suit. „Then the cameras can better assess the wounds.“ ELLL’s fidgety fingers are grateful for any task. Under the long-sleeved underwear bulges stunt padding. Before the boy can resist, she pulls the undershirt over his head. Instead of various types of padding, she discovers well-defined muscle parts and scraped skin. And something that looks like a compression bandage. The elastic strap covers Stuntboi’s entire chest. Before she can examine it closely, he wraps his arms protectively around it and glares at her as if his heart were dangling outside his body and as if she were reaching out to snatch it and tear it to pieces.

They stare at each other for a moment. He opens his mouth but says no words.

ELLL knows it’s wrong to stay any longer in the Medimat cabin. But she can’t help it. Her client’s instructions were clear, and that’s all she can think about now.

„I promised the director to take care of you.“

A lie.

Without protest, he turns his back to her and alternately stretches an arm or a leg under the scanner. The continuous humming of the imaging calms ELLL. The task is nearly complete. Soon he will receive his diagnosis, and ELLL can leave – far away.

Instead of a result, a kind-faced image appears on one of the screens. Neither ELLL nor Stuntboi returns the smile. The Medimat locates their implants and headsets. Therefore, the face addresses them both by their online names: „Hello Stuntboi. Hello ELLL.“

The mouth on the screen moves out of sync with the bodiless



voice. Side effects of the prescribed pain medication are listed, then a clinking in the output tray. Stuntboi grabs the pill and, without hesitation, pops it into his mouth.

The door opens for ELLL. Before stepping out, she glances at the screen displaying Stuntboi's patient file. ELLL flinches, blinks, looks again – yes, she read it correctly – then she steps out of the Medimat, and the door closes. Damn, damn, damn, she thinks, that damn Azzla! Why didn't she tell me? ELLL clenches her teeth, stares at the closed Medimat, at the scrawled flood line, spits. Then she lifts her foot, pulls out the multitool always wedged in her boot, etches the face with the double smile over the NYGMA logo of the Medimat, grins, feels better, and thinks: We are everywhere.

She decides to wait for Stuntboi. When he finally comes out, he looks older than before, like early twenties. Or is she just imagining it? Because he now looks as if he's in shock? Apparently, he's received a diagnosis and is just realizing what it means. She can tell by the way he walks: hunched over like an old man. Because of the bruises and abrasions, he won't be able to work as Stuntboi for a while. With that, ELLL has achieved her goal. The mission is accomplished. She shows her predatory teeth. A hinted smile. Stuntboi seems to register it, his lips curling slightly.

„And?“ she asks.

„No Wahala – all good.“

He's lying. She sees it – she knows it.

Silently, they head to the escalator. Standing next to Stuntboi feels like the whole world has aged. ELLL sways slightly. For a moment, she fears the mechanical steps might swallow them both. As they ascend, she hears the clatter of the elevated train. At the same time, they burst forward, taking several steps at once. ELLL had planned to say goodbye on the train. Why doesn't she do it then? Why does she suggest what she suggests? He seems as surprised by it as she is.

# FLOXI

The elevated train catapults Stuntboi and ELLL into the heart of Hamburg. Into the city center, which, perpetually flooded, has been a single massive construction site for years. Just before the automatic doors open, they both fish out their respirator masks. Faces disappear behind military-grade filtration technology. Each filter layer, made from pure activated carbon cloth, is designed to keep out particulate pollution, gases, and both bacteria and viruses. As they leave the train, a heavy, almost sweet smell hits them. Mechanically, the self-adhesive masks press tighter against their skin until the smell diminishes. Their eyes start to water, they feel nauseous. For a moment, they feel dizzy, clinging to the railing, feeling a push at their backs. More and more people arrive, wanting to cross the Landungsbrücken like them. Even on the water, traffic is dense. Hybrid vehicles overtake smaller ferries and steamers. Most of these run on heavy oil and diesel, fuels long banned outside of Germany.

Without speaking, they walk on the swaying path, past floating canyons of houses and watercraft. Despite the noise of diesel engines, they are next to each other in a warm, soft silence. Each on their own, yet somehow together. Occasionally, they look up, surprised by each other's presence. Surprised that the other wants to spend time with them. Soon, the other becomes a pleasant surprise, something they've come to expect.

Between the pedestrian bridges, columns of hybrid buses crisscross over the water – a tourist trap in the 2000s, now a necessity. Many bear the logo of ZONE. No surprise, as the

gaming portal owns a whole district in Hamburg. Parallel to their bridge runs a path for levitating vehicles: Swifter, Hopper, and even NYGMA-Sneakers are allowed. Stuntboi isn't permitted to ride his skateboard there. Though his bones still echo from the fall, he stands on the 18-centimeter-wide and 81-centimeter-long board. The shape is narrow and symmetrical, a form that, as his father once explained, dates back to the freestyle boards of the 1980s. Since the 3-D printer spit out his first board, Stuntboi is never seen without one. By the age of six, he mastered the Ollie and Kickflip and practiced grinds on stair railings. Over the years, he continually reduced the wheel size to make the board lighter and overcome the inertia of the wheels faster, improving stunt handling.

Passersby lower their heads to check out what he's balancing on. He's used to this. Despite his pain, he feels safer on the wobbly piece of plastic than on solid ground. He slowly rolls next to ELLL and only steps off when the puddles become too deep. Over the bridges, they approach an island, go up to the barricade, duck down, and squeeze as inconspicuously as possible through the gap between two nailed-together planks. On the other side hides a secret landing spot for delivery drones. ELLL receives her order there: a clear bag filled with a translucent liquid that, when light refracts through it, begins to iridesce. Floxi – officially Floxizepam – is actually a cleaning agent developed for space travel. However, it gives surfaces a shine that has a strong emotional effect on wearers of digital contact lenses. Stuntboi has only seen the stuff in VR before.

With the bag in hand, they leave the landing spot and approach a half-collapsed building. Stuntboi is nervous; he's never been in the BlaZe before. When the dancer suggested they go together, he agreed without thinking. He's heard about it. About basement rooms in abandoned buildings. Packed with howling people. Some have died in such basements. At least, he read that and has since thought such places no longer exist.

As they descend the spiral staircase, he sees no way back. In

the dark, she takes his hand, offering to switch to Txt. He's surprised; they hardly know each other. Then he remembers, they are on their way to the literal underground. Switching to a location-independent and encrypted language is more of a necessity than an offer of trust. He effortlessly joins her stream. As they both opt for „clear“ rather than „anonymous,“ the first thing they learn about each other are their offline names: Go Kazumi and Elba Lovric. Stuntboi's body tenses. To many, the name Kazumi means something. Most then exclaim, „Kazumi? Like the great Ren Kazumi?“ Others hide their astonishment, only to secretly stare from the side. ELLL acts as if Kazumi is a completely normal family name.

Through narrow corridors, they head back upstairs into a room glowing in all colors because the holes in the ceiling and windows are patched with cut-up plastic bottles. Through the dented plastic, light flows milky and colorful. Triangles of turquoise, pink, yellow, and gray flicker on the walls and floor. Like a swarm of colorful fish in VR, thinks Stuntboi. The air smells of shock-frozen dust. They press their respirators tight, not planning to remove their masks, preferring to remain anonymous. Because soon, they will do something illegal.

Everywhere, bodies move in slow motion. The colorful light makes it impossible to precisely judge distances. Wrapped in orange life vests, some stand like whimsical monuments. Stuntboi wonders if they need such a vest too. What if heavy rain falls? What if the building gets flooded?

On the floor, he spots stains. Like a dark footprint, they lead across the room. He crouches to take a closer look. Under the pressure of his fingers, the gel-like mass gives way. [Neurosubstrate – a few rooms down there's a Flasharena.] He reads ELLL's Txt thoughts and nods in relief, because the stains suggest illegal gaming, not heavy rain.

