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KRUSO
Novel

480 pages

Release date: September 1st 2014

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Chapter 4: The Station Hotel

He could smell the sea before even leaving the train. He still remembered the “The Station Hotel” from his childhood (the one and only trip they had ever taken to the Baltic). It was directly across the street from the station, a big, beautiful, turreted attraction with bay windows and weather vanes where the seasons slowly crumbled.

He let a few cars pass by then paused. It wasn’t that smart as far as money was concerned. And furthermore, there was no point landing on the island in the afternoon, as there probably wouldn’t be enough time to get checked in to a place to stay – that is, if he could find a place at all. He was carrying around one hundred and fifty marks and if he found a good job waiting tables, he could live for three, maybe even four weeks. He had left behind about ninety marks in his bank account, enough to last through September. With a little luck, no one would even notice his disappearance. He could just as well have been sick. In three weeks’ time the semester break would begin. He had written his parents a postcard. As far as they knew, he was in Poland, in Katowice at the so-called International Student Summer Meeting, just like last year.

The hotel reception was set abnormally high up and looked as if it had been swept completely clean, no papers, no keys. On the other hand, what did Ed really know about hotels? It was only at the last moment that the heads of three women popped up, deployed like the pistons of a four-stroke engine where the fourth spark plug hadn’t fired. It was impossible to figure out with any precision at all from just what depths the receptionists had arrived. Maybe the high bank was connected to a backroom or maybe over the years the women had simply gotten used to being under cover as long as possible, utterly still, hiding there behind their darkly veneered barrier.

“Hello, I...”

His voice sounded flat. Alone in his train compartment, once again it had been impossible for him to sleep. A group of military police, most likely a type of pre-border guard, had taken away his

map of the Baltic Sea. In Aklam, the train had stopped for quite some time, and that is where they must have gotten on-board. He regretted not having thought of anything cleverer to say than that it was not *actually* his map...and therefore he really couldn't know why certain places had been underlined nor why certain coastlines had been traced...All of the sudden his voice had choked, and instead he heard only a buzzing: Brockes, Eichendorff, and over and over again the relentless sound of Trakl's poems, those poems so full of leaves and brown, and this was precisely why Ed had suddenly grabbed hold of his head. An unexpected gesture and immediately one of the soldiers reflexively raised his machine gun.

In the end, Ed could happily say that they had left him alone. "Strange bird," the Kalashnikov-toting soldier muttered once out in the corridor again. Ed's forehead was covered in sweat, fields passed by, black blades of grass along the embankment.

"Do you have a reservation?"

For the first time in his life, he was getting a room. And what was amazing was that it had worked. Ed was given a detailed form on dull paper, and asked for identification. As he began to fill it out, elbows forced up over the high bank, wrist stiff, the receptionists flipped thorough his identification booklet. In a moment of panic, Ed feared that his secret escape might somehow have been automatically entered into the little book, all the way in the back maybe, on one of the empty pages, under visas and trips. *Unauthorized movement* – this one little mysterious stamp and its various punishments had already existed at the time of his military service.

"I'm sorry, I'm doing this for the first time," Ed said.

"What?" the concierge asked.

Ed raised his head and tried to smile, but the attempt fell flat. He received a key that was attached to a lacquered cube of wood by a little cord. He closed his fist around it but knew the number. It had been burned cleanly into the wood. For a moment he saw the hotel's maintenance supervisor in his cellar workshop: there he was sitting before an endless row of little sawn and sanded blocks upon which he would carefully place his glowing soldering iron, number for number, room for room. Ed too had once been a hand-worker, and a part of him still seemed to be at home in the workshops, in the caverns of the *working class*, those side rooms of the world in which things had asserted their clear and tangible shapes.

"Second floor, to the left of the stairs, young man."

Above a brass fitted door next to the stairs shimmered the word *Mocca Room*. On the first landing, Ed turned around again. Two of the three women's heads had once more disappeared, while the third woman was on the phone and at the same time following him with her eyes.

By the time he woke up, it was already after four o'clock. At the end of the double bed was a sink. In the corner a television mounted on a chrome under-frame. Above the toilet hung a cast iron tank that must have come from a much older time and which was covered in condensation. The lever was in the form of two jumping dolphins. In the time it took the animals to leisurely return to their original position, there was an endless torrent of water. Ed enjoyed the sound and felt himself somehow close to the two.

But the fact that one could go into a hotel, ask for and receive a room (to some degree without any particular reason), had to belong to the few wonders of the world that had survived "in spite-of-it-all" Ed gurgled to himself beneath the shower's jet of water. With the passing of time, you simply forgot that such things still existed, you just didn't believe it any longer, you forgot how good life could be. Or that, at any rate, is what Ed thought. He wanted to masturbate, but was unable to concentrate.

To the right of the hotel there was a small lake with a little fountain that regularly shot up into the air, broke back into itself, then disappeared for a number of seconds. A couple in a paddleboat glided slowly across the water. While crossing the street to the lake, all of the sudden Ed was overcome by a *good feeling*. This is all the beginning of something. Someone who's already been through a lot suddenly seems capable of...His sentence stopped. It became clear to him that his had been an escape delayed. He could feel the pain. It was as if he was only just now waking up from out of anesthesia, millimeter for millimeter.

A cobbled road to the left was called *At the Bleachers*. He passed a few rundown villas complete with conservatories, courtyards, and garages. He walked up to one of the nameplates to glance at the house's former itinerary. The small and stalwart light within the doorbell panel still made legible some of the lower, older names that had likely already been covered up for years. Proceeding along his way, Ed tried to take up their rhythm: Schiele, Dunst, Glambeck, Krieger...With his muttering he began to build a jetty out into the sea while his steps across the wood became a metronome. *Do the-al-read-y-de-ceased*...Ed whispered while automatically grabbing his face...see with other eyes? The old city-wall appeared, then an archway, and then a café called the Torschließerhaus.

Ed cut through the old city down to the port and checked the departure times of the ferries. In the Kiosk of the "White Fleet" he purchased a trip for the following day. The view of the ships made him almost euphoric. The steps down to the quay were of a light gray concrete and then: the sea.

In order to eat for little money, Ed turned to go back toward the station. He was calm and contemplated his chances. Hide-out in the sea, secret sea, Hiddensee...He knew the stories. A whispering forever washed about the island.

Ed thoughtfully chewed his food and drank his coffee in tiny sips. It wouldn't be easy to get onto one of the ships. Then it'd be almost impossible to find a place to stay, but any other destination *within the borders* was inconceivable. Sure, he had listened to experts who maintained that Hiddensee lay outside of them, that it was exterritorial, an island of the blessed, of dreamers and of dream dancers, of the washed-up and outcast. Others called it the Capri of the north, already booked for decades.

In Halle, Ed had gotten to know a historian who worked every winter as a server in the Offenbach-Rooms, a wine restaurant where he had gone to the bar a few times with G. Every spring, at the beginning of the season, the Historian (that's what everyone called him) would go back to the island. "At last, at last!" as he would happily say to his guests who would simply nod indulgently as soon as he began one of his eulogies, having already been addressed with his familiar "Dear Friends!" "The island, dear friends, has everything I need, everything I have always sought. As soon as it appears upon the horizon from the deck of the steamer, its slender and fragile face, its delicate outline, the last gray coxcomb of the mainland still at one's back, Stralsund with its steeples, the whole hinterland and its filth, you know, my dear friends, what I mean, my dear friends, the island appears and all of a sudden you forget *everything*, for there she lays before you and something new begins, indeed, right there, on the very steamer!" The man, a gray-haired middle-fortyish retiree from the university (of his own accord, as it was officially called, and thus even more deeply sunk into his dreams), would rhapsodize, his face, like many thinkers of the land, covered in a type of Marx-like beard. "Freedom, dear friends, at heart, consists of forging one's very own laws within the frame of existent laws, to be simultaneously both object and subject of legislation, that is one of the chief characteristics of life up there in the north." That is how the Historian of the Offenbach-Rooms would summarize it all, a tray of wine glasses before his chest.

The most important bit of news for Ed, however, was learning that, even in the middle of the season, sometimes jobs could suddenly appear. From one day to the next waiters might be sought, dishwashers, kitchen help. For a variety of reasons, there were seasonal workers who disappeared overnight. Most of the time, the storytellers would stop at this point to cast a glance at the person sitting across from them and then, depending on the way things were going, would set off in one of the possible or impossible directions: "Of course there are always people who give up on going back to the mainland, people who are just not cut out for it." Or: "You know, a trip out of the country can suddenly be authorized, right in the middle of summer..." Or: "Sure, it's almost

impossible to believe, fifty kilometers, but there have always been some good swimmers out there..." By the end of all the stories, the tiny piece of land that was Hiddensee had attained a mythical stature, it was the last place, the only place, an island that led one ever further out, out of eyesight even – and you had to get moving if you too wanted to become a part.

After his meal, Ed went back to his hotel. Someone had gone through his things, but nothing was missing. He went to the window and looked over to the station. Once in bed, he began to call out for his cat Matthew – a relapse. But he did so only very quietly, and only in order to hear his own voice once again before falling asleep. No, in the end he hadn't jumped.

Chapter 5: The Island

Most of the time the refusal came straight away. Someone walking past with an "all full!" Then a few heads would lift up when in a half-loud voice Ed said "thank you" and tried as quickly as possible to move away, hands in fists around the sweaty straps of his imitation leather bag.

He had started at the north of the island and wandered southward, about six kilometers, which he then once more had to retrace. At times, the island was so narrow that one could see the water on both sides. To the left a sea of silver, to the right the rushes, a darkblue glass, almost black. Here the clouds seemed to hang lower than usual, and for a time their strange, elongated forms lingered in his thoughts. As the horizon continued to grow, the distance of the sky grew smaller as one dimension displaced the other. At the end of the day, as he was beginning to lose hope, the question didn't bother him all that much any longer: "Would you happen perhaps to have a job for me? I'd also need a room, though."

At an inn called "Norderende" he was offered 1.40 Mark an hour to do just about everything, as they said, "but without accommodation." Somewhat off to the side stood a pair of discarded strandkorbs. The bleached out blue of their covers appealed to Ed, being the color of doing nothing, July, sun in your face. While the crabby host exchanged a few words with him (Ed's first conversation on the island), two employees scurried past with sunken heads, almost as if they were afraid of losing their jobs. For a moment Ed remained between the garbage cans and the drink crates. Without having noticed, he had taken on the timidity of a beggar.

As he was getting ready to move on, one of the employees called to him through the almost closed door of the storage shed so that Ed could not quite recognize him. The only thing he understood was the word "Hermit" and then "Crusoe, Crusoe –" as if Ed were being offered a secret message. What was entirely more likely, however, was that the man only wanted to make fun of him with the old story of shipwreck.

It was getting dark and lights began to come on in all the houses. The weight of Ed's bag constantly forced him to walk with a bit of a stoop. The straps were far too small and cut into his shoulder, the imitation leather frayed. Ed wondered whether it might have not been smarter to have put the bag down somewhere, or better yet, to have hidden it in a sea-buckthorn bush somewhere along the way. Without any doubt he had phrased his question about a job poorly, poorly and stupidly, as if he hadn't been a member of the same society. Here one *had* work, you didn't need to ask for it, and certainly not like that, going from door to door with a ratty old bag over your shoulder. Work was like a pass, you had to be able to show it; not having a job contradicted the law and was therefore punishable. Ed sensed that his question, as he had phrased it, couldn't be answered at all, on the contrary, it was equivalent to a provocation. And as he trudged along with his far too heavy bag, he reformulated it:

“Would you happen to need a bit more help this season?”

