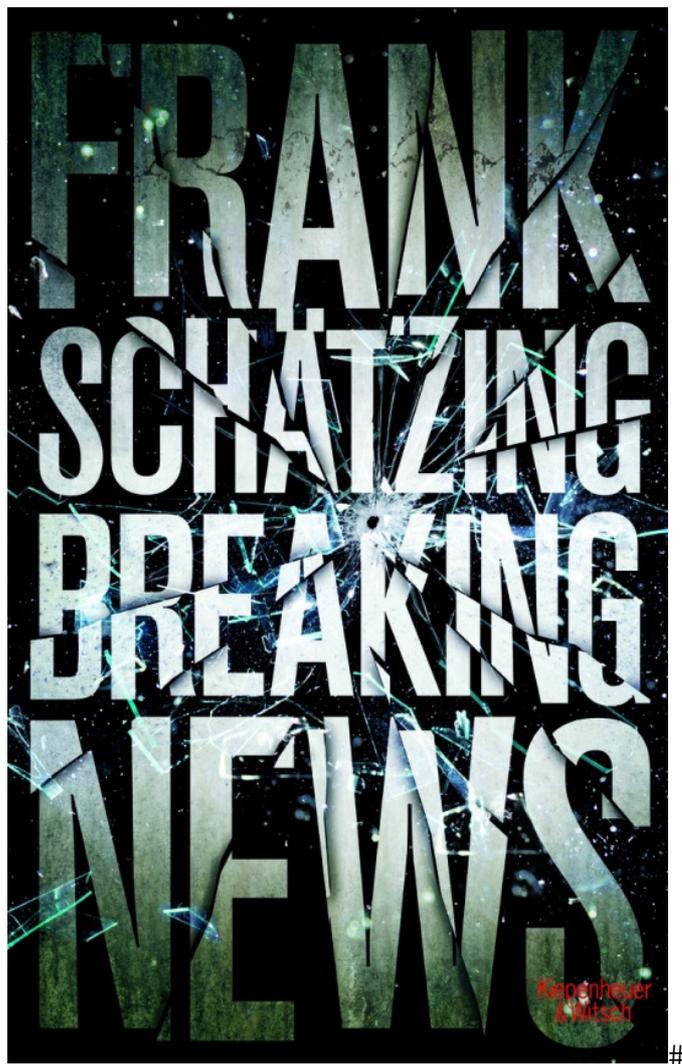


Sample Translation (pp.7-37; 76-98; 715-718;762-789)

BREAKING NEWS
by Frank Schätzing
novel

Translated by Charlotte Collins

Frank Schätzing: Breaking News
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Afghanistan, Northern Provinces

On the road, Toyota Land Cruiser, seven a.m., sack over head, tied under chin. Mouth open, inhaling cloth, not enough air reaching the lungs through the nose - though actually the problem's a mental one. The fabric's porous, just got to get used to it.

Is this something you can get used to? Bumping over potholed mountain roads, deprived of sight, back seat thrashing at your spine?

Depends on the circumstances. Even in less civilized areas there aren't that many reasons for putting a smelly black hood over someone's head. Either you're about to be shot or hanged, in which case wondering whether or not you can get used to it is irrelevant. Or you've been kidnapped: you hear the calm footsteps of the torturer approaching, his friendly voice, before he puts you through hell. That sort of unpleasantness.

Third possibility: you've agreed to wear the thing because the driver doesn't want you to be able to remember the route afterward.

Hagen knows that Björklund next to him isn't dealing so well with the situation. He's struggling with his asthma. The only thing that's really bothering Hagen is that at some point someone must have vomited into his bag. The fabric's clean - that is to say, it's been washed - but some smells impregnate for all time. It's not so much the molecules themselves that preserve the past, more the circumstances through which they arrived there; the way dead people's thoughts occupy a haunted house. Hagen prefers not to imagine the fate the poor bastard who vomited all over the hood had to suffer. Wants to believe that he or she also wore it voluntarily, as the two of them are right now. Knows better.

Was it Marianne Degas, Max Keller or Walid Bakhtari? Which of the three of them, temporarily blinded by the cloth, first lost their nerve and then control of their stomach?

Hagen is starting to convince himself that they've given him one of the very hoods under which the abductees would have pictured the manner of their deaths. As if there weren't hundreds of these hoods doing the rounds - thousands, even. Who manufactures something like this, he wonders. Is there a mail-order company for kidnappers? Summer sale, grab yourself a bargain! Hood, opaque, S, M or L, excellent quality, one-year guarantee, immediate delivery. Goes with: 'Dadullah' shackles with low-noise click fastening. No more fumbling when you're in a rush: one click, and the fetters are on! Buy ten sets and get the 'Pious Deeds' torture kit for free - so don't hesitate! Call now, giving the code -

Degas. Keller. Bakhtari.

Ever since Husain confided that he knew the whereabouts of the three aid workers who've been missing for the past month and a half, Hagen hasn't been able to think about anything else. Two employees of a German aid organization and their local driver who disappeared on the road to Qowngowrat in the northern Kunduz delta, where they were headed with a truck full of medicine and IV solutions. Never arrived. Last seen in the area around Aqli Bur, a godforsaken village scattered in the foothills of the mountains, between rice fields and melon plantations, less than ten kilometers away from Kunduz city. The usual. Clay buildings, thatched roofs, goats, waving children.

This was where they vanished.

Three days later the organization - Heal Afghanistan, a name that smacks unpleasantly of hubris - informed the Foreign Office and put out a press release. Facts available: virtually nil. No video claiming responsibility, no demand. The crisis response center is sitting quietly on its hands. What are they supposed to do? It isn't even a hundred per cent certain that the three have actually been taken. Maybe by now they're already fertilizing Afghan farmland. Or lying out in the desert, covered in sand, nicely mummified by the fifty-degree midday heat, the Ötzi of future generations. Anyone fancy searching for them?

You must be joking.

The incident can't be completely ignored, though, so the press publish ten lines of text: Heal Afghanistan bewails its losses. The report appears in the World section, that graveyard of news, just as Hagen, sitting in his Hamburg apartment, is booking flights to Kabul for himself, Krister Björklund and Inga Dorn. From Kabul they'll travel on to the military camp in Kunduz. Feature on the everyday life of German soldiers out there.

A job he has not the slightest desire to do.

It might be quite illuminating for Inga. Her first trip to a crisis zone. But him? Why the hell does he have to go? If information policy there adheres to Defense Ministry doctrine he could just as well stay home in Hamburg and google his report. One thing's for sure: as a representative of the meddlesome tribe of investigative journalists, the first thing they're going to do is stick the press officer on his back.

He reads the article. Reads it again.

Then he calls Bilal Husain.

Asks whether he can find out more about the business with the abductees.

Bilal Husain is Hagen's fixer, in journalistic jargon: his contact man in Pakistan. The future of Afghanistan is being negotiated in the neighboring country and no one is as well-connected as Husain. As a reporter for papers like *The Statesman* and *Independent News Pakistan* he can access almost any item of information, but most importantly he enjoys the trust of the Taliban. They release their infamous videos to the media through him, calling for

holy war or showing deathly pale foreigners squatting in front of banners that sag beneath the weight of their slogans. Every few days Husain meets with the spokesman of the group responsible for Kunduz, then makes sure his requests get heard. In return, the Taliban is required to accept him as their mediator whenever they need to negotiate with foreign crisis teams. He's acquired a reputation of having a certain degree of influence over the holy warriors. He's also notoriously strapped for cash.

Husain is happy to hear from Hagen. How's work, how's the family. Small talk, long-winded overture, orientally stilted. Hagen doesn't mind. If his Pakistani friend can deliver a story that will catapult him out of the summer doldrums, he can read the Koran to him on an endless loop as far as Hagen's concerned.

Finally Husain says: "Sure, Tom. I'll see what I can find out."

"Great. Thanks, Bilal."

"You're sure they disappeared in the Kunduz delta?"

"Well, that's where they were last seen."

"Strange."

"Why?"

The Taliban are always kidnapping people.

"Not that far north, though," says Husain when they meet, two weeks later, in Peshawar, Pakistan. They're just walking out of Jeweler's Street, onto Chowk Yadgar.

"Not as often," Hagen concedes.

The fixer's right, of course. The professional kidnapping networks, like Haqqani, have spread their tentacles further east, between Khost and Jalalabad, where Pakistan's border region bulges into Afghanistan like a tumor. Foreigners are abducted in the south, too. In the north, they prefer to bury IEDs in the sand and are overjoyed whenever a soldier's legs get blown off. But who's to say they haven't started kidnapping people there, too?

Husain shakes his head. "Doesn't fit with their strategy."

"Has that changed?"

"Let's just say they're watching and learning."

"From whom?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Husain smiles. "From their enemies, of course."

The sun has been roasting Peshawar since the early hours of the morning. Now, as dusk begins to fall, the heat still sits like stagnant water in the streets and squares of the Old Town. Every atom of oxygen seems to have combined with a substance that reduces your life expectancy even as you breathe it in. The smog in this metropolis of two million people can easily compete with Kuala Lumpur, Los Angeles and Beijing.

“The Taliban’s program of decimating ISAF is all very well,” says Husain. “But it doesn’t get them anywhere in the long run.”

Hagen glances around as they stroll across the square. Chowk Yadgar is looking pretty run-down. A mere handful of visitors skulk around the famous domed monument, pointing their cameras half-heartedly. Hardly any travel agencies will still recommend a trip to the region - not since the early 1980s, when a poisonous cocktail of interests began to persistently eat away at the tourist trade. Afghan *mujahideen* fled here from across the border to recruit fighters for their cause and develop strategies for expelling the Red Army - fully supported, incidentally, by Uncle Sam, who not only showed them how to bring down Soviet jets but also encouraged the concentration of jihadist ideas, to create a network the name of which the whole world would come to know after September 11th, 2001. Nowhere else could al-Qaida have flourished as successfully as in scheming Peshawar. The guesthouse of a certain Osama bin Laden burgeoned into Hotel Terror: this was where suicide bombers came to wish each other God speed on their blessed heavenward journey. The city was teeming with agents of the CIA and the ISI, military advisors, journalists, jihadists, gangster bosses and politicians - the last two often being one and the same.

“And what is their new strategy?”

“You’ll have noticed that they’re trying to win back the sympathy of their countrymen.”

True, thinks Hagen.

And for this it’s to the Taliban’s advantage that the ANA, the Afghan National Army, are a corrupt lot who are essentially disqualifying themselves, with the police no better. Whatever ISAF instructors dream of as they try to mold the illiterate, the unemployed, and the criminal into representatives of law and order, it’s going hopelessly wrong. They might just as well open up the prisons and present every man who walks out with a cap, badge and gun.

That’s not *entirely* true. There are certainly some Afghan custodians of the law who are willing to defend their people.

But against whom? Against the Taliban? Against the rampant nepotism that insinuates itself through every political body like a tapeworm? Against Hamid Karzai, the president, whose half-brother runs the drug mafia from his home in Kandahar and gets the CIA to foot the bill for his gold door-handles? Against their own colleagues, who no sooner take possession of their guns than they sell them off to the very people they’re supposed to use them against?

The answer is: Yes.

And another thing. Be a good policeman, don’t let yourself be bought, and you’ll be a dead policeman tomorrow.

No wonder the majority of Afghans are a hundred times more likely to trust any ISAF soldier than one of their own security forces, who bestow their favors upon the highest bidder, are stoned twenty-four hours a day, and definitely don't do one thing:

Administer justice.

But the Taliban do.

They've started to focus on filling the vacuum created by state lawlessness, settling conflicts according to the statutes of Pashtunwali, taking into account the needs of people who know nothing of the world beyond toil in the mud of their fields, people who've never traveled further than ten kilometers from home. People who haven't the faintest idea what a ballot slip is, who can't read the names on it and can't write their own, never mind that the candidates mean nothing to them - certainly not this Hamid Karzai in a Kabul so far removed from their lives it might as well be on the moon. People whose justifiable question is how Mr. Karzai intends to resolve, for example, the problem Abdullah's idiotic nephew has saddled them with by staring at Ajmal's daughter for longer than was seemly - certainly a potential reason for bloodshed. Shouldn't Mr Karzai have got his ass down here by now and spoken with all the parties concerned?

No?

Why vote for him, then?

You don't have to like the Taliban. But they do resolve problems.

"Because they've been paying attention," says Husain. "Because they've been studying ISAF's strategies very closely."

They watched ISAF launch one charm offensive after another. The soldiers went into the villages, listened to the locals' concerns, studied their customs, tried to think like Afghans. They became the kindly uncle who brought presents, improved the infrastructure, made little alliances, and slowly but surely undermined support for the holy warriors, who preferred to preach out of the barrel of a gun.

"So they said to themselves: We can do that, too."

And adapted their strategy.

Pretty smart, thinks Hagen. The invention of the cuddly Taliban.

Well, maybe not quite.

But for people who will enthusiastically stone a woman to death for committing adultery, they are showing an unexpectedly fluffy side. And blood is thicker than water - Pashtun blood, that is. So gradually the mood started to change. The funny thing was that ISAF didn't pick up on any of this to begin with. They'd never known things to be any other way than that people were afraid of the Taliban. Realization only began to dawn on the commanding officers when their soldiers started coming under fire from villages where they'd only just finished building schools. Aghast, they asked themselves what was going wrong.

Hadn't they all been getting along like a house on fire?

They had. And most Afghans like the ISAF soldiers - more than their own government, at any rate. It's just that in this country you survive by forging alliances of convenience, not by liking someone.

"By now the Allies have realized that they're going to lose the haggling over hearts and minds. That only works on a large scale if you maintain a constant presence."

"And there aren't enough of them for that."

"Aha," Husain smiles. "The birth pangs of comprehension."

"So ISAF is trying a different approach in order to thwart the mujahideen's strategy of cozying up to the people: target their leaders, hunt them down, and neutralize them?"

Husain nods. "Like the Israelis with Hamas."

Hagen looks at him. What's going on inside the fixer's head? Asking him which side he's on would be obsolete. Over here, changing sides is how you stay on the right one.

But what does he believe in?

They've turned into Market Street, which leads to the Cunningham Clock, a relic from the era when Britain still dreamed of Empire. As the evening cools the quarter livens up. Tuk-tuks dart towards them, their windscreens smothered in stickers. The hornet-like buzz of mopeds mingles with the rattle of two-strokes desperately in need of a service. Cyclists practice the survival slalom. Those who can honk, honk: to greet friends, startle pedestrians, comment on other people's bad driving, announce their own, or simply because the ownership of a horn entails using it.

"Hungry?"

Husain stops in front of one of the stalls. Vegetables, fruit, spices beckon from shallow bowls. The stench of exhaust fumes is overlaid by a cloud of aromas. Live chickens huddle in cages, stacked one on top of another. The fixer jokes with the stallholder in Urdu; mangoes and rupees change hands. The stallholder cuts open the fruit for them before they move on.

"The Taliban are bothered by it," Husain says, munching. "So what should they do? Go back to spreading terror in the streets? Keep blowing themselves up in marketplaces and hoping that, among the hundreds of civilians who go to meet their Maker, there'll be a couple of foreign soldiers as well? They'll only forfeit the people's trust again if they go down that route."

"They won't stop doing it altogether," Hagen comments, juice collecting in the corners of his mouth.

"No, but like I said - "

"It doesn't get them anywhere."

And nor does open warfare. *This* conflict is one the Taliban, in turn, cannot win. Not against ISAF's high-tech machinery. So how do you weaken an opponent who's driving your leaders out of their holes with night-vision equipment and shooting them down like rabbits?

By adapting his new strategy, just like you did the last one; the same way you've adapted every single one of his strategies so far.

Watch and learn.

Sacrifice the bigger picture in favor of deliberate targeting.

"'High targeting', to be precise," nods Husain.

Because the Taliban have understood that this war can only be won in the media. And the media get fed up of constantly zooming in on the same old bloodstain. Tragic as it may be when civilians get blown to pieces and soldiers travel home in coffins, the world gets used to this, too. Who still cares about the daily car bombings in Iraq? That's not news any more, that's background noise.

"So from now on the Quetta Shura is focusing on operations that will guarantee the Taliban a constant, twenty-four hour presence on CNN. That's the new directive."

"Winning the ratings war."

"Right."

Quetta Shura. After the U.S. intervention, what was left of the Taliban regime settled in the Pakistani city of Quetta where it reformed under Mullah Mohammad Omar. A kraken, constantly growing new arms, snaking its way across the border into first one Afghan province, then another, to strangle the unbelievers and reinstate the old order. The Quetta Shura: they're the bosses. They make the policy decisions.

Hagen snorts contemptuously. "If they go about it like they did back in April, their directive won't get them very far."

April was when they tried to kill Karzai.

And screwed it up.

But what if they succeeded? In killing the president. His governors. The ISAF commander! Attacking the Kabul Hilton. If the Taliban come to dominate prime time, to all intents and purposes they will have won. And ISAF, that muscle-bound colossus in all its impotence, can pack up and stagger home.

"You don't happen to know what they're planning right now?"

Husain looks at him. Raises his eyebrows.

"I'm just asking."

"Come on, Tom! I deal in information, not people's lives."

Nicely put.

"But they're planning *something*?"

“I know they’re channeling all their energy into a big offensive. Mullah Omar himself has taken charge. While that’s going on they want to lay low. Not jeopardize anything. Not get caught up in sideshows.”

“Make out they’ve been weakened, too, maybe?”

“That too, yes.”

Hagen understands. Suddenly it’s all right there, in front of his eyes. “And then, welcome as herpes, a couple of farmer’s sons in the Kunduz outback grab themselves three aid workers.”

“End of the harvest. You’ve got it.”