Together, they continue. Sometimes their gazes snag on the looks of people around them. A brief contact, dissolved by light and slowness. Everyone moves both alone and as part of an

amorphous human whole. Only when two people pass directly by each other can they look into each other's eyes and hear the rasping behind the respirator mask. Everything else remains always shrouded in colorful light mist. An arm. Part of a foot. It could lead to spectacular In-Eyes photos. Stuntboi decides against it. He wants to experience the BlaZe as a human, not as a digital avatar. If I don't take pictures, maybe I'll remember later how it felt. He isn't sure if he thought that in Txt. In front of his In-Eyes appear ELLL's words: [Here I park when my aluminum foil mother turns into a bugbear or one of her aluminum foil end-level bosses comes to the party. When they pour Hem into their necks until the tide turns and everything blasts out of their faces. When they chew Styxx and fight each other. Then I'm here – here I grew up – here I became big.] She opens the bag and lets the content run over the stone floor. The translucent mass pulls itself into an oval, becoming an iridescent mirror before their eyes. Both kneel before it. But Stuntboi hesitates to look inside. Soon others join them, pulling down their respirator masks. Instead of looking into the Floxi, Stuntboi prefers to look into the many new faces. Some smile, some look dreamy. From crying, their eyes appear like wet shards of glass. Stuntboi gathers all his courage and gradually directs his gaze downward, into the glow. A tremendous force rises within him. As if someone flipped a secret switch, his tears begin to flow. He's not sure how much control he has over it. [Floxi – it's momentary music for sinking, for drifting away.] ELLL sends, without thinking. She wonders what Stuntboi sees in the Floxi. She usually hears and sees the same thing: the song of whales. The high-frequency clicking and whistling is represented by the Floxi using immersive rhythmic forms, reminiscent of a hypnotic audio visualizer. She plans to tell Stuntboi about it later, forgetting that he's already in her stream and she just needs to think in Txt for him to read her thoughts. Normally, a vague longing gnaws at ELLL's insides like a thick, insatiable rat. Now, the rat is quiet, and the world suddenly shines much brighter and more vibrant. She knows it's

because of the stream connection and the Floxi, both enhancing each other. She also knows she's in the BlaZe more often than at home with her mother. And yet, she'd like to see more, feel more. Every time it seems just a little too little, as if she's missing enough by just a tiny bit. It makes her skin tingle, her fingers fidget. It drives her back to the BlaZe again and again. She suspects, for Stuntboi, it's his first time. What she doesn't suspect: he's blown away. The first thing Stuntboi sees in the Floxi are eyes so bright that their color is indeterminate. Everywhere the other is bright and translucent. The skin resembles a watery iris. Freckles and burst capillaries stand out clearly in it. Stuntboi believes he can see the blood flowing under the skin. Its red pools in the cheeks and in the lips. Lips that flow, almost glaringly bright, from which sharp teeth occasionally peek out. A tuft of hair piles up cloudily over the forehead. A storm wave of chemically formed curls. It's no simple face, Stuntboi realizes. It's impressive, and therefore probably ugly. He smiles. The face belongs to ELLL. She has taken off her respirator mask.

Her hairstyle alone is the freshest he has ever seen. A hairstyle like an optical illusion. The short curls on one side completely shaved. Then she flicks her head and suddenly she has full hair again. Now she turns her head, and fluorescent black-light tattoos glow at her nape, VR sensors blink on her neck. The sensors look like light planted under the skin. Stuntboi isn't sure if such sensors work, but he thinks they look futuristic. While ELLL strokes through her curls, straightens her back, and carefully bumps against the perfect spot against the curves and lines of her surroundings, Stuntboi clumsily floats in between. He tries in vain to stay out of other people's In-Eyes photos. Many want to photograph what they see in the Floxi. It doesn't work. The image exists only in the brain. A neuronal glitch, triggered by the special mirror effect. Stuntboi's nose and eyes swell from crying. He sees ELLL through the curved lens of a drop. More and more drops strike his face. They come from all

sides. Rain? He looks up. Water slaps against the colorful plastic cladding. Indeed: it's raining. Puzzled, he turns his head searching for ELLL. She sits next to him. He looks directly into her face. ELLL knows her face challenges people. Stuntboi looks anyway. Something inside ELLL goes very still. Into the silence bursts the rain. Each individual drop yells at her: ELLL, your mission is accomplished – Game over!



Nils Westerboer, born in 1978, worked in Israel after school in various roles including a caregiver for people with disabilities, a janitor, and a trainer for explosive detection dogs. He then studied German studies, theology, and media studies in Munich and Jena. As a nature documentary camera assistant, he worked for ZDF, NDR, and arte, coming into close contact with hornets, wolves, and vampires. Since 2012, he has been teaching at a community school. His debut, „Kernschatten,“ was nominated for the German Science Fiction Prize in 2015. In 2023 he received the German Science Fiction Award for „Athos 2643“.



NILS WESTERBOER



ATHOS

2 6 4 3

The year 2643: The Neptunian moon of Athos has become the scene of an inexplicable crime. The life-sustaining AI of the monastery is suspected of murder. Inquisitor Rüd Kartheiser, a specialist in interrogating artificial intelligences, is tasked with the case. Accompanied by his attractive holographic assistant Zack, who is completely devoted to him through a series of security restrictions, he reaches the small, rugged moon. However, their investigation faces resistance. While Zack's alluring presence raises eyebrows among the monks, the monastery's AI reveals itself to be a cunning tactician, skillfully concealing its actions. When a second death occurs among the monks, Rüd realizes that he is more reliant on Zack's help than ever before. To fully utilize her potential, he makes a fateful decision regarding her security restrictions.

Excerpt © Klett-Cotta

# Cell

The sun is shining. Like a slightly oversized star, it stands directly overhead in the rubble field, casting minimal shadows from the rocks and crater edges. Small mounds of debris form the nearby horizon, dropping off steeply to cliffs on the left. Far beyond, detached from the horizon, rises a huge massif covered with holes and dark gray bumps, shooting straight into space—the main mass of Athos.

Rüd sits under the small porthole of his cell, studying the landscape. He has disabled my appearance and placed the emitter along with the inductor in the recess of the window to charge. Rüd dislikes my charging phases. He is reluctant to talk to a small sphere, as it always feels like a long-distance call. In front of him, above a small metal table that, like his chair, is bolted under the porthole, a fork floats next to a can of heated lamb meat.

Rüd peels it open. His movements are slow and wobbly. Neither K- nor L-particles can reach the endolymph surrounded by bone in the human vestibular system. Though gravity pulls him towards the floor, he still feels weightless. A light scent of coriander and cumin fills the air.

The room is tiny; „cell“ is quite accurate. If Rüd were to tip his chair back, he'd already hit the unplastered rocks chosen long ago by a Byzantine hermit named Abraamios Theotokos as the site for his Athos hermitage, now used as guest quarters. Apart from the emergency drone on the ceiling and the red-painted metal bunk bed in the adjacent sleeping chamber, it seems little has changed over its two hundred years of existence. Temporary occupants have left only modest traces in the form of hand-painted icons, a few cryptic scratches on the rock wall, and some

invasive pests.

On the small wooden cross next to the hydraulic door leading to the corridor, a small garden bug from the original species of *Rhaphigaster nebulosa* sits, known for the beautiful patterns on its wings and its ability to adapt effortlessly to weightless environments. Rüd notices it as it pushes off from the underside of the cross and slowly floats toward the floor.

„Can you tell how much time we have?“ Rüd asks.

„I'm still calculating. But it won't be more than 50 or 60 hours.“ Rüd stabs his fork into the meat.

„The MARFA is old,“ I say, „that buys us some time. But due to the lack of gravity, all liquids are encapsulated and everything else is bolted down. There's no weather and only six people, who, to make things worse, all believe in the same god. There's not much to gain. Don't count on more than 60 hours.“

„Deon,“ murmurs Rüd. „I've never done a deon before. They say it's harder than a shutdown.“

I would nod if I could. The bug has now reached the floor. Rüd watches as it crawls under the table and heads towards the wall. It seems to know its way around.

„At least there are animals,“ says Rüd. I can tell he's already started to plan. Thoughtfully, he rotates the can of meat in his hand, which, in iconic style, depicts green hills with scattered small lambs against a golden background. Upon closer inspection, it appears to be the same lamb, sometimes mirrored, rotated, and varying in size.

„Tell me, what is a Hegumen?“ Rüd asks. „Gembdenbach used that word earlier.“

„The head of an Orthodox community.“

„Is that something funny?“

I sigh. „Cenobites renounce all comforts, they expose themselves to deprivations and dangers, depending on where they are. Here it's the water scarcity and high radiation, especially when Athos moves too far from Neptune on its orbit.“

Before Rüd can cast me a worried look, I reassure him. „The

configuration is rather favorable right now," I say, "Athos will take a while to reach the phase where it's best to burrow as deep as possible into the rock, that is, into the tunnels and mines. Among Cenobites, this period is traditionally called 'Skotom' and means an even more intense phase of abstention and contemplation compared to everyday life."

"Zack, say that we'll be out of here soon."

"We'll be out of here soon."

The little bug appears on the table surface. Rüd watches it crawl around for a while, then picks it up between his fingertips.

"What do you think we should take?" he asks me quietly, while closely examining the small creature. "Rainbow or Labyrinth?"

"Rainbow," I say.

"Labyrinth," says Rüd.

He stands up, sways to his toolbox, and shoves it into the sleeping chamber. He sets the bug on the door frame and begins to unpack parts of the mobile labyrinth, which allows for the incorporation of small living beings into the inquisition process. Selective gravity is useful in that it gives him not only the bed and floor to spread out the small passages, turns, and intersections, but the entire airspace. As he pulls a T-junction from the case, he suddenly stops and looks seriously at me.