He had found the right words.

On the way through Kloster, the northernmost village on the island, he encountered a pair of vacationers. He offhandedly asked them about a place to stay. They only laughed, as if he had told a great joke and wished him “all the luck in the world.” He came past a row of beautiful old wooden houses. A man about the age of his father called him names from his balcony while repeatedly thrusting his beer bottles jerkily into the air. Apparently he was drunk enough to automatically recognize a *nonentity*.

“Would you happen to need help in your kitchen? I happen to have a bit of time.”

Thanks to the waiter from the Offenbach-Rooms (he kept his eye forever open on the chance he might glimpse the Marx-beard), Ed knew that it could be dangerous to sleep on the beach. It had to do with the border patrol. They would find him, they would find him in the middle of some dream and shine their heavy flashlights into his face and ask him about his escape plans. It was forbidden to be around the border without a permit or accommodation. The inspectors on the steamboat hadn't been too interested, as they figured those on the early ferries were day tourists. What was important, however, was that one could respond with a name, an address, if asked. The naturalist Gerhard Hauptmann had maintained that everyone on the island was named either Schluck or Gau, and, essentially, it was as if there were only these two families: Schluck and Gau. Ed mistrusted these names though as, to him, they seemed implausible, made up. Sure, in literature it was possible, but not in life. In the harbor in Stralsund therefore he had looked through the telephone book and chosen the name Weidner, scribbling it on a piece of paper that he kept folded up and by him at all times. Weidner, Kloster Nr. 42.

“Would you happen perchance to need additional help in your restaurant?”

Terribly wooden.

And furthermore, it was more than likely that one saw he only wanted to find a place to crawl off to, to disappear, that, essentially, he was washed-up, run aground, a wreck, only twenty four years old and already a wreck.

The beach was out of the question and the rest of the coastal bunker too. His fears were childlike: someone could come up and step on his head by mistake while he was asleep. All of the sudden the water could rise and drown him. There could be rats in the bunker.

With the onset of darkness, Ed reached the northern end of the island. He had already walked through each of the three villages twice: Neuendorf, Vitte, and Kloster. On a sign he came across in the harbor (it was strange to once again be there where he had first come ashore, as it seemed to him now, years ago) he learned that the surrounding area was a bird sanctuary called *Bessiner Haken*.

He deserved a night out under the stars, of that much Ed was convinced, and it was indeed just that all should begin that way, in spite of his fears. At the edge of the village was a weather-beaten sign labeled "Institute of Radiation." On a hill in the distance, behind a group of poplars, he recognized the outline of a large building. He walked past a big shed and fencing that had been smeared with spent oil. The rushes at the edge of the path rustled and towered over him so that he could no longer see the water. The evening cries of geese echoed through the air. The last house had a thatched roof overgrown with moss. Its vegetable garden reminded Ed of his grandmother's: potatoes, kohlrabi, asters. The sloppily laid concrete path disappeared into a soggy meadow.

The first stand looked like a cabin, a tree house, a great hiding spot, but, sadly, was bolted shut. The second, smaller perch was open but swayed, and Ed wondered whether it was in use any more at all. With difficulty, he heaved his bag up and did his best to do everything as quietly as he could. He picked up a bit of wood to place in front of the entry as a sort of makeshift barricade. As he was taking a pair of rotten branches to place above him, a light passed across him. As if struck, Ed threw himself to the ground and hit his forehead against the seat. He lay there dead still. It was hard for him to breathe, he could smell the wood, his forehead burned. The tiny space did not allow him to stretch out his legs. He thought about "Wolfsblood", the man in the desert of snow who at the very last second was able to start a fire with his very last match, but then... After a little while, the light returned. Slowly Ed raised himself up and greeted the lighthouse like an old friend he had only temporarily lost track of.

"And do you still need someone?"

The beacon fanned jerkily out and then telescoped once again – most likely a "no." It was strange how the prismatic finger of light could shoot out in sections, only to pause in the very next moment as if it had come across something that was more important than to forever turn in circles.

“I mean, only as help for this season?” Ed murmured.

He had given up on his plan to go back to the village again to eat something at a bar. He still hadn't even been to the beach. But the very fact that he was *here*, on the island...For a while he continued to listen to the sound of the jungle around him, then pulled on his sweater and jacket. He spread out the rest of his things as best he could on the wooden floor of the cabin. The night was cold.

Chapter 6: To The Hermit

June 13th. Ed's perch was still immersed in darkness when an ear-splitting noise began to arise. The birds from the sanctuary were waking and began to call for day, a great din of displeasure and interminable, ever repeating complaints. Although the sun still had not yet risen, Ed left his room and trotted inland, face full of insect bites, forehead still aflame.

His first job would be to take a lay of the land, and more than anything, find a better hiding place or, at the very least, a place where he could keep his bag and his things (his heavy Thälmann jacket, his sweater) during the day. Apart from the mainland's fairy tales and myths, Ed knew little about the island, neither its geography nor the border company's cycles of surveillance and control. Everything seemed so open: meadows, moors, and a single road, partially fixed with concrete slabs, no landscape at all for hideaways. The forest and the highland in the north, however, they were attractive options.

The next night Ed crawled into one of the high recesses at the foot of the coast. His hollow was like a wide, fresh fissure; the crag had opened itself up just for him. There were no mosquitoes, but water dripped from out of the loam onto his neck. The sea was black and almost silent, with the exception of a regular, recurring boiling sound in the pebbles between the stones along the shore – as if someone were pouring water onto a glowing hotplate. There were a number of sounds in his hollow that Ed could not recognize. Something crinkled above him, and it crinkled *within the loam*. And, sometimes, it breathed, or softly groaned. Then, in his mind, he heard the hum of verses saying that the tiny, listless Baltic waves were like the whispers of the dead. These whispers annoyed Ed; if he really took his having broken out seriously (and his new beginning as well), he would have to fight back, which is why he once again tried with *his own thoughts*.

He closed his eyes and, after a while, saw the Baltic Man of the Waves. He was big, stooped, he was the maintenance man of the institute. He scooped water from out of the sea and threw it over his fire-pit on the shore. The water evaporated, smoke rose, and the man himself grew ever thinner and more transparent. In the end, only his face remained. It smiled at Ed from the sand, thereby

exposing its rotten teeth, a cold mass of mussels, bitumen, and algae. Then it spoke, “My presence now is spent.”

In the morning he awoke to find his things soaked through and a fine delta burrowed into the shore. The water turned the loam into shining pieces of earth you could walk across with no trouble at all. At certain points, it was backed up. At first kneeling awkwardly (like an animal with its hindquarters raised and head dipped), and then stretched out, he tried to drink. Although no one would be on the beach so shortly after sunrise, Ed felt as if he were being watched. With one hand he pushed his half-long hair back toward his neck, with the other he kept the stones that kept trying to push through his ribs at bay. “Nature sure isn’t just a walk in the park, no sir,” he muttered. He imitated the voice of his father and had to giggle. He had managed to make it through the second night.

The water tasted soapy and smelled fermented. He followed the delta back to the crevice from which it came, which was directly next to where he had slept. An animal was staring at him. A fox. It was protecting the water source and watching Ed, and most likely had been for quite some time already.

“You gave me a start, you little rascal,” Ed whispered. The fox said nothing, and remained motionless. Its head lay upon its front paws, like a dog; its eyes faced the sea. An uprooted seabuckthorn bush overshadowed its fur, which looked clean and healthy.

“You sure have a nice place here, you old rascal, nice and hidden. No mosquitoes, fresh water... You’re a pretty smart guy, aren’t you?”

Ed spread his things out to dry on the stones, but immediately felt uneasy and gathered them back up. He was hungry and had a rotten taste on his tongue. The rolls he had bought in Kloster from a baker named Kasten had turned into a single paste. He kneaded a few balls and pressed the liquid out of the dough, then chewed slowly and swallowed. The energy from his escape was gone, and he felt a pulling behind his eyes. It wasn’t pain, only a memory of chewed fingernails. Enflamed nail beds and fibrous, frayed adhesive bandages – G.’s fingernails. He wondered how long he’d be able to go on like this. How long his strength would last. When he would have to turn back.

“There’d be no point, old rascal.”

The high, pitted coastline – he had never seen anything like it. It was made up of breaks and overhangs and a glacier-like landscape, huge meandering tongues of loam and clay on their way into the sea. There were vegetated sections and barren sections, fissured and furrowed, and there were gray, loamy walls from out of which, now and again, the skull of a cyclops emerged to look disdainfully down at Ed. But Ed hardly looked upwards at all, he wasn’t interested in cylopes or

whatever else people might have taken those pieces of rock to be. With a lowered head, he trudged on along the stony beach and tried to keep the small fire of his conversation with himself going, full of both encouragement and good arguments. And in his own words.

A little bit ahead, toward the north, all of the sudden between the coastal brush he saw some stairs. The concrete blocks with which they had tried to anchor their steely construction to the shore hung in the air, about a meter above the ground. As Ed swung himself down onto the lowest step, there was a bright, metallic sound. Just like the sheet steel of sinking ships softly begins to sing, Ed whispered and waited; the rusty iron teetered threateningly. In the end, Ed counted three hundred stairs (every third either rotten or broken) distributed over the various parts and sections all the way up the fifty or sixty meter high cliff.

Through the pines shone a bright, wood-gabled building. At first glance, it resembled a Mississippi steamboat, a stranded paddle steamer that had tried to make through the woods to the sea. Several small log cabins were anchored around it, circling the mother ship like lifeboats.

So that it couldn't vanish, Ed kept it all firmly in sight. From the ship outwards spread a paved terrace with tables and beer stools almost all the way to the cliff's edge. The outer rows of tables were canopied and looked like mangers for the animals of the woods. On a slate board next to the entrance, there was something written in a spirited hand, but Ed was still too far away to see. To the left of the entrance, above a sliding window in the wooden front building (which belonged to the wheel case of the steamer), hung a stiff little flag with the words ICE CREAM. To the right of that, in the middle of the same building, someone had screwed a handwritten sign:

TO THE HERMIT

The "T" was extravagantly detailed, and for a moment Ed saw the sign-painter in his mind: he could see the man receive his commission, see how he noted down the name of the ship and the date of its christening. Ed sensed the intense amount of dedication with which the man must have prepared that initial letter and was suddenly overcome by a feeling of uselessness.

In order to be certain that a third dimension did, in fact, exist, Ed circled slowly around the building. It was a ship in the style of a forest house. The gables had taken on a moss green stain and saltpeter crust bloomed from out of the lower parts of the walls. Behind the first, there was a second, somewhat more modern house, in between the two a courtyard, and behind that, the woods. Seen roughly, the grounds consisted of three concentric circles. In the center there was a courtyard with the two main buildings and an additional small terrace covered with a mass of wrought-iron café stools, painted white and flecked with rust. In the second circle, in addition to two sheds and a log yard with a chopping block, were the log cabins. At its northern end, the courtyard opened up into a clearing, a sloping and root-filled meadow that rose slightly up to the edge of the woods and a

path that had to lead to his old friend the lighthouse. In the middle of the clearing, someone had erected a playground with a jungle gym, a seesaw, a sandbox, and a concrete ping-pong table. For a moment Ed was amazed that a playground like any other in the country had made it to even this magical place high above the breakers. The third, outermost circle marked a kind of palisade, or more precisely, a type of game fence made out of driftwood and carefully wattled between the foremost trunks of the woods. The entire site was embraced by pine trees and beech.