The harvest is ending.

The poverty is not.

So now the farmers are fighting for the local Taliban and earning a few afghanis on the side. It’s not ideological. It’s a question of survival. ISAF’s familiar with this. The number of attacks always shoots up after the harvest. And of course these yokels in Aqli Bur think three hostages will bring in good money when they sell them to the holy warriors, so to begin with they lock them in the goat shed.

“But the Quetta Shura isn’t buying right now.”

“No.”

Because hostage-taking is a speculative business. Subject to supply and demand, just like citrus fruits, crude steel, or stocks and shares. Some kidnappings are organized at the highest level, but often the people behind them are just desperate farming families or ordinary criminals. They peddle the hostages to the local Taliban, who sell them on, until eventually they end up with the professional networks. The critical factor is their market value. How many million dollars, imprisoned mujahideen, political concessions will one hostage buy you? How great is the media pressure on their government or relevant organization to purchase their freedom? What will be the propaganda effect of cutting off his or her head live on camera?

Heal Afghanistan can’t claim any market value. An insignificant NGO based in Aachen, no media influence, no lobby, no money. The Foreign Office would rather forget all about it. Most importantly, not talk about it. And as long as no demand is made, no one has to.

“They sat around in the shed for a couple of days, eating the farmers out of house and home, until a small jihadist group relented and took them on. The lowest of the low - provincial warriors. The farmers were happy to have got rid of them; their new owners convinced themselves the hostages would bring them kudos. They thought the networks would bite their hands off.”

“But they were wrong.”

“Very wrong. First of all, they’d bought poor-quality goods. Second: the Quetta Shura told them where to go, because they don’t want any kidnappings at the moment.”

“And where are they now?”

“They’ve been moving around a lot. Since last week they’ve been stuck in a farmhouse somewhere in the mountains.”

“The high mountains?”

“More like Afghan Tuscany.”

“That could be anywhere.”

“My contact was talking about a populated area. The territory of a clan chief who sympathizes with the Taliban. No idea where exactly.”

Hagen wipes his hand over his head.

“They can’t be in the best of moods.”

“No. They’ve purchased unsalable stock. Got to feed them, keep them alive. They’re still hoping the Quetta Shura will give in and buy them off them.”

Which explains why no demands have been made so far. If the Quetta Shura does take over the hostages, they’ll be the ones to make demands. If it doesn’t, the group that’s currently stuck with them will have to come up with another plan. It’s unlikely the top brass will let them handle it themselves if the strategy right now is not to rock the boat.

Three hostages no one gives a damn about. Not in Germany, not in the Hindu Kush. What a miserable fate.

A canary-yellow auto rickshaw comes straight at them, hooting like mad. Husain steps unhurriedly aside; Hagen, lost in thought, leaps to safety. The crowd drifts in the direction of Karimpura Bazaar. Men in Punjabi dress hurry past, caps glowing in the gathering dusk, signaling their piety to a higher authority. Others are in kaftans; only an occasional turban. If one of these does pass by, it crowns the weatherbeaten features of an old, white-bearded man. Among them, women wearing the loose-fitting *salwar kameez*; bright, semi-transparent fabrics that hint at the contours beneath. A bit of Ali Baba romanticism, counterbalanced by the tangled lianas of the electricity cables that sag alarmingly just above the street, strung between giant distribution masts. Printed flags billow from the carved wooden balconies of old merchant houses: star and sickle, Koranic verses, mustached film stars surrounded by beautiful, adoring women with flowing hair and thrusting, scantily-veiled bosoms.

A panorama of contradictions.

Then a vehicle turns into the street. An amusing sight, at first glance. Like a dare, to see who can cram the largest number of men onto the back of a pickup truck. There they sit, densely packed, practically on top of one another, legs dangling out on all sides. Sporting turbans, black, white or patterned, and neat beards. The outline bristles like a hedgehog as virtually every single one of them is pointing a rocket launcher or Kalashnikov at the sky.

“Tehrik-i-Taliban,” says Husain, curling his lip.

Pakistani Taliban.

Not at all amusing. Peshawar is a powder keg, the jihadists’ logistical stronghold. Their Death Star, as it were. So anti-American that the word ‘ally’ in Pervez Musharraf’s mouth sounds like pure mockery. Everything the Pakistani government used to regulate with the Frontier Province elders they now have to negotiate with the Taliban.

“What they really want is to take over Peshawar,” says Husain. He spits. “But they can’t. Not yet.”

Either way: they control the city, regardless. A hundred kilometers away the strategically vital Khyber Pass winds through to Afghanistan: a terrorist artery, as well as NATO’s main supply route. Across a border that *de facto* isn’t one, because it can’t be policed. The rugged mountains all around it are controlled by the Taliban, together with al-Qaida, Haqqani and Uzbek jihadists, Arabs, Chechens, and extremists of all colors. Anyone who wants to turn the war in Afghanistan in their favor needs to win it in Pakistan.

As soon as they move the three aid workers to that region, they’re lost. No one can help them there. For now, the Quetta Shura is still stonewalling. But what if it changes its mind and takes the hostages after all? No ISAF soldier would ever find them in the mountains, up where the really *bad* bad guys are. The beheaders.

Hagen considers.

What Husain has confided in him so far is enough for an article.

Not for a story.

The fixer heads over to a café. The display counter is laden with sweets made out of nuts, almonds and caramel, along with little pots of *shahi tukra*. Hagen loves shahi tukra - very addictive - but he stops and pulls Husain back by the sleeve.

“Hey, Bilal - ”

“What?”

“Can you get me there?”

“What are you talking about?”

“To the farmstead. To the hostages.”

Husain frowns. He doesn’t say, “Are you crazy?” or “Don’t even think about it!” He just looks Hagen in the eyes, and waits.

“I want an interview. With the kidnapers. Tell your contact I’ll create the pressure in Germany that they need for their hostages to be worth something. I’ll put these guys in the media. Give them kudos. And in exchange I’m allowed to talk to everyone, and take photos.”

“Will you be helping the hostages, too?” asks Husain.

“I’ll be getting them publicity.” Hagen smiles. “Berlin seems to have decided to sit it out. Well, they can forget about that.”

Husain raises his chin, glances left and right. Flares his nostrils, as if scenting disaster. A little further on, the pickup carrying the Taliban disappears behind the Cunningham Clock Tower, leaving behind the sense of a ubiquitous threat.

“You know what you’re letting yourself in for?”

“Yes.”

“You’re starting a fire. You may be holding the match to the right spot. Or it may be the wrong one.”

“Dammit, Bilal! They’re just sitting there, and no one wants them! What do you think the Taliban are going to do with them? Adopt them? Who’s going to miss them if the papers don’t write about them, if no one publicly champions their cause, if the German government doesn’t get its ass in gear. It couldn’t be any worse!”

Husain purses his lips.

“Why do I have the feeling that something about your equation doesn’t quite add up?”

“The money certainly will.”

The fixer’s eyes lose a little of their sparkle. A barely perceptible touch of resignation. Because he knows how much he needs the money.

“So which is it? Yes or no?”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

Since then: silence.

Ten days after their meeting in Peshawar, Hagen is standing on a hill in Kunduz province looking down into the valley. Low, cubic buildings encircled by mud walls are nestled together over an area of about three square kilometers. Rural Afghanistan. So archaic-looking it feels like you traveled here in a time machine. Bushes and carpets of tall grass flourish along the straight lines of the irrigation canals. A pond to the south; delicate trees cast their shadows. Branches trembling feverishly in the baking wind. On the other side of the fields the vegetation stops short, almost without transition. A couple of lime-colored streaks, as if whoever painted this picture took the last vestiges of the green he’d lavished so generously on the village and wiped the bristles of his brush off on the plain, which looks like the surface of the moon. Then: nothing. Only dust and scree between there and the foothills of the mountains, which are sand-colored and bare, like the plateau.

What are they here for?

Holy warrior alert.

Hagen rubs dust from the corners of his eyes, and thinks: If the prayers of all the hordes of radical Islamists, bigoted ultra-Orthodox Jews and fanatical Christians were to be answered and the Savior they yearn for so fervently were to return, they would strike him down dead on the spot.

He wouldn't be radical enough for them.

Never ceases to amaze him. Ideas, lucid, precisely formulated, as if pre-programmed. His brain a hard drive. Somewhere, fingers flitting across a keyboard: *If the prayers of all the hordes...* save - send -

Someone is sending e-mails to his cortex.

He blinks. Tips back his head. Falls into the blue desert of the sky. Camouflage blue. The camouflage of God, if he exists.

Which Hagen doubts.

Not that he lost his faith on the frontline of poverty. Others spout that kind of maudlin crap to make themselves look good. Self-important individuals trying to compensate for their lack of experience by taking every corpse in a ditch by the road as an excuse to ponder the meaning of life. Hagen hates them. Hates the giddy dismay with which they hold forth to innocent bystanders in hotel bars. These people shed a bad light on his profession. They'd have 'war correspondent' tattooed across their foreheads if you gave them half a chance. In view, they tell you, of all the thousands of people who died as a result of the tsunami in South-East Asia/the blood-soaked madness of African civil wars/a voracious virus, they can't believe in God any more.

As if you could negotiate with the Boss.

Hagen's view is a different one. Anyone who sincerely believes in a Creator must be able to endure the fact that he's responsible for the shitty stuff as well. Kosovo. Somalia. Darfur. Chad. Khao Lak. Iraq. Afghanistan.

All the shitty stuff.

Hagen has never believed in God. At least, not in any of the ones on offer. At ten, entrusted perforce to Catholicism and thus required to observe the sacrament of confession, he was essentially already over it. Slipping into the oppressive stuffiness of the confessional with no clue what he was supposed to say to the shadowy form behind the grille. Asking himself, drenched in sweat: forgiveness, for what? Couldn't think what he was guilty of. In the brief inventory of his childish transgressions, the only real problem would arise if, by saying nothing, he failed to do what the shadow expected of him. Because the minute said shadow emerged from the wooden box with the stuffy curtains where it sat as if in a photo booth, it would metamorphose back into the asshole everyone was terrified of, an unmistakably solid presence who doled out slaps with greater fervor even than the Body of Christ.

The minister of God had a powerful hand.

So Hagen brought his lips up close to the grille and whispered through it whatever came into his head. Lied to his parents. Crossed the street on a red light. Was that enough? He tried saying nothing. The shadow said nothing, either: clearly it was not yet satisfied. It seemed

three sins were needed to provide sufficient evidence of a ten-year-old's fallibility, so that the man behind the grille had something to forgive him for.

Okay then: snatched a boy's cap off his head and threw it onto the roof of the school.

He'd got that from *Tom Sawyer*; he couldn't think of anything else. At least it sounded original, even if Sawyer's school was single-floor, whereas the one Hagen went to was a faded block seven stories high, which somewhat undermined the credibility of his tale. But the priest didn't ask any questions. Maybe he was even pleased. Something else for a change, since he must have heard the nonsense about lying to one's parents dozens of times before. Judgment was meted out and Hagen - sentenced to two Our Father's and an Ave Maria - made way for the next schoolchild to sit inventing stories.

Said to himself: oh well.

If God attaches importance to such things.

And thought to himself in the same instant that God didn't attach the slightest importance to such things, because He didn't exist. Couldn't exist. The priest with the heavy hand had made him up. Why? To obtain power. And like all those who aspired to power, this priest was also open to bribery. Could be corrupted by the lies of a child.

It was too funny for words.

There was no way God would allow some idiot to act in his name who went and sat in a box with a tariff of sins in order to give adolescents a guilty conscience.

But the priest was sitting in there doing exactly that.

And God was an invention.

The struggle for power - this much was clear - would be decided in favor of the person with the best story up their sleeve. So Hagen decided he would be that person.

He would become a storyteller.

Tell incredible stories.

He would tell the truth.

His neck crunches as he tilts his head further back. The sky is sucking him in. His shaven head is slick with sweat. He runs his right hand over it, wipes his fingers on his pants. More perspiration immediately springs up to replace it.

Layer by layer he is evaporating in the midday sun.

Beside him the press officer puffs out his cheeks.

"Damn heat."

Hagen smiles.

You clown, he thinks. I bet a month ago you were still sitting in Potsdam farting into your swivel chair. Back there in the operations unit everyone's shoulders are drooping beneath the gold and silver, but none of them has ever had to defend his life. Ever come under

fire. Ever had to ask himself whether his next step will be his last because he'll tread on a goddamn landmine. This horror has shock-frozen the Kunduz camp: mines and improvised explosive devices. Who wants to end up a torso in a wheelchair, or have what's left of them pulled out of an armored reconnaissance tank that an IED has just transformed into a heap of smoking metal? Better to take a bullet. Die an honorable death, weapon in hand.

Soldierly romanticism?

Not in the slightest. The soldiers here may watch Bruce Willis on their laptops - "What do you expect, man, we're at war, of course we watch war films!" - but basically every single one of them wants to go home. And can't. So he starts to think about what if.

If I have to die, then preferably -

The truth is that most of them will step on something or drive over something that explodes.

Like two days ago. Chardara District. Booby trap.

Like three weeks ago.

Because of tragedies like these, every private in the Hindu Kush knows more about the daily routine of killing and being killed than the entire high command back in comfortable Germany, who claim to know how the forces stationed out there feel, what equipment they need, what's good for them, and how they should be rocking the fractious baby Taliban.

Who tell them that this is not a war.

It *is* war, thinks Hagen, no matter how many times you claim it isn't. And people never get used to war! Or anything that goes with it.

They just don't have the choice.

"Tal Gozar," he says to the press officer. "Have you given it any more thought?"

"Sorry, Tom."

"I know the risks."

"All the same." The man shakes his head. "I can't be responsible for that." He's breathing heavily. Looks pale, dehydrated. Not in a good state.

"You're not drinking enough," says Hagen, trying to sound solicitous.

"I am, actually, I -"

"No, you're not. I've spent more time than you in places like this. Most people take weeks to acclimatize. So drink. Go and sit in the shade. Take my advice; trust me." He grins. "Just say: Tom Hagen is more experienced than I am in every way. I can let him go wherever he pleases."

The officer grins back feebly.

"Go on, say it." Inga, sitting beside him, laughs. "Say: Tom is more experienced than I am. Hell of a guy, that Hagen! He's got his finger on the pulse, and I've got circulatory problems."

Mistake.

The atmosphere changes. The man is probably thinking that Hagen is allowed to make digs at him, but not some cheeky girl with the life experience of a freshly hatched chick. Trainee? Don't make me laugh. Sent over with him so he doesn't try and get into the female soldiers' uniforms while he's at the camp - that's what the press officer is thinking. And that Kunduz is not a kindergarten.

"Journalistic experience isn't what counts here," he says peevishly.

For a while they sit gazing down into the village.

"What exactly is the problem, anyway?" Inga persists. "If the north is as safe as you say, nothing can happen to us, can it? Unless you're saying something that isn't true. In which case the public has the right - "

"Inga." Hagen points to the pump building of a waterworks, perched on top of the hill like a child's building block. Björklund is taking photos of the soldiers from the protection unit who are securing the hill to the south-west, their heavy G36Ks slung over their shoulders. The guns' mouths are pointed at the ground.

"Ask Krister if he needs anything."

Inga rolls her eyes. "He doesn't."

"Ask him anyway."

She shrugs her shoulders, saunters off. Swings her hips provocatively; certainly a more rewarding sight than the dreary lowlands around them. Presumably that's why the press officer seems to think the paper has provided her to be Hagen's groupie, but it's only partly true. Inga has talent. The fact that she also knows how to deploy a well-proportioned pelvis, even if only to cross a dusty square, is unlikely to do her career any harm.

Up till now, everyone in the camp has been staring at her ass.

And in so doing perhaps forgotten, just for the turn of a head, what the enemy is capable of. Blanked out, for a few seconds, the row houses, mortgaged to the hilt, where their wives, still young but already grown motherly, gaze at souvenir photos, redecorate the kids' rooms, and look forward to the day they'll return. Distracted themselves from the girlfriend who sounds more distant with every phone call; wouldn't be the first to end it by text. The satellite that connects them is an interface of loneliness, Inga a flashback to an era boys their age only remember from films: 1954, Korea, entertaining the troops. Monroe swinging her hips. The ass-end of the world at its best.

Today, nobody stares.

The troops have spread out; the atmosphere is charged. They've been here so many times before. Whenever they came bumping along in their 4x4s they always drew a comet's tail of children behind them. Repaired the waterworks, set about building a girls' school. They were welcome here. Friendly words, tea with the *malik*.

Never any problems.

Today, nothing is as expected.

Deathly silence throughout the settlement. A couple of goats wander into view and bleat in fright. A boy, apparently the last human being in the village, drives them towards the dark mouth of a stall. The way he walks, the way his eyes dart about, suggest that he wishes he could just vanish into thin air.

Not once does he look up at the hill.

He's afraid.

Of what? The children in these villages aren't afraid of ISAF patrols.

"Black smoke!" shouts one of the soldiers.

The vocabulary of the resistance. Hagen knows that the patrol leader will strike camp any minute now. Sees him emerge from the shadow of the Dingo where he's been discussing the situation with the maintenance sergeant for the past few minutes; makes a final attempt to change the press officer's mind.

The man shakes his head wearily.

"I'm supposed to report on the daily life of the soldiers here," Hagen persists. "If I'm to do that, I have to have *something* I can report."

"You do have something."

"Are you joking? For a week now we've witnessed the 13th contingent dusting its tanks, homesick recruits running to the post office, military police trying to make policemen out of a pack of illiterate Afghans..."

"That *is* our soldiers' daily life."

"Not forgetting our exciting impressions of the service tent. Remind me: how many cans of beer is your average soldier allowed per day? Two?"

