

Rothilda von Rotortod

OVERTURNED

How aliens tried to conquer the Earth with wind turbines

Novel



About this book:

After the invention of a rejuvenation pill, space and resources threaten to become scarce on planet Kadohan. The only way out is the search for a replacement planet. The choice is made for the planet "Earth". Unfortunately, intelligent life already exists there ...

The novel captures the feeling of alienation from nature resulting from the progressive disappearance of landscape behind wind turbines in the image of mankind being overwhelmed by extraterrestrials: The aliens disguise the landing pillars, which they need for the approach of their spaceships to Earth, as installations for generating wind power.

About the author:

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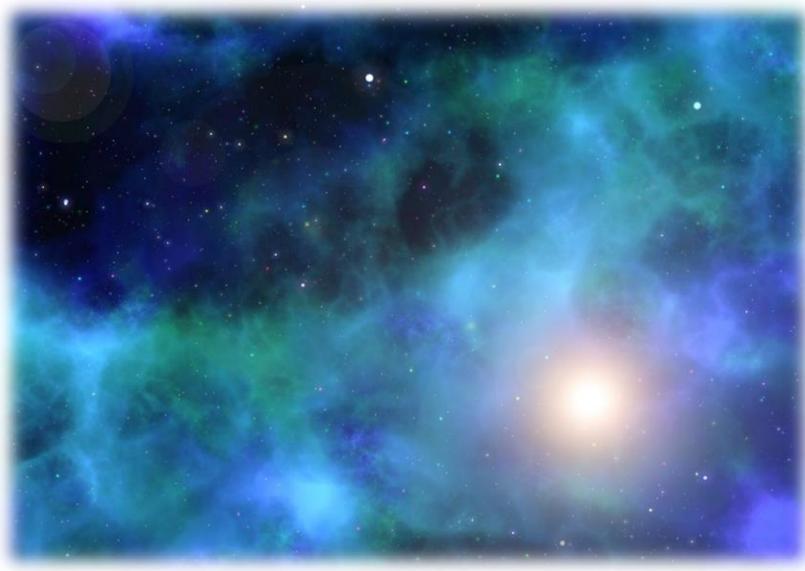
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I. In the sights of the aliens



1. The rejuvenation pill

After the invention of a rejuvenating pill, space and resources threaten to become scarce on planet Kadohan. The only way out is the search for a replacement planet. The choice is made for the planet "Earth". Unfortunately, intelligent life already exists there.



Search for a replacement planet

When the rejuvenation pill was launched on the planet Kadohan, it was foreseeable that resources would no longer be sufficient for everyone in the near future. Admittedly, a law regulating reproduction was passed immediately and procreation was completely switched over to artificial insemination. Nevertheless, it was clear that in the years to come – if reproduction was not to be completely abolished – a replacement planet for the coming generations would have to be found.

As a result of extensive cosmic explorations, the choice finally fell on the planet Earth. Firstly, it was relatively easy to reach for the Kadahanian spaceships. And secondly, the planet had interesting raw material deposits and also offered ideal conditions for permanent settlement.

The only problem was: Planet Earth was already populated. If the Kadahanians wanted to use it for their own population, they either had to reach an agreement with the dominant species or displace them.

As a result of a reconnaissance mission that was conducted undercover on Earth, the first alternative was classified as unrealistic. The Earthlings, the members of the exploration team unanimously reported, were an extremely aggressive species that would rather destroy their own planet than share it with others. In addition, the Earthlings themselves were said to be quickly-multiplying and to overstress the colonisation capacities of their planet, too.

So for the Kadahanians exactly that became a problem what made the earth attractive for them. Just because the planet offered ideal living conditions for them, the dominant species there was very similar to them in constitution and temperament. Living together and sharing resources proved to be difficult or even impossible.

In the end, therefore, only the second, invasive approach remained. This, however, was associated with logistical problems that could not easily be solved either. As the fact-finding mission had shown, the Earthlings had an extremely effective arsenal of destructive weapons at their disposal. Even if the Kadahanians' own protective shield was supposed to neutralise this deadly potential, there was still the danger that the Earthlings would be

driven to the extreme by the attack and make the planet permanently unusable with their weapons.

The only way to stop the Earthlings from this self-destructive act was to prepare the invasion long in advance and then implement it so quickly and effectively that the attacked would have no time to fight back. However, the Kadahanian fleet of spacecraft could hardly pass unnoticed through the radar screen that the exploratory mission had detected around Earth. The stealth mode, which worked tolerably for a single small space glider, reached its limits here. At the latest during the landing approach, the existence of the spaceships could no longer be concealed – and would then provoke the feared counterattack.