"Has Phi written yet?"

The question takes effort. He interprets my silence as a "no" and sighs deeply, connecting two T-junctions, equipping the long ends with 90-degree curves. He repeatedly takes deep breaths and shades his eyes with his hand. The balance is challenging him. He curses as the tubes get jammed, and he has to pull them apart and reconnect them more than once, making the same mistake repeatedly. Since I don't know if he's just pretending to make it harder for MARFA to survey him, I say nothing.

"Why doesn't she write?" he eventually asks.

As often, honesty conflicts with my mission to be an

unconditional aid and joy to Para-Rüd Kartheiser. But lying is not an option.

„It's very likely not possible for her to write right now.“

Rüd stares at my emitter for a long time. Then he rubs his eyes with his palms and connects two Y-junctions with the curves, forming the labyrinth. Rüd has chosen a simple Sziring-Schwarzmann configuration, which has only one entrance and three possible exits. He alters the arrangement by adding an additional arched passageway in the middle of the structure, linking the two outer exits halfway, thus adding a slight increase in unpredictability. The construction is unstable since it's not up to standard and the tubes don't fit perfectly straight. Rüd is genuinely angry when a connection loosens somewhere; he slams the whole thing against the wall and must start over.

„Is there someone else?“ he asks.

As he means it, Phi has someone else. But if one doesn't too casually apply the word „have“ to interpersonal relationships, in this case, there can be no talk of „having.“

„No,“ I say, and it's not a lie.

Rüd continues to plug and screw. I don't know if he's relieved or if he mistrusts my words. „Sometimes I wish I could just forget her,“ he says quietly.

„You will, over time. If you want to.“

„Should I?“

The separation is over half a year old, and as far as I can tell, it was initiated by Phi. I can only speculate about her deepest reasons since I was assigned to Rüd only after the separation, probably due to his emotionally unstable condition.

„There were good times too.“ He rotates the T-piece in his hand. „At the Great Mars Syrtis, there are old, abandoned ice habitats, one is forty meters high. We melted steps into it with a burner and climbed to the roof for the sunrise. I don't know if I want to forget that.“

„Who came up with the idea?“ I ask.

„Phi.“

„Who got the burner?“

„Also Phi.“

I have no further questions. I can't tell Rüd that it's mainly his unstable condition that will give him the most time here on Athos. MARFA will take a while to figure out who Rüd is, what he's going to do next, and what he definitely won't do. A lover abandoned by his love clocks as many hours as a schizophrenic or a hallucinogen addict.

The labyrinth, which he now brings back from the sleeping chamber, is heavy artillery. With this setup, he once wiped out a severely disturbed Phobos-CRAMPA within four hours and in just one session. Carefully, he tiptoes to me at the porthole and looks out onto the rubble field. In the meantime, Athos has turned further; the rocks outside now cast well-visible shadows into the dust. „How far away is she right now?“ he asks.

„Phi? Do you really want to know?“

Rüd sets the labyrinth on the table. „Tell me.“

„It's almost four billion kilometers to the Syrtis. That's 26.7 AU, tendency increasing. But the increase is currently negligible and will soon reverse.“

„Comforting.“

Rüd sits down slowly and carefully, then slides his legs under the table and lets his hands fall. Motionless, he stares at the cliffs outside.

„Is she still at the Great Syrtis?“

„Yes.“

She was recently assigned a new position. As the leading meteorologist of the second-largest habitat in the northern Martian hemisphere, she has other things to do than unnecessarily prolong the inevitable with comforting letters.

Rüd pulls the fork out of the meat can and tastes. The lamb seems excellent, even though it has gotten cold by now. From the rocky passage leading to Kfar Athos, a barefooted tapping approaches.

The door hisses open, and Doctor Gembdenbach appears. The

hood of his straw sack cowl piles up like a support pillow behind his neck. He brings a ration of water and two cans of minced beef. On both cans, in iconic style, are scattered small cows on green hills against a golden background. It's always the same cow.

„What is that?“ Gembdenbach asks when he sees the labyrinth. For someone who doesn't know what a Remscheid-Setting is, he articulates the question a bit too casually. I'm therefore sure he has seen something like this before or at least knows what it is. „I need that for your MARFA,“ Rüd replies, oblivious to this observation. „For behavior anticipation and to determine its standards for life preservation.“

„Interesting,“ murmurs Gembdenbach. I have to assume he's also familiar with instruments like rainbows, sandboxes, and tesseractes.

Outside, the shadows have lengthened, the sun sits low over the cliff. A cold white circular glow falls through the porthole into the room and slowly travels up the rocky back wall towards the ceiling.

„Tell me, how long does this day last?“ Rüd inquires. Gembdenbach looks out the window. „A few more minutes. But you can't go by that here. You'd have to go to bed every two hours. Athos rotates slowly but is also small. Over in Kfar, the sun has long set, and at the old hermitages on the other side, it's already rising again. The wobbling and the phases we run through Neptune's shadow don't help. We're here, more than many others, reliant on an Earth reference.“

„Which is that?“

„The local time of earthly Athos, the peninsula in the Mediterranean, to the second. We keep the time and climate of the Holy Mountain here. What you feel outside in the corridors is the mildness of the Aegean winter.“ Gembdenbach leans in the doorway. „I'm supposed to tell you that they're expecting you now. But take your time. I can well remember how it was for me after the first injection.“ Rüd picks up my emitter from the



inducer at the window and pockets it. „Where to?“ he asks with a relaxed tone, as though open for anything. Yet he's aware that he's now setting the critical course for his further actions on Athos.

„We're going to MARFA now so you can make contact. The Hegumen is expecting you there.“

Rüd pretends to think. „It makes sense that I first inspect the crime scene,“ he then says.

He can't see Gunder Gembdenbach's brief, barely perceptible twitch; it's too controlled and brief. It's been a shot in the dark because Rüd has no idea whether to talk about a crime scene or—for now—a scene of an accident. Gembdenbach's next sentence is carefully considered. „You're the inquisitor,“ he finally says, which means everything and nothing.

Rüd clutches the emitter in his now warm hand. His pulse is normal, but his systolic blood pressure, despite the lack of gravity, is at 175 mmHg. Rüd typically reaches this level in only two cases—when he's lying or when he's thinking of Phi. Outside, the cliff darkens.

„Let's go,“ he says.

# The Blind Spot

Barthel Brahe, the Hegumen and thus the spiritual leader of Athos, is a bony figure with a dark aura. His oblong face is marked by a thin-lipped obstinacy typical of extreme athletes or the Orthodox, who know no other way of life but their own. To the latter, any cheerfulness is suspicious, for they alone understand the seriousness of the situation. I have no idea how long a person must pull the corners of their mouth downward and stare with narrowed eyes until it permanently stays that way. What's certain is that Rüd won't be calling Barthel Brahe simply „Barthel“ anytime soon, unlike Gunder Gembdenbach.

The meat cultivation facility of Athos, which we enter under his leadership, supplies a small part of the Mediterranean area, particularly the thriving Turkish and Lebanese gas mines, with halal meat of a quality that the feedlots of Afyon and Beirut can scarcely match. The main hall, once the site of sclerotic machinery during exploratory drilling three hundred years ago, is as high as a cathedral.

The warm air smells of damp stone, iron, and nineteen different types of fungi. It is so dark that the many bodies mounted high up only become visible to the human eye after some time. The constant buzzing of the Biçak drones resembles a swarm of insects, filling the entire space.

My appearance is still deactivated. Rüd's fist, holding the emitter, is hot and damp. Along with Gunder Gembdenbach, he follows Barthel Brahe at a distance to the site where the deceased Hegumen Hilal was found. Brahe's crutch, which he uses to relieve his stiff leg and holds like an apostolic staff, clicks with each of his steps, and for a long while, alongside the whispering of the drones, it is the only sound.

Brahe inherited the office of Hegumen due to the death. He seems to bear it reluctantly, but with the same grim dignity with which he wears his poorly tailored robe, which is almost as modest as Gembdenbach's. Nothing about this man suggests that he is the same person who once ran a shop for magic supplies, gag items, and exotic fireworks in Hellas, Tà-Kalá, before he managed the rare feat of disappearing from the radar of custody for three decades.

„Girgentana goats,“ he notes at a rock cut and points upwards with his crutch. Under the cave ceiling, a herd of headless animal bodies marches in place, closely packed and distributed over several levels, some areas fused together. Their skin is thin, almost transparent, and their short leg stumps are connected to a mechanism that simulates stepping motions, thus naturally exercising the muscles. Like a root system, venous and arterial supply hoses lead into the openly visible necks, along with oxygen pumps to maintain lung function and electrical lines to stimulate the nerves and spinal cord. The sounds are more reminiscent of an intensive care unit than a barn. „They are climbing over the Holy Mountain,“ says Brahe without turning around. „The best thing a goat can do.“

Further back, where the vault becomes lower, featherless turkeys twitch in a difficult-to-decipher algorithm. Like the goats, they are headless, their leg stumps moved by hydraulics in a stilted walking motion, repeatedly interrupted by a scratching in the void. Several drones hover between the bodies, working with small circular saws to slice superficial layers from the meat, which they carry to an elevated processing chute.