"That's not fair, Tom."

"Exactly. It's not fair." Hagen sighs. "This mission is fucking dangerous, *that's* your daily life! *That's* what I want to report on. Not how you conduct water protection exercises in the camp in case the coffee machine in the admin HQ blows a fuse."

"I'm sure there are other ways of increasing your circulation."

"That wasn't fair, either."

"Nobody doubts that you're a hero, Tom."

"That's not what this is about. The soldiers here *deserve* for us to report on what they do."

"No. Let's stay with you for a minute. I understand you. Seriously! You've crawled through the poppy fields of Helmand with the Taliban trying to shoot your ass off. Your photographer could give Schwarzenegger a run for his money. And I'm sure that kid over there is the great white hope of her profession. I get it." He looks Hagen in the eyes, doesn't bother to conceal his distaste. "But we do things differently in the Bundeswehr. The Royal

Marines may not have a problem with taking reporters into the Green Zone; that's up to them. I was charged with protecting you and your team."

"If we came with you, it would be our own free decision."

"Wrong. As long as you're reporting within the context of our operations, it's *my* decision. The trip to Tal Gozar could end in disaster. We know that the *malik* there has offered his hospitality to a whole pack of mujahideen. Operational control is expecting armed confrontations. Far too risky to embed you."

"It was agreed that we would go along on regular patrols."

"Regular ones, yes."

"I'm only asking to - "

"In fact, you shouldn't really even be here now."

Hagen swallows his anger. He knows he has to keep his emotions under control. So he says nothing as the patrol leader walks over to them. In his sand-colored uniform mottled with dark patches and the heavy protective vest he looks like an action figure from a toyshop. The only thing that doesn't really go with the look is the sunhat with the floppy brim they all wear here. It makes him look like a tourist.

"Well?" asks the officer.

"Not a chance." The man gestures in the round. "Even if we posted one Wolf on every point of the compass. We can't see the approaches."

"You've got the Dingos for that."

"For the main approach road, yes. But there's still a dozen other ways of getting in. A whole set of chokepoints. I couldn't get a Dingo anywhere near them without having to drive through somebody's kitchen. And we're sitting up here, laid out on a platter. No buildings, no roofs I can post snipers on. Besides - "

He nods towards the village.

The column of smoke is now visible for miles around, an ominous finger, warning the holy warriors that there's a patrol in the area. Which means *they're* in the area as well. After too many painful lessons the soldiers know how to read the signs. As when villages suddenly appear deserted because people either don't set foot outside their houses anymore or have all slipped away in the night to stay with relatives. When that happens, you can guarantee the mujahideen have prepared an ambush, or laid an IED, or both.

The boy has vanished, too, along with his goats.

"Twenty-five kilometers to Lummerland," says the patrol leader cheerfully. "Let's get moving."

Lummerland. Home away from home.

Drinking beer, watching the Bundesliga on the big screen, playing pool, table football Officially designated and operating as a “leisure facility”, this is the Camp Kunduz hotspot, a weird hybrid of bazaar and beer garden that’s been provided for the soldiers so they can come and clear their heads when alternating terror and boredom combine to make them edgy.

And everyone here is on edge.

The press officer scowls as they walk over to the 4x4 and swing themselves inside. He’s annoyed, and urgently in need of someone to take it out on, but all he has are the circumstances. Hagen knows his anger isn’t really directed at him or Inga. He has to prepare this confounded visit, and it’s really doing his head in. A visit which people will read next week came as a complete surprise. The Commander-in-Chief of the Bundeswehr will fall from the Afghan sky, “unexpected as bird shit”, as Krister put it.

Hagen sees Inga get into the other Wolf. There’s a burst of laughter, overlaying the tension. Soldiers, happy. About having female company, and even more so to finally be getting out of here. Krister Björklund is the last one back; runs up and squeezes in on the backseat next to Hagen.

“So what’s the alternative?” the press officer wants to know.

“How about the girls’ school in Aliabad?” The patrol leader doesn’t wait for an answer, speaks into his radio. “Everybody listen up. Change of route. We’ll drive back over LOC Pluto. When we pass through the villages we’re ‘firm, fair, friendly’, everybody got that? We’ve had a dry August, we don’t want people choking on clouds of dust. So: low gear. And as before, absolutely no shooting whatsoever.”

Change of route. The Taliban aren’t supposed to know which road the unbelievers are on.

They know anyway.

Gravel crunches beneath the wheels. The Wolf bumps along the path from the hill down to the plain, trailing a pennant of dust. The other vehicles follow close behind.

“We can’t do that,” complains the press officer. “We’ve got the boys’ school in Baghlan down as the first port of call.”

“The girls’ school is better.”

“Why?” asks Hagen.

The company leader turns his head to look at them, a smile playing on his lips. His sunglasses are powdered with a thin layer of dust.

“Close to our hearts.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Honestly. The soldiers donated money for the reconstruction. Out of their own pockets, from their pittance. There was no way it would have happened otherwise. I’m telling you, they *love* this school!”

“But he doesn’t want another school,” grumbles the officer. “He wants a waterworks. *He* loves waterworks!”

“Well, we won’t be showing him this one.”

Of course the press officer knows that the patrol leader is right, even if, as the senior officer present, he could make a much bigger fuss about it. He’s a captain, the other a first lieutenant. But perhaps the deskbound warrior, now that he’s running out of steam at forty-five degrees in the shade, has actually understood more about Afghanistan than the arrogant bastards in the task force. Besides, the press officer isn’t the problem. He’s just a guy looking for another promotion. To understand the problem you have to be aware that any German soldiers who get blown up or killed in some other way have not fallen in battle; rather, as decreed by the incumbent Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung, they have “lost their lives in the line of duty”. The “fallen soldier” is on the best road to dying out altogether. Never again is he to haunt German sensibilities, which is why this whole business is not allowed to be called a war. In war, there are “fallen soldiers”. *That* is the problem. In peacetime, people buy the farm in the line of duty.

That doesn’t make it any better, but it does make it sound better.

So the soldiers ordered out to the Hindu Kush find themselves stuck in a blind spot, because people at home would rather not hear any stories at all about soldiers, dead, half-dead or alive. There’s no other country in which an army that’s putting its neck on the line overseas receives as little support as in Germany, where if a guy just goes to McDonald’s in his uniform people stare at him as if he’s too dumb to unwrap his burger - if, that is, he isn’t immediately suspected of being latently bloodthirsty.

Hagen closes his eyes. Writes:

We are sending our sons and daughters off to a war we despise them for waging.

Could work as a first sentence. Then what?

If we can really say they are waging it. Even more than for fighting, we despise them for trying to save their own skins. Mission accomplished; mission failed. For both, soldier, the peace-loving German civilian punishes you with contempt.

Too polemical? Perhaps.

Vietnam veterans felt alone and abandoned after their return. It’s not like that in Germany. As a soldier in the Bundeswehr you’re alone even before you’ve been deployed. No one publicly states that they’re proud of you. No one really wants to know what your shitty everyday reality is like out where you’ve been mandated, almost 5,000 kilometers from

home. Pride in the army? Not in the land of the politically correct, never again from whose soil bla bla bla and so on and so forth -

Opens his eyes again, sees stunted trees passing by, brittle brushes, burnt fields, the wreck of a tank. Björklund is taking photos. The main roads are lined with rusty Soviet legacies. Silent witnesses, testifying to the fact that, in this country, you can never win either the war or the peace.

He can't write *shitty*.

Grueling?

He still has to get out his dictaphone and record that bit about the extremists beating the Savior to death. Quickly, before the heat cooks his brain so thoroughly that he forgets it again.

The convoy drives faster. As long as there aren't any people walking by the side of the road, driving their donkeys before them, and as long as they don't have to pass through a village, they can speed up. So here they are, well builders in uniform, stuck in this country between the modern and Middle Ages, harbingers of democracy, inactivity and mortal terror, slowly but surely cracking up. And that's precisely why press officers scurry like Australian Shepherds around every journalist who comes to report from the camps, ensuring his security, his wellbeing, and that none of the soldiers lose their composure when asked what they feel inside. And that none of the press guys are there when an ordinary patrol turns into a horror trip.

Too late, thinks Hagen.

I've been there. Down in Helmand, the area around Musa Qaleh. The Taliban's claustrophobic 'garden', right in the heart of the rampant opium jungle. Pressed my face into the mud whenever the shout went up - "RPG!" - and the shell came whizzing in. Hoped, like everyone else, that it wouldn't hit me. And saw hope die. So what is it you're trying to keep from me? That conditions up here are becoming like those in the south, a little more each day? Who's going to believe you when you claim that the north is still secure, populated by friendly, waving Afghans eager for valiant Bundeswehr pioneers to come and dig wells, build schools, and drink tea with the tribal elders, surrounded by cheerfully chattering children? Sure, it was like that once. While the Brits and Danes crouched, armed to the teeth, beneath mujahideen barrages, German sergeants courageously refilled the barrels of pens and presented them to beaming children. In the north they were glad of every *talib* they eliminated down there. But it's not like that any more.

Not at all.

And just as he's thinking: this won't get us anywhere, we're wasting our time here, his cellphone bleeps.

He pulls it out from under the protective vest.

A text message. Bilal Husain.

Hagen wipes the film of sweat and desert dust out of his eyes, opens the text on the display. Reads what he's been hoping for for ten days now:

You'll get your interview. Details when we speak. Bilal.

"Just the two of you, you and Krister," Husain warns him, over the phone. "No video camera, no satellite antenna, no laptop, no cellphones, okay? Otherwise they'll keep you there."

"What about Krister's little hand camera?"

"No, not that either. Ordinary camera and a dictaphone, that's it. They've made a video of their own which they'll give you to take away. Filmed specially for you! You can be proud of yourselves."

Hagen already knows why the kidnappers don't want him to turn up with a BGAM antenna. He could use satellites to work out their location.

"Where do we change cars?"

"Slow down. First of all they'll send someone to pick you up. The man's name is Afeef. He drives a dark-blue Subaru. Acts as an interpreter and driver. Trusted by all sides. He knows the way."

"If possible, I'd like to get to know him as well."

"You take the A7 to Kunduz city, past Mor Sheykh and Naqel. Just before the center you hang a left towards Kholm; when you get there you turn off and follow the road over the river, out of the delta and - "

Right into the middle of the desert.

Into no man's land.

Afghanistan is not like the country we see on the evening news. They present it as a vast plain of scree surrounded by distant, watery mountains, the sky stretched over everything like a shimmering screen. The pattern of dreariness. Kabul, the pile of debris at the center, seems to exist solely for the purpose of demonstrating to the West that its efforts have been in vain.

But sometimes Afghanistan is green.

In the spring, whole regions disappear beneath meadows of flowers. Imposing mountain ranges run right across the country, spectacularly rugged. The Nowshak towers more than seven kilometers above sea level, the dream and nightmare of every mountaineer; Kuh-e Tuluksa and Kuh-e Bandaka are more than six kilometers high. There are valleys for which the only description is charming. Fruitful deltas that centuries of farmers have transformed

into mosaics. Even now, on the threshold of autumn, after the earth has been baked hard by the sun, these regions are anything but dreary.

And there are the deserts.

Barren. Inhospitable.

Not a place you'd want to get stranded.

Afeef is a friendly little Pashtun with a reckless driving style, who's constantly amused by things. He comments on Krister Björklund's way of wearing his *pakol*, the Afghan cap, with the insistence of a broken record.

"Like a bird's nest! Like a bird's nest!"

"Because the damn things look like bird's nests," grumbles Björklund, imperturbable.

"More like a cheesecake," grins Hagen.

"Cheesecake?" Afeef laughs. "You call it a cheesecake?"

They're actually having a really good time, making fun of each other. Afeef is also entertained by the fact that his passengers in their salwar kameezes look about as Afghan as Vikings. It's true. The full blond beards they grew before leaving home could hardly be said to make Pashtuns of them. They could pass at a pinch, if they bound cloths around their heads and over their faces; however, the salwar kameez is intended not as a disguise but as a mark of respect for local customs. Gestures are important in this country: even beards help to establish trust.

Everything can be important.

After setting off, Afeef drove Hagen and Björklund for just under an hour through the agricultural zone of the delta, past stubble fields and plantations. They took the turnoff to Kholm and crossed the bridge. More farmsteads. Then the abrupt transition to the start of the mountains, whose stark, burnt massifs look like something you'd expect to find on Mars: pale, forbidding, alien. They followed the road westwards, past ruined caravanserais, crossed a high plain that extended like the giant, solidified crest of a wave, scarred by Soviet bomb craters.

And asked themselves: why westwards?

Something doesn't feel right.

Kidnapping groups, whether Taliban or ordinary criminals, favor the East.

For some time now it's felt as if they were traveling back in time. The mud huts with their cracked, domed roofs look like something out of a forgotten age. You almost expect to spot mythical beasts prowling through the meager undergrowth.

Then, suddenly, commercial buildings.

A town unfurls on either side of the road. Billboards, parked trucks. Endless rows of power poles.

"This is Abdan."

Abdan, aha. Not a must-see.

“You drive through,” Husain said. “Until just past the gas station. A few meters after that there’s a road heading off to the right.”

Road? A sample collection of potholes. A nightmare.

“Take that, and keep going straight.”

Abdan diffuses on the horizon. Becomes a shimmering mirage, disappears from view.

They drive on, still westwards.

After a while a fine dust starts to rise.

Gigantic dunes bear down on a wide basin, a billowing sea of sand; and the road, now barely worthy of the name, winds downwards.

It is infinitely deserted here.

Apart from the Land Cruiser.

Afeef hands them over to three men with Kalashnikovs. Faces hidden; one speaks broken English. First they’re frisked, then they’re handed the sacks so they can put them on themselves. The English speaker apologizes for the unpleasantness.

“And this, right here, is where I pick you up again,” beams Afeef.

If you come back.

Is what he’s not saying.

“Of course you’ll come back,” Husain had told Hagen. “The Pashtun law of hospitality, *melmastya*, will apply to you. *Afghanyat* is binding for your hosts. They would even defend you with their lives for as long as you’re on their soil. Provided, of course, you abide by the rules.”

“And what exactly are the rules?”

“Ha.” Short silence. “They’re like the weather.”

“Terrific.”

“Stop it, Tom. What am I supposed to say? You know the rules.”

He certainly knows plenty of people who don’t abide by them.

“Just be prepared for anything. You’ll be enjoying the hospitality of a tribal leader who isn’t a *talib* himself, but who sympathizes with the Taliban. He’s providing shelter for the holy warriors and their hostages.”

“What do you know about this guy?”

“Nothing. Well, other than that he seems to be an explosives expert. My contact let slip something along those lines. I’m guessing his people supply the Taliban with IEDs and the like.”

“Okay.”

“Just take it as it comes. Relax.”

“Don’t worry.”

“This is what you wanted.”

Is it?

And now here they are.

Hagen breathes into his hood, trying to ignore the sour smell. Conversation drifts across from the front seat. Laughter, relaxed chatter, offset by the tortured howls of a transmission that, defying all predictions of its imminent demise, will still be holding together in ten years’ time. In the dusty hell of Afghanistan there’s no demand for elegantly purring six-cylinders. Here, vehicles must possess the resilience of a cockroach.

The radio floods the cabin with Arabic pop.

Which reveals an interesting piece of information.

Apparently there are no Taliban on board.

Because the holy warriors have banned music, which strangely does not prevent them from being enthusiastic singers: of ancient, melancholic songs, convoluted recitatives without musical accompaniment that have a strangely soothing effect. As always in this unpredictable country, the factual situation is unclear. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban’s spiritual leader, has banned music for pleasure; religious songs, on the other hand, are allowed, which begs the question of whether a religious man can still be religious when he experiences pleasure.

Either way. Arabic pop was certainly not what Omar had in mind.

Does Jung know this kind of stuff?

Franz Josef Jung, the surprise guest.

The reporters knew he was coming, of course. The moment Berlin concluded that the latest debacle called for the ministerial eating of humble pie - a dish increasingly being prepared in Afghanistan these days - the press were already in the picture. And kept their mouths shut, not least because they would be crucified if they didn’t. After all, not even the exceptionally well-connected Taliban could plan an attack on someone they weren’t expecting.

They could carry it out, though, as soon as he was in the country.

It was therefore proving correspondingly difficult to demonstrate what German money and German soldiers were achieving in the Hindu Kush. They weren’t allowed to show Jung most of the things that would have been worth visiting because it was too risky. In the end they contrived to bounce him and his retinue around the countryside in a fleet of armored safes on wheels so that he could subsequently declare that the northern provinces were

secure, and only twelve percent of Germany's area of responsibility acutely under threat. The same area in which the people responsible lived in constant terror of the minister having a close encounter with an IED - here, of all places - as no one could say where exactly this goddamn twelve percent actually was. It was about as easy to separate from the other eighty-eight as condensed milk from coffee after repeated stirring.

But it all remained calm.

In the end, what Jung glimpsed gave him strength to pay tribute, in front of six hundred soldiers, to the patrol blown up the previous week by a booby trap south of Kunduz city. Three men wounded, one dead. Not easy, overcoming the demoralizing effect of these kinds of incidents. The minister did his best. He said that the victims had been defending freedom. The atmosphere remained depressed, but at least no one glared at him during his speech as if wishing the same fate on him. Apologizing to Pashtun tribal leaders for the fact that, the following day, German and Afghan police had lost their nerve and opened fire on two cars at a checkpoint proved considerably trickier. Four children died in the hail of bullets. A tragic accident, a misunderstanding - resulting in terms like "violated honor" and "blood vengeance" being bandied about.

And that was a fucking disaster!