Ed drifted through the clearing to the coast and looked out to the sea. A soft and sweet current of air, a bewitching mixture of wood and water, wafted through the morning damp. It was foggy, a milk-white and washed-out horizon that you could breathe if only you took the air deep enough down into your lungs. You are both here, and way out there, Ed thought.

On the hill above the playground, a man lay dead, or dreaming. As Ed got closer, he could hear that the man was speaking, quietly, up into the sky. Maybe it's a prayer, Ed thought, but it sounded like the sound a snake might make, some kind of hiss, and then, at a certain point, he understood.

“Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off...”

It was still only six in the morning. Ed sat himself down in one of the mangers and decided to wait. He was cold, he was hungry, he had hardly slept at all the last few nights. His leather Thälmann jacket was waterlogged, and heavier than a suit of armor. But the bench, the table, and the little roof were comforting – it was as if he had already been away for weeks and was coming back from the wilderness just at that very moment. He opened his bag for it to air and took out his few things, his few books, and laid them out to dry.

The windows in the front building, behind which must have been the restaurant, were hung with a crude, net-like curtain that at seven began to move a few times. Ed tried to sit up straight and, at the same time, give off a relaxed impression. A wind came in from the sea. The door was pushed open and its leaves anchored to the building with hooks; the man who had done so didn't look at him. White shirt aglow. For a moment, Ed saw a pair of oval glasses in a metal frame and a big, bushy, black, walrus-like moustache. The man went to the board and wiped away *Steak a four* and in the dark, still damp space where it had been wrote *Oxtail Soup*.

“Rimbaud!”

Someone yelled and Ed automatically jumped up to recite, there was nothing he could do to stop it, at the very first moment, at least, his entire interior library crashed about his skull: Paul Zechs' free adaptation of *The Drunken Boat*...“Rimbaud!” someone yelled again from within the innards of *The Hermit*, and Ed sensed that with it they meant the waiter with the walrus-like whiskers.

Almost an hour went by before another, smaller man appeared in the doorway to stare at him, motionless. His face remained in shadow. Something in his bearing transmitted the fact that he would not cross the threshold to go outside. After a little longer still, he raised his hand in an undefinable way, only halfway, as if he were just greeting Ed, or stopping him where he was. Ed got up, and, although he was still a few tables away from the door, the man began to speak in a loud voice as if gathered there on the terrace were half a hundred people in whose best interest it was to understand what he had to say from the very beginning.

“My name is Krombach, Werner Krombach, director of the vacation home The Hermit.”

“My name is Edgar Bendler,” Ed answered quickly, calling it into the director’s back as it rushed away and at the same time quickening his pace to keep up. As they crossed through the guest room, Ed noticed that the man appeared to be sporty, stocky, and had the shiny egg of a small, but smart, bald head going to the back of his skull, the hair on the sides gray and short. With half-opened eyes Ed took in the bar and the cast-iron register. They entered a tiny office, the director skillfully pushed himself past his desk, took his place, and extended his hand.

“Please have a seat, Herr Bendler.”

Nothing in his appearance suggested mistrust or suspicion. He took Ed’s identification booklet, opened it up, flipped through the pages, stroked his high forehead a number of times as if what he had come to be looking at was, essentially, already too much and in the end simply asked Ed if he was *healthy*.

On Krombach’s desk there was a prehistoric Torpedo typewriter, next to it a gray rotary phone and a photograph that showed him before the entrance to a large building that shone like copper; it was the legendary Palace Hotel – “built by the Swedish.” Throughout the land, whenever and wherever it came up, someone, with a mysterious air, would always say, “by the Swedish...” The photograph showed the director surrounded by a horde of men and women in waiters’ dress or hotel uniforms, only Krombach, curiously, was dressed in almost the exact same way that day as he had been in the photograph: a pale pink summer shirt with wine red cufflinks, a light sport coat with a light brown check pattern, and a scarf around his neck, maybe silk. Only the tie was missing.

“No diseases *anywhere*?” Ed looked up and saw Krombach looking at him very seriously and intently.

Most likely he had understood the question poorly. But Ed really had no idea what Krombach was getting at, and so, as a precaution, stayed silent. In any event, Ed had decided to be proper. Where Ed was from and what he had done up until then – Krombach’s questions, casual and only as if to satisfy the demands of some protocol that he himself wasn’t particularly interested in. As far as Ed’s work history was concerned, he had been a mason, and he mentioned the fact. “Construction

worker, then,” Krombach corrected him. “Cleaning work, brick work, concrete and form work, that kind of thing, then your studies, German Studies and History, to become a teacher I imagine, the usual order of things and then the usual?”

Before Ed could answer, Krombach began to talk about the island and his *restaurant*. His voice changed, becoming soft and absent-like. “Up here we enjoy a particular position, particular conditions, in all respects, but you, no doubt, are already aware of all of that, I believe, Herr Bendler, or else you wouldn’t be here. Let us begin with the currents. The constant breaking away and slow drift of the coast upon which once upon a time this restaurant was built, well-nigh eighty years ago, upon the stones of the old hermitage, the foundations the hermits left to us...”

As the director shifted from the slow, inexorable disappearance of the island into the expanses of the Baltic and from there into the history of The Hermit, he seemed to have forgotten that Ed was sitting there in front of him. For a long time he spoke about some man named Ettersberg or Ettenburg, who, in a warm voice, he referred to as the Ur-Hermit, a man in long robes “forever on the way between tumbling practice and Tusculum, lavation and the library...”

Ed absentmindedly enjoyed the soporific music of Krombach’s soliloquy. Apparently, the director enjoyed employing sailor-like expressions: every one of his coworkers was part of the “crew”, and he himself was known as the “captain.” “You have, then, already noticed? Piece by piece it’s breaking away from the coast and sliding into this beautiful chasm, a true piece of natural theatre, and someday The Hermit too, *our ark*, will go along its way, one night, perhaps already during the next storm or the one just after, out into the sea, and with him passengers and crew, and upon that everything depends, you understand?”

In reality, the office was really only a cubicle whose ceiling sloped sharply into Krombach’s back so that the space at his end was not more than a meter high. There was a sofa bed there, covered by a bedspread. To Ed’s left was a locker. In the uppermost, open part, it was filled with tin boxes of “Danneman Brazil” cigarillos; on the shelf underneath, there were twenty or thirty small, dark bottles whose labels were impossible to see. On the wall above the locker was a bulls-eye that looked out onto the light-brown striped wallpaper. Only then did Ed notice that the office had no window. Judging by the sounds, it was built directly under the stairs that led to the upper floor. Without any doubt, the space usually reserved for use as a supply- or broom-closet. Next to the bulls-eye hung a row of square display cases with complicated seaman’s knots, behind the glass like graying hearts, twists eternal enigmas –

“...and Iphigenia?” the director asked. Ed stammered, but his inner library sprang back into action with its little survival engine.

“Exactly! Precisely that piece!”

Ed nodded as soon as he was met by the director's glance. In reality, it was difficult for him to follow the speech that Krombach's idiosyncratic appeal had to have been a part of. Maybe those words had been spoken too often. In spite of their unusual content, there was something worn about them, and yet, at the same time, warm, parlor-like, and the cubicle was appropriate. Four days after having jumped (no, he hadn't jumped), it seemed to Ed to *just be good* to be hunkered down in that tiny office listening to the director's words. Yes, he had wanted to leave, to go under, to be lonely, but not alone. Krombach's softly murmuring speech was enough for him, he felt secure. It also had to do with the smell that filled the cubbyhole, a smell from a much older time, strong and biting; it seemed to come from Krombach himself, from the smooth skin that covered his skull as if it had been freshly oiled, maybe even from one of the bottles in the cabinet...

"Okay, good. Why are you here, Herr Bendler?"

The words "I leaned too far out the window," flashed through Ed's mind. Only through great effort did he manage to get his sentence out, even if unintentionally doing so in the old, useless manner: "I'm looking for a job, but I'd also need a room."

Krombach took a breath, and turned his office chair to the side to look at the graying hearts.

"Don't worry. No one has ever had to excuse himself *for that* while sitting in this chair, on the contrary, to a certain degree, it's a sort of prerequisite. My crew, believe me, is made up of the most diverse types, the most diverse paths, but all of them led to this office, and not one person has ever been treated poorly here simply because the mainland spit them out. The most diverse paths, but, in the end, it's the same wherever you go. You're aware of it, you know it, at some point the moment arrives. The island took us in. Here we found our place, and among the *Esskaas*, everyone is there for everyone else, if it comes down to it. In this crew, however," his hand wheeled in a wide arc across the desk and thereby grazed almost all the walls of his cubicle, "it's about much, much more, and, as far as that's concerned, we *all* agree..."

The director turned back around and stuck a finger into the telephone's finger wheel. At the same time, he looked at Ed as if the only thing left to do was to give him his number.

Without a doubt, this was the moment to contribute something of his own. Something that would suggest that he met the (by and large unstated) prerequisite, a statement touching on his previous life, his own individual story, which, however, had had nothing to do with anger or being spit out, but more to do with a streetcar.

The director's finger hovered impatiently on the finger wheel – a small, buzzing noise.

"So you're healthy then?"

"Yes, yes, I think so, I mean, I'm not, that I know of anyway, un-..." The question embarrassed him.

“Healthy, but no certificate of health?”

“Certificate of health?” Ed had never heard of the need to have such a document.

“Healthy, but neither proof of accommodation nor registration?”

“No, I wanted to...”

“Healthy and freed from the past, like all of us up here?”

Krombach laughed softly and threw a quick glance at the graying hearts; he seemed to be particular friends with them. His sudden directness caused Ed discomfort.

“I mean, no *terribly nasty* diseases in the past, no?”

“No. I broke my arm once, the left wrist, that was complicated, I fell while climbing, I was nine years old and was supposed to go to summer camp, but in the morning...”

Krombach looked at him quietly and uncomprehendingly, and Ed went silent.

“No one knows you’re here?”

“No,” Ed answered rashly, and took the change to the familiar as a sort of advancement.

“You didn’t tell anyone at all?”

“No.”

“And you came alone?”

“Yes.”

“How long can you stay?”

“Through the summer...?” For a moment Ed held out his calendar with the fall semester’s registration deadline – immediately he was almost ashamed for having done so. From outside he heard the clang of silverware. Judging by the footsteps and the voices, breakfast was being cleared; the work sounded challenging and coarse. The sense of something foreign drifted in to him, the fear before the step into the unknown.

“Summer then. Autumn too perhaps?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Maybe, hmm? We had some problems here last season, problems, and that’s putting it mildly. We lost some people, in different ways, our last ice cream man, for example...” Krombach took a deep breath.

“Why did you sneak up here?”

“Sneak up?”

“You arrived from behind, over the cliff coast, that’s a long, difficult stretch, two hours along the stony beach, and with a travel bag!”

“I...”

“Good, good.” The director suddenly seemed exhausted. He bent Ed’s identification booklet with its already worn plastic cover back against the binding, in the next moment the paper would have to tear. Then with peaked fingers he let the booklet fall into one of the desk’s invisible drawers.

“You’ll stay until Crusoe comes back. You’ll learn the ropes, then we’ll see how we want to proceed. Food and board, two marks seventy an hour. How do you feel about dishwashing? If you’re qualified, I mean. Everything else...Everything else comes later.”

Ed nodded and lowered his eyes. Krombach's shoe rested on the porous casing of an old space heater. Suddenly, Ed recognized the smell; it was his father's hair tonic, every morning, every evening - *Exlepäng*.