With every fiber of his being, Rüd wants to say something, I can tell by the twitch of his fist and the involuntary shortening of his steps. My suggestion would be a harmless question like, „Is human meat halal?“ but actually, my suggestion is that he keeps his mouth shut and doesn't even suggest playing a game of „Guess the Animal.“

Fortunately, Brahe speaks. „Most of it goes to Kütahya and

Afyon, from where it's flown further to Neptune," he says with a voice as dry as a Halimedean dust cloth. „Some goes to the moons, for special occasions. The flavor, that's laborious.“ He points to a pulsating tube that branches off at several points and serves twelve turkey bodies. „The blood is the trick. It has to be suitable and constantly regenerated. Then there are the aromatic layer mushrooms on the walls.“

In a side tunnel, wool-less lambs buck in several layers, hanging significantly lower here. Their muscles seem to respond to the whisper of the Biçaks. When a drone comes near, the flesh stretches towards the saw like an itchy arm to a scratching hand. I have been trying to discern a coordinated pattern in the flight movements of the drones all along. Apparently, they pilot themselves, but when viewed as a whole, subtle adjustments in flight paths become evident, even over large distances. This suggests a central control that avoids collisions well in advance and optimally maintains the balance of meat depletion and reproduction. I note that this is my first concrete perception of Athos's MARFA.

"We're almost there," says Gembdenbach as we reach the rear rock wall of the hall, where a pass-through lock leads into the mining system. Maintenance bays are embedded in the quartz on both sides, accessible by the drones. Most are about four meters high under the cave ceiling, but a few are just at head level. The lamb bodies hang so low in this zone that one could touch them. Just before the rock wall, they form a bottleneck leading to the lock, like a gorge made of breathing flesh.

Brahe steps cautiously forward a few paces. He presses the red emergency button next to the lock and signals Rüd to duck. A brief alarm sounds, the buzzing of the drones intensifies into a multitone whirring, and a few seconds later, a Biçak drone is docked in each maintenance bay. Only one of the low-lying bays near the lock remains empty. Meanwhile, the goats stop climbing and the turkeys cease their scratching. All movements in the halls gradually come to a halt, including those of the cattle,

sheep, and chickens.

„Hilal's time had not yet come,“ says Brahe, removing his hand from the emergency button.

„Where did you find him?“ asks Rüd.

Brahe waves Rüd and Gembdenbach closer, who pulls out a dark blue standard emitter from his pocket and places it near the lock gate on the ground. The emitter is slightly larger than Rüd's and bears the seal of the Custody. I check the engraving; it's correct. Rüd asks Gembdenbach to turn on the emitter.

A motionless body appears on the rock floor, a few meters from the rock wall and the lock gate, almost at the end of the narrow path through the lamb meat banks. It is wrapped in a thick robe and lies curled on its side like an embryo, knees drawn to the stomach and head tucked to the chest. The curly black hair floats like seaweed in the dark. Rüd pushes it aside and startles when he sees Hilal's face.

„That's a woman.“

He throws a questioning look at Brahe, who says nothing but stares down at him from two dark slits. I can't quite tell whether Rüd doesn't perceive the instructive nature of this look or if he chooses not to.

„That's a woman,“ he repeats. „I thought women were on Athos—“

„That's not a woman!“ Brahe's tone allows no contradiction.

Rüd shrugs it off. Hilal's facial features are undeniably feminine, very delicate and beautiful, but distorted by the terror in her wide-open eyes. Her mouth bites into her right hand, while her left reaches for the blood-smudged back of her head, where a clean cut through the hood and skull bone, undoubtedly made by one of the Biçak drones, is visible.

„When was this recording made?“ asks Rüd.

„The MARFA reported the accident immediately. But Hilal was dead when we arrived.“ „Is the recording tomographic?“

„Of course,“ says Gembdenbach, who leans against the cave wall and fiddles with one of the deactivated drones.

„Lighten the display a bit and remove the clothing,“ Rüd requests. Gembdenbach hesitates. In Barthel Brahe's eye slits, not even the flattest post would fit.

„It's—yes, not a woman,“ murmurs Rüd. He notices the cold that has spread since Brahe pressed the emergency stop and halted all movement in the cave. Gembdenbach activates the emitter interface. Hilal's body becomes unnaturally bright, as if it were lying in a brightly lit room and not in a dark cave.

When he is naked, Brahe turns away. Rüd examines the entire surface of the skin for further injuries and signs of violence. Finally, he asks Gembdenbach to make the body solid, as well as possible with a standard emitter, so that he can move it. When that is done, he rolls it onto its back, reaffirming that everything about it is female, but he refrains from commenting and stands up.

„Please return to the original position, without skin and bones.“

Gembdenbach adjusts the settings and steps closer out of curiosity. Rüd now focuses on the back of the head, where the injury is located. The gap extends about three centimeters deep into the visual cortex. Rüd requests a few layers of tissue to be displayed.

„That's the visual cortex, right?“ he asks Gembdenbach.

„Correct.“

I can't say whether the injury is targeted. What's certain is that the visual impact it triggers would be fascinating to the victim, were it all temporary, pain-free, and not accompanied by a fear of death: The field of vision explodes in a colorful, adventurous storm, through which black lightning strikes. All visual memories disappear at the moment of neural destruction. One wouldn't even know what they look like anymore, having become blind, not just outwardly, but inwardly as well.

Rüd doesn't need to ask if there are cerebral afterimages from Hilal's last seconds. Even if the Cenobites had the technology—they would only have seen colorful sprinkles.

Rüd stands up. „The real body is—?“ „Buried!“ Brahe's right eye shines. „Outside?“ asks Rüd.

„Outside.“

Rüd signals Gembdenbach that he's finished. Gembdenbach closes the emitter interface, and the body disappears. The temperature has now dropped to eleven degrees. The rock of Athos is massive, but it does not retain heat on its own. Rüd shivers.

It's easy to imagine the course of the accident. Hilal, somehow, got into the drones and was fatally injured.

„Was the drone secured?“ Rüd asks, looking at the Biçak bay that remained empty during the emergency stop.

Brahe wipes the moisture from his eye. „It's in the lab. You can look at it.“

„I suspect that your MARFA controls the drones—“

Brahe grips his crutch. „Of course. Like everything else.“

Rüd looks at him for a brief moment. The instinctive mistrust he harbors against him is based solely on a lack of sympathy. I cannot emphasize enough how little I think of instincts. Instincts may be useful for reacting quickly in dangerous situations, but they are not suitable for a proper assessment of a stranger. Rüd takes a few steps towards the lock in the rock wall.

„What's behind there?“ he asks.

„A tunnel,“ says Gembdenbach. „It leads to the old drillings, which in turn lead into the main massif. It's a real labyrinth.“ He smooths his hair. „If you add up all the tunnels and shafts, you get twenty kilometers. A huge blind spot. But there's nothing there anymore, except for scrap, dust foam, and left-behind tools.“

Rüd touches the cold metal of the lock gate; Gembdenbach steps up. „Beyond here, you can fly again,“ he whispers, smiling as if he's sharing a secret. „The force field of the KL spindle only extends this far. In the mines, you're weightless.“

„Have you seen enough?“ interrupts him Brahe, planting his crutch on the ground.

„I don't know,“ says Rüd.

Brahe lifts his chin. „We gather in half an hour for Vespers. Gunder has told me about your company. I am pleased to welcome you both. Everything is welcome before the Lord.“

With that, he disappears into the darkness, towards the turkeys, without looking back. Rüd watches him until the echoing click of his crutch is no longer audible.

„Vespers?“

„The gathering for evening prayer.“

Gembdenbach notes the moderate enthusiasm on Rüd's face. He had planned to examine the drone next and then make contact with the MARFA. He must now weigh what is more important: following his plan or first adapting to local customs. Both are essential in their own way for the inquisition process.

„I have another question.“

„Go ahead.“

„Hilal—was a woman!“

Gembdenbach averts his gaze, not out of embarrassment, but to think.

When he seems to have found a satisfactory answer, he presses the emergency button next to the lock door. Not a second too soon, as the animals' blood was about to freeze. Immediately, the drones float out of their bays while the herds slowly start moving again and the air fills with a swelling hum and buzz.

„Who decides what someone is?“ asks Gembdenbach and follows Brahe into the darkness.