If there was one thing they could really do without around here, it was this blood vengeance bullshit.

The governor of Kunduz found placatory words. The Bundeswehr was not to blame. What was the situation with regard to compensation? Compensation always helped. The tribal leaders took a similar view, and the troubled waters were calmed. Jung hadn't come with empty hands - not as empty as his words, anyway. Besides, it must be said, soldiers love it when people come and visit the troops. Basically, they're delighted to see anyone at all who comes out to check whether they still exist.

Politicians too, then.

Okay, maybe they'd have been even more delighted if it had been Lady Gaga.

But Jung was okay.

Meanwhile the Defense Minister flew back to Germany in the comforting certainty that he had fulfilled requirements to the very best of his ability. And Hagen, who dutifully documented the whole sad farce, is on the way to his interview.

In an unknown vehicle.

In unknown hands.

The Land Cruiser slams into a pothole, bounces out again. Struggles up a hill. They're still chattering incessantly in the front; young, strong voices, in Pashtu. Hagen doesn't understand a thing, but the men seem to be in a good mood.

He exchanges a few words with Björklund. Astonishing how little they've spoken to each other in the past few hours. On the other hand, what should they talk about? That it's stifling in the car? That the hoods don't give them the chance to prepare themselves for the uncertainties of the terrain, so that every bump in the road is like a guerrilla attack on their lumbar vertebrae? That what they're getting involved in is very risky?

Of course it is. What do you expect? What is there to say about that?

His thoughts stray to Inga.

She was determined to come with them.

Which was impossible. Because of the rules. Generally speaking, Hagen has no qualms about putting his team at risk. You don't travel to crisis regions to bathe in the hot springs. Inga's been spared the really hard stuff so far; but then, if you come out to report from Afghanistan your honeymoon period is effectively over.

In this case, though -

Oh, she was insistent! Really nagged him. Even last night in the camp, as he was screwing her, she moaned that he had to take her with him. And he understands, of course, can relate to her hunger. Back when he was still trailing after the veteran war correspondents, carrying their equipment, having to pay their flamboyant beer tabs at the hotel bar, he was exactly the same. Tom Hagen wouldn't leave anyone in peace until they took him with them.

Everywhere.

Now he has the reputation of being a veteran himself.

But the Taliban make the rules.

So he explained to Inga that the hostage-takers didn't want a third person. Certainly not a woman. And in any case, the editorial desk had banned him from getting her involved, which was true. The main thing was that he was off the hook and she couldn't accuse him of thinking she wasn't tough enough.

Where the hell are they going?

Somewhere.

They could be driving in any direction. Except north, maybe. The terrain is rising too fast and too steeply for that. The northern margin is flat, a dusty desert that stretches all the way to the border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The west is equally unlikely. There too the wheels would be driving over desert by now; instead there's no change, they're still bouncing along as before.

South? Towards Kabul?

He can't help thinking of Daniele Mastrogiacomo, the Italian journalist whose name was all over the media the previous year. By no means a novice. Traveled to Helmand to

interview Mullah Dadullah, one of the Taliban's most brutal commanders. Everything agreed, pre-arranged and organized. Through trusted intermediaries, not unlike this.

Then they were kidnapped.

And put through hell.

Mastrogiacomo, his interpreter and his driver spent two weeks at the mercy of the Taliban, only to discover eventually that the Mullah had been fucking with them big-time. After some tough negotiation Mastrogiacomo was finally released. The driver was beheaded. The interpreter they initially let go, then changed their minds, caught him again and beheaded him, too.

(Think about something else.)

For example, why they haven't passed through a single checkpoint so far. The driver seems to have remarkably precise knowledge of where the checkpoints are; in any case, he's certainly doing his utmost to drive around them. Sometimes they lumber over rutted tracks then head off across the fields, completely off-road. They rarely encounter a vehicle coming the other way. Sometimes, far off, Hagen's ears catch the lingering rumble of truck engines, but most of the time the Land Cruiser coughs and howls a lonely solo. He can, however, hear birds. An eloquent chirping. Almost as if they were talking to him, divulging their route.

"Thirsty?"

One of the Pashtuns nudges him with the water bottle. Hagen takes it, works it under the sack, closes his lips around the opening, drinks. Lukewarm as piss. Passes the bottle to Björklund.

"You good?" asks the English speaker, in a friendly tone.

"We excellent," says Björklund. "We Ritz Carlton, man!"

The Pashtun laughs.

Ever since they set off he has exhibited an almost touching concern for their welfare. Constantly inquiring whether they're hungry, thirsty, need to stop for a moment, need anything else. As if they were in a hotel on wheels. Hagen's already given him a nickname: he just calls him Yougood now, after his standard question. Again and again Yougood apologizes for the fact that they have to wear the hoods, that it's not more comfortable for them on the back seat, that they can't enjoy the delights of the landscape.

"You not see. So pity! Nowhere in the world beautiful like here. Very beautiful, Afghanistan!"

Then he says something else in Pashtu, and the others roar with laughter.

"Bet you they're laughing at us," growls Björklund.

"So what?" Hagen shrugs his shoulders. "Be happy. As long as they're laughing at us they're not going to wring our necks."

[...]

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Hagen blinks. Looks at his watch.

Gone half four.

Shouldn't it be starting soon?

Unless -

No. Impossible! Inconceivable that they would call off the operation, or postpone it. His article is coming out today, the conditions are ideal, why would they postpone? He tries to ignore the thought, but morning is diffusing in the east like illuminating gas and nothing's happening.

Which side will they come from?

They definitely won't come roaring in through the valley, that's for sure. If they did that they'd send a wave of noise ahead of them that would give the men in the compound ample time to reload their Kalashnikovs. Ergo, they're approaching from the other side of the ridge. Which makes sense, for various reasons. As long as they're flying low the neighbouring valley will swallow the sound, and they'll remain invisible right up until the last moment. Then: ascend, hop over the crest, dip back down, discharge the assault teams. On a rescue mission, momentum is what counts. As you disperse you should already effectively have separated the bad guys from the hostages. Meaning: get straight in there, search the buildings in squads and disarm or liquidate fighters, while the prisoners - whose precise location you're already aware of, thanks to the snipers - are already being evacuated.

And then get the hell out.

It's the first few seconds that decide the success or failure of the mission. Seconds Hagen is trying to induce by sheer force of will, as all the while the thought that the whole thing might have been called off rampages around his skull like an angry drunk.

He's just starting to seriously doubt they're coming when Björklund stifles a cough.

Idiot!

Could someone up above have heard?

He strains to listen. Strains so hard that he just catches a far-off drone, anticipated rather than heard, no sooner picked up than it falls silent, blown in on a telltale current of air.

Adrenaline floods his body.

He signals to the others, gives the thumbs-up. Watches as Björklund gets his camera into position; as Inga stands up, grips the steadycam, leans forward.

Overbalances -

Loses her footing -

Holds his breath.

Inga flails wildly. For one deceptive moment it looks as if she's going to recover. She struggles to regain her balance, fumbles, claws at Björklund's sleeve -

Then the edge of the ridge crumbles beneath her and she tumbles down the smooth slope, dragging the photographer with her.

Noisy as an avalanche, the two of them slide down into the valley.

Before the eyes of the snipers.

Before the eyes of the guards.

Who start to scream like stuck pigs. Wake up the whole compound with their yelling. Shoot wildly at the slope where, in the darkness, they guess Inga and Björklund must be, as men stumble out of the main building and raise their Kalashnikovs, confused, because they don't know which direction the attack is coming from, if indeed it is an attack. Two of them disappear into the side building, come back out with something long - RPGs, Soviet anti-tank rocket launchers, unmistakable even at this distance - and get into position.

Hagen feels like he's about to go insane.

And because he can't do anything else, he turns the camera on them. A reflex. Pans from the compound to the slope beneath him. In the ghost-train light of the night-vision goggles he sees Björklund stop his fall and steady himself; unlike Inga, who slithers on down into the valley on the seat of her trousers, somersaulting and bouncing.

The snipers!

What about the snipers?

Will they abort the operation? Can they still even do that, at this point? How long before -

The sky above him roars.

A droning noise is making the air shake, as if someone has whacked up the levels on a mixing desk from zero to maximum volume. Hagen hoicks up the handycam. To left and right the hornet-like bodies of two Apaches shoot over the ridge, drop down, taking the compound in a pincer movement.

Fantastic.

His first thought.

No. You're crazy! You can't possibly film now.

Where's Inga?

"Fucking hell!"

A rock has broken her fall, not big enough for her to take cover behind, but at least it's stopped the exasperating slipping and sliding. She crouches down, makes herself small, assesses the situation. Her body feels like the proverbial china shop after the bull's been in.

Even ten rounds in the boxing ring didn't take it out of her like this just has. And Inga can take a lot. But there's a difference between being pummeled by your trainer, when at least you can try and get your own back by landing a couple of blows, and being pummeled by a hillside studded with stones.

Worse by far, though, is the shame. The feeling that she's screwed up. It burns inside her, searing her insides.

Igniting her anger.

Don't give up now!

She looks for Hagen just as the helicopters swoop into the valley, making the air vibrate. There he is, high above her. Turning his head, searching.

"I'm okay!" she screams.

Waves with both arms.

Now he spots her, waves back, and she raises her handycam, which she hung on to all the way down, imitating a revolutionary salute.

"Hey! Keep filming! I'm all right!"

Is she?

Depends how you look at it. She's in very deep shit, actually, but she's going to see this through now, she's definitely going to see it through if it's the last thing she does. She's not going to cock this up, she can't do that to Tom, he doesn't deserve that. Cursing under her breath she snaps open the display, praying that the camera isn't damaged, when suddenly a new frequency starts reverberating in her ears.

Storm winds blast over her.

"What the - "

Something massive has materialized over the compound; no lights, like the two Apaches. Long, bulky, locust-like, it lowers itself onto the enclosure.

Lowers itself?

Plunges down to it!

A Chinook.

Hagen realizes that the transport helicopter with its tandem rotors won't be able to land in the inner courtyard: the well and a couple of stunted trees are in the way. But it doesn't need to. The tail and belly of the machine are spewing ropes. Figures in battle dress slide down them, agile as monkeys; they strafe the Pashtuns, who seem to be running about like headless chickens, and hurry up the path to the sheds. All hell breaks loose. Kalashnikovs and MGs rattle furiously. The Chinook makes a go-around, gains height, makes way for a second transporter that spits its cargo of soldiers into the sand, veers off again.

A turbaned figure materializes on the roof of the side building. Shoulders his RPG, takes aim at the Chinook.

One of the Apaches wheels about.

Fires.

The man spins round like a toy as half the house explodes in all directions. Hagen wriggles down on his elbows and backside to get closer to what's going on, keeps the camera trained on it. In the main house there are a series of bright flashes: stun grenades. For several seconds the low light amplifiers on his goggles generate a blinding, all-encompassing white that hurts his eyeballs, and then he can see again: people running out, women and children. A fat man, could be Muneer, firing as he runs; flings his arms wide as if crucified, tumbles head over heels, lies motionless.

Chaos sets in.

People flee in panic towards the gates, trampling each other in the struggle to get outside. Smoke rises from beside the well. Hagen's eyes dart about, seeing everything: the soldiers heading for the sheds, driving Pashtun fighters before them. Björklund, clinging to the rocks, photographing with stoic calm.

Inga, further down.

Much further down!

No more than ten meters above the entrance to the cave, she estimates.

A little way away she can see the path leading up from the compound to the grotto. Cuts and bruises aside, she could scarcely be in a better position. So close, yet high enough to have an overview. Her nerves are tingling; fear has given way to feverish euphoria. She understands Hagen so much better now! This is what he was always talking about: when you become a part of the whole, merge with it. This is what it feels like.

Awesome!

She zooms, greedy for images.

Focuses on the sheds.

Picks up a group of armed men, Pashtuns, some bareheaded, others with turbans, possibly Taliban, trying to cut off the path of the fast-approaching soldiers.

Not good, she thinks.

My fault.

Without me the assault team would have had surprise on their side, wouldn't be having to fight their way through to the hostages, they'd already be there. She hastily adjusts the lens as two Afghans suddenly fall down and fling their Kalashnikovs aside, as if they've had enough and don't want to play any more. Inga knows that they're dead. The others scatter, take cover.

She films on as if possessed.

Hagen sees the disaster coming.

Behind a low wall to one side of the main building the operator of the second rocket launcher pops up like a jack-in-the-box. Points the finger of his RPG at the Apache that pulverized the roof, its aircraft cannon now spraying hundreds of bullets to prevent the Afghans further up from getting as far as the sheds.

Shoots.

Hits it.

The helicopter's tail rotor whirls apart in a dark-red cloud. The machine lurches to one side; lines of bullets meander up the path, up the slope, blaze a trail past Inga and blow the rock apart, ripping out chunks the size of fists that fire off in all directions like splinters of shrapnel.

She pulls her head down, throws her arms up in front of her face.

Blackout.

Something's hit her on the head.

The handycam slips through her fingers. As she feels for it, another stone projectile grazes her shoulder, whirls her around. She staggers, tries to brace herself -

Stumbles -

Hagen sees her fall.

Down below, three Pashtuns have made it to the shed and are dragging Degas, Keller and Bakhtari out.

He pays no attention to them.

"Inga!"

Falling.

She scrabbles frantically, trying to hold on, to stop herself, splays her arms and legs, lacerates her palms, but this time nothing breaks her fall. As she teeters over the edge she's flipped upside down, flies through the empty air, an almost agreeable sense of weightlessness after all the knocks and blows, but it doesn't last long.

The impact, when it comes, is all the harder.

She hears her arm break, and screams aloud.

Rolls onto her back.

"Inga!"

The helicopter is making a veritable crash landing over the fields, but Hagen has no eyes for that. He scrambles down the hillside like a madman, without a plan, without the slightest idea of how to help her.

Without a weapon.

You'll be shot.

You *can't* help her.

"Tom!"

There - Björklund. Who's stopped taking photographs; edging his way towards him.

"We have to help her!" shouts Hagen. "We have to help Inga!"

"I'm coming!"

She's almost unconscious with pain.

Groaning, she props herself up on her uninjured arm, struggles to her feet. Breaks out in a cold sweat. From the direction of the stables, she sees a knot of people moving grotesquely towards her, a mêlée of limbs and guns.

Tries to make sense of what's happening.

Everything is darker than before. Something is dripping into her eyes. She wipes it away. Blood sticks to her fingers, black as tar, and she realizes she's lost the night-vision goggles.

She looks behind her and sees a gaping fissure in the hillside.

Dark and mysterious.

The cave.

God almighty! She's landed right in front of the entrance to the cave!

The ground trembles with the droning of helicopters, rising and falling in volume as they circle above the valley. The knotted group approaches, surrounded by soldiers from the assault team, who are hurrying towards them now, MGs at the ready, unrecognizable under the protective goggles and the scarves wrapped round their faces. Further off, silhouettes race past each other, volleys of gunfire shatter the breaking day, but in the immediate vicinity of the cave no one is shooting any more.

And now she realizes why.

The people retreating to the cave, passing right in front of her, are Pashtuns; but they're using Marianne Degas, Max Keller and Walid Bakhtari as human shields, the mouths of their Kalashnikovs pressed up under their chins. Nobody pays any attention to Inga. One of the turbaned figures suddenly falls to the ground as if felled by an axe, although no shot was heard. The snipers? They may still have the kidnappers in their sights. She sees the desperation in the girl's eyes before the group is swallowed up by the darkness of the grotto.

The soldiers move closer. One of them points his gun at Inga.

Of course! She's wearing Afghan clothes.

She hastily raises her hands. Shudders with pain; manages to lift the broken arm a little, stumbles backwards. Now she's standing right in the entrance to the cave, directly below the rockfall, and fear seizes her with icy claws.

"I'm German," she whispers.

Fucking idiots. Can't they see my face?

She pulls the scarf off her head with her uninjured arm. Her hair pours out, tumbles down below her shoulders.

"I'm German! You hear me? German!"

One of the soldiers calls something out to her, or perhaps he's just talking into his radio, giving orders. The squad closes in, moves up, the leader raises his hand in reassurance. Seems to have understood. He's almost reached her when the absurdity of the situation, the full magnitude of it, suddenly dawns on her.

What are they doing in the cave? They're trapped in there. So why did they go in?

Because they're *not* trapped.

This is a trap.

"No!" she screams. "No! No!"

The mountain shakes.

Hagen falls head over heels, lands heavily on his stomach.

What was *that*? The entire hillside seems to be rising up in an attempt to shake him and Björklund off.

An earthquake?

In the same instant he hears the blast. At first just a diffuse rumble that seems to come straight from the bowels of the earth; then the sound waves force their way into the open.

And with them a demon erupts from the cave.

A barrel of fire, stones and dust that spreads out in all directions, races snarling up the path to the sheds, sets fire to mud and straw, burns air, soil and vegetation, reaches fiery fingers past the ledge of rock and up towards the heavens, belches out a column of sooty clouds, and abruptly collapses in on itself.

Hagen is rooted to the spot.

The helicopters are maneuvering over the valley. He can see the rescue helicopter too now, flying lower, followed by a Chinook. Fires are blazing on all sides. The western flank of the main house is burning fiercely, but most people in the compound seem to have survived the inferno. Through billows of smoke he sees shadows reeling in helpless confusion. He jumps up, staggers, grasps at the undergrowth. Tears the night-vision goggles from his eyes. Hears the voices of women and children, of soldiers, screaming over the whumping of helicopter blades.

Hears them, and doesn't.

Everything recedes far, far into the distance, as if a bell jar has descended over his head.

Becomes muffled.

Dies away.