To make matters worse, the spaceships had to land in very specific, strategically favourable places to nip the Earthlings' resistance in the bud – namely in the vicinity of the more densely populated areas where the landing manoeuvre was particularly difficult to manage. Therefore the landing sites had to be marked accordingly. Thus towers with an altitude of at least 100 meters were needed, in order to indicate the landing sites by strong flashing signals.

The reconnaissance mission had also revealed that the engines of the large transport spaceships would heat up excessively on entering the Earth's atmosphere. In order to minimise the risk of explosion during the landing process, it was decided to cool the engines beforehand. For this purpose, giant propellers should rotate at the top of the towers. They were also expected to have an antiiconographic function, so that the spaceships would look like a swarm of meteorites from Earth.

Cover stories

The crucial question now was how this preliminary work could be carried out without arousing the mistrust of the Earthlings. In the Future Commission, where all issues essential to the planet were debated, it was quickly agreed that this would only be possible with the help of infiltrated pseudo-Earthlings who would conceal the true purpose of the construction sites. But with what kind of story should the actual function of the concrete towers be disguised?

The first to speak was the commissioner for the inner dynamics of cosmic events. His skull, which was bald as with all Kadahanians, was decorated with blue shimmering concentric circles. "What would it be like," he asked, "if we were to openly take up the mysterious, incomprehensible aspects of the structures – if we were to declare the concrete pillars to be sacred buildings?"

"I hardly think that would be a good idea," replied a Kadahanian woman who herself had taken part in the exploratory mission on Earth. Her dainty body almost seemed to sink into the puffy robe that was common on Kadahan. "Firstly, we need far more landing pillars than there are sacred buildings on Earth. And secondly, our reconnaissance mission has just shown that the importance of such buildings among Earthlings tends to decline. Additional sacred buildings would be very difficult to communicate to them."

"And if we label the landing towers as residential buildings?" pondered one who had been appointed to the Future Commission as a member of the construction team. His browless eyes gleamed full of energy.

"This is not a very realistic scenario either," replied the Kadahanian woman with the delicate figure. "The Earthlings live either all by themselves or in apartment blocks very close to one

another. Single standing residential towers would contradict their everyday habits. And besides, how should we then explain the rotor blades we want to mount on the towers?"

"Exactly!" another commissioner agreed with her. "Landing towers as residential buildings – that wouldn't work. We would then be inviting the Earthlings to the landing sites ourselves, so to speak. In this case we wouldn't have to go through all the trouble of disguising ourselves!"

"We could explain the whole thing to the Earthlings as a power generation project," one of them finally suggested. "Energy seems to be a scarce resource for Earthlings, too."

"Let's just work it out with the simulator," suggested another. "Then we'll see whether this narrative has enough persuasive power."

So the simulator in the corner of the meeting room was fed with the data that would support the fiction "power generation by rotor blades at high altitude". The result was extremely sobering: high energy expenditure in the manufacturing of the turbines, uncertain, fluctuating energy generation, high costs for the later cumbersome disposal of the material, plus follow-up costs due to infrasound-induced health damage as well as soil compaction and the loss of green spaces. The narrative therefore hardly seemed to be suitable as a justification scheme for covering entire areas with gigantic concrete towers.

"Too bad – that was probably the wrong idea," even the person who had introduced the proposal had to admit.

At this point the head of the fact-finding mission, who had so far stayed out of the discussion, joined the conversation. "Now, wait a minute. I don't think the proposal is completely far-fetched," he contradicted the general assessment. On his skull he had drawn a window-like rectangle – perhaps a symbol for the view into distant worlds.

Everyone looked at him in astonishment. The expedition leader seemed to enjoy their amazement. He had a youthful appearance, but this was mainly due to the fact that he had only recently taken a rejuvenation pill. In truth, he was one of the most experienced experts in the group. After all, he had been head of the extrastellar exploration department for over 100 years.

"But even small children don't fall for this fairy tale," disagreed a Kadohanian woman with a particularly wide robe. It was waving like a stormy sea when she gesticulated mockingly.

"Maybe not on our planet," admitted the expedition leader. "We must not forget, however, that although we resemble Earthlings on the outside, we differ greatly from them in our brain structure. While in our case the processing of emotions and analytical operations take place in two independent brains, the Earthlings have only one organ for both. Therefore, the thought processes can directly be influenced by strong emotions."

"Very interesting," interfered another commissioner. "But how can we benefit from that?"

The expedition leader smiled mischievously – with the left side of his face, the one where his emotional brain was located. "Well," he explained, "all we have to do is create a catastrophe that demonstrates to Earthlings the unreliability of another energy source they depend on. The resulting feelings of fear will automatically increase the willingness to believe in our wind power story."

The Earthling's brain

The others still looked at him skeptically. "And what kind of catastrophe could this be?" a commissioner sitting opposite him asked.

"Well, I was thinking of an accident in a nuclear power station," replied the expedition leader.