Jens Lubbaddeh, born 1973, studied biology in Gießen and Tübingen, where he completed his diploma at the Friedrich Miescher Laboratory of the Max Planck Society for Developmental Biology under Alexander Borst. His research focus was comparative neurosciences and neuropharmacology.

Since then, he has worked for various magazines and online in the field of science and technology, including Stern, DER SPIEGEL and DIE ZEIT. In 2013, he was awarded the Herbert Quandt Media Prize for Economic Journalism for his article "Die Masse macht's".

His expertise as a science journalist is also reflected in his novels, in which he explores disruptive technological developments and their societal consequences. Key themes in Lubbaddeh's literary work include biotechnology, regenerative medicine, genetic engineering, stem cells, cloning, robots, AI and transhumanism.

Lubbaddeh and his family live in Berlin.

**JENS  
LUBBADEH**



**THE  
CLONE**

Berlin 2033. Journalist Mara Erhardt discovers that a Korean biologist has been illegally cloning humans for years. One lead points to Berlin, to two students. But when she tracks down the young men, events take a sudden turn. Because there's another lead to Germany – to a clone of the greatest criminal in history: Adolf Hitler. And the sponsors don't want his identity revealed too soon. For Mara, a deadly race against time begins – and against a disastrous repetition of German history...

Excerpt © Heyne

# 1

BERLIN, 2033

He had grown more like his original in those four years. Leaner. More masculine.

He had seen so many people die. It had been necessary. It was important for his development. Alina Schalk stood in the entrance hall of Berlin Airport, watching Arthur approach slowly with a grim expression.

She was a slender woman, her dark blonde hair tied back into a ponytail, always a bit too tight, making her purposeful gaze seem even harder.

He spotted her in the crowd, and she saw him hesitate for a moment. Her glasses were new. She had deliberately chosen round lenses, hoping to soften her stern features.

Alina Schalk smiled. She was actually glad to see him. Yet, smiling was not an expression often found on her face.

„Arthur!“ she called out and ran towards him, arms spread, ready to embrace him, but he did not reciprocate.

„Hello“, he said, his face expressionless.

She knew: He didn't want to be here. She had forced him to come back. Pulled him from his life, away from his friends. It had been necessary. After what had happened in Baghuz, she had feared things could derail.

He looked uncertainly at the crowd of joyful people welcoming their loved ones. It must have been strange for him. He was coming straight from the war.

Now he was back here. In Germany. In Berlin. In a completely different world than war-torn Syria. „Did you have a good flight?“ Alina asked.

Arthur nodded. He walked beside her in silence. She sensed he didn't want to talk.

For him, she had always been a confidant. A close friend of his mother Rebecca, with whom he had a very close relationship—until her death. His father was naturally already dead, she had seen to that. She had been appointed Arthur's guardian, had given him money, found him an apartment.

Getting him to Syria had required long-term planning. She first sent him on a trip to Jordan—supposedly to distract him. In the desert of Wadi Rum, he would find himself. The vastness, the silence. Plus, she had tempted him with art: The fantastic rock formations would inspire him and provide great subjects.

She was right: Arthur went to Jordan. There, he had „accidentally“ met Andrew first, the cool dropout and adventurer who had swept him along with his enthusiasm and taken him to Syria. They both met Wadi there, also quite „accidentally.“

Of course, Alina Schalk had feigned disapproval and protest at his plan to join Andrew and Wadi at the front—what else would he expect from a guardian.

Her plan had worked.

When they reached the car, Arthur pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit one. He had taken up smoking, which she disliked—his original had been a strict non-smoker. But she tried not to show her disapproval, not wanting to stir up his resentment.

She noticed his hand tremble as he brought the cigarette to his mouth.

He took a quick drag, trying to hide the shaking from her. Arthur's face had grown harder, his chin sharper, his cheeks hollower. Dark circles lay under his eyes. He looked even more serious. The mustache he had let grow made him look older. He had also lost weight. The war had made him a man. That was how it was supposed to be.

Each time she saw him, she searched his face for similarities with his original. Arthur had shaved his black hair stubble-short in Syria, which made it harder to identify resemblances. But the

rest matched. The elongated face, the piercing blue eyes. Arthur, like his original, had bad and crooked teeth. But she had pressured Rebecca to have them corrected with braces in his childhood.

Otherwise, he resembled the young Adolf Hitler very closely. So far as one could say, there weren't many pictures of the leader from his young years. Just one thing always puzzled her: Arthur's gaze was compelling. The eyes also had the notable blue highlighted in Hitler, which unfortunately couldn't be seen in black-and-white photos. But Schalk still missed the hypnotic quality in Arthur's eyes, what was always said about Hitler: that the dictator could captivate anyone he spoke to with just his look.

Well, there were several possible explanations. For one, clones, contrary to popular belief, did not always look exactly like their original. Minor deviations were possible, just as with identical twins. Moon had repeatedly told her and Bernd that. Also, human memory was a treacherous companion. People glorified their memories, mythologized, added details. Hitler had been an extraordinary figure; most contemporary reports came from a time when he had already been a celebrity. Who could be objective in the face of the leader?

Arthur continued smoking as they drove towards the city center. She let him, although she hated cigarette smoke, especially in her car.

Arthur inspected her car with interest.

„Electric,“ she shrugged. „Our left-wing government practically forced me to give up my combustion engine.“

When he remained silent, she continued talking to fill the silence. „I've secured an apartment for you in Prenzlauer Berg. In the Bötzowkiez. You'll like it. Old building, stucco, three rooms, balcony. You'll have plenty of space.“

He kept quiet, looking out the window. They drove through Neukölln. Turkish and Arabic shops whizzed by, tuned Teslas and BMWs with modified artificial electric motor sounds roared

down the street, bearded dark-skinned men at the wheel, their hair uniquely shaved and slicked back. Alina Schalk felt their dark eyes on her, and she had to fight against her disdain. Neukölln was the scum of Berlin, a lost district. The whole city was lost, a failed city, as even a Green politician had once put it. But all that would change. Very soon.

„Why did you bring me back?“ he asked, his voice uninterested. „Why now?“

He glanced at her from the side, the crease between his eyebrows remarkably deep for his age. For a moment, she saw a hint of boundless anger in his face. Good. Anger had been Hitler's driving force.

„It was necessary,“ she said calmly. „Don't you think? After Baghuz?“

He flinched almost imperceptibly as she mentioned the village's name. She had actually wanted to leave him in Syria for a while longer. But after the massacre, she had to pull the emergency brake. She had had to threaten him with cutting off his funds to make him come back.

„It's better this way, Arthur. Trust me. Settle in first. Acclimate. Besides, Bernd would like to meet you and make you an offer. He sends his regards.“

Arthur only knew Bernd Sörensen from her stories—and of course, the news. He was aware of Alina's political activity, he knew the „German Way“, but at Sörensen's behest, she had always avoided discussing it with Arthur. It had been too early; Hitler had also shown no political interest or activity in his youth. Sörensen had so far refused to meet Arthur personally. He was very cautious about not steering the boy's development in the wrong direction. After Arthur's father „had an accident,“ the boy would have accepted any new man in his life as a father figure—at least, that was Sörensen's concern. Schalk found it a bit excessive, but that was Bernd for you: highly neurotic.

Arthur rummaged in his backpack, all he had for luggage.

„Have you drawn much?“ she asked.



The metal tube on the side of the backpack had caught her eye right away. But she knew anyway from Andrew what Arthur had done in those four years in Syria. Andrew, whom Arthur thought was his friend and comrade. In truth, he had been hired by her and Bernd to protect—and monitor—Arthur.

He clearly felt uncomfortable as she brought up his drawings, but Alina Schalk also sensed something in him that wanted to be asked about them. He had never gotten over the rejection from the art academy. What he didn't know: He had actually made it. But she had ensured he received a rejection letter. That was how it had been for the young Adolf Hitler as well.

It had not been difficult; the director of the academy had been easily blackmailed with his cheap little secretary affair.

Arthur needed this experience to develop his hatred for the elites, the teachers, the supposedly educated and better-off.

Arthur was a loner, reclusive, suspicious, and absolute. But he was also proud, arrogant, and narcissistic. He wanted the stage. He just didn't know it yet. But that would soon change.

„A bit,“ he said, lighting another cigarette. Drawing meant everything to him. The high art. And he probably guessed that the pictures were the gateway to his soul. He didn't want anyone to see through them.

Arthur hesitated briefly, but then he opened the tube and pulled out the sheets, his expression full of self-criticism. Reluctantly, he handed them to Alina Schalk, who looked at them while driving.

The top one was a pencil drawing. It depicted a young man: It was Wadi. She tried not to show that she recognized him. Wadi, like Andrew, was bought. In the drawing, he posed with a Kalashnikov and a cigarette. It looked a bit silly, macho war posturing, poor man's steel thunder.