Chapter 14: Why the Man and the Moon Slide

Even before noon the terrace was swamped with guests. Every morning there were four ships overflowing with day trippers who surged from the harbor up to the Dornbusch highland, as if there was nowhere else to go. The clearing and the woods around it were occupied up to the cliffs by vacationers, waiting to pounce. Some of them tried to place orders from the edges, and soon several of the most shameless stood in between the tables, in the middle of the waiters’ serving lanes. They looked down at the tables, discussed the dishes, stretched out their arms to point to the food, and almost touching it, or tried to drive away the guests at the tables with hostile grumbling. The waiters yelled “careful” and “watch out” but even more serious rebukes had only a temporary effect, and at some point you would see Krombach circling the beer garden. In an effort to placate the all too impatient, he lead them back to the edge of the terrace, as if he were leading them out of a labyrinth, holding them by the arm like the blind. Sometimes he went to the cliff with them to the cliff – to rush them over the edge, Ed thought, which would have been one solution, and would have given the term *rush hour* a deeper meaning...

In fact, the rush brought out the best in everyone, and Ed soon began to understand what was behind the fancy terminology of crew and staff. Krombach, who otherwise never left the office, pulled a short gray piece of rope from his pants pocket and began to demonstrate sailors’ knots with hands raised high. He tied various kinds of heart-shaped knots, held them in the air, and received applause. The fact that someone was demonstrating something attracted attention immediately, especially because the whole thing was clearly unplanned, spontaneous, without inspection and no admission fees, and therefore amounted to a rare, exotic event, something that could only be experienced here on this island.

Ed never discovered what Krombach was showing off while tying his knots. The gray hearts seemed to exercise the same hypnotizing power on him as on the tourists. After four or five hearts the manager took a bow. Then he removed more short ropes from his pants pocket and distributed them among the bystanders, who received them incredulously and as if they were extraordinarily valuable. Several bystanders instantly began to knot the short ends, or at least they attempted to, and for a while producing their own hearts seemed to be more desirable than schnitzel or *steak au four*.

Rimbaud and Cavallo soon fell into a kind of permanent trot, while Chris tried to keep walking but had to take it to the extreme and ultimately broke into his typical limping gait. Now the dishes came to the sink in large, swaying stacks covered with sticky leftovers and had to be immediately washed, dried, and made ready for use (there were simply never enough of them available). The pale walrus skull belonging to Chef Mike intermittently appeared above the swinging door to the kitchen. His scoldings weren't malicious or aggressive but utterly dramatic, urgent, an aria that commenced daily when the rush hit about the missing plates, knives, bowls, and the end result they could expect from such conditions, irrevocable collapse, exitus. No sooner the aria rang out, than the time for niceties had passed. Entire stacks of unscrapped plates were unceremoniously dashed into the sink, and the greasy remains of schnitzel, potatoes, salad, and meatballs were swept from the surface of the water with a backhand stroke. After Ed had some practice at it, two or three backhands in quick succession were sufficient to clear his sink in a matter of seconds. He just had to be careful not to sully the clean dishes, and it was a slight disadvantage that they stomped through a disgusting morass of trampled leftovers, a swamp of mushy leftovers that made obscene noises under the soles of their shoes, which is why Ed soon moved over the tiles as if on gliding shoes. Kruso intermittently wiped and dried approach paths so that the waiters didn't slip – even now, when no one knew if he was coming or going, he showed he had things under control, showed responsibility and care. Ed would have liked to embrace him for that.

The thermometer in the Hermit read 43 degrees Celsius. They worked like maniacs, but still lagged behind. The sun pierced the windows and the dishwater exuded a caustic humidity. They guzzled tea by the liter, Karola prepared it at the bar and carried it to the dishwashing station in a large brown stoneware pitcher. The can was usually kept in the opening to the dumb waiter behind Ed, which might once have gone down to the cellar or up to the servants' quarters but by now only served as a shelf. There was no time to pour, so Ed drank directly from the spout. In his rush the lukewarm tea lapped over the edge of the pitcher onto his face, which didn't matter much because they were naked to the waist and the tea towel slung around his hips was long soaked by dishwater

and sweat. He was a galley slave. He felt naked, even his crotch was wet, and it itched between his legs.

After an hour of rush Cavallo began to whinny, all the while executing little unbridled leaps, like a child that would like to imitate a gallop. This was accompanied by slight grunting and snorting, which caused his narrow moustache to vibrate. It was difficult to reconcile this performance with Cavallo's normal demeanor (his taciturn character). "Romacavalli", Rimbaud roared through the Hermit and spurred them on: "Avanti, Avanti, dilettaanti!" Ed admired the way Rimbaud reeled around with arms widespread, as if standing on tiptoes, how he operated the till with one hand, sorting bills, frozen for seconds while deciphering something on one of the tiny receipts, and simultaneously taking the big tray full of beer and soda (with an arm that became ever longer), in one fluid motion from the counter as if he had a telescopic superpower. He did all of this while keeping an eye on the serving counter and making an imperceptible gesture towards Chris, who was sweeping past with twisted motions.

"Fame, when will you come?"

When the rush approached its climax Rimbaud began to recite quotations, quotes scatological or pornographic in nature, which were in complete contradiction to his elegant appearance and expressed a kind of profound hatred that Ed couldn't put his finger on, contempt for everything in life, and life itself, but Ed couldn't believe it was serious. The euphoric, fundamentally pugnacious sound of his voice also spoke another language. Ed understood Rimbaud's dirty jokes as the expression of the difficult synthesis between philosopher and head waiter that this by far most well-read staff member performed as best and proudly as he could every day. Sometimes Rimbaud began suddenly speaking French: "mon plongeur, mon ami," and when he rushed by Krombach's door on the way to the dishwashing station he berated him loudly: "Chef du personnel – une catastrophe!" The manager remained unseen after his performance on the terrace.

Ed slogged away and sweated off the remainder of his thoughts and feelings. He worked his way down to the solid foundation of real exhaustion, and in those hours he felt pure, released from himself and his unhappiness. He was no more and no less than a dishwasher who tolerably managed to hold his ground in the chaos.

The first time he heard it Ed had believed Kruso was explaining something, a continuation of his instructions, which were worth following. Ed's ears had grown accustomed to the echoing space that was the dishwashing station, but he still only understood individual words that were repeated, the words "man" and "sea".

“What?” Ed bellowed through the roar of the rush, perhaps too vigorously as Kruso immediately held his hands still. The water slapped against the walls of the sink.

“Past the high reeds, past the low moor, the boat slides to the sea.”

It appeared to be some kind of incantation because everything in the vicinity immediately fell silent, even the radio in the kitchen. Kruso’s head remained bowed, and Ed assumed that the conversation had come to an end before it had started. He plunged his hands into this basin to reach for a plate when the choir commenced:

“Past the high reeds, past the low moor, the boat slides to the sea. With the moon sliding, the boat slides to the sea ...”

Ed sensed Rimbaud and Cavallo behind his back, singing, panting, and weighed down. They seemed like extras in an absurd piece of theater with their outstretched arms covered with dirty dishes. Then behind them in the semi-darkness was Karola with her wonderfully deep singing voice.

“So they are fellows to the sea, the boat, the moon, and the man.”

Kruso voice was reduced to a whisper, making the basses that much stronger, the voices of Chef Mike and Rolf:

“Why do the moon and the man slide together to the sea, so eagerly to the sea!”

The waiters’ plates crashed into his sink even before Ed had understood what was going on. Chris pushed past all of them, bellowing “So eagerly to the sea!” and hugged Kruso, who remained nearly unmoved, which by the way did not seem dismissive or unnatural. It only corresponded to the dignity of the poem that they had recited together, apparently a kind of hymn of the Hermit, “our sacred hymn” as Kruso later explained frequently.

Like the hearts made of knots, or Cavallo’s whinnying, the chorus about the man and the sea belonged to the ritual of the midday rush and its delirium, it was its climax. In the following minutes Chef Mike bellowed out his “finito” from the kitchen, the end of orders *à la carte*. The menus were quickly collected, had to be virtually ripped out of the hands of some particularly disappointed guests. Two or three dishes remained available, usually *soljanka*, *jägerschnitzel*, and roulade. The proclamation of the backup menu was handled by Chris, the most beloved waiter among the guests due to his boisterous and affable demeanor. Our best man in service, warbled Rimbaud, and puckered his lips. Rimbaud and Cavallo liked to make fun of Chris, who had come to the island from Madgeburg last year, from a previous life as electrician, as *electrical*, as he himself put it.

After Chris had hobbled back and forth like a dervish for two hours (his neck covered by the inert feathered rug of his greasy, black curls), he stepped out and took up his position on the steps of the terrace like a royal herald. He waited until the din had subsided and all eyes were directed towards him. Then he called out “*soljanka*”, and whoever wanted to eat *soljanka* learned to reply loudly and clearly with “here” and stand up simultaneously, “So I can keep an overview,” as Chris reasoned, logical and comprehensible. The procedure for distributing the dishes was similar. Chris often had six or seven plates on his arms as he stormed out onto the terrace and called “schnitzel”, and those who had ordered stood up and yelled “here”, often louder than necessary in the hope of being one of those first. Several went overboard and call “here sir!” or clicked their heels, whereupon Chris, who slid plate after plate or bowl after bowl onto the tables in a single fluid movement, yelled something back like, “twenty pushups!” or “fall out for star jumps”, cocking his head with an expression that oscillated between contempt and insanity, and of course the whole thing was just a game.

The saluting nevertheless had some serious aspects now and again, as if there was in fact some kind of higher power emanating from Chris or as if he had awakened with it something that some guests could barely keep in check. There were patrons who dropped into the pushup position or swung their arms out at a side chop position, and startled the birds that hid in the surrounding bushes waiting and hoping for scraps of food with their jumping jacks. Some guests simply didn't know when was when (as Ed's mother would have put it), and clearly weren't enjoying their vacation, or it was down to their entirely unfulfilling existence. Chris didn't care. At the end of the rush, he abandoned them to their fate. The kitchen closed at 1:30, and the door to the terrace was bolted shut at precisely 2 p.m.

Rimbaud and Cavallo shed their jackets and shirts, bent over the kitchen sink, and scooped handfuls of cold water into their armpits. When Ed stepped onto the ramp after surviving the rush, in order to pump fresh air into his lungs, which had been irritated by the odor of the wash, he felt encrusted like a fossil whose petrification had not yet been completed. While the skin on his face was taut like old leather, it dissolved on his hands and frayed in pale little shreds around his fingertips. He felt unsteady on his feet, a touch of vertigo, which also came from the syrupy detergent that produced hardly any bubbles, but exuded caustic fumes that upset his stomach.

During the meal together at the staff table Ed had difficulty separating the image of the sinewy pork schnitzel on his plate from those he had seen before, carved up, masticated, spat out, trodden upon, or floating in the suds of his sink. He was actually satisfied with his daily onion, he didn't require more. He was tired, and he didn't want to move any more, just lie down, stretch out, sleep, but he held fast to his walks down to the sea. Before Ed set off he waited for a moment with

the others at the table in the yard, and at some point he did eat something, and smoked, he had started smoking again, everyone smoked, and hardly a word was said. The same heavy satisfaction prevailed that had been so good for him on the construction sites, in the years before he had begun his studies, losing his bearings in the history of the language, its labyrinthine constructions of syntax, morphology, orthography, and lexicology, the whole idiotic merry-go-round, as the students called the exams in those subjects at the end of the first year of studies, full of loathing and respect. It was their own kind of preliminary examination consisting of sentences from Musil or Kleist, which caused more than a few to despair and fail.