"But nuclear power is completely harmless," someone objected.

"For us it is," the expedition leader admitted. "We are immune to the radiation it produces. But for the Earthlings, it poses a deadly threat. And because this threat is invisible and persists for centuries after the use of the required material, there is something very sinister about it. So all we have to do is activate and intensify an already existing sense of threat in order to achieve our goals."

The colleague opposite him shook his head. "Wait, I don't understand. Why should the Earthlings approve of an ineffective form of energy production just because they have recognised another form as harmful to them? After all, for us it was no problem to reject the idea either. All we had to do was take a quick look at our simulator!"

"The Earthlings don't have real simulators at their disposal," the expedition leader explained. "Instead, they make complicated calculations, which often lead to contradictory results and are easy to manipulate. In addition, the Earthlings find thinking tiring – their brains are simply not as far developed as ours. Therefore, they prefer to adopt the opinions of others rather than drawing their own conclusions from the facts. This suits us insofar as we only have to get the most important opinion leaders on our side to steer the Earthlings in the direction we want them to take."

"Do you already have a clear idea of who these opinion leaders are?" someone asked.

The expedition leader nodded. "I think we should mainly get the representatives of the environmental movement on our side."

As he saw the uncomprehending looks of the others, he added: "The Earthlings do not see themselves as part of a whole, but as something that is opposed to the rest of what exists on their planet. Therefore they call everything they do not feel as an immediate part of their own world – the Earthling world in the narrower sense – 'environment', which means 'surrounding world'. This part of their world has primarily a serving function for the Earthlings and is exploited by them to satisfy their needs. Those who see themselves as 'environmentalists' advocate a more careful treatment of the environment – either because they consider it to have an intrinsic value, or because they fear health risks for their own species. If we succeed in finding supporters for our fictional project in this group, we will give it a clean, 'green' appearance and thus generally increase its credibility potential."

"And how is this to be done?" asked a commissioner who had been frowning all along. "I thought our simulator predicted negative effects on what Earthlings call the 'environment', especially on creatures that move through the air."

"As already mentioned – the thinking of the Earthlings is not independent of their feelings," the expedition leader reminded. "If the catastrophe I spoke of is strong enough to release the desired emotions, it will remove all doubts about our wind power narrative."

Magic Numbers

"But that won't last forever," another critic said. "Eventually, the negative effects of the power generation fiction will become obvious."

The expedition leader showed his half smile again. "That may well be – which is why we must use the initial fears to set in motion a self-reinforcing process. The original, primary interests in the new form of power generation will thus be supplemented by other, secondary interests".

"And what kind of interests are these?" the critic wanted to know.

"Well, I primarily thought of financial interests," explained the expedition leader. "As the Earthlings say: 'Money makes the world go round'."

The others looked at him irritated. "Money?" someone finally asked. "What's that?"

The expedition leader smiled, which means: The right corner of his mouth, the side where his thinking brain was located, twitched slightly. "Well, how can I explain this? In the end it is a kind of magic numbers. They exist in both material form – as tiny metal plates or paper notes – and immaterial form. In the latter case, they are no more than columns of numbers on a monitor. Everyone needs a minimum of them to satisfy their basic needs. Anything beyond that can be used to fulfill your dreams."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed the commissioner who had just expressed his scepticism.

"Everyone knows that it is the very nature of dreams that they can't be fulfilled!"

"That's right," admitted the expedition leader. "But for the Earthlings it doesn't matter at all whether they really try to fulfill their dreams with the money or only dream of the fulfilment of their dreams – the numbers have an electrifying effect on them either way. They are really crazy about them. Therefore, if we link the emotions associated with them to our wind power story, we will be able to stop critical enquiries for a long time. Even those who see themselves as environmentalists might, under these circumstances, see what is harmful to the environment as beneficial to it. Maybe this could even be a way to make the Earthlings see our landing pillars as sacred buildings in the end. This would make our narrative practically unassailable."

Even now, scepticism still prevailed in the commission. The customs of the Earthlings simply seemed too strange to most of the commissioners. However, for lack of alternatives, it was decided to implement the project. Perhaps things would turn out to be easier than they seemed at the moment.

2. A therapy session

Alfons Heimenross, a well-known environmental politician, is in an identity crisis: he has become a stranger to himself.



Mrs Andrews, an experienced therapist, looked attentively at her client. Her consulting room looked a little like a cave from childhood. Ceiling floodlights produced a subdued light that was only weakly reflected by the terracotta-coloured walls. The smooth carpet swallowed every superfluous noise, so that the sound of the voice could spread undisturbed.

The best conditions for a journey of the soul were also offered by the various seating arrangements. Besides a computer table with guest chairs and a classic Sigmund Freud couch, there was also a seating group with blue armchairs. These were so soft that they surrounded the lost and searching souls like a mother holding a crying child in her arms. Those who sank into them got a physical impression of what was in store for their soul: the sinking into their own self.