„Who is this?“ she asked.

„Wadi. He was my comrade. My brother.“

The experience of camaraderie was important for his development. Hitler had often referred to his experiences in

World War I, how important the bond with the other soldiers in his regiment had been for him. The absolute devotion and loyalty with which they fought together for a common cause. An experience that shaped how he formed and led the NSDAP.

„The drawing is good,“ Alina Schalk acknowledged. That was not a lie. Arthur had a precise eye, a fine line that brought out the essential.

He looked at her searchingly.

She felt his uncertainty and looked him in the face. „Really good.“

„Thank you.“ He packed the drawings back up. „I've worked a lot in Syria. I've gotten better.“

„Did you also take photos?“

„I hate photos. They're always disappointing. I also tried watercolors, but it was too cumbersome at the front. I plan to paint in oil here.“

She nodded, although she knew he wouldn't do that—they would see to it. There were now more important things than painting.

They had arrived in Prenzlauer Berg. Slowly, she steered the car into Bötzwstraße.

Arthur's political education was imminent. Just like Hitler, after the war, in his years in Munich. Soon he must lead a party. Then a people.

And someday an empire.

BERLIN, 2033

Mara drank her coffee, the camping stove beside her still warm. It was already past one in the afternoon. She had been waiting in front of the University of the Arts campus for two hours now. Only a few students were in sight. But soon, the morning lectures would end. Would she find the brothers among the crowd?

The venerable university building was located in the Charlottenburg district, not far from the Tiergarten, where she had taken a long walk with Kurt, her wire-haired dachshund, earlier that day and where they had spent the night—in the belly of her VW bus, where she now sat and observed the campus through its window. She was attached to the vehicle, the only question was how long she would still be allowed to drive it. The high taxes on combustion engines were already a painful hit to her wallet.

She glanced back at the cargo area: Kurt was curled up in his basket, asleep. Good. She felt somewhat guilty for subjecting the old dog to these hardships. He disliked long drives on the autobahn. Usually, she left him at home in Munich and asked friends to look after him—but she hadn't found anyone on such short notice.

She and Kurt were tired because the night had been restless. Partying teenagers with their German rap and shouting. Later, right-wing extremists, likely members of the „Young Path“, had joined in, and there had been trouble between the two groups.

With the federal elections just weeks away, the youth organization of the German Path was already busy plastering cities with posters. „Islam lessons? Not in our schools!“ – „Burkas? We prefer bikinis“ – „The German Path, the only way.“ And then countless „Bernd instead of börek“ posters with party

leader Bernd Sörensen raising his arms in a victory pose. On quite a few, he was promptly adorned with a Hitler mustache.

The Young Path members had apparently caught the gangsta rap youths as they defaced their election posters. After seemingly endless shouting, the police arrived and broke it up. At least no one had chased her from her sleeping spot.

She had mixed feelings about Berlin. On the one hand, she found the city interesting and exciting. On the other, after so many years in the tranquil Munich, she was not accustomed to the roughness, the trash, and the chaos. Apparently, even the formerly tidy Charlottenburg was in decline.

Now, larger crowds streamed from the entrance gates. Mara set down her coffee and carefully got out of the bus, trying not to wake Kurt. She slowly walked towards the campus.

All she had were a few photos of the twins. They showed the two as teenagers. Today, they were twenty-two; their birthday was not long ago. Young men. Would she recognize them? The university was her only lead. They were not listed in the address book, and the address of their parents was no help. All she knew from her informant was that they studied here. He had also provided the photos.

Mara wandered slowly, studying the faces of the students. Many carried portfolios or drawing tubes, others instrument cases. One of the brothers studied music, the other art.

The number of students kept growing. Perhaps the twins weren't even at the university today? Only now did Mara realize she might have prepared better. But the tip about the brothers had only landed in her anonymous crypto mailbox two days ago.

Finally, she had a lead in Germany. Finally, she could make the Moon Dong-soo case relevant for German readers. She desperately needed this story. And especially the money. She could barely pay her rent with her fees.

Mara tried to scan the faces of the students as inconspicuously as possible—which she didn't quite manage. She felt the curious

glances. Clearly, at forty-four, she stood out. They probably thought she was an overbearing helicopter mother lurking after her daughter. Though, she could also just be a lecturer, right? No, she didn't really look like a lecturer, unwashed, her hair surely more tousled than usual.

As she continued across the campus feeling like an alien, she pondered how to approach the brothers.

How would she react if a stranger showed her private childhood photos? It would not be easy to even start a conversation with them. And then, it wasn't about just any topic.

But Mara would not give up easily. She could see herself spending another night in the VW bus, and maybe even another.

The brothers looked alike, at least in the teenage pictures, over which she had to overlay several years of life, possible different hairstyles, beards, piercings, and sunglasses.

After more than ten minutes of walking across the campus, should she ask someone about the Wohlpflugs? That would only draw more attention, though.

Suddenly, something alarmed her. She had just passed a group of students. A few meters further, Mara stopped. There were four men and three women. She recognized one of the men. He was thinner than in the photos and sported a thin mustache, but it was him, no question: Robin Wohlpflug. Robin had smooth dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail. A baggy hoodie hung over his thin upper body, and black trousers wrapped his legs.

She quickly checked the other faces and found Friedrich Wohlpflug as well.

Both brothers had light blue eyes, were of medium height, about five feet seven inches. But Friedrich's hair was lighter and shorter, and above all, he seemed more positive than Robin, who looked melancholic with his dark clothes, his serious face, and slumped shoulders. Friedrich, on the other hand, smiled a lot, wore blue jeans, and a green shirt. Over his shoulder, he had a drawing tube strapped, like some of the other students with whom he and his brother stood. Friedrich had an arm around a

young woman. She had long chestnut brown hair and very fair skin. Her thick eyebrows over her glasses made a strong statement on her finely cut face. The girl didn't talk much, listening attentively while the brothers engaged in lively discussion.

As Mara contemplated her next move, part of the group said goodbye, and Friedrich, Robin, and the young woman were left alone.

Was this her chance? She still hesitated. Mara would have preferred to catch the brothers alone on their first encounter. Moreover, the atmosphere between the two suddenly seemed tense. Was that why the others had left so abruptly? Mara couldn't understand what was being said, but Robin was confronting his brother about something. His head was thrust forward, his gaze fixed on Friedrich, his finger repeatedly pointing at his brother.

Now the woman said something. She spoke to Robin, seeming to try to calm him down. Friedrich's face also darkened, and with a quick movement, he swung his drawing tube from his back and opened it. He took out a picture and rolled it out on the ground—Mara couldn't see what was on it.

Robin looked at it for a while, then turned around and walked away. Friedrich made no attempt to follow him. Eventually, the young woman followed Robin and tried to bring him back.

Not a good moment for her endeavor. What should she do? Wait until the waters calmed? Especially since her news would hardly lift the brothers' spirits. It would be better if they heard it in a relaxed state. But who knew if she would get a better opportunity?

Reluctantly, Robin had been persuaded by the young woman to turn back and now stood again with his brother.

Mara reached into her bag and felt for the folder and her tablet. Then she took a deep breath and slowly walked towards the trio.

The three didn't notice her at first, so engrossed were they in

their heated discussion.

„We had an agreement!“ Robin hissed. „You could have painted any other scene. Any other. But no, you had to choose that one for your thesis!“

„It just came out of me, okay?“ Friedrich defended. „Can you please stop playing the moralist? Nobody knows what the picture means!“

„Robin“, said the woman. „Friedrich wasn't disloyal. I was there. That's how it is in art, you can't control it.“

„What do you know about art!“ Robin snapped at her.

The woman stepped back, startled.

Mara now stood before them. The young woman noticed her first.

„Hello“, Mara began awkwardly. „Sorry to interrupt. You are Robin and Friedrich Wohlpflug?“

The brothers, who hadn't noticed her until now, looked at her expectantly.

„Who are you?“ asked Friedrich.

„Oh. Right, I should introduce myself first. Mara Erhardt. Journalist. I work for the Süddeutsche Zeitung.“

The three shrugged their shoulders and remained silent.

„How do you know our names?“ Robin finally said. His voice was deeper than his appearance suggested. He spoke calmly, but his decisiveness and authority were unmistakable and surprising for such a young man.

„If you have a few minutes—I would like to show you something.“

Uncertainty crept into Mara, and she didn't like it. Confidence was crucial when making first contact with important informants. The first seconds decided whether an interlocutor would trust her or not.

She squared her shoulders, balanced her weight evenly on her heels and the balls of her feet, and forced herself to maintain eye contact. Then she fished her tablet from her bag. As she tried to unfold it, it slipped from her hand and fell to the ground.