No idea who the guy is. Seems to be an explosives expert. My contact let slip something along those lines. I'm guessing his people supply the Taliban with IEDs and the like.

Bilal Husain, back in Peshawar.

1929

Palestine, Kfar Malal

Arik's eyeballs are shining as if trying to illuminate the cowshed, and Rachel thinks: if they burst in any minute and slaughter us all, they'll have been lured here by the light of his eyes.

We'll all die because of Arik.

Silly cow! she scolds herself.

Have you gone crazy, how can you think such nonsense? A strip of moonlight is falling on Arik's little face, that's all. There are gaps in the roof as wide as my hand; the light is filtering through. Pull yourself together, for heaven's sake, you always pride yourself on your clear head, whereas Vera beside you is about to go to pieces. Just look how she's clutching Arik, dear God. As if it's not her protecting the boy but the boy protecting her: an eighteen-month-old child. Oh, Vera! As if your boy could save you from death if you cling to him like a piece of driftwood.

"Nothing's going to happen," she whispers. "You hear me?"

Vera, who's usually so brave, so tough. Rachel ought to hug her, stroke her hair, but right now she can't do more than whisper encouragement. Her arms are heavy with her own children, their heads motionless on her shoulders. Yehuda and Benjamin have slept through it all so far, responding to the excitement with regular breathing, even though Rachel's heartbeat must be hammering in their tiny ears and should surely be keeping them awake, it seems so loud to her.

"Rachel?" Vera's voice is like the whining of the wind that sweeps about the house. "Why haven't they come back?"

"Don't worry."

"But if they were attacked... What if they were - "

"They've got everything under control."

Have they?

Rachel is not entirely sure about this, but she keeps her fears to herself.

"I'm so afraid, Rachel - "

"Shhh!" a woman hisses.

Vera's voice fades away. Again no one speaks, but the shed is far from silent. Instead: a cosmos of quiet sounds, ears and tails flapping to keep the omnipresent army of flies at bay, lips smacking, snorting, heavy heads turning, dung splattering, farting, scraping, stamping.

The beasts are restless, and no wonder: the cowshed has never been so full. Adults, children and cows all confined in a very small space, with the temperature at night over twenty degrees.

Like an oven.

Rachel listens closely in the hot, suffocating air.

It's extraordinary, she thinks, the noises people make when they're trying not to make any noise at all. Clearing their throats, for example. Like at the opera, or a concert. The challenge of remaining silent seems to provoke in us the overwhelming urge to propel mucus upwards through our throats.

Then there's the constant scratching.

Swallowing our saliva with a gulp.

Holding our breath, and releasing it all the more audibly.

A symphony of fear, and God knows these people are afraid. They're terrified, the women and children in this shed whose husbands and sons are at this very minute patrolling the edges of the village with their guns at the ready. The warning was clear: Arab bandits are going to attack the *moshav* once the moon is high in the sky.

She tilts back her head, looks up at the gaps in the roof.

And how high it is now!

Benjamin stirs in her arms, moans. She shifts his weight a little toward the middle, sees the black shadow of a baby crawling through the hay, straight toward the planking. In the dim light the crawling creature seems to her like something inhuman, a huge, fat rat. Someone stands in its path, crouches down: Dita, perhaps, Arik's sister.

Who's also nearly four now, Rachel realizes.

We really must patch up the roof.

If we still get the chance.

She tries to estimate how much they'll need for the repairs, as if she didn't have more pressing concerns. But anything's better than thinking about what happened in Hebron two days ago.

Don't think about it, just don't think -

But now, of course, she thinks about it all the more.

It all began with a wall.

Last year.

A simple folding screen, to separate the men and women who throng to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. A wobbly wooden frame covered with cloth, which immediately attracted the anger of the sheikhs.

That thing had to go.

Immediately.

The religious Jews can't understand it. They were always allowed to pray here under the Ottoman Empire. All right, so the Ottoman Empire is history now, and of course Arabs aren't Ottomans, but they're both Muslims, aren't they? Why all the commotion all of a sudden? They just want to praise Yahweh; for them, the Wall represents the remains of the foundations of the Herodian Temple, and if we allowed men and women to pray there without separation, wherever would that end?

But it's more complicated than that.

For Muslims, this piece of wall is equally holy. The Koran instructs us that this is where Mohammed tied up his horse before he embarked on his night journey to Heaven; and besides, they claim the right of control over the Temple Mount. They will not tolerate any Zionist claims to possession: not a single atom of the holy sites can belong to any of the faithful, regardless of their religion. Pray: certainly. Jews at the Wall, Muslims in the mosque.

But NOT possess.

What's that got to do with the screen, the hastily-assembled rabbis want to know.

That's not a screen, that's a construction.

What? Are you *meshugge*? That warped construction?

Precisely: you constructed this in order permanently to alter the location, to give the Wall the status of a synagogue, with the intention of, sooner or later, getting your paws on the whole of the Temple Mount.

Nebbich!

Thieves!

If ever history has been written by a folding screen, it was this one. The thing becomes a political issue, irritating already frayed nerves, stirring up Muslim fears that the Zionists and the British mandators will rob them of their property and drive them out of the country. Surely it is a matter of general knowledge why the Jews pray here? They long for the coming of their Messiah. The Temple Mount is crowned with two magnificent mosques, al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock, but with the coming of the Jewish Messiah these will be required to make way for the Third Temple. They are trampling on our religious feelings, they don't give a damn about the Balfour Declaration -

"Mama?"

"Sssh!"

Rachel scarcely dares breathe.

Even the animals have frozen.

She's lost all sense of how long they've already been sitting huddled together in the furnace of this August night, breathing in the smell of hay and cow shit. Hours must have

passed; she could almost believe that's daylight she can just make out through the holes in the roof, a barely noticeable lightening of the night. How comforting to see the break of day - were it not for the crunching of footsteps outside the shed.

Muffled, furtive.

"They're coming," whispers Vera.

Rachel looks down at her two children.

At some point, when they grew too heavy for her, she laid Yehuda and Benjamin down to sleep in the straw. Her right hand grips the handle of the pitchfork propped against the post beside her. They're not completely unarmed in here. The men left behind an ancient shotgun, practically a museum piece, and a pistol: with these, two half-grown boys are supposed to defend them. Three cheers for good intentions. Right now the two of them look more likely to shoot off their own toes, their hands are shaking so much. It's a good thing their defense arsenal is enhanced with a couple of forks, pickaxes and spades. You can impale someone on a pitchfork, smash in his skull with a spade.

As long as he isn't quicker, and smashes in *your* skull.

Or worse.

Like in Hebron.

Rachel shudders.

She herself didn't look inside the houses, but the descriptions have burned themselves onto her cerebral cortex in a ghastly panorama. Walls dripping, as if some demented painter had thrown around hectoliters of paint. Floorboards slippery, mirrored with blood, the rugs wet and clotted, furniture encrusted where coagulation had begun, the dead and dying piled up indiscriminately, one on top of another. Similar scenes in the streets, on the doorsteps, in passageways and stores. Anywhere Jews lived, worked, prayed side by side with their Arab neighbors the picture is the same, and those who were simply shot could count themselves lucky. The majority were stoned, beaten, throttled, stabbed, burned alive by the mob.

Children beheaded. Men castrated.

Women raped with daggers.

Old and young tortured to death; the sight of it almost unbearable. Their fingers and hands cut off, eyes gouged out, tongues excised.

Hebron, the ancient, holy city.

Drowned in a sea of blood.

Rachel sees all this in her mind's eye. Bodies slashed open, bowels spilling out, bones exposed, astonishment frozen on the faces of the murdered victims: how could it come to this, hadn't coexistence evolved, over the centuries, into trust, and trust into friendship?

Now there are no more Jews living in Hebron. Sixty-seven died, the rest fled, on the morning of August 24th 1929.

Two days ago.

The mob went on the rampage in Jerusalem, too; the frenzy is infecting the whole country like a virus. Convoys of armed men are attacking Jewish villages and farmsteads; blinded by hatred, Arabs are setting upon the inhabitants. In Motza alone they killed an entire family: father, mother, three children, and friends who had the misfortune of staying there at the time. The ghastly climax of a wave of unrest that started -

When, exactly?

Last year, Rachel muses in the half-light; less than ten months after we arrived. With the ridiculous quarrel about the screen. We got off the boat in January; in September they lit the fuse.

A screen!

Well, historians love beginnings.

But: a screen?

Didn't it start much earlier...

With a question: what makes a Jew a Jew?

Genes?

Faith?

A destiny of eternal persecution?

A book everyone keeps in the cupboard, regular or sporadic synagogue attendance?

Bar Mitzvah?

Jacob's fourth son?

A *kippah*?

Is there any connecting, identity-building characteristic, not just in the brain but also in the heart?

The answer came in 1897, shortly before the *fin de siècle*, at the First Zionist Congress: *Zionism seeks to establish a home for the Jewish people in Palestine secured under public law for those Jews who cannot or do not wish to assimilate elsewhere.* Which could perhaps have been more ardently expressed, but it seems that this is precisely where it is to be found, this identity that has increasingly become the stuff of legend:

In a concrete nation state.

But for the time being, Palestine is not something to unite the various parties.

Palestine divides.

Many European Jews have not the slightest desire to be dragged off by the shackles of history to a desert full of unruly Arabs. They have rights now, consider themselves to be on equal terms, part of the European bourgeoisie, just as it is part of them; they marry without regard for confession or creed, and besides: religion?

It's no big deal.

This complicates things. Conformity in religion unites people through the millennia and across the abyss, but time has moved on and now here we are, smack in the middle of the GOOOOLDEN Twenties, we're dancing on iridescent dance floors that shimmer like soap bubbles, partying on credit but never mind, everybody's falling into each other's arms, partly because they can't stand up any more, tea with a shot of alcohol and nights painting the town red, seven days a week, even those who live respectable lives are caught up in the atmosphere of intoxication which is most reliably expressed in its utter lack of spirituality, but also in its staggering creative output, an overnight flowering of culture, the triumph of the atheists.

Many Jews in Europe who were already secular before the party started now become even more so.

Zion?

Later.

Yet basically they agree, those who want to go to Palestine and those who do not: that the project of establishing a Jewish State does not call for a religious approach - quite the opposite. It is a question of establishing a refuge for a people who for centuries have been subject to reprisals. A place of security, which some say will be urgently needed very soon, while others say not; above all, it's a question of identity.

Because if religion is no longer the quantity that establishes their sense of identity -

What is there left that unites the Jews of the world?

Is it even possible to be a people if you do not have a state?

Wherever you look, God is going out of fashion. Jews marry Christians marry Jews marry Christians, traditions are being diluted, no firm terrain anywhere on which to stand and declare:

This - is - my -

IDENTITY!

Surely the pioneers of Zionism were forced to conclude that even the naïve, utopian concept of a world in which Christians, Jews and Muslims all fall into each other's arms and everyone lives and lets live would, in the absence of their own national statehood, eventually lead to Judaism disappearing altogether?

No, a Jewish state was absolutely not a religious requirement.

It was a secular project.

A home for the Jewish *people*. The attempted rescue of a disintegrating Us. High time, too, in the opinion of those who could see the dawning of something that, in the euphoria of the Twenties, people preferred to play down.

That the party was going to end badly.

Because actually you couldn't help but see it.

So why didn't everyone take up the offer?

As above: desert, Arabs, bad food, no opera house.

Second: no sense of Biblical history.

Third: home is where you come from, and - hands up - how many actually come from Palestine?

Fourth: it isn't that bad.

We've got things under control.

Because anti-Semitism comes in many forms, and it's a master of disguise. In the Golden Twenties it sat in the audience applauding Jewish musicians, actors, painters and writers, putting on a jovial front. It deceives whoever and wherever it can. Points the gun, and the dazzled victim sees only an outstretched hand; and God knows they can be pretty dazzling, the lights on Berlin's Broadway. With a radiant smile the handsome gigolo sweeps across the ballroom, scarcely put off his stride by the folksy marching music that quietly, almost imperceptibly, starts to mingle with the Charleston -

But -

Nothing happens imperceptibly.

It happens because when you're under anesthesia you don't perceive anything, and Germany, the united Fatherland, is currently in a state of

GENERAL ANESTHESIA.

But Rachel and Shalom Kahn don't let themselves be anesthetized.

They are neither religious nor equipped with the gift of prophecy. Sufficiently, if not excessively, educated. Avowedly but not ideologically Jewish. They run a hardware store, and business could be better, which is why on the weekends Rachel sews exquisite ballgowns for high society ladies; the neighbors are friendly, and they've not made any enemies to date, at least not so far as they can tell.

But they recognize the hideous face reflected in the soap bubble for what it is.

So they leave Berlin, with twins ripening in Rachel's belly, and set off for Palestine before the Brownshirts conjure up their horrors.

This spares them a great many troubles.

And brings them others instead.

"I hate this Arab scum," hisses Vera.

"Shut *up* already!" the woman snaps.

It is now getting noticeably lighter outside. The footsteps outside the shed door have fallen silent, which doesn't necessarily quiet Rachel's unease. It's like snoring, she thinks.

Shalom, for example, whose respiratory passages must rank close behind the trumpets of Jericho; but God forbid he should stop. Whenever he does she lies there waiting for it to start again, which is almost worse.

It's not over yet.

As if in confirmation, someone outside gives a muffled cough.

Voices; rustling.

The door is barred, strong padlocks with chains, but there's nothing you can do against axes swung in fury.

That's what they used in Hebron, to break the doors down.

Rachel tightens her grip on the pitchfork.

There's movement in the cowshed. Women draw their children close, huddle together, away from the door. *As if that's going to help.* But people are cattle, too, driven by instinct. She sees one of the youngsters raise the shotgun, shaking like a leaf; the barrel is shaking too, but never mind, shot isn't choosy. Anyone who manages to miss with a shotgun should go straight out and get himself a guide dog.

Someone is fumbling with the bolts.

The boy hoists the gun to his cheek.

Rachel listens, and -

"No! Don't!"

All night she's been tormented by visions: the corpses of their men, covered in blood, figures in burnouses bending over them, going through their pockets, finding keys, tearing down fences, setting fire to wooden huts, moving on to the shed, preparing to rape, torture and murder, but now, as the door is unbolted, she recognizes the familiar voices -

Sees that the boy is about to shoot -

Drops the pitchfork -

Dashes forward, elbowing her way through, flies at the shooter -

The door swings open.

Shalom enters the cowshed.

The crack of the rifle as it fires; the scattered drumroll of shot hitting home.

Rachel's scream.

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

"His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of

the object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country".

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour

November 2nd, 1917

Baron Rothschild, popular activist with the Zionist Federation, must have kissed this letter from the British Foreign Minister.

God save the King?

God save the Zionists!

London is seeking to acquire the League of Nations mandate for Palestine; Zionism has come along at just the right time. Establishing a home for the Jews on the banks of the Jordan puts a fine gloss on this contemptible claim to power. Its bid is successful, on condition that it creates all the preconditions for the aforementioned home, while for their part the Zionist leaders pledge to give the Empire their full support.

A train sets off on a collision course.

Fighting alongside the British and French, the rulers of Arabia shattered the miserable remnants of the Ottoman Empire for the promise of their own independence. Officially, the commitment still stands, but their country has long since been passed around the colonialists on a cake slice. Promising both Arabs and Jews the same territory seems like a clever move to the British. *Divide et impera*. Set them at each other's throats, then they'll be all the easier to rule. The Balfour Declaration reads accordingly. It promises everything and specifies nothing, which gives Chaim Weizmann, the president of the Zionist Federation, pause for thought.

How will the Arabs react when Jews come streaming, unhindered, into their country? How's that going to work?

He takes the matter in hand and meets with Faisal I, the Emir of Mecca, later King of Syria and Iraq. The essence of the talks: to each his state. You accept the Declaration, specifically: Jewish immigration; we campaign for your independence and get the colonial powers to give us the whole thing in writing.

Faisal-Weizmann Agreement. Handshake.

Faisal lets it be recorded that he is mindful of the racial kinship and ancient bonds between the Arabs and the Jewish people, and of the good understanding which exists between them. Fundamentally, he says, they are absolutely in agreement.

Absolutely! say the British.

Then disregard and neglect the agreement and sow -
HATRED.

Rachel is lying in a very unladylike manner on top of the spotty thirteen-year-old who fired the shot at the door.

And didn't hit anyone.

Because she grabbed his arm.

She sits up, brushes the straw off her clothes. Like a pig, covered in mud and dung. Who says women can't fight. She collided with the boy so heavily that they skidded into one of the stalls; empty, thank God, after they sold the calf yesterday, but perhaps it would have been a good idea to have cleaned it afterwards.

And suddenly she can't help laughing.

Loudly; cackling.

All around her the tension dissolves, women run to their men, scenes as if they haven't seen each other in months, yet it was all of eight hours. Shalom hurries over, caught between shock and relief, helps her to her feet.

She nuzzles against him.

"The boy," she says, because she knows that what her husband most wants to do is wallop the young ruffian, and that's exactly what she doesn't want; what can you expect of a youngster whose head is full of what happened in Hebron, and who this very second is creeping away like a beaten dog.

Shalom catches his sleeve.

The boy swallows. Doesn't dare look up at him.

"You fired the shot?"

Nods.

A moment of silence.

Very long. *Very* silent.

"We'd better practice that again." Shalom laughs, ruffles his hair; and Rachel finally allows herself to weep.

I earned these tears!

Shalom puts his arm around her even tighter.

"You're a heroine," he whispers. "You're all heroines."

And Rachel thinks, thanks very much, but if you'd heard us sniveling, you wouldn't be so generous with your compliments.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Nothing. False alarm." He shrugs his shoulders. "Heaven knows why they didn't attack."