Ed enjoyed the satisfaction. It was a kind of honor: in that moment they were all united in their pride. A sincere pride that was perhaps derived less from the nature of their work (slave labor) as from having accomplished something fundamentally impossible, to have withstood a storm. Nothing so clearly conveyed the feeling of solidarity as the rush during the high season with its turmoil and impositions. They belonged to that crew that would defend their ship to the last, so much was sure, with their utmost expertise, their gastronomic daredevil natures, and the skills at their command due to their academic or artistic backgrounds. By accomplishing the impossible in this violent, chaotic campaign they clearly fulfilled the code of honor Kruso had spoken of. That code that unified the SWs. With the help of a special brand of lunacy, an essence of gastronomy and poetry, they held their ark above water, day after day. And saved the island, rolling from side to side.

Chapter 23: The Map of Truth

9th July: Weaponless hunt with Kruso and other SWs, only pots and sticks. Afterwards there was zander for all, grilled on the sand in garlic and sea-buckthorn sauce. The fish was still alive. Chef Mike says you have to grab him by the eyes so he won't bite. Rimbaud and the counter-couple sang battle songs, over the hills, across the Steppes...Rick and his stories. He says that folks like Hauptmann hurt the island. Karola doctored Cavallo's sunburn with curd. She's the medicine woman here, a cute little witch schooled in the art of herbs. Every day she brings fresh tea to us in the dishwashing station, and yesterday, all of the sudden, she was behind me. Ice on her fingertips, by my spine, up and down – a kind of ice cube massage, perfect for back pain, incredible! Thanks to the heat, we have even more roaches. Every morning I manage to kill four or five, sometimes even more.

Over on the waiters' beach there were even more SWs: Tille, Spurtefix, Sylke the tall girl with the freckled skin, Antilopé, Rimbaud's girl, or Santiago from the Island Bar who Kruso seemed to be good friends with. As a general rule, everyone met in the nude. Already at the newt's burial Ed had felt it: a quasi sibling-like closeness from this natural, rather spontaneous, nudity. It was something that Ed had never experienced before, a special kind of trust they all had reached in this particular way, a form of casual closeness – a collegial intimacy, if there was such a thing. As if this nudity in truth was a kind of seal, a reward, Ed thought, for the shared sense of modesty that had been overcome, in any event, nothing at all indecent. And yet, modesty remained at the heart of their alliance, and so even the way the SWs greeted one another (cheek pressed softly to cheek) could be better understood. This was the first thing Ed had really understood about the island caste and the circle's solidarity, which spread far beyond the island itself.

At the end of their hunt, Kruso suggested taking a side trip to the Schwedenhagen ridge, "to his home," as he said in a derisive tone. Up until that point, Ed had never considered that Kruso too had to have had a home other than The Hermit.

From the concrete path a second path split off in the direction of Bodden. Up on one of the moraines stood a bright, two-story building virtually hidden by poplars. The hill, the house, and the trees, which from a distance seemed similar to cypresses, reminded Ed of those southern landscape paintings one found in official state galleries.

"Institute of Radiation" – the sign hung low behind the wire mesh fence next to the entrance, it barely had any color left, only the letters had made it, that, or at some point someone had made the effort to repaint them. Kruso went past the gate. After a few meters, he suddenly dropped in his half-military way into a push-up like position and crawled under the fence. They came up before a tall, slender brick building whose lower half was encased by a grass-covered mound of earth as if for protection. With its steel door and skull and crossbones sign it looked like an old transformer tower, only the cables were missing.

"This is the tower," Kruso explained.

The room was windowless, but everything had been covered in blankets which seemed to be hiding something and which exuded a sweet, dry smell of old wool. Kruso's steps upon a steel ladder and then: silence. Ed breathed in the dust, and his mucous membranes began to swell. He slowly felt his way through the wool-labyrinth but could not manage to find the way up. "It's not too easy!" Kruso yelled down and seemed to be quite happy about it.

The secret room was like that of a young boy. The light bulb, which hung down from the ceiling on a cable without any shade, dimly lit up a puzzle consisting of photographs, texts, and drawings, between which were a Che Guevara poster and a dusty prospectus of a metallic brown Volvo

station wagon. All of the pictures were studded with tiny black spots, as if they suffered from some kind of disease; Ed felt like he was going to suffocate. Kruso pulled a few stones from the wall and a fresh gust of salty air blew through the room. At the same time, in the opposite corner where there was a bed and a locker, something moved. Most likely a cat, Ed thought. Sleeping bags and pieces of clothing littered the ground.

To the right of the arrow-slit-like opening was a giant, childlike drawing. The rough and wavy paper, which really could have been just the backside of a strip of wallpaper, was attached to the wall by tiny nails. Kruso pulled the cable and bulb over in front of the drawing and fixed them with a piece of wire that also hung down from the ceiling.

The drawing was made up of three colored pieces placed one on top of the other. The darkly colored, ineloquent watercolors immediately reminded Ed of those dreary paintboxes from elementary school, those forever quasi fossilized colors you had to painstakingly mix for such a long time that you lost all interest and the brush (you always only had a couple of brushes, and most of the time, in fact, only one you could work with at all) ended up in the round and colorful stones you called a *palette* thereby generally rendering the artistic tool completely worthless. His entire childhood a battle with poor materials, outdated matter, a battle full of complaints and curses and yet still somehow completely innocent. In those early years Ed would never have come upon the idea that *he himself* might not have been the bad one, *he himself* not insufficient. For who else could have been at fault for such misfortune?

“This is the one and only true map of our world, Ed, the *Map of Truth*, as you might be tempted to call it.”

Kruso looked at him. He paused meaningfully and then gave Ed, who the entire time had been standing completely still in the middle of the room, the chance to look at the paper more closely. It was full of water spots and edges, a stylized sunset perhaps, Ed thought, a sort of Hiddensee Expressionism. Above the black was a wash of red, and over that a kind of gold, gold-red-black, and only then did Ed recognize the image of the country’s flag turned on its head. A delicate crackling – Kruso stood with a bottle in his hands. Very slowly and in an almost celebratory fashion he unscrewed the cap from the bottle’s neck. Ed recognized the cheap brand, which thanks to its blue label was known as “The Blue Strangler”.

Independent of the three colors were lines, extremely fine lines, which in places corresponded precisely to the water stains, and soon Ed detected what were the country’s borders: the outlines of Rügen, Usedom, the Darß peninsula and very delicately, almost invisible, the narrow form of their own island, the seahorse with its wrinkled mouth. With its swollen skull turned to the east, the little animal held itself upright – half black, half red. Now it was easy to make out the golden shapes of

Denmark and Sweden up above. The red between the southern and northern shores was covered by a delicate series of strokes consisting of barely recognizable geometric links, broken and unbroken lines that wildly intersected one another. The whole thing looked like the knitting plan or sewing pattern Ed as a child once had seen on his aunt's living room table. At first it was completely unfathomable – how could his aunt have had something to do with drawings of this sort, completely encoded and not unlike secret plans...

Kruso cleared his throat. Ed had to take a deep breath in order to turn his eyes away from the map. He felt the bottle on his upper arm, it was cool and he wanted to take hold of it, as if following a mechanical gesture among drinking buddies, but Kruso held onto it tightly and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Listen to me now, Ed, and listen good.”

With that saint-like solemnity that accompanied all of his instructions, he pressed the bottle to Ed's chest and motioned to the bed against the wall. The “Strangler” got rid of the taste of dust in Ed's mouth, and for some reason, from his position on the bed, he could now better recognize the lines in the map.

Kruso looked at the map, and then at Ed. He then walked up to him once again and took the bottle back.

“On this island,” Kruso pointed to Hiddensee while nodding a few times and simultaneously shaking his head, a movement which made his skull appear to wheel, “I mean, in this country,” the bottle's bottom, which let out a bright and happy gurgling, crossed over the blackened section of his drawing, “there is not one, single realistic map. In this country, my friend, not only are rivers, streets, and mountains shifted to the point where no one knows exactly where they are at home anymore, no, the coasts too move, back and forth, like waves...”

“No, don't say a word!” Kruso bellowed, bottle raised. “I've had them all here, geologists, surveyors, even cartographers – through those with access to confidential information, here, with the shipwrecked and the outcasts...I know what their reports say.” He took a swig and wiped his hand across his lips.

“It's the spaces that are never right, the falsified size of the sea, the distances, the fake horizon. It is never, ever,” skipping over the red stretch of sea, Kruso tipped the neck of the bottle first into the black and then into the gold sections, “*that far* from coast to coast! If these maps were correct, dear Ed, you would have never seen Møn from your beautiful little attic room, the silent cliffs made of that chalk that speaks of the beyond, that shimmering innocent-like white when mornings you sit up in bed and ask yourself what you should be doing here, what's actually happening to you, why you ended up *right here*...”

“There is no ‘why’,” Ed countered, but Kruso now handed him the bottle with a gesture of pure goodness.

“This map, my friend, is true, as true as the ‘Amen’ in church, Amen.”

Ed drank and gave the bottle back.

“Møn, Mønsklint, Gedser...” Kruso lost himself in the enumeration of places that appeared on the map only as tiny crosses or numbers.

“But what’s with the lines?” Ed tried to get around the potential slight. On the waiters’ beach he had already heard the strangest stories. A man from the county town of Plauen had placed a real flag with the hammer, compass, and ring of rye down in front of his doorstep and had been promptly picked up from the island and put into prison, for years it was said...but what was a doormat compared to the Map of Truth?

“What do these lines mean, Losch? This kind of sewing pattern in red between the coasts?” Ed repeated.

“Those are the lanes of the dead.”

Kruso’s answer arrived as if from far away. He was sunk into his drawing.

“Those are their ways across the sea.”

Kruso pressed his hand to a well worn and ripped point in the paper, as if there were a wound there he meant to cover.

“At first they still can swim. Or paddle at least. Or they cower in little diving bells, or hold tight to motors that pull them through the surf. But they don’t make it. Somewhere out there water runs into the carburetor, or they freeze, or they lose their strength...Some wash up over there. Some are pulled out of the water with the day’s catch. The fishermen radio the dead back over the sea and then talk about them in their bars – ‘yet another one who gave it go, well, cheers,’ and so on...”

Sounds came from below. Kruso came back and took a long drink from the Strangler.

“The fishermen know the currents here. They know them exactly. They know just how long the dead can be upon their way.”

Kruso slowly traced one of the broken lines. “They know how long they’re underwater, and when the sea will bring them back up, and how they’ll look, and how they’ll look at you with their decomposed eyes...” He seemed nervous now and bent his head toward the slit in the wall.

“But no one, I repeat, *no one* over there knows just who the dead are. Which means that they are simply laid on ice, on the good, cold ice of the Kingdom to wait for someone to come and claim them. But no one will ever come for them, no one, ever.”

It had grown louder down in the courtyard, and Kruso began to put the stones back into the wall.

“How do you know all of this?”

“The dead whisper to me. The dead are waiting for us, Ed, what have you got to say about that?”

“I had no idea, I mean...”

“What *I* wanted to say, Ed, is this: it’s the wrong way. Totally wrong. Or to put it another way: the maps *aren’t lying enough!* Starting with that damn, hopeful light blue in our school atlases, that goddamn fake light blue, every kid goes soft in the head with that blue. Why don’t they make the sea black, like the eyes of the dead, or red like blood?” He pointed to his own map.