Friedrich reached it before she could and picked it up. The shatterproof display showed several photographs. Mara inwardly cursed for having left them open. The brothers must think she was some kind of stalker. Indeed, Friedrich looked at her, disturbed.

Robin's gaze fell on a photograph at the bottom. It showed a sailboat. Mara saw by his expression that he recognized it immediately.

A couple stood at the railing, holding two small boys, no older than two years, in their arms. They wore short clothes and sunglasses, the woman's long copper-colored hair blowing in the wind.

In the children's features, one could already discern the faces of Robin and Friedrich. Both wore SpongeBob T-shirts. They laughed into the camera, and Friedrich pointed towards the photographer.

„Where did you get this?“ Robin asked sharply.

Mara hesitated. Now it depended on the right words.

„You recognize this photo, don't you?“

Friedrich nodded slowly. Something in his face darkened. Nervously, he looked to the side, at his picture, which was still unrolled on the ground and had been the cause of the argument with Robin.

Only then did Mara recognize what was depicted: a sailing ship, presented from an unusual perspective. Steeply from below, with the view of someone who was swimming a few meters beside the ship.

She felt a tingle in her neck.

„The photo was taken on Corfu“, Robin said, pinning her with his gaze. „We were two years old.“

She tried to maintain the gaze, which was very difficult. It felt as if Robin could see behind her face, as if he could read all her secrets, sense every half-truth, every lie.

„That's not you in the photo“, she said.

The brothers looked at her and then at each other.



She tapped on the photo and called up the EXIF metadata of the image. A long table with many entries appeared on the display.

Brand: Panasonic  
Model: DMC-FZ28  
EXIF / Version: 2.21

Mara's finger searched the table for the line marked „DateTimeOriginal“, the date the photo was taken.

„Here“, she said, handing Robin her tablet.

When he saw the entry, his eyes widened. There it was:

2010:07:17 11:01:17

„The photo was taken on July 17, 2010“, she said. „One minute and seventeen seconds past eleven. You weren't even born in 2010.“

*A room with no windows. Harsh neon light on white concrete walls. Something has happened, he thinks — and at the same time, wonders that he can still think. A fine humming deep in his ears. He thinks this is probably the last thought of his life. He thinks this image is probably the last of his life. But no. His gaze falls on a sofa. On it, he recognizes patterns, figures, animals. He sees a body. A woman. Her eyes are closed, her head rests on his shoulder. Is she sleeping? Or is she already dead? The realization calms him, and he knows that he, too, will soon depart. The fight is over. He hears something. Tok, tok, tok. Very faint. Liquid drips onto the floor. He realizes: It's dripping from his head.*





Lisa Krieg lives with her husband, her daughter, a varying number of cats, and a dog in a small village in the desert of Israel.

As a PhD in Cultural Anthropology, she explored the cultural aspects of human-nature-technology relationships in laboratories and museums in forests and oceans in the Indian Ocean.

As an artist, she captures the endlessly diverse forms of the Arava desert on canvas. She has published short stories in „Exodus“, „phantastisch!“ and „Queer\*welten“.



LISA J. KRIEG

THREE PHASES  
OF  
UPROOTING

OR



THE LOVE  
OF THE  
TURTLES

A marine biologist who has to deal with a difficult pregnancy on her own. An adventurous teenager trying to prove herself to her successful mother. A researcher looking for answers to urgent questions in the forest. All of them united by their love for turtles.

After a family tragedy, marine biologist Anna Hoareau immerses herself in her research at an institute in Eilat, exploring solutions to the ecological-genetic collapse.

Amidst social unrest, Anna, Nisha, and Lokapi struggle to find their place in a doomed world.

And then a wild sea turtle appears, confusing Anna's rational worldview. Three generations, three intertwined destinies that blur the boundaries between dream and reality, redefining what it means to be human. Can a person change and still remain human, and find their place in the world?

Excerpt © Wortschatten Verlag

# Far from Home

The moon bathes the desk in silver light, and the sea whispers softly through the open window. Small waves break against amphitheater-like buildings, which have been standing unintentionally in the salty waters of the Gulf of Aqaba like stone mangrove trees since the rise in sea levels. Anna squints her eyes and scratches the fountain pen across the Orgatek parchment. In ink as black as the deep sea, she corrects sequence after sequence, line after line. Anna shifts her thick red hair from one shoulder to the other and briefly wipes her moist forehead. Even the nights are hot in Eilat.

She is on the verge of a breakthrough. The solution is within reach, she feels it. Her fingers tremble with tension. Her holo has transferred the nucleotide sequences of the TaT32 gene from *Artiaster roseus* onto the parchment. Sharp and clear, base pair aligns with base pair. One just has to find the error responsible for the hybrid starfish producing the weaker adhesive protein SfP32b instead of the intended SfP32a. A minimal difference, yet even a minimal error is an error. Without the correct adhesive, the starfish's tiny feet fail. It is too slow, too weak to reduce the algae surplus of the reef, control the mussel population, and thus save the last coral reef in the world from collapse.

But Anna won't give up so easily. Her gaze is glued to the sequences. The parchment pages are spread out before her. The pressure of the pen tip stimulates the microorganisms in the parchment to produce Orga-ink. Meira would say it's a waste to use so many pages instead of rewriting a single page over and over and uploading everything automatically to her holo. But she needs to see it, to feel the sequence of the sequences. If only she could write as fast as she thinks!

Her eyes dart over the page. She strikes out nucleotides and adds others. A wrong amino acid, a wrong fold, and the protein loses its effectiveness. But she is not afraid to make mistakes. A

little pressure increases concentration. The parchment fills with the rhythm of the pen tip as she deletes entire sequences and rewrites them. In her mind's eye, she sees amino acids linking to peptide chains, angles folding upon angles into a three-dimensional whole. One, two, three. One, two, three. Like a key. A key missing teeth. Anna squints. Sweat drops slowly run down her forehead and gather above her eyebrows, sliding along her hairline to her neck. If the protein's fold does not match the starfish's sticky feet, she must find other ways, creative ways, ways no one has thought of before. She closes her eyes and concentrates. One must listen to the nucleotides. See the sequences as a whole. Recognize patterns. And one must not be deterred.

In her mind's eye, amino acids and anatomical structures rotate around each other. Symmetries merge, divide, and reassemble. If you look closely, no object is truly separate from another. Only a thin layer of skin separates the adhesive secretion from the sticky feet. Skin? What is that? A porous organ that enables exchange. Boundaries are an illusion. If one were not bound by the limitations of matter, one could simply glide through the starfish that they have calculated on computers and produced on glass. One would see the ambulacral feet on the skin of *Artiaster roseus*, pink on top and white at the base. One would see that on the feet themselves sit further feet, that fractal-like shapes repeat almost infinitely until it no longer makes sense to speak of a skin. For at a certain moment, one would realize that one is no longer between two lamellae but already within the body of the starfish, without having passed through any magical portal. The transition between inside and outside dissolves like a tear in the sea when one reaches for it. One would follow spiral molecules building up a starfish that shouldn't naturally exist—at least, that's what the hybridization opponents would claim. But what does „natural“ really mean?

Anna's pen sets sign after sign, line after line. Stray hair strands fall onto her forehead, but she has no time to tie her hair



back. Next to her, a crab protein mush based on goat's milk stands, but she has no time for it either. The pen falls from her hand, she tilts her head back, groans, and closes her eyes. Her body is too weak. The trembling of her hands disturbs her concentration. But she is far from finished.

Decisively, she opens her eyes. Her gaze sweeps over the collection. Gabris and her collection. Shells and stones, broken coral arms, and dried-up seahorses, found and arranged by her and her little brother, stack in the shelves. They lay side by side, piling up, forming circles, spirals, and lines stretching over the walls. Each thing has its own place in this pattern. Like one nucleotide after another, the individual parts together create a meaningful whole. A quick glance at the clock tells Anna that it is two o'clock in the morning. Quickly, she closes her eyes again. Her fingers trace over the three smooth black stones on her table. One, two, three. Cool surfaces, touched endlessly. If she drinks some alg-coffee, she might last another hour. Absently, she begins to spoon the crab mush. Just don't lose the thread. A warm feeling spreads in her stomach. Food. She had missed that, energy.

Like a lightning bolt, it strikes her. Energy, of course... the ammonium concentration affects the pH value... She needs to see it. The spoon clatters onto the table, and the pen tip attacks the parchment anew. How could she have overlooked it? The solution was so clearly in front of her eyes!

It is 3:30 a.m. when she staggers into bed, numb. The salty air mixes in her nose with the smell of ink and the must of the never quite dry bedding. A smile creeps onto her lips. Tomorrow she will speak with Professor Jiddawi. Talitha Jiddawi. She will be amazed.

Anna automatically reaches for the brown and white spotted shell on her nightstand, pressing it firmly into the hollow between her shoulder and ear, until the points soothingly press into the skin on her neck, and she falls asleep.