(And if you know, all-knowing Heaven, feel free to keep it to yourself. We'd rather you told us what awaits us tomorrow night. And the next night. And the night after that.)

They go outside, into the early morning sunshine. Shalom stretches his arms and legs. "Well, we'll have a bit of peace and quiet after this."

Peace and quiet?

We picked the wrong place for that, my love.

It'll be a while before there's peace and quiet in Palestine.

Though, admittedly, it was peace and quiet they came here for.

The twins were born right after they arrived, and they couldn't be more different.

Here's Yehuda, round and contented.

No wonder.

For nine months he made himself comfortable, took up most of the space, siphoned off the lion's share of nutrients and antibodies from the placenta. A greedy little prince. In excellent spirits, insofar as this can be said of a newborn, he paid homage to his drafty new home; the rumor was soon doing the rounds among the nurses on the ward that the boy's first, strident breath was tantamount to jubilation, as if he wanted to assure Palestine, this land so much more promised than loved, of his positive character.

Excellent human material! as the glorious Zionist leaders would later put it.

And now Benjamin.

The latecomer.

Strives with all his might, finally stretches out his slippery little head, too, but compared with his brother's triumphal arrival his birth is just a postscript. Whereas Yehuda's lungs ally with his vocal cords to deliver a never-ending oration on hunger, self-confidence and physical strength, Benjamin seems exhausted by life before it has even really begun.

He is more wrinkled, smaller, quieter.

When he finally cries, it sounds quite different.

Weaker.

But mad as hell.

The fury of one who got a raw deal.

The *moshav* Kfar Malal, where they've settled, is situated around thirty kilometers northeast of Tel Aviv in the Plain of Sharon. Excellent, fruitful agricultural land. Over the past few decades pioneers started to drain the swamps; now *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* are springing up like mushrooms, citrus fruits, figs, olives and vineyards are being planted, increasingly you see herds being watched not by Arabs in billowing burnouses but by sinewy Jewish pioneers, and the country is changing, becoming more European.

What a development!

Out of nothing.

Even under the Ottoman Empire this Palestine was a nebulous province where time stood still, segmented only by the hours of prayer. A land of myths and camels, archaic, uncivilized, swamps along the coast, desert beyond.

Far from promising.

Until collective memory whipped up Christians, Jews and Muslims like a hurricane.

And suddenly they all came.

Bible romantics, pantheists, soldiers of fortune, eccentrics, pioneers, refugees, entrepreneurs, self-appointed prophets. Some anticipating the Messiah, others singing the praises of living in proximity to Nature. Ecstasies, mumbling verses from the Talmud, alongside Socialists lacking both God and good taste; inventors, scholars, agriculturalists, doctors, architects, artists, laborers, farmers, Russians, Poles, Germans, Dutch, Persians, Moroccans, Egyptians, some with an entourage, some with just the clothes on their backs, and even that looking as if they'd spent four weeks wandering through the wilds of Kurdistan. So different from one another that Babel in comparison was a bastion of comprehension, yet united by an awe-inspiring faith in the possibility of achieving the impossible.

Came and flooded Palestine.

Between its pines, thistles and lemon groves they recreated their homelands in miniature: onion-domed Russian towers, German cathedrals, Black Forest cottages, Oxford spires. More and more immigrants followed, also because word spread that anyone completely off their rocker was heartily welcome here.

And pioneers, it has to be said, are almost all off their rockers.

Anywhere else, they'd stick out a mile.

Not in Palestine.

An entire region was recreating itself. Everything that already existed elsewhere celebrated its second, glittering premiere in the Promised Land. The first automobile clattered through the mountains of Galilee like the very Devil himself, an immigrant delighted the children who marveled at his home-made ice-cream, a Romanian teacher opened kindergartens, a conductor from the Ukraine founded an opera society. While a Dutch Christian suggested the Galileans adopt Esperanto as a means of understanding each other, a Polish Jew translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Hebrew, and a Muslim Palestinian devoted himself to founding an Arab university on Galilean soil. A great many little Tolstoys poured into the country to break their backs from morning till night in the scorching desert wind and wrest whatever they could from Nature: true Marxist Zionism. Almost all the Christians scurried off to Jerusalem; the soldiers of fortune and the intellectuals dreamed of a shimmering pearl on the Mediterranean and built Tel Aviv almost overnight; the pioneers cultivated the land.

And so now the Kahns are pioneers.

And devoted parents.

They love their children equally, without differentiation. But as often happens when auspices are there from the beginning, one child is given all the things the other would like to have; and Benjamin, with his ancient, wrinkled soul, undoubtedly the cleverer of the two, is given books.

A whole heap of them, when the twins turn six.

Yehuda is given a club.

So is Arik.

[...]

Jerusalem

Why will you never see bulletproof vests in fashion magazines?

Because you sweat like a pig in them.

Five kilos of armor will neutralize any deodorant; if, on top of that, you're nervous and the sun is beating down on you, you end up stewing in your own juice.

Arik curses the thing.

It sticks to him, pinching and constricting him beneath his dark suit. He keeps taking off his sunglasses to pass a handkerchief over his face and wipe the sweat from his forehead. His tie is strangling him; his bodyguards huddle in close, the cage of bodies creating even more heat.

Make a point -

He's done that already. There are about a thousand police spread out all over the Old City, security checks on the access roads have been stepped up. Cars with Palestinian license plates trying to get to Jerusalem might as well just turn back. Helicopters are circling or hovering in the air, blades throbbing, as if preparing to swoop on prey; snipers are lurking everywhere.

All because Ariel Sharon wants to pay a visit.

To climb up a massive hill of ruins comprising the remains of two temples and a wall, sacred to Jews, and crowned by a plateau with two places of worship sacred to Muslims.

The most volatile thirty-five acres on the planet.

And if there is one person who, as far as Muslims are concerned, has no business being there, that person is

ARIEL SHARON.

Sheer provocation!

Moshe Dayan, on the other hand - now that was classy. After the capture of East Jerusalem, when Israeli soldiers raised the Star of David over the Temple Mount, he gave orders for the flag to be taken down immediately, and assigned the administration of the complex to the Waqf, an Islamic foundation, out of respect for the Muslim faith.

So what's the Bulldozer doing here?

Trying to raise the flag again?

"No, no," Arik explains to the television crew, the moisture content of his shirt now giving it the consistency of a wet dishcloth. "I came here with a message of peace. I believe that we can live together with the Palestinians. I came here, to the holiest place of the Jewish people, in order to see what happens here, and to have a feeling of how it will move forward. Not as a provocation."

What happens here and how it will move forward?

Hm. Cryptic.

His entourage plows on over the Mughrabi Ramp, which leads to the plateau, surrounded by furious demonstrators; people shouting, booing, crying *Allahu akbar!* with such ferocity the security forces can barely control them. Pandemonium. And yet Arik showed up like an ordinary tourist, just before eight, during regular opening hours - "a completely normal procedure", as he informed the reporters before embarking on the ascent.

Normal: well, not really. Ranks of heavily-armed border guards, police vehicles, ambulances parked beside the security checkpoints - hardly the usual picture of a Sunday museum visit.

"Murderer!"

Arik sighs; walks faster.

Wants to get it over with.

He'd known he would have to deal with an angry crowd: Palestinian organizations have been railing against the visit for days now, saying it serves no purpose other than to demonstrate Israel's sole claim to Jerusalem, and to the whole of Palestine.

"Murderer! You are killing peace!"

"You have blood in your eyes!"

"Sabra and Shatila!"

Sabra and Shatila. Dear God, the same old tune. Fine: he had *known*, but he hadn't realized he would find it so physically exhausting.

"Blood and fire! We will liberate al-Aqsa with blood and fire!"

"Butcher! Bloodhound!"

They stride through the Mughrabi Gate, set foot on the plateau, and instantly a hail of projectiles rains down on the security forces. There must be several hundred people up here, all of them now striving to get at the detested visitor. Arik is breathing hard, wedged in by two security guards, his Likud colleagues and a couple of American guests. His son Gilad and his friend Roni have his back. He's glad the two of them are there, and at the same time worried about Gilad, more than he is about himself. Again he dabs sweat from his forehead and upper lip, while the mob yells that he'd better not dare approach the Dome or the mosque. Doesn't feel at all well. Thinks: God damn it, I'm seventy-two, why am I doing this to myself; but then this was what I wanted, and if we're honest, I know exactly what I'm doing it for.

Here, today, is where the election will be decided.

They approach al-Aqsa Mosque.

Now all hell really breaks loose. Arik had neither expected to get inside nor even considered trying, so he almost has to laugh when he sees grown men flinging themselves

down like dogs to block the entrances to the shrines, while at the same time anger bubbles up inside him.

What the hell is this? The visit was agreed.

With the PA.

With the goddamn Palestinian National Authority: it gave them the green light, on condition that he didn't enter either the Dome of the Rock or al-Aqsa Mosque.

"Who wants to enter your stupid mosque?" he growls to himself. "I'm a Jew, I have the right to visit Jewish holy places whenever I - "

Gilad puts a hand on his forearm, a subtle hint that the camera crews' microphones are too close for comfort.

"We're leaving."

About time, too. Stones, plastic chairs and buckets are flying through the air, tear gas drifting across the plateau. The demonstrators, beside themselves with rage, have turned on the police, who have taken cover behind full-length plexiglass shields and are firing rubber bullets into the crowd. Out of the corner of his eye Arik sees a boy fall to the ground and lie there, motionless; soldiers are rushing to the Mughrabi Gate, carrying a wounded colleague between them.

"Murderer! *Allahu akbar!*"

"Piss off back to Mecca!" one of the Likud members blurts out. "Get the hell out of our country!"

"Arik, king of pigs!"

"Over the Jordan with the lot of you!" the Likud man screams. "The Temple Mount must remain Jewish!"

"*Allahu akbar!*"

Arik thinks of his air-conditioned car.

But when he's almost there, he just can't help himself: he turns around and says what he didn't actually mean to say, repeats the now-legendary words of Mordechai Gur, whose units conquered the Old City of Jerusalem back in '67:

"The Temple Mount is in our hands."

Oh, that'll fan the flames!

Let it.

Let them vent their anger, start a second intifada. It'll only make him stronger. He came up onto this plateau for several reasons: he's made the point Benjamin spoke of, given an impressive demonstration of Israeli strength, made clear that Jerusalem is non-negotiable.

Just you wait till I get elected!

I'M GOING TO PUT THIS HOUSE IN ORDER.

[...]

Nablus

Hagen takes a shower.

Ten minutes turned into almost an hour. The boys finally had to call time on the game because Hanaan summoned them in for lunch, otherwise they'd still be at it now. The kickabout has done him good. For a few moments, a couple of passes and the chance of a goal, he really thought of nothing else, just getting that ball in the back of the net.

And they *did* win!

Hagen feels elated. He relishes the jet of hot water, pulls on a clean T-shirt and emerges from the bathroom, rubbing his hair.

Yael is standing there.

"Everything okay?"

She glances away. And back again. "Yeah. Okay."

"You should have come with us. It was great. We - "

His gaze falls on the laptop.

The lid's down.

A film clip plays in his head. The boys pestering him. Wanting to go outside. He closes the file - does he turn the computer off as well? He isn't certain, but one thing he's sure of:

The lid was *up* when he left.

"Have you been at my computer, Yael?"

She hesitates. Which is answer enough.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, I - " She gesticulates, eyes darting to every corner of the room as she tries to avoid his. "I just wanted to take a quick look at my mails, and - "

"You opened your e-mails?"

"One, just one - "

Slowly, he lowers the towel.

"Who from?"

She squirms. Bites her lips, obviously very distressed. Struggles with herself.

"Yael."

"I won't betray you," she blurts out. "I won't do it."

"What are you talking about, for God's sake?"

"Shimon wrote to me. The man who recruited Yossi for the attack. Who threatened our families - I told you about him - and he wanted - he promises he'll leave me alone if I turn you in, but I don't trust him, he - "

I can't believe I'm hearing this, thinks Hagen.

"Are you crazy? This guy tries to *kill* us, and you open his e-mail?"

"But - I just - "

"You let him know *where we are!* The minute you opened his mail he'll have been able to trace the laptop." Looks around frantically. "When was it? How long ago?"

"About - half an hour - "

Yael looks terrible. It wouldn't take much encouragement for her to dissolve in a puddle on the floor. Hagen rushes to his laptop, turns it off and shoves it in his backpack.

Where's the gun? Already in there.

CDs, prepaid cellphones? Those too.

"Tom." Yael is close to tears. "What are you doing?"

"The same as you. Pack your stuff, quickly. We've got to get out of here."

"W - where are we going?"

"How should I know. Away from here. Have you got your money?"

"Neck pouch."

"Cellphone, wallet, passport?"

She stares at him. Turns on her heel and runs to her apartment.

"Ric?" Cox has allowed herself to fall back a bit; a few cars separate her now from Adler's entourage. "We're heading for the center of town. Coming up to Hussein Square."

Adler bears left, towards the university.

"I don't believe it," she murmurs.

Turns into a side street. Cox follows him, sees the entourage pass a bus stop swarming with schoolkids. Cranes come into view, a new housing development.

No doubt about it.

"They're not heading for a settlement, Ric."

They're in the heart of Nablus.

Fuck. FUCK!

(Calm down, Tom, it's not her fault. How was she to know -)

Okay, so she's the picture of innocence.

What difference does it make?

As fast as he can he shoves some underwear into the backpack - where's his washbag - in the bathroom - goes to fetch it, glances out of the window -

Two cars are coming down the approach road.

Pretty fast.

Who says it's them?

(I do - your gut.)

Pulls on the backpack, strides into Yael's apartment, sees her stashing cellphone and wallet in her jeans. Her clothes are still strewn about beside her travel bag. Without a word he takes her by the hand and drags her outside.

"Tom, wait! I haven't - "

"They're here."

Her face turns white with shock. They clatter down the stairs to the ground floor, where did they come in just now from the soccer game, where's the back door again?

There!

Adler's been very concerned since he realized they were being followed. There was at least one car that looked suspicious to him, but it disappeared after the intersection. Since then, nothing unusual. Just worsening traffic, cars, buses, big trucks, all on their way to Nablus; nothing in the skies, either, as far as he can see.

One of the motorcyclists, perhaps?

Whatever.

They don't have much time left.

His Ford skids to a halt; the van stops behind him. They leap out of their vehicles, and Adler assesses the situation. Half a dozen nearly-finished apartment blocks; gravel and sand where there will soon be paths and flowerbeds; cement mixers, fences. Beyond, a patch of wasteland with hoardings on posts announcing the next construction project.

They walk toward the house.

The computer's been switched off again; no signal any more. Doesn't matter. It's the white block in front of them. As soon as Yael succumbed and opened the silent e-mail, it was child's play locating the computer to within just one meter. The only thing the location finder can't tell them is height, but it doesn't take long to search five floors.

We know where you're hiding, my little ones.

You just keep playing.

You're about to get the surprise of your life.

Then he glances again at the wasteland behind the house, and the surprise is on him.

Two people running, already a long way off.

A man with a backpack.

A woman.

Running for their lives.

"Fuck!" Points at the fleeing figures. They all wheel round, head back to the vehicles, then someone comes flying towards them and Adler knows he was right about the motorcyclist.

Cox sees the two people running across the field, can't see their faces but it's them, and as if she needed any further confirmation Adler provides it himself.

His reaction leaves her in no doubt as to who is escaping.

Should she arrest him?

Four against one, with Sivan and Noy those crucial few meters away?

Perlman can deal with it.

More important to catch the two rabbits over there.

She switches to collision course, sees the horror in Adler's eyes -

- as the BMW heads straight for him, an HP4, now he knows who's riding it, too, he'd like to drag the bitch out of the saddle but he doesn't even have time to translate his reflexes into a leap to safety.

His men scatter in front of him.

The madwoman accelerates.

Shana, you fucking -

Clips him, spins him round like a top and hurls him to the ground. Adler falls hard. Seconds later he catapults himself back onto his feet.

"Get after her!"

Runs to his Ford as the others jump into the Multivan and take up the chase. Two more cars are coming down the approach road, driving fast - wait a minute -

Weren't they tailing him before, on the highway?

"Oh, terrific," he growls.

Shin Bet summit in Nablus.

Cox's machine bounces over the fallow field, more like riding a camel than a bike.

"Ric, I've got Hagen and Kahn in front of me."

"Where are you?"

"Not sure exactly. Between the Old Town and the uni. They're escaping on foot." In the rear mirror she sees the van rocking from side to side as it turns onto the wasteland, kicking up a cloud of brown dirt as it accelerates.

"Sivan?"

"Here."

"Follow the van."

"Already on it."

"Noy, you block Adler."

"Too late. Just passed me."

“Then fuck him from behind, goddammit!”

The fugitives are struggling on in front of her, a futile trial of strength - or maybe not? They're running toward the site fence, to a narrow crack where two sections don't quite meet. Could just be wide enough to squeeze through, but for the bike it'll be tight.

Too tight.

She brakes and steers the machine against one of the sections, shoving it aside. It scrapes noisily, moves a little. Not enough. The Multivan is hurtling up behind her. If she doesn't get out of here this very second she's going to be squashed like a fly against the fence. Slams the BMW into the barrier again, widens the crack, forces herself through. Gets stuck. Throws her shoulders into it as the van looms up, closer and closer, then with a sudden lurch she's free at last and shoots out the other side.

The van slams into the fence, reverses, engine roaring.

“He's heading for the road.” Sivan.

“Stay on him.”

Where's Hagen, where's Kahn? Everywhere she looks concrete skeletons, piles of sand, skips. The real estate miracle of the West Bank.

There they are. Running down a freshly-paved street.

Cox revs up.