“And why not, for example, cover up Sweden completely? A neat page split could take care of that. And what about Denmark, Scandinavia, the whole normal and pointless world? Sure, Møn is a bit of a problem, but only because we can see it, you get that, Ed?”

Kruso was clearly drunk. Without attempting to aim, he threw the “Strangler” into Ed’s lap, a grenade of glass.

“Forget it, Ed, you hear me, forget it, just forget it...But don’t you ever forget one thing, ever: Freedom exists. It’s here, on the island, for this island exists, doesn’t it?”

Kruso stared into Ed’s face with fierce determination, and Ed nodded obediently.

“And you too heard her siren’s call, didn’t you? She calls, dammit, she calls like a goddamn siren...And everyone hears something. Deliverance from one’s job. From one’s husband. From pressure. From the state. From the past, right, Ed? It sounds like a promise, and all come, and here our task begins, the real work, which means: three days and they’re initiated. We give everyone, *every single person*, three or four days and with this simple thing we have created a giant community, a community of adepts. And this is only the beginning. Three days here and then they can go back to the mainland, no one has to escape, Ed! No one has to drown. For then they’ve got it: in their head, in their heart, wherever...” Kruso waved his arm through the air and, halfway turned to the map, pointed to different parts of his body.

“This is the measure of freedom.”

Ed flinched. The last sentence had not come from Kruso. Next to him on the bed sat the cat, looking at him. Its skull was immense and round and its paws as wide as children’s feet.

It had grown dark and was pouring rain. Santiago was waiting by the fence. He cursed Kruso under his breath. Ed stood to the side. He was worried about the state of his friend. Something had changed, and for the first time he felt as if he were the one responsible.

The whole time he had wanted to say: “You’re getting yourself into a hell of a mess, Losch.”

“And you, what do you want to do with your life, Ed? How far would you be willing to go?”

Only now did he notice the other shipwrecked ones crouching by the embankment, unmoving, soaked, rabbits just about to spring. It was a small group, two men, two women, all of whom had

followed Kruso's instructions to the letter, unquestioning and thankful. One after the other, they crept under the fence and disappeared into the darkness.

"I can't blame him," Santiago explained.

"What?" Ed asked.

"They both grew up here, he and his drowned sister." Santiago touched the wet wire fence as if it were a precious object. "This is where they grew up, right here on Rommstedt-Hill."

Chapter 24: Black Shelters

Kruso's organization – or how should it be referred to? Lifeguards, janitors, bar staff, bird ringers, sous-chefs, dishwashers, kitchen assistants – all appeared to be connected with each other. The decision to live on the island (or at least to *estivate*, as Cavallo put it) was enough to know the most important thing about the others and functioned as an invisible bond: whoever was here had left the country without crossing the border.

Their support for Krusowitsch initially didn't mean anything more than one of their cheerful assumptions – like skinny dipping at the waiters' beach, the fire at midnight (although forbidden) or the discotheque at the Dornbusch vacation center, where you could wend your way between the two opposing bars all night long for two marks seventy-five (not much more than the hourly wage). The bars were named after the men behind the bars. At the so-called sweet end of the Dornbusch (the Heinz bar) green, brown, and red liqueurs were dispensed without interruption. At the sour end of the hall (the Heiner bar) wine, vodka, and a kind of rotgut nicknamed 'choker' flowed, augmented by "Stralsunder" beer, and occasionally a homemade mix of sea buckthorn juice with "choker" as its base. Even this so-called "opposition of the bars" (a neologism from Rimbaud) celebrated by the SWs five nights of the week was a concept of political import. The Heinz bar was sweet, the Heiner bar was sour, and one thing was certain – there was action between the Heinz and Heiner bars. Heinz or Heiner: No one could make an insolvable contradiction out of that. There was no antagonism on the island, much less irreconcilable: the evening undulated from sweet to sour, from sour to sweet, far beyond the Dornbusch hall, over the meadows and dunes to the beach, beyond the sea to the horizon, the border, invisible in the darkness.

Ten percent land, ninety percent sky: it was enough that they were here on the island. And more than enough for their pride. The island ennobled their existence. This beauty was simply indescribable, and powerful. The magic of its creation. The mainland represented nothing more than a backdrop that slowly blurred and died in the perpetual sound of the sea. What was *the state* anyway? Every sunset obliterated its frozen image, every wave washed the bleak silhouette of that battered handaxe from the surface of their consciousness. They were the riders of the sea horse with the wobbly muzzle, they walked all over the hand axe, traveling between sweet and sour.

The SWs were surely not particularly interested in leading the castaways (or homeless, as Kruso called them) in the area to any kind of new freedom. But they sensed Kruso's will, his power. He exuded an air of otherness that had an inspirational effect. Most of all it was his seriousness and resolve that made the difference. Whatever he said was completely free of cynicism or irony, and whatever he suggested was nothing less than the embodiment of that old island habit of approaching

things more or less playfully. Secretly (and without them wanting to admit it) their island existence lacked this substance, it lacked a task, an idea, something that went beyond the daily sweet-sour.

And yet Kruso never had the demeanor of a ringleader; but he organized activities, planned, collected, and established and then maintained connections between the circles of SWs spread across the island. These consisted chiefly of those circles that could be readily connected to individual watering holes like the group around the island bar, from which several slept in the Wollner house next to the island museum. Kruso maintained the best of contacts with them, including men like Santiago, Tille, Peter, Indian, Spurtefix, or women like Janina, Sylke, and Antilopé. And there were also SWs who considered themselves belonging to various campfires, where by night they grilled, drank, and regularly proclaimed the “Free Republic of Hiddensee”, including the Enddorn fire with A. K., Ines, Torsten, Christine, and Jule, for instance. Beyond that there was a group of older SWs who had applied for an exit visa, and once in a while they formed their own group at the Heiner bar. They had detached themselves and were already immersed, perhaps too deeply, in the state of waiting, although Ed frequently had the impression that they had forgotten the waiting itself, as if their lives already lay in the beyond, not only beyond the country, but beyond time, the measurable progression of which was suspended by the island and its magic. As if their state of waiting had been condensed into a kind of paradisiac great beyond. Kruso reasoned it was a form of self-immunization that aimed to at least partially counteract the infectiously liberating effect of the island, which he by no means wanted to judge, on the contrary. Under these circumstances the approval of an exit visa struck one or two applicants like a blow to the face at first. They had drifted far onto the island and were suddenly told to resurface and paddle back to the official measurement of time – they often had only a few days to do it.

The circle of very young SWs, which included punks, was more communicative. With their eighteenth birthday they had all decided to spend their life on the island and nowhere else. Because the punks weren't presentable they never made it into service, and almost always ended up at the dishwashing station where they accomplished extraordinary things. In fact, the punks were considered the best dishwashers. Their industriousness and reliability was legendary. “Work like devils,” Kruso declared. People knew and valued names like Ata at Norderende or Dirty in Hitthim. There was also an alliance between punks and the long-haired men who improved their position and represented a certain kind of protection if it came down to it. The director of the island bar announced “it doesn't matter to me what people look like if they work.”

“Hiddensee is also a gay paradise,” Kruso remarked quietly while they stood at the Heinz bar, which was strictly speaking the Heinz and Uli bar, the sweet end of the Dornbusch, where

Losch, and more recently Ed as well, received their drinks for a modest fee. Heinz and Uli unquestionably considered them a couple, which didn't particularly seem to bother Kruso. The Dornbusch (and not just the gays there) were the Hermit's main rivals at the annual soccer tournament, which was organized by no one other than Kruso. The tourney was considered the highlight of the "Island Day", an island-wide celebration of SWs, also supported by the locals and bar managers like Willi Schmietendorf, the head of Dornbusch, who donated a keg of beer, while Krombach completely relinquished the matter to his top dishwasher, Alexander Krusowitsch.

Through Kruso a network of contacts and activities arose, which suited the SWs because it emphasized their uniqueness and gave them an awareness of their uniqueness, that peculiar, difficult to comprehend form of legal illegality in a country that either spit them out and declared them useless or to which they simply no longer felt they belonged. Rimbaud had applied the concept of inward emigration in the case of SWs, although each had to work hard daily for their right of residence.

Most of the SWs were untouched by Rimbaud's monologue but Kruso showed respect for them. He was the man with the golden armor, and in his company it gave him protection and a few things that he requested or demanded of them, nothing that would have really been difficult. Yet only very few were able to comprehend his *philosophy of freedom*. They did not feel as if they were part of the resistance and hardly any of them would have viewed themselves as part of a conspiracy. They were interested in the undertaking and above all the bacchanal celebrations of the allocation, the unlimited bar on the terrace of the Hermit and last but not least, the unfamiliar guests who gathered there, night after night – their foreignness, their mellifluousness, and their pleasant scent, strangely accentuated by the peculiar designation Kruso had given them: castaways.

Initially it only concerned the nights, accommodating the castaways for at least three or four days in so-called black shelters. It was an ambitious goal because their number was increasing continuously, a pilgrimage without parallel across the country, the pilgrims were drawn by the siren call of the island, trekking disoriented and recklessly across the moraines and walking the beaches searching for a place to sleep, without billeting papers, without residence permit – in a border zone.

At some point this was augmented by the "eternal soup". "They just need something warm in their stomachs at least once a day," was Kruso's simple reasoning. The "good bits" Ed plucked from the plates in the dishwashing station each day were cut into small pieces, combined with the freedom-granting herbs and mushrooms from the "consecrated plots," fertilized by the slime from the drains ("the newt is nutritious and full of vitamins") and landed in a cast iron cauldron that always had a spot reserved with Chef Mike. Ed had frequently observed how two castaways handed

over the kettle with the soup, or what was left of it, on the ramp where Kruso received it, gave short directions, and then returned it to the range without washing it. The eternal flame, the eternal soup. For Kruso this meant a kind of biological cycle, a closed system of sustenance – and illumination. And all that was, as he said, “just the beginning.”

The three or four days on the island were essential and the first and foremost condition on the path to freedom, which he henceforth explained with increasing frequency and detail. This was augmented by the support program. This basically amounted to three elements: the soup, the washing, and the work, which took place – voluntarily, of course – on the beach or on the Hermit’s picnic benches, on the terrace above all in the morning.

Initially, Ed could not associate washing with anything more than vague memories, a burning sensation in his eyes, and a figure dressed as a Roman, who streaked across the yard in the night. The work was usually the production of jewelry that was astoundingly easy to sell to the vacationers. At its core, these were earrings (twenty marks per pair), and their basic raw material were the rings from dead migratory birds collected in the bird sanctuary. “Sometimes you can find really old birds. I mean cadavers that still wear the old rings, Heligoland rings, or rings from Radolfzell bird observatory or Rossitten rings, unbelievably valuable pieces...” But Kruso acquired a far greater number of rings directly from the central tagging station on the island, which Ed had become familiar with on their forays. The bird taggers there greeted them like old trading partners. Kruso not only acquired the rust proof material for his secret production from them, he also borrowed rare tools, fine pliers special, quite unusual in some way, similar to a dentist’s instruments. And he let them explain their work with birds, as if that was the real issue, into the details of drawing up so-called tagging reports. He discussed with the taggers at length about bird species that Ed didn’t even recognize the names of. “A hundred thousand rings per year, simply unbelievable,” he called over to Ed, who was nauseated by the hundreds of wings flapping in the cages surrounding them. “Too many rings, which is why they no longer study them,” explained Kruso while they were leaving the central tagging station. “Hormones that trigger the migratory instinct – that was once their subject, can you imagine that, Ed? Just for a second? We should really know something about *that*. Instead, they write reports now. A report about every single bird!” Another source provided the wire that had to be pulled through the ears, “dental wires”, whispered Kruso in a tone as if he were referring to the Hiddensee Treasure.