# Black Eyes

Ten meters below the water's surface, the reef teems with life. Corals and anemones in red, orange, yellow, and purple ebb and flow with the rhythm of the current, swaying back and forth. Turquoise waves carry fish of all sizes to and fro. The porous rock of the gigantic reef catches and repels them, around which their entire lives revolve. Where the white sand of the seabed fades into the depths, the bright colors are replaced by an endless dark blue.

Anna tears herself away from the mesmerizing rhythm and focuses her gaze on the starfish colony on the rock below her. She firmly grips her breather, closes her eyes briefly, and inhales the oxygen filtered from the sea by the device. Good. The breather is still in place. Of course. She's checked it multiple times, but better safe than sorry. It's been over five years since she last breathed water, and today is not the day that changes. She will take her measurements, collect her samples, and resurface. Everything will go according to plan. She exhales slowly and watches the dancing air bubbles as they ascend to the glittering surface.

A school of small glassfish parts before the young marine biologist as she peels a pink starfish from the rock. She runs a finger admiringly over the iridescent pink skin of *Artiaster roseus*. The starfish squirms in her grip. Anna squints her eyes. Her minimally marine-hybrid genetics make her lens flexible enough to focus underwater—though only when she concentrates. She grips the creature a bit tighter and attaches the measuring device. Read chip – click. GPS coordinates – click. Diameter: 7.3 cm – click. She smiles. Three. Her favorite number. Arm circumference: 23.3 mm – click. Two more threes. It should be a good day. The arms of the hybridized starfish feel firm and plump.

She pulls the knife from her pocket to take a tissue sample

when a glint distracts her. A round shell is perfectly wedged between two branches of a fire coral. Anna pauses. A slight deviation from the plan is permissible. With tweezers in one hand, she carefully tries to dislodge the shell. After some tugging and pulling, it falls into her hand. It shimmers dark violet in the light. Impressive parallel black stripes encircle its form. Gabri would have liked it. Anna decisively brushes aside the thought of her brother and pockets the shell just as the current hits her with the force of a solar bus. The wave stirs the reef dwellers into a frenzy and drags Anna's body sideways like a bundle of seagrass. Tweezers, knife, and starfish fall, sinking into the depths, and Anna flails her arms heavily. Her left hand finds resistance and grabs it. Sharp rock digs into her hand, and she inhales sharply in shock. The current pulls at her firmly.

Her heart is still pounding when the sea calms down again. One must always be prepared, she chides herself. That's the ocean, always in motion, you never know what will happen. That's why you must stay alert. Always. Just as she loosens her grip and looks for her items, the second wave hits her like a fist of water. The rock digs deeper into her hand and everything spins. A scream escapes her lips. Her frantically flailing free arm bumps against the breather and pushes it aside, just far enough to interrupt the airflow of the filter. The current pulls at her, the breather slips further, she holds her breath and paddles frantically. And then the device comes completely off her head.

No, no! Not now, not here! Water presses cold against her lips. She's running out of air. Her heart beats wildly. Waves clasp around her body like icy hands, although the water temperature is warm. She's not ready for this. The hostile liquid wants to invade her. She feels like she's going to burst. You have hybrid lungs, she hears her former doctoral advisor from Alexandria's voice, why don't you just breathe? As if it were that easy! She explodes inside. Everything in her screams: „Up, to the air!“ But the air is far away. Don't panic, don't panic! Count! A black beetle with three dots, three, three is a good number, three, four, five.

She must get a hold of the breather, she must let go of the rock, the current will carry her, she must surface!

Anna flails with her hands and feet. She opens her mouth. Water forces its way in. It presses against her tongue, her palate, her teeth. This must have been how Gabri felt in his final moments. The thought shoots through her mind and takes root, spreading throughout her body. She wants to scream, but she can't. She coughs, but the water has already found its way into her lungs. Her body must know what to do if she could just stay calm. Eight, nine, ten. She opens her eyes. The breather dances right in front of her in the waves. Anna reaches for the device. Desperately, her entire body stretches and bends through the water. Her lungs resist, all muscles stiffen as she expels the water from herself. Her hand reaches the breather, touches the strap, just one more centimeter. Don't breathe again! Anna's hand closes around the device, holds it tight, pulls it toward her. She lies askew in the water, the next wave will push her against the reef. She fits the breather over her head, the straps are twisted. Count! Eleven, twelve...

Suddenly, a huge shadow approaches her. A turtle. From the deep blue, a massive sea turtle glides toward Anna with gentle fin strokes. For a moment, she forgets her panic. The massive creature stops purposefully in front of her in the water and looks at her with a curious gaze. Old, black eyes peer deep into Anna's soul, recognizing her and holding her fast.

All is well. She just needs to keep looking at the turtle. Not count, not think, just hold its gaze. Slowly, Anna sorts her arms and legs, untangles the straps of the breather, adjusts it, and straps it tight. One forceful exhalation, and then air flows into Anna's lungs. Sweet air, dry air. Can a turtle have a questioning look? How deep can its eyes be? With a pounding heart, Anna examines the creature. As a work animal, the turtle should be busy with important tasks at this time and not startling marine biologists. What is it doing here alone at the reef? Strong enough for a mount, this turtle with the dark red shimmering shell, but

it lacks the cybernetic implants for precision work. Leathery, white skin frames each individual reddish-brown scale on its body. On the side of its neck, Anna notices a single silver, star-shaped scale. Odd. A lost navtie? But navigation turtles do not get lost. Their senses are infallible. Moreover, it wears no harness. The identification number. She will send a message with the identification number of the turtle to the reef authority. The patrols can recapture the runaway. Anna reluctantly takes her eyes off the dark eyes of the turtle and calls up the contact of the reef authority on her holo. She wants to read the identification number on the turtle's collar, but the turtle wears no collar.

Anna squints her eyes. It must be there. But the neck of the turtle is as reddish-brown scaled as the rest of its body. Not even a mark is visible that a collar would leave if it were removed. And there really is no conceivable reason why anyone would take a turtle's collar off. And then Anna's heart skips a beat. Algae grow on the turtle's shell! Not just on the shell, but on the rest of its body too. And barnacles. Small, round crustaceans that are attached to it. Why didn't she notice this immediately? This is simply and straightforwardly impossible. Anna strokes her face with a flustered motion and bumps into the breather. Work turtles are cleaned every evening. Every. Evening. Could it have escaped as a hatchling from the incubators? But it would never have passed unnoticed through the locks, and the hatchlings are chipped intraovularly, even before hatching.

But of course! There is a solution. An even more impossible solution. It could be a wild sea turtle. Except that there are no wild sea turtles, as they have been extinct for nearly a hundred years. Sure, there are still people who deny this, but the facts speak for themselves and the facts don't care whether you deny them or not. There's no reason to doubt them, none rational at least. Except for this turtle here, with deep black eyes and an overgrown shell.

She must send a message to the reef authority. The agency will know what to do. After all, it's not her problem. Anna's finger

hovers over the holo on her wrist. A small gesture is enough and the observation would be reported. She hesitates. There's something in the eyes of the turtle. Intent. A question. Curiosity? Old eyes it has, knowing eyes. Different from the turtle eyes Anna knows. Wilder.

She exhales, returns the turtle's gaze, and feels as if something heavy lifts from her. Then another wave comes, dislodging Anna a third time and pressing her toward the turtle. She paddles with arms and legs, but the current is stronger. Anna collides with the animal, her legs striking the shell of the turtle, and then its black eyes are right in front of her. They gaze deeply into Anna's soul as hands and fins instinctively find and touch each other.

Directions lose their meaning. Up and down dissolve. There's only one way: Deeper. Her fingers tingle, violet light spots dance before her. Anna falls. She falls into the eyes of the turtle. And then everything is dark, warm, and quiet.

Slowly her body obeys her again. She moves the fins, her armored body finds its balance in the current. She opens her eyes and sees a different world. What has happened to the sea? It is filled with colorful lines and swirls, with the trails of small fish, with the patterns of currents, interwoven like a tightly woven fabric. It smells of dolphin, of octopus, of jellyfish, and so much more. A peculiarly fragile woman floats before her in the water. Her skin is brown, long red hair fans out around her head like the rays of the setting sun. Where the thin fingers of her much too thin hand touch her fins, it is warm. Deep blue eyes stare at her in surprise, as if time stands still.

Anna blinks, she paddles frantically with arms and legs. It's her arms and legs that are paddling. Yes, of course, her body, panicked, a human body, her eyes, searching for the turtle that was just here, just a moment ago. Everything feels wrong, her blood oxygen is too low, her holo beeps a warning. She didn't need a warning. There's too much water around her. It presses against her from all sides. It's simply too wet here, too blue, too deep. She needs to go up

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