Hagen's wheezing.

Why the hell did he use up all his energy playing soccer?

Yael's a good runner, better than him, but then she's not schlepping any baggage. Not that the backpack weighs all that much, he just didn't fasten it properly. Now it's hammering against his spine, more annoying than painful; anyway, it makes no difference how fast they run -

The biker's made it through the fence.

That fierce, aggressive buzzing is closing in on them from behind, getting louder, it won't be long now -

“There!” gasps Yael, and he sees what she means.

A straight edge where the building site comes to an end; the field behind it considerably lower.

Three meters at least.

If they can make it to there - and already they're balancing on the ledge, high enough to break their legs, never mind, the grass will soften the impact -

Cox sees them jump.

Too high for a motorcycle stunt, she's not Evel Knievel.

Turns and drives along the ledge.

Weighs up the possibilities.

Down below the two figures run through the grass, rattle a garden gate, obviously locked. Climb over it and disappear down a footpath running between two rows of houses: a residential area, flanked by parallel roads.

The lower road is closer.

She takes that one.

On the upper road Sivan is stuck behind the van.

Tries to overtake, but it's hopeless. Single lane. No pavement he can swerve onto. He wonders where Cox has gone; he lost sight of her on the detour from the wasteland up to the road. No sign of the fugitives, either.

The guys in the van must be just as puzzled, though.

They're passing the end of the construction site, which segues into a neighborhood of two-story houses.

A strip of grass between the site and the residential area.

At the bottom of the strip he catches a brief glimpse of the parallel road they drove into Nablus on.

And Cox.

Going all out.

She emerges right behind Noy's car.

Immediately sees what's happened.

Noy is blocked by a tractor trundling along the road; Adler, the other side of it, is steadily pulling away. Whenever Noy swings out to edge past the tractor, oncoming vehicles force him back into his lane.

Hagen and Kahn on foot are faster.

Cox switches to the center line.

Pulls past Noy, which takes her dangerously close to the oncoming traffic. Someone honks, keeps their hand on the horn; the note changes frequency as she leaves him behind and zips down the narrow lane; and then the tractor too is behind her.

Adler sees her coming.

Steps on the gas.

Mistake, thinks Hagen, mistake, mistake!

His sides are aching as he runs past gardens and backyards, what a crazy idea, going into a residential neighborhood, who knows where they'll end up, where they'll eventually get stuck.

Trapped.

On the other hand, he doesn't have a better idea, so keep going, what else can they do; and there, less than a hundred meters ahead, he sees the road cut across the footpath, a steady stream of cars -

And Cox sees *him*.

For a split second, between two houses.

The woman alongside.

By now she's hanging on Adler's fender like an angry wasp, shuttling back and forth in an attempt to get past him. The *rakaz* accelerates. Uses the few meters of free space that open up in front of him; and suddenly, from one moment to the next, the oncoming lane is also empty, as if deserted.

If that's not an invitation -

Cox revs the engine, and with a triumphant roar the BMW pulls past Adler's Ford.

Side by side they race toward the intersection.

Sivan pounds the steering wheel in frustration.

Enough to drive you insane! Not the remotest chance of him overtaking the van; but then the street bends sharply to the right, cuts through the residential neighborhood, and he realizes it's about to cross the parallel road.

The vehicle in front picks up speed.

Sivan follows suit.

Just wait till we reach the intersection, he thinks.

That's where I'll get you.

Lost him! Adler's going to bite the dashboard.

Cox speeds towards the intersection, where Hagen is already coming into view, followed by the woman -

What's he doing, for God's sake?

Trying to kill himself?

Doesn't even stop, just runs straight out onto the highway -

- across the lane markings, brakes screeching, Yael shouting after him:

"Are you crazy?"

“No! Come on.”

Because his memory tells him they’re not far from the historical Old Town, where they can disappear in the labyrinth of alleys and street markets; for cars, at least, that’s the end of the line.

It’ll make it harder for their pursuers.

And suddenly he sees the motorcycle zooming towards him.

Neck and neck with the car -

Shit! If she wants to avoid Kahn running straight into the bike, she has to swerve now.

Impossible.

Adler’s alongside again, in the wrong lane. Glaring so furiously at her that he hasn’t seen the taxi coming at him over the crossing.

Cox does, though.

Her brain fast-forwards through what could - will - happen - what are her choices? - no choice. Swerves to the right as the taxi driver, frantically spinning the wheel, clips Adler’s Ford which then hits him and drags him, unable to brake, into her lane. As the radiator lunges towards her she dodges it by a hair’s breadth, jolts up onto the sidewalk into a group of passers-by who leap apart like dancers in some balletic farce; the world turns green before her eyes -

Adler struggles to regain control, shoots over the intersection. Sees Hagen and the woman running like rabbits -

The BMW crashes to the ground, surrounded by bushes and trees.

- stops, yanks the wheel around.

Steps on the gas.

In his rear-view mirror he sees the van, approaching from the other side.

The traffic lights switch to green, they’re coming from all directions now, mass confusion, people running away, any second now there’s going to be the most godawful crash here, no doubt about that. The taxi reverses, cuts off a delivery truck coming from the south; its driver jerks the steering wheel, crunches the back of the Ford, which fishtails, skids a meter to one side, forcing the van to slam on the brakes -

Before Sivan’s eyes the back of the car in front seems suddenly to expand.

Chances: zero.

His head smacks against the horn and back, sounding a futile, staccato warning, as he drives full speed into the vehicle ahead and shunts it over the intersection.

The van makes a leap and crashes into the delivery truck.

Cacophony. Tormented brakes, maltreated metal.

A miracle we're still alive, thinks Hagen. Within seconds the crossroads has descended into chaos. He can still hear crashes and shattering glass, a symphony of lost control, as more and more vehicles plow into one another. He resists the temptation to look behind him, reaches the other side, Yael still with him, unhurt.

All that counts.

A black bike helmet shoots up out of a ravaged strip of roadside vegetation.

Ahead of them: a park.

They run in.

The helicopter drops down lower as Perlman consults with the town council in his best Arabic. Old acquaintances from the period post-Oslo, when Israelis and Palestinians were still buoyed up by cooperation and goodwill. He knows the people who call the shots in Nablus nowadays. Explains to the town council why they're about to fall out of the sky like an invading army any minute, in fact right

NOW.

And that they're going to have to set down a couple of agents.

"Keep your police back. Nobody's going to get hurt."

Which is probably something they've never heard from the cockpit of an Israeli attack helicopter before.

The town council is not happy.

What do you think I am, thinks Perlman.

Cox struggles to her feet.

She's covered in leaves and broken twigs. The bushes cushioned her landing; what can she expect now? A mob bearing tar and feathers? She wrenches her bike upright, but no one comes to lynch her, they're all mesmerized by the chain reaction that's still happening in front of their eyes. Cox sees a Smart crumple into an Audi that's ground itself into a truck. The van is crushed, doors agape.

Empty.

Where are the men?

There - running.

Under the trees and into the park. Predators who've picked up the scent.

Adler fumbles furiously with the ignition.

"Come on, start!"

The Ford wheezes like a patient on their deathbed. Through the shattered side window he thinks he can hear the sky vibrating.

No - it *is* vibrating.

A helicopter.

"Start, goddamn it!"

Turns the key; turns it, turns it.

"Fucking piece of shit!"

The insult does the trick. Spluttering, the engine reports for duty. Adler hits the gas and maneuvers backwards and forwards, crashing here, crashing there. Contrives to squeeze himself out of the resulting gap, ripping the bumper off the car behind and dragging it with him for a few meters before it falls off with a loud clang, dances over the asphalt and demolishes the side door of a car that's just parking up.

Noy follows him.

Decides to drive up the sidewalk, honking to clear a path for himself, draws down furious curses on his head, so be it, ladies and gentlemen, today is

NOT

the day to be a pedestrian; steers the car around the junkyard that once was an intersection, sees Adler bumping along a little way ahead of him through the park. The Ford, battered and scraped, is emitting painful squeals. Looks like it's barely escaped the scrap press, but it's still going.

That wasn't your final blow, thinks Noy.

It's not a park.

It's a downtown graveyard, the peace of which is now well and truly disturbed. Hagen's running apparatus seems to have disconnected from the rest of his body; heart and lungs are threatening a general strike. He's puffing like a steam engine. How long is it since they left Mansour's house in such a hurry? Minutes? An eternity? Scalpels are gouging into his sides; he won't be able to keep pace with Yael for long. She's bounding like a gazelle between the tightly-packed headstones; this is not what they call resting in peace.

Someone stands in his way.

Hagen pushes him aside.

Long way to Tipperary, how much further to the Old Town? The cemetery can't be all that big or he'd have remembered it from their quick tour in the car.

Still running, he looks over his shoulder.

Figures are closing in in quick staccato. Four men.

Not angry mourners, that's for sure. He hears a crack like someone firing blanks; are they shooting at them? He risks a second look and sees the bike, slaloming wildly around irate visitors.

Now they've got the biker on their backs as well.

Then the biker does something Hagen doesn't understand.

He attacks their pursuers.

One of the men is hit at full speed, sails over the graves like a ragdoll. The path forks. Yael leaps over a railing, runs on between the weatherbeaten stones, good idea! Bad terrain for bikes, and already they're at the edge of the cemetery, out on the street, a frontline of cars lying in wait, held back by the lights; on the other side, walls, timeworn steps climbing up to a plateau.

The beginning of the Old Town.

Shrieking like a harpy, a car races at them from the other direction, and Hagen catches a glimpse of the driver.

That's right! Looky here!

Adler laughs triumphantly. Right in front of the car; any second now he'll have them on the hood. He slams his foot on the floor, his laughter mingling with the howling of the gears; come on, slowpokes, it's countdown time! You're too close, I'm too fast - end of the road, you're not getting away from me again!

Heads straight for them -

Someone crashes into him from the side.

Noy shunts Adler's car diagonally across the road.

Cox hurtles out of the cemetery gates.

Skids to a halt, surveys the scene. Another crash; Hagen and Kahn on the steps to the Old Town.

Go on, then, she thinks.

My bike's got legs.

Noy's laughing, too, just as hard. With grim satisfaction he sees Adler gesticulate wildly in the driver's cabin; reverses, puts his foot down.

Bam!

Adler's passenger door buckles beneath the impact.

And again.

He's really enjoying this. He slams repeatedly into the battered Ford, gleefully shunting it toward a row of parked cars -

And Adler thinks, a couple more kisses like that and I'm trapped for good.

Gotta get out of here!

Another, heavier jolt flings him against the door; his head slams painfully against the side window, then at last he manages to get hold of his gun, aims it across the passenger seat at his attacker's windshield, and fires.

Noy recoils as if branded by a red-hot poker. A scarlet fountain spurts up from his jacket and onto the upholstery.

He reaches for the automatic transmission.

Adler tears open the driver's door, jumps out. Just a couple of steps and he's beside the other guy, who's lying half-dead in his seat, looking at him, eyes wide with fear.

Half-dead?

Asshole!

Never do things by halves.

Shoots him twice in the head as the helicopter throbs across from the intersection.

Plane trees, ruins, a palace, a barracks? Have they slipped back into the age of Vespasian, the Crusaders, Saladin? Mansour didn't bring them up here on the sightseeing tour yesterday.

The far edge of the plateau is marked by a wall.

With a gap where a flight of steps leads downwards.

The dull thud of rotors is making the sky reverberate, mingled with a familiar roar -

The biker.

Not a moment's respite.

Adler sees Cox ride up the steps as the helicopter appears over the park, so low that the tops of the trees start thrashing in all directions.

Where the hell are his men?

As if in response they appear at the cemetery gates - and then the lights turn green and the metal horde races towards him, only to back up again when it reaches the vehicles wedged tightly into each other.

“Hurry up!” he yells.

Runs to the steps, because he knows things are about to get nasty.

The heavenly hosts are upon them.

Perlman sees him running. Cox is already on the plateau, just disappearing under a canopy of leaves.

Adler and three men are running after her.

“Aim for the legs,” he instructs the agents. To Dreyfus: “Adler’s your man. Do you want to deal with him?”

Dreyfus is already leaning out of the side window, gun in hand.

Leaping downhill over greasy, well-worn steps.

“Where to?” pants Yael.

“There.”

Three cross vaults loom up in front of them; blindly, they run into the middle one. Everything is swallowed in darkness. The shining semicircle at the end of the passageway looks over-exposed, Yael against it a fleeting shadow. Their footsteps multiply, pattering over the ceilings and walls, then they are spat out by its maw: an alley, winding downwards past centuries-old, weathered façades; grass sprouts from cracks in the walls, plants twine around balcony railings; heavy, ornate doors. Bedding dangles from open windows, water tanks, high on roofs, balanced on stilts like lunar rovers, impossible to say which historical periods overlap here, and besides -

WHAT DOES IT MATTER!

- But maybe it does, because Hagen suddenly asks himself why, in the middle of the day, all this picturesque magnificence is so devoid of people.

Just like the plateau.

Devoid of people.

Cox curses as she jolts down the steps, standing in the saddle. Dogs and motorcycles will never be any good on steps, can’t things be easy just for ONCE? Why do there have to be three fucking passageways right next to one another, all guaranteed to lead in completely different directions, and not a trace of Hagen and the doctor?

She hesitates.

She has to choose one of the passageways.

Right.

Whump - whump - whump -

The helicopter hovers like a fat dragonfly directly above the plateau. Adler turns as he runs, sees one of his men stumble, roll on the ground.

They're shooting at them.

(You're shooting? If I were you I'd be throwing grenades!)

Runs faster. If there were still any doubt that his cover's been blown, the agents proceed to shoot it to pieces. Well, it was only to be expected. He'll have to find some way of going to ground as soon as Kahn and Hagen have been taken out of action.

They escape the hail of bullets by the skin of their teeth, diving under the plateau's shady plane trees for protection, reach the steps on the other side, run down them two at a time -

Stymied.

Three possibilities.

He can still hear the BMW, but where's the sound coming from?

Which passageway did Cox go down?

The alleys bounce the echo back and forth between them; it probably sounds loudest where nobody is.

"Left!"

Agents leap out of the helicopter, Dreyfus right behind them.

Survey the plateau.

Nobody.

"The wall!"

"Circle," says Perlman.

The helicopter moves slowly forwards. Its ominous shadow creeps over roofs and alleys. Someone calls him, another acquaintance from better days. The mayor of Nablus, extremely agitated.

"No need to worry," Perlman assures him. "We're only chasing our own people."

"Well, you've already caused a pretty impressive pileup in the process. Why Nablus, of all places; dear God!"

"I'll explain it all to you over a good dinner."

"Ric, this isn't a joke. People are calling non-stop. We're sitting here in a concert of ringtones. I hope this'll be over quickly. Tell me you'll be leaving soon."

"Inshallah."

“God willing? When have you ever done what God willed?”

Good question, thinks Perlman.

When has God ever done what I willed?

And suddenly it dawns on Hagen - of course, it's obvious.

No shops, no banks, no cafés.

And where nothing of the sort exists, the locals have little reason to be out and about. Old Town or no, what are they supposed to do, living in their own museum? The most fervent wish of most people here must be for the world to see their city with different eyes. The problem, though, is that the world doesn't see it at all.

They have the perfect tourist attraction.

But no tourists.

Imagine Bruges.

The Pyramids.

Venice - with no tourists. The Piazza San Marco, yawningly empty, dotted with starving pigeons because no one comes to feed them any more.

Up steps, down steps.

At last, people. Beneath a corrugated iron awning, an ancient man in a *keffiyeh* sitting in a plastic chair; the occasional passer-by. The stone labyrinth becomes ever narrower and more winding, everything here seems enigmatic; rusty shops, elaborately decorated latticework, the ornamentation of fallen empires. They emerge in the courtyard of a castle, its battlement walkways overgrown with weeds, Palestinian flags billowing from cables strung between them; on the other side of the courtyard the next dim passageway.

Damp coolness. Silence.

Hagen sinks down against the stone, Yael squats, breathing heavily. The vaults are disfigured with graffiti, walls plastered top to bottom with posters, portraits of young men in martial poses. They gaze at him from beyond the grave, martyrs, fallen in the fight against Zionism - as they see it here.

A few kilometers away they're seen as terrorists.

“Now what?”

They don't get a chance to consider the answer. A motorcycle is coming closer, the pounding of running feet.

“Keep going.”

Adler's diminished team has split up. He and one of his men have ended up in the souk, where they're greeted by a hearty ‘Welcome to Nablus!’ - a wizened old man, almost invisible behind a mountain of carefully-arranged lettuces - then, all of a sudden, the crowded

bustle of the market, a hubbub of voices, stallholders' cries. They push through the people buying goods, searching, trying to keep an overview amid the flood of impressions: multicolored abundance, oranges, grapefruits and lemons piled up in pyramids, cabbages, eggplants, chilies, okra and tomatoes, artfully-constructed towers of canned goods, price tags perched at intervals, Arabic interspersed with a random sprinkling of English words - *Sweetcorn, Plums* - bowls of brightly colored candy and dried fruit. A massive air conditioner reposes amid the temptation like the turbine of a crashed Lear jet. Light bulbs, barely insulated, blossom from low-hanging cables. Veiled women are having a discussion in front of a stacked wall of cages in which bad-tempered, gawking fowl await their passage to the stockpot. You can find anything in this souk, it seems -

But not Tom Hagen; not Yael Kahn.

Instead, very close: the helicopter. The chopping of its blades is making passers-by look up at the sky; nothing visible yet between the awnings and metal roofs. Adler urges them on, hopes that his other man, who's off on his own, will be luckier -

Which, in a way, he is.

He can count himself lucky they don't shoot his legs off. Perlman is looking down at him from the cockpit. No sign of Adler, but at least they've tracked this one down and chased him this far.

Now he's trapped, caught in the agents' sights.

Two of them abseil down, because the helicopter can't land in the narrow alleyways. A couple of shoppers watch the spectacle, spellbound; others prefer to go on their way.

Perlman waits until the man from the Zionist Protection Services is in handcuffs.

Turns to the pilot.

"Keep going."

Wrong decision.

Cox could kick herself. The pair of them must have taken one of the other passageways, and driving back again via all those flights of steps and narrow alleys is no solution, either. At least she knows where she is. She came here plenty of times during the Intifada; just around the corner is where the market stalls begin.

She hears the helicopter up ahead.

It seems to stand still, then the noise moves eastwards.

(Where are you?)

(You can't have got far in such a short time.)

She rides at random toward the souk.

“Stay under the awnings.”

“We’ll get through faster if we go down the middle.”

The streets are livening up. They pass an open cookshop, little more than a tiled shack, shelves groaning under heaped-up boxes of groceries. Frying pans on an open fire, bags of couscous, friendly, inviting words, when do they ever see foreigners here? The next alleyway is completely blocked. Stalls selling DVDs, cheap jewelry and watches, sneakers, T-shirts with humorous slogans - *Google Startpage, Search: Israel, underneath: Sorry, no matches found, did you mean Palestine?* - Arabic pop blaring from the walls. High up under the vaulted ceiling caftans and coats wink against the light, floating there like ghostly manifestations of Mary Poppins, lurking stealthily as if any minute now they might pounce on passers-by; astonishing what the fear-driven imagination makes you see.

Now it’s getting narrow. Really narrow.

That’s good. It should be difficult to find them in this throng. Yael points to the right, a food market where the awnings almost meet in the middle.

“Doesn’t that take us out to Hussein Square?”

Yes - to the centre of town, with its taxis and buses. They got away by taxi once before, in Ashdod.

They push their way in.

Walking speed.

She can’t move any faster in here. There are more and more people about, bright strings of pennants stretched across the street. Riding the clutch, Cox passes under nets bulging with neon-colored footballs. Inflatable animals grin at her with huge, staring eyes, Pisa-esque towers of plastic toys, an orgy of baby blue and pink, international kitsch that bridges every global divide.

The helicopter briefly comes into view. Moves off again.

It’s getting increasingly crowded. Cox is spewed out onto a street lined with clothing stalls. Colorful textiles blaze against weathered stone; store-window mannequins without a window, all looking about as Arab as the young Grace Kelly with their retroussé noses and cornflower-blue eyes. A phalanx of trunkless heads, stereotypical girls’ faces, draped with *hijabs* of every color and design, staring at nothing with empty eyes, like beheaded enemies. To the left, a vegetable market.

Aha. The start of the food section.

Adler sees Hagen.

His head appears briefly in the crowd, vanishes again.

“There!”

Elbows the ZPS man in the ribs, points his finger, and as if by doing this he's created an invisible line of connection, Hagen comes back into view, turns his head -

Looks the man straight in the eyes.

Shit.

He's only seen this face once before, for a fraction of a second in a speeding Ford, but he'd recognize that square, mustached head anytime.

"Move," he says.

Yael's eyes flicker. "Where?"

"Behind us. Don't turn round."

He walks faster, plowing past a spice stall, yellow, brown, red and ochre-colored cones in open sacks, and all around the fragile architecture of the souk: towers of cooking utensils, cloths, cat food, cosmetics, diapers, all sorts of other items, the entire construction looking as if a sneeze would be enough to bring it crashing down.

Beyond it: a narrow alley.

"They've gone," says the ZPS man.

"No they haven't!"

Adler barrels through the crowd with brute force, earning digs in the ribs, doling out some of his own. It's true: he can't see Hagen any more.

But he knows where he saw him last.

And again it all goes quiet. No more stalls, just the mysterious labyrinth. The street in front of them leads uphill: open doors, the dim interior of a mosque, inviting, peaceful. Hagen suppresses the urge to run inside. Anywhere you can't get out the back of can turn into a trap from one moment to the next.

The alleyway forks.

Steps radiating down in both directions.

"Left," gasps Yael, at the exact same moment he pants, "Right."

"Okay, ri-- "

"All right then, left."

"That's where they went in."

Right behind the sacks of spices and the perilous tower of merchandise - very perilous. The ZPS man takes the corner too tightly, nudges the pots and pans, toilet rolls, soap, perfumes, Pampers, shampoo, hand mixers and hair dryers out of their terrifying equilibrium. With a deafening crash everything comes raining down on them: a packet of aspirin empties

itself into a sack of curry, toothbrushes sink into ground coriander, a juicer lands in the turmeric, cloaking itself in a venomous yellow cloud. Cursing, Adler just manages to dodge a bathroom scale that shatters as it hits the floor.

“Idiot! Keep going!”

The stallholder grabs him by the jacket, remonstrates with him.

Adler holds the gun under his nose.

“Can I pay in lead?”

The man releases him, stumbles backwards.

Cox sees the tumult from the other end of the market, people stopping to stare.

Adler’s square Brian Dennehy face.

“I don’t believe it.”

The climb ends at an open gate leading to an interior courtyard of immense proportions - and not a soul in sight.

Now they’re trapped.

“Back?”

“We’ll run straight into their arms.”

In, then.

The complex is an imposing one. Pontius Pilate, thinks Hagen: as a child, this is exactly how he imagined the Roman prefect’s residence. Square atrium, façades on all sides. Even in its dilapidated state the building exudes imperial power. The ground floor appears to be intact, massive load-bearing structures interspersed with semi-circular arches; open colonnades running across the top. Between the slender pilasters the roof is missing in places. Building materials - cement mixers, scaffolding, piles of sand - suggest that restoration work is in progress.

To one side of the gate, a flight of steps.

Yael is already halfway up.

“We really will be trapped up there,” hisses Hagen.

She points to the scaffolding surrounding the upper story of the section opposite the gate: it juts out past the edge of the roof.

“We can get down to the other side from there.”

True - not a bad idea, especially as the helicopter, by the sound of it, is still quite a long way off. If they’re going to go over the roofs, this is the time to do it. He follows her, they run along the balustrade, first corner, second corner, now they’re opposite the main portal, just a few more steps and they’ll have reached the scaffolding... The floor’s collapsed, there’s a missing section several meters long, brittle-looking planks form a bridge across it -

Hagen stops, listens.

Steps are approaching from the alley.

“Get down!”

Drops to the ground. The planks wobble alarmingly, but at least they’re behind the balustrade, out of sight. He spots a crack in the brickwork, wriggles forward, peers through. Sees a strip of the atrium in front of him; then the stocky guy and another man appear in the archway and enter the courtyard.

Come closer.

Disappear from view.

Talk in muffled voices.

Hagen looks at Yael inquiringly. “They can’t agree,” she whispers. “One of them wants to look for us here. His pal reckons we took the other fork.”

Ha, he thinks.

If only we had.

Cox passes the demolished stall, hears some colorful language. The stallholder is explaining to the people standing round that the guy held a gun under his nose; he jumps about wildly, trying to recreate the scene. He speaks the regional dialect of Arabic. Slang, but Cox understands him.

“There! They went down there!”

A couple of people take a few half-hearted steps into the alley, immediately turn and walk back. Gestures of helplessness.

Cox rides past them.

“Ric, I’ve got Adler in front of me somewhere. Could do with some backup.”

“Where are you?”

“In the souk.”

Perlman takes his eyes off the roofs and calls Dreyfus as the helicopter circles on the spot.

“Are you near the souk, by any chance?”

“Right in the middle.”

“Cox needs backup.”

“Where is she?”

“Shana? Can you describe where exactly?”

Tricky. This old quarter hardly has any street names. Only the coding of long-established clans, the secret symbols of the resistance.

“Off the food market. I turned off where a stall had collapsed, just follow the ruckus.”

“We’re on our way. Reuben?”

Dreyfus listens to the description.

Shouldn’t be much of a problem. Not that many stalls will have collapsed in the last few minutes. Right now he’s standing in front of a general store, or to be more precise the extrusion of a general store. The goods spill out right onto the street; crates, baskets, pallets and sacks piled up to the roof; the stallholder squats between them in the only space available.

Dreyfus smiles at him.

“Where’s the food market, please?” he asks in Arabic.

The man raises a hand and points with a sweeping gesture.

The stocky man and his sidekick are combing the ground floor, they’re right underneath them now. Shoulder to shoulder Hagen and Yael lie on the planks, so close he can hear her breathing.

The men are talking.

God, I’m an idiot, he thinks suddenly. Packing the gun in the backpack instead of putting it in my waistband – how am I supposed to get it out now without those two down there pricking up their ears?

He thinks he catches the word *balustrade*.

They’re coming up.

Cox reaches a fork in the alleyway, steps leading down on both sides. Shit! All these decisions, can’t she just flip a coin?

She turned right last time, and that was wrong.

Left.

Beneath them a cellphone starts warbling.

The stocky guy answers it. Doesn’t talk much, just says “*Ken!*” several times – one of the few words of Hebrew Hagen knows.

“*Ken. Ken!*” – Yes. Yes!

His pal asks a question, the stocky man answers, tells him something, stomps into the courtyard, back into view. The other guy runs towards the steps. Quick as a flash Hagen slips off the backpack, reaches inside; his hand closes on the barrel of the gun. The throbbing of the helicopter is evenly distributed across the sky, hard to say where it is, but it sounds closer again.

Something else is getting closer, too.

The familiar, sonorous voice of the four-cylinder engine.

Reaches a crescendo –

The bike erupts into the courtyard.

Cox sees Adler freeze.

Raise his gun.

Crouching low she speeds towards him, but the *rakaz* has learned his lesson. He leaps to one side and lets her ram the empty air. Cox yanks the handlebars around, zeroes in on him again, full speed ahead. Adler stumbles, jumps aside. She just misses him, shoots past, turns the bike, spraying up a fan of sand.

Stops.

Sees the other man at the top of the stairs.

Aiming at her.

Takes out her Beretta and fires several times in quick succession, sends half a magazine on its way. The killer is rocked by hits. He doubles up, tips over and falls down the steps face first -

And already Adler is beside her, using the full force of his body to lever her out of the saddle.

Cox slams onto her back.

The gun slips out of her hand.

He kicks it away, points his own at her head.

“Bitch! You fucking bitch!” His voice is cracked with fury. “We’re not going to let you ruin this for us, do you think we spent all these years - ”

A shot rings out over the courtyard.

Adler staggers.

A gaping hole has appeared in his chest. His eyes turn to the gate, and a strange look comes into his eyes.

“But - ”

Tries to raise his weapon. There’s another shot, and this time the hole sits cleanly over his heart. The *rakaz*’s jaw drops. He looks as if he wants to say something of utmost importance, turns, and falls down dead in the sand.

“Everything okay?”

Dreyfus comes running over.

She jumps up, removes the helmet.

“Y – yes,” she stammers. “Thank you. Thank you!”

The head of the Jewish Division stares down at Adler’s body.

“I can’t believe it,” he says quietly. “I still can’t believe it.”

“In there,” whispers Hagen.

An open passageway leads to the upper floor. The helicopter is approaching rapidly, they have to see to it that they get off the balustrade.

Yael crawls ahead of him into the shadowy interior.

He follows her.

Not a moment too soon.

The rotors are whipping up sand and stones, sweeping the center of the atrium bare. Perlman leaps out before the skids have finished setting down.

Cox reports.

Dreyfus delivers the bitter final blow.

Final shot, she thinks. She asks herself how the head of the Jewish Division must feel right now, but essentially knows the answer. How would anyone feel who’s just had to shoot his friend, even if he was a traitor a thousand times over?

Agents bundle the body into the helicopter; voices are heard outside the portal. Police storm in. Palestinians. A lot of shouting; the visit is well overdue. She can see this is going to be fun.

Perlman sighs.

“First let’s sort out the jurisdiction issue, then we’ll search the complex.”

Hagen sizes up the room. Unplastered walls, steel girders holding up the roof, metal staircase leading down.

He puts a foot on the top rung.

Loud crack.

Tension dissipating in the metal. They creep down the stairs, quiet as cats. With that contingent mustered outside they can forget the escape over the roof; perhaps there’s a rear exit, though. Through the open arches they can see into the courtyard, but they can be seen, too. If anyone looks over right now, they’re finished.

Yael points to an opening in the wall.

“Back room,” she whispers.

Scurries ahead. The back part of the building is almost completely dark. Cool, moldy air hits their faces, the whiff of something rotten, damp earth, bacteria at work. Somewhere an animal’s body is decomposing. What looked at first glance like a refuge turns out, on closer inspection, to be a prison: only a couple of slits in the wall for ventilation, too narrow to squeeze through, and too high up to reach, anyway.

They’re stuck here.

Yael circles a puddle. A black mirror, a secret door. Hagen imagines stepping into it and being swallowed up, reappearing in another world. An even darker, adjoining room seems to suck him in; steps, covered in rubble, lead down to uncertain depths. They descend. It takes Hagen's eyes a few seconds to accustom to the twilight. He sees a gaping pit, surrounded by halogen lamps on stands to illuminate the scene when works are in progress.

Walks right up to the edge.

Three meters, he reckons. Probably more. Crates filled with fragments of pottery peel themselves out of the darkness: is this an archaeologists' dig? A ladder the only link to ground level. A wooden gangway leads across the pit to the back wall.

And there –

Is a door.

Cox watches as Perlman reasons with the officials, makes soothing gestures.

Suddenly she finds herself standing alone.

No one wanting something from her.

She turns and enters the building. A long passageway, bright and empty. Scaffolding, struts, metal steps leading to the upper floors. Sacks of cement piled up in a corner. Rats, at best, could hide behind them.

Looks like there's nobody here.

Upstairs, maybe?

She hesitates.

Her gaze falls on the opening to the rooms at the back.

Yael scurries over the gangway. Pulls at the door, a crude construction of rough planks, immediately drives a splinter into her thumb. Damn, that hurts. Too much to stifle the cry of pain that escapes into the dripping silence –

(Ssh. Stay cool.)

Manages to prize the door open, planks scraping treacherously across the floor.

Fresh air streams in.

How about that. A corridor extends before her, low, long, straight as a die. In the distance daylight falls on iron rungs driven into the masonry. The classic secret passage.

She turns to Hagen, gives him the thumbs-up. Can barely see him; he's merged with the darkness of the cellar.

The silhouette on the staircase stands out all the more clearly.

Cox descends the stairs.

The woman on the other side of the room is staring at her as if paralyzed. She ought to call Perlman; instead, her reflexive impulse is to calm the woman and she raises both hands, shows her empty palms.

“Yeah, that’s good,” says a man’s voice behind her.

Shit.

“Hands up. Higher.”

She obeys. God, what a stupid cow! Are you nuts, Shana? No weapon at the ready, room not secured – only the greenest of greenhorns make mistakes like that.

“I’ll only say this once, and only so you can’t claim afterwards that I didn’t warn you.” He’s whispering, sentences like gusts of wind. “If you try anything, I will shoot you. I may not *kill* you, but it will be fucking painful, and at the very least you won’t be able to walk for quite a while. Nod if you understood that.”

Cox inclines her head.

“Take off the headset. Throw it away.”

She’s been in better negotiating positions, so she obeys this command as well. Yanks at the cable, pulls it out from under her biker’s leathers, drops the lot on the ground.

“Take out your gun. Drop it.”

The Beretta skitters across stone.

“Tom Hagen,” she says. “We meet at last.”

“Shh. Are you alone?”

“Outside - ”

“I know who’s outside.”

“Yes. I’m alone.”

“What’s your name?”

“Shoshana Cox. Shin Bet.”

“Ah.” Short pause. “So my hunch wasn’t that far wrong. Was it your people who attacked me and my friend in Jerusalem?”

“No. We’re the good guys.”

“Bullshit!” A wave of suppressed fury reaches her. “You tortured and killed him, you murdered two girls - ”

“That wasn’t us.” Standing here like an idiot - why the hell didn’t she bring anyone with her? “They were eavesdropping on you, you stupid moron. We’re chasing you, true, we can hardly let you run around carrying state secrets, but I swear we didn’t lay a finger on your friend or the girls.”

“So who did?”

“The others.”

“What others?”

“The ones you spooked when you said you had proof someone tried to assassinate Sharon.” She almost has to laugh. “Who are eavesdropping on *us*.”

So he was right after all. He kicked a hornet’s nest, and now the hornets are out to sting. In this moment all Hagen’s worst fears are confirmed.

“You mean – it’s true?”

“Apparently.”

Hagen looks at her. Tall, with a strong back. Skull coated in a velvety layer of hair. He can think of any number of men he’d rather take on. He remembers all too clearly how she eliminated the bloodhound in the cemetery, shot the other one off the steps, attacked the stocky guy.

She certainly wasn’t on *their* side.

She has as little reason to be on ours, he thinks.

Yael balances her way back across the gangway.

“Did the same people try to kidnap me?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Kill Yossi?”

“Probably. Listen - ”

“Be quiet.” Hagen thinks. They have to neutralize this woman. Silence her for a while, give them time to get away. His eyes fall on the top of the wooden ladder sticking out of the pit.

“Climb down there.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

It’s bad enough being tricked; this is just humiliating. As soon as Cox reaches the ground, the dull eye of the pistol following her warily, Kahn pulls up the ladder. She stands there in the sludge, powerless, compelled to watch as the two of them make it over the gangway to the other side.

And suddenly she realizes.

As if a great light has been switched on.

You mean – it’s true?

“You don’t have any data on Sharon, Hagen.”

He stops. Even in the darkness she can see she’s hit home.