The profits from this small, but lucrative manufacture flowed exclusively into the “SW Fund” and above all served to finance the drinks on the task force evenings. The fund was kept in Kruso’s custody. The regularly occurrence of the distribution of pilgrims to emergency shelters, the unquestioned highlight and hub of the organization, resembled a celebration which was to lack for

nothing. The idea that he had recited Trakl on one of these festive evenings of all times was an embarrassment to Ed. He had removed himself from the organization. Sure, he was a good worker, and he mastered the daily inferno of pots and dishes, but still he fulfilled neither the explicit nor implicit requirement for becoming a full-fledged member of the Hermit.

Yet Kruso had chosen him.

The accommodation of all the castaways was a difficult, basically impossible task, without a doubt. Kruso, who emerged as the quartermaster, divided the shelters into permanent and open-air accommodations, which were special, so-called “consecrated spots” at the foot of the moraines. But first and foremost there were the rooms belonging to the SWs – a not inconsiderable number of places to sleep spread across the entire island. The remaining system of emergency shelters and its branches distributed in such a polymorphic way that Ed was repeatedly astonished. It was the expression of Kruso’s strategic talent, a predisposition that reached into the martial, which made it possible for him to regard his hiding spots as a system of outposts and develop his logic starting from that premise. During their patrols Kruso initiated Ed into the black shelters and their details:

- The sheep shed in the former agricultural cooperative “Friendship of the Peoples”, most recently the state-owned farm Ummanz, at the foot of the Dornbusch; capacity 10-12 castaways.
- The donkey stable belonging to the movie director Walter Felsenstein, below his villa, a small but extremely stable building with an attic and space to sleep three people above the donkey.
- The tower (Kruso’s teenage bedroom at the radiation institute property); capacity 5-7 castaways.
- The cutters belonging to the fishermen Schluck, Schlieker, Kollwitz, Krüger, Gau, und Augstein, the freighters Johanna and Hoffnung in the harbors of Kloster and Vitte; total capacity 10-15 castaways.
- The big wooden barn belonging to the Weidner family in Grieben, which was divided into various compartments for bicycles, carts, and an unused horse-drawn buggy that could function as a plank bed; capacity up to 8 castaways.
- The secret brick shed behind the former estate, above the Swedish shore, surrounded by a piece of woodland completely gone to seed and full of trash. A narrow ascent up steps behind the harbor led there, and you had to leave the path and go a bit through a thicket of undergrowth. First you encountered the rusty skeleton of a huge machine formerly used for threshing or woodworking, then to your left, the accommodation. These brick shed was considered the SWs’ headquarters. It served various purposes, as Kruso put it, regarding which he dropped no more than a couple of hints; capacity 10 castaways, or more if needed.
- The poet Gerhart Hauptmann’s bed. You had to climb over a fence into the garden on the back part of the property and walk crouched over along the small descent to the house where one specific window was always just ajar. This was ensured by the SW who supervised the museum and was also responsible for the writer’s bed being returned to its museum-like, viewable state; capacity 2 (slim) castaways.

- The tiny red brick building along the path behind Hauptmann's house. It belonged to the biological station and was so tiny that you could only spend the night while standing, "good for two sleepers leaned against each other," and "it's not so bad," Kruso downplayed it once he registered Ed's incredulous look.
- The cinema tent in the movie woods, when the projectionist didn't already have illegal overnight guests of his own.
- The equipment shed at the sports grounds in Vitte, a hard, rough, but extremely secure hiding place, deep between the piles of stacked granite blocks behind the so-called promenade, a sand dune shored up with stones and covered with tar. Capacity 3 castaways.
- The gravedigger's wooden shack, a shelter beloved among castaways. There was a sign nailed to the door labeled "office". Next to the door there was an overturned wheelbarrow without a wheel, and a chopping block. There were masonry tools in a box, a freshly oiled trowel, a sledgehammer, a pointed chisel and a cold chisel "the old utensils / of the ancestors. / this shakes the breast of the stranger." it had suddenly sounded from Ed's reserves. There were narrow graves with weathered, skewed stones all the way up to Gerhart Hauptmann's granite cliff. The grass from the last round of mowing hung on them so that they now looked like a small herd of hairy, sick animals. Kruso touched one of the stones in passing. Only later, when Ed returned to the graveyard once, was he able to decipher the inscription: "... GOVERNOR OF THIS ISLAND rests here since anno 1800 and dwells in the blessed sanctum." The gravedigger of Kloster was one of the few SWs with a year-round contract. His shack was on the furthest edge of the grounds, not far from the grave of the unknown seaman, which was overgrown with brown conifers. In addition, there was a tiny, light stone with letters made of steel, behind which Kruso kept a key to shack hidden. "For castaways it couldn't be a bad thing, Ed, if they had to kneel here at least once, and even if only to retrieve the key." Capacity 3-4 castaways.
- The old transformer building in the woods between the lighthouse and the Hermit. It resembled the station of a caretaker or toll keeper at the entrance to the Dornbusch hinterland, where there was a spring surrounded by old willows and rushes, to which Ed immediately felt drawn. Behind the transformer there was a stack of wood and underneath this was the hiding place for the key with which it was possible to open the massive padlock with considerable back and forth. It was too dangerous to sleep in the transformer, Kruso explained, which is why it served as a kind of archive, a repository for tarpaulins, blankets, and sleeping bags that were necessary for spending the night outdoors. There was a spot nearby consecrated for that purpose. "Staying the night here is a dream, you should try it at least once," Kruso murmured as if they were already surrounded by darkness. In fact the location of this sleeping spot seemed downright fantastic – on the one side the lighthouse directly vis-à-vis, on the other side a view of the rushes and the lights of Rügen. As if hidden, you could lie in the hollow that was not visible from the barracks.

- The so-called lamp workshop, a clinker brick building surrounded by high reeds on the farmstead of the lighthouse keeper. It lay under huge chestnut trees that were always swaying, near the bluffs and only two hundred meters below the lighthouse. First there was a wooden lattice fence, easy to overcome, then a door that could be lifted off its hinges. The replacement lamps for the lighthouse were stored in the workshop, bulbs as large as a child's head, with filaments thick as fingers, and next to them a row of decommissioned reflectors, "by which it was better not to be reflected, as a castaway," unless "the island had already been sufficiently infiltrated." "Vacation from unhappiness" Ed whispered to himself, but Kruso had understood. "No, not a vacation." His right eyelid began to quiver, his voice hardened. "This is Hiddensee, Ed, you understand, *hidden*? The island is a hiding place, the island is the place where people find themselves, where they return to themselves, that is to say, back to nature, to the voice of consciousness, as Rousseau said. No one has to flee, no one drown. The island is the experience. An experience that lets them return enlightened. An experience that makes it possible to continue living till the day on which quantity switches over to quality, on which the measure of freedom in their hearts transcends the bondage of the situation all at once, that moment ... it will be a great throbbing, one thundering heartbeat." Kruso placed his hand on one of the NARVA lamps. No wonder if they start to glow, thought Ed; capacity 4 castaways.

When Ed returned to his room the next day there was a clean, fresh brick under each of the legs of the table. The height was good, the wood cooled his underarms. He took out his Hermes diary and wrote.

Chapter 52: The Autumn, the Autumn

It was still gray when Ed crawled into the black hole to stoke the fire, and it was hardly any lighter when he came back up. A raft of little flames drifted towards him from the restaurant. He wiped his eyes to scare away the camel that had to appear any minute, but the fire wasn't part of his dream. A cake decorated with ordinary candles lay in the middle of the staff table. The cake appeared to have exploded, the candles were far too large. In the broken cake they seemed like sticks of fresh dynamite that could detonate any second.

"Thirty-five, my friend, you don't need to count. No one here needs to count!"

Ed saw that the table was freshly set for everyone. Plates, cups, glasses, and cutlery for twelve people. He saw Sonja's photo, like a silent offering, a small grave at the head of the table. It was a breakfast affectionately prepared by the parents awaiting a child who will toddle down to the dining room from her room any minute now, half asleep, and find itself in the blessed certainty of being in the center of a warm, fundamentally good world. To the left and right of the photo lay a

thirteenth place setting – knife and fork surrounded by candles. Ed discovered the light on Sonja's forehead: It was *his* photo. Kruso extended his arm towards him but did not reach him and instead flailed impatiently in the air. The dynamite began to flicker.

“You have to blow them out, Ed!”

“The person with the birthday blows them out.” He had said it quickly and without thought. Perhaps only because it was his photo, his own little death.

“Blow them out, dammit!”

“I don't think I'm entitled to, Losch.”

“Okay, Okay, Sir Edgar ... the birthday girl isn't here right now, she's – still out and about, somewhere out there!” his arm pointed to the sea. “That's why she can't come today, you understand? Is that enough for you?” Kruso's cheeks were gray, as if cast in lead.

“To be precise it is the nineteenth time that she's missed her birthday. And to be precise, today she became older than her mother, which is quite strange, right?”

“Sorry, Losch.”

Ed had a thought but he was also afraid.

“Let us do it together, Losch, I mean the two of us, as – her brothers.”

Kruso stared at him and uttered something in Russian, although he no longer made the effort to articulate. It was more like a sputter. Ed asked himself how Kruso could have managed to set the table with plates and glasses and fix the candles without breaking anything. Losch's face was empty, but then the corners of his mouth lifted as if he had understood.

“The two of us!”

Ed lowered his head.

“By the way, no one else is here either,” Kruso slurred, “they're all gone, Ed, gone, gone, gone! – although there's sparkling wine for breakfast, Soviet sparkling wine with cherry whisky.” He poured schnapps into his half-full champagne flute. Ed still expected Krombach would step out of his cramped office, or Chef Mike would appear with a forgotten order in his hand – he wished it were so.

“To Sonja, Solnyschka, Sofija, to Sonja Valentina Krusowitsch, thirty five years old! For she's a jolly good fellow, that nobody can deny. – dammit, Ed, can you imagine how I sang *that*, me, Ed, her tiny, little brother?”

“To Sonja,” Ed replied and raised his glass. He thought about G. About the day that she had found the cat she named Matthew, still blind and with wet fur.

Their heads' movement toward the table, suddenly intense, hungry, with puckered lips – as if they were simultaneously trying to kiss the photo. While doing so Ed almost forgot himself. He blew, spit, and inhaled smoke.

“You’ll stay, little brother, right? You’ll stay put right where you are!”

For the first time Ed was wearing the sweater belonging to his predecessor. He shook it out, felt it, and pressed his face to the wool. It smelled of tobacco, and for a moment he felt something akin to thankfulness.

“Closed due to taking of inventory” – he discovered the sign on the door when he returned from the sea (a rushing, bellowing sea at the sight of which you want faint or at least fall to your knees). In the restaurant it smelled of smoke.

“Happy birthday, little girl.”

The face was strewn with splashes of wax.

For a while he was indecisive. Then he took the photo and carried in back to his room. He slowly went down the hall and opened all the doors. There was no one left.

Kruso lay crooked across the bar and slept. His right hand hung in the sink and clasped a glass. Ed released it from his fingers and placed the soggy hand on dry land.

His friend had knocked over a couple of clean glasses with his elbow, and one was broken. Ed covered the sleeper with table clothes and pushed a dry rag under his head. Kruso’s cheek lay in his hand for a moment.