After initial hesitation, Alfons Heimenross had made himself comfortable on the Sigmund Freud couch. The main reason for this choice was that he felt infinitely tired this morning, as he had for several weeks. Furthermore, he hated soft armchairs. They always reminded him of a very unpleasant experience from his childhood, when he almost drowned in a swamp – and he didn't want to start the journey of the soul right at the beginning of his earliest traumas.

What made things worse was that he had never been to a therapist before. He never thought he would see one either. But the events of the last few weeks had worried him so much that he just couldn't help himself any more.

After his first words Heimenross had fallen into a sullen silence. It almost seemed as if he was half asleep. So the therapist asked in a lullaby voice: "You said you have the impression of being a stranger to yourself?"

Heimenross flinched abruptly. It startled him to hear what he had said about himself from another mouth. "I know ... it ... it sounds kind of ridiculous. Maybe I'm expressing myself wrong – I'm not very good at this kind of conversation."

The therapist smiled indulgently. With her rimless glasses and the notepad in her hand, she looked more like a teacher taking notes for the next report card. This was another reason

why Heimenross avoided looking her in the face – although the woman, all psychologist, did everything she could to facilitate his confession.

"There is nothing ridiculous or wrong here," she encouraged her client. "Just give free rein to your feelings and thoughts. Think of a dream journey: Everything comes as it comes, nothing is forbidden. Every feeling is allowed to find a picture."

Since Heimenross nevertheless remained stubbornly silent, the therapist built him another bridge: "Just describe a situation in which you are haunted by these feelings of strangeness." Heimenross' eyelids twitched. "Well," he explained haltingly, "for example in the morning, in front of the mirror, when I look into my face, I ... I often have the feeling that I am not the one looking at myself from the mirror. Those pale lips, the unkempt hair, the deep rings under my eyes ... It's not like me at all."

The therapist smiled. "These feelings sound quite familiar to me ..."

A slight redness shimmered on Heimenross' cheeks. "See what I mean? That all sounds kind of stupid. Midlife crisis, you could say, the hair is not so strong anymore, I could cut it back, half-length is not ideal for a politician anyway. And the rings under the eyes: not enough sleep, the typical problem of all workaholics. Take a break, Heimenross, I could say to myself, just go to the seaside for two weeks, then you can start off again."

The therapist scribbled something in her notebook. "Wouldn't that be a good idea? Why don't you just give in to this desire?"

"That's exactly the problem!" Heimenross exclaimed, almost like in one of his parliamentary speeches. "I've already tried to take more time for myself. I've been to the sauna again and have chilled out with friends in the evening, like I used to when I didn't have so many obligations. But none of that helps. I just can't get rid of this damned feeling of not being myself anymore! I'm already feeling all fidgety about it."

The therapist looked up from her notepad. "Could it be that you are suffering from insomnia?"

"I can't rule it out," Heimenross admitted. "But the opposite can be true as well. In any case, I rather have the feeling of sleeping too soundly. Lately I've been having very intense dreams that I can remember quite clearly in the morning. I almost have the impression that the dreams are real."

The therapist bent over slightly. Carefully, as if she feared to destroy the precious confession, she asked: "And what kind of dreams are these?"

Heimenross sighed. "Above all, there is one dream that keeps coming back. A certain image that I just can't get rid of: I wake up in the morning – I mean: I dream that I wake up – and the whole world is covered with huge reinforced concrete towers. I walk through an endless forest of concrete trees, I run and run and run, ever further I run, I run and run ..."

The therapist's ballpoint pen scurried busily over the pages of her notebook. "And in the morning you feel shattered by these nightmares?"

Heimenross shook his head violently. "That's just what is so strange about it!" he clarified. "The dreams are no nightmares to me at all. That's what I mean when I say: I am becoming a stranger to myself. The walks through the concrete forest are quite pleasant for me. I enjoy stroking with my hand over the smooth steel trunks that are not threatened by decay. I have even caught myself stopping in front of highway bridges and admiring their powerful concrete pillars. And in the past I used to chain myself to every tree that should be chopped down for a road!"

The therapist threw a worried look at Heimenross. Hectic spots glowed on his face, the corners of his mouth twitched uncontrollably. In an emphatically calm tone she suggested:

"Try to admit your feelings! Steel and concrete are the building materials of our time. Perhaps you should simply not resist to that fact and acknowledge it instead."

Heimenross frowned. For a while he fell back into a brooding silence. "If it were only these dreams ... these silly dreams," he murmured monotonously, as if he was talking to himself. "What worries me most is ... Even when dealing with others, I have the impression of looking at me from the outside ..."

The therapist adjusted her glasses. "And how does that manifest itself