He began with the shards of glass. Then he cleaned up the staff table, and the bar to be on the safe side, one movement leading to the next. Without hesitating he threw what was left of the cake into the trash. There was chaos in the kitchen. He went into the cellar and checked on the fire. He spoke a couple of words to the coals, then he brought the ashes to the ashbin. He had laid a rag over the ash drawer so that the wind couldn’t blow the ashes out. Once again he thought of his father, but here he carried the responsibility himself. He stacked the dirty pans in the sink and let water run over it. He waited until he could be sure that there were no tourists on the terrace at the moment (once in a while voices, calls, the doorknob rattled), then he went out and erased the menu from the slate. He had suddenly no longer tolerated the thought of *their offerings*. There were too many hopes in the world anyway. “But even the wrong ones are legitimate, more than legitimate, and for that reason not at all wrong, probably neither right nor wrong, you have to admit that, just admit it,” Ed whispered and relaxed. He had begun to converse with himself. He checked the stocks in the freezer. The work made him silent. Haven’t seen my bear-horse in a while, Ed thought, then

he saw the horse's head in front of him, and around the contours of the head his thought slowly commenced, hesitant and still imprecise, but he could clearly sense that he himself was the one thinking. That it was him.

“We have two hatches, Ed. The hatch for beverages and the one for ice cream, the so-called ice hatch. So we'll close everything, the terrace, door, restaurant, and leave open the hatches up front. This is war, Ed, the Hermit in the middle of a storm, on a difficult course, with a *small crew*.” He motioned to Ed and himself, nodding as if he was in agreement with everything and himself, and ultimately made a vague dodge that was intended to communicate that the notion of help was not out of the question but also not absolutely necessary. It was late afternoon by the time he had come to. He had washed, shaved, and dressed in fresh kitchen garb. His plaid pants were too short, hardly reaching his ankles. Ed sat in the kitchen under the radio and listened, an onion on his plate and two slices of brown bread. He had believed that Kruso would woo him in some way, maybe ask him. Now he understood how much Kruso took it for granted that he would stay, that they would carry on.

“You know Rick had always called the hatches the valves, and starting today I'll also call them that, which has nothing to do with him. I would like to suggest you also start calling the hatches the valves starting now. Do we want to?”

“Do we want what?”

“You're not listening.”

“Sure, of course, you mean the hatches.”

“I meant call the hatches valves, and effective immediately.”

“Good, Losch.”

“Okay: two men – two valves, at least when everything goes very well. But it will often be as follows: *one* man – *two* valves, back and forth, to and fro, you understand, Ed? And the other one back here makes the munition ready, right, *bockwursts*, *boulette*, and so on, low caliber. And always accompanied with a lot of bread, a lot of mustard, that soothes frayed nerves. Deliver them right to the ice valve, or as before, to the food serving counter. At any rate we'll have to run a bit, Ed, you and I, but we don't mind, do we? Just behind the beverage valve there is the counter with bar and coffee machine. There's no paths there, no problems. Everything just goes out, everything we have that's liquid.”

Voskamp came nearly daily now, often in the morning, with a couple of his soldiers on the terrace. It wasn't really an inspection. He ordered coffee, added a lot of sugar, and stirred for a long time. He rested an arm on the wooden ledge in front of the beverage 'valve', commented on the weather,

and inquired about Krombach. The frigate captain acted like an old neighbor, the officer of a basically befriended ship that lay only a good hundred meters further north, same coast. Kruso invented a business trip for the director to the parent company in Berlin. Once again Ed admired his companion. How he was able to control himself, and issue information with apparent eagerness, despite Vosskamp's performance on Island Day. Maybe this had to do with Kruso's arrest (which he didn't talk about) or with the presence of the good soldier that crouched with the others in Vosskamp's patrol out on the terrace, and glanced over at them nervously the entire time. Her *third brother*.

They had made the Hermit into a fortress – that much was obvious. All windows and doors were locked, the curtains closed, everything shut except for the two hatches, “two valves”, whispered Ed, “and we'll shoot out of them.”

After a couple of days the frigate captain requested a tour. As if commiserating he went through the empty rooms, ignoring the grime that had spread out over the floor and tables, and ultimately crossed the kitchen with his polished boots, giving Ed his hand, who could do nothing but grasp it. He spoke with Kruso in a muted, affable manor, as if dealing with a death that effected them both, even if not to the same extent.

That evening Kruso explained to Ed why they had to be on guard and why it was essential to stick it out, especially now, when the borders were apparently on alert and the possibility of overreaction couldn't be ruled out. For the first time he referred to Viola and its news from the mainland, from cities like Leipzig, Plauen, and Dresden. “We'll signal through the valve.”

They sat together at the bar till late in the night and out on the terrace once again. The weather had suddenly changed. The foghorn sounded for nights on end. The beacon seemed to circle more rapidly, and the pine trees with their stiff branches moved as if they wanted to express a despair shackled within. Losch raised his hand with every noise and stared into the darkness. He began to tell about his sister and their time together in the Institute for Radiation, their games, and hiding places. And how huge the building seemed to them at the time, how endlessly long and confusing the windowless hallway, only milk glass panes behind which light shone day and night, and how mysterious the machines were that were capable of shining through their heads, which is why he long believed his father could read minds. “I was sure that's the only reason why he wanted us to come to his laboratory once a week. I was afraid of these appointments because of my evil thoughts and tried to hide. That's when I discovered the tower. It was full of trash, thousands of x-rays in wooden crates, an army of skulls – sometime they all burned. Our own radiographs were stored in hallways to the lab, and I believe he was particularly fond of them. In them I saw nothing less than

skulls above which a ruler floated like a halo. The millimeter marks glowed white. When I stood in front of these x-rays I was afraid of myself. I mean I was afraid of what was inside of me, invisible.”

Kruso quietly pontificated about the refuge the Hermit’s terrace could continue to represent. I spoke about the *returnees* and that it would be more than a few as soon as they had recognized the deception of the consumer world. “They’ll still be able to recognize it, Ed. But many who were born there and never had anything else won’t be able to feel their unhappiness. The entertainment industry, the cars, owning their home, fitted kitchens, why not? But for them it is their bodies, their natural extension, the location of their emotions and thoughts. Their souls are firmly encapsulated in a dashboard, they are deafened by hi-fi or baked in an oven made by Bosch. They can no longer sense their unhappiness. They don’t hear the cynicism contained in the *consumer* – even the word! Its creaturely sound, full of cowbells and herds driven over the hills of affluence, grazing, chewing, consuming, digesting, and new consumption – feeding and defecating, that’s the life of a consumer. Everything is set up for this, from the cradle to the grave. The consumer protection agency registers every movement within the herd and determines the average consumption, not per kilometer, like with motors, but rather per years, decades. For example, how high is the consumption over the course of a life? And how long does it take till a consumer is consumed? The word alone, Ed, this cow-eyed word, would be evidence enough – if they still had ears.”

They were silent for a while and listened to the foghorn that sounded every twenty seconds, “boo-boo-boo” and then a pause. “We still have an important late season ahead of us. I think we’ll start with the shelters again.” Ed was sad that he could not agree, and avoided dissenting. It was his task to remain at his companion’s side, take care of him and protect him, if necessary from himself. At the same time he enjoyed the idea that it was no one beside the two of them that held down the fort: two best friends that were managing the Hermit completely alone, and therefore were basically accomplishing something impossible, with their own effort, like heroes.

Kruso thought very highly of the next planned distribution meeting, although at the moment there was nothing to distribute. It would be more focused on contact, the maintenance of the “organization”, the “family” or that which used to be called that. He drank even more than during the summer, and his speech quickly lost form and shape. He repeatedly called the two valves the “heart valves of freedom.”

Ed skinned onions, just like in his first days, onions and potatoes. He had inspected the supplies in the cellar and drawn up an inventory list. Following the example of Chef Mike, he made a shopping

list and developed the emergency menu: scrambled eggs, *boulettes*, *bockwurst*, either with bread or roast potatoes. He was now the commissary of the Hermit. He was cook, sous-chef, and dishwasher in one, the center of a relatively large kitchen, which filled him with a certain pride despite all setbacks. Nothing else demonstrated more clearly how far he had come since setting out. He bit into his onion vigorously before doubt or grief about the wording could overcome his thought: Robinson had dreamt up Friday and Friday had appeared. Kruso had not been wrong when he counted on him, trusted him, had seen something in him that he had never been before. His dream was right.

Over those days much was deposited in the account of unspoken presumptions – it had to be more than balanced. The feeling of the lie, or that which was the cause for Ed’s constant depression (had ground him down him) alongside Losch or in the circle of the SWs, so all of those who had distinguished themselves through *insubordination*, was now obliterated. And what’s more: he did not leave, he didn’t do what everyone else did.

Among the provisions in the cellar there were several hundred rusty cans containing pears that must have come from one of the previous years, because the label had rotted away. Ed cleaned the cans and lugged them up into the kitchen. He suggested to Kruso that they could sell the pears as compote. The cake from the refrigerator, was reserved for the last round of people on company vacation (the Seven Samurai and their families), could be offered as “dessert”. Using a knife, he demonstrated the size of the pieces he planned to cut from the baked good that were made of a rubber-like fruit jelly – small pointed bites, “for thirty or forty pfennig per piece.” Kruso, who incessantly walked back and forth between the two valves to serve both the food and beverages, stared at the knife, and then hugged Ed.

“U menja brat i sestra!”

He returned to the valves on the double. Yes, now they were really like siblings.

There were merely five SWs that showed up to the traditional distribution meeting, and Ed only knew them in passing. No castaways, no homeless. No one had brought any care packages, and it soon became clear that the SWs only wanted to drink and watch the sunset. Although Ed served them well, they complained they weren’t offered the late summer cliff coast drinks. Kruso returned to the bar and mixed the drinks. Ed was incensed but his friend didn’t give him a sign. The small group went off to the cliff coast with drinks in hand, to the highest point, in view of the barracks, which didn’t seem to matter to anyone.

They drank and stared at the sea. At the escarpment the wind was so strong that it virtually wiped the smiles from their faces, which was why they stood around stupidly with their mute expressions made of lips and teeth while the glasses turned to ice in their hands. The low light of

the sun lifted the chalk cliffs of Møns out of the sea like a miracle. In fact the island of yearning seemed to have grown or come closer during the last few weeks. Maybe this was connected with the fact that by now the sun was much further to the left, set much further south than in summer and the light in autumn was completely different. Most of all it's the cold air, thought Ed, it's clearer and the wind cleanses the view.

Streaks of storms moved across the water from the west, straight over the wave crests incessantly rolling in, which if oceanographers could be believed, would slowly but surely swallow the Dornbusch including the lighthouse, barracks and Hermit, little by little. The storm whistled its singsong on the tower of the lighthouse behind their backs. The clouds billowed like a great bright gray mass and concentrated like the exhaust fumes of a giant chemical plant – “Bunabuna,” Ed muttered, and thought about Buna's workers and the breathtaking emissions of its enormous, steel battleship before the gates of the city from which he had fled.

He took a step back away from the cliff, and it became quietly instantly, as if there was no more wind and nothing else in the world. Once more he saw G., how she crouched in the yard and with the help of a bowl of milk tried to lure the tiny cat that had fallen from the shed roof: “Matthew!” Perhaps it was Sonja that he meant in his thoughts. He instantly felt hot. “This is the autumn that will break your heart ...” His collection of memorized poems stepped forward, but the name of the author had slipped his memory, and the rest of the poem lay in a fog.

The autumn that ... the autumn? They had already begun to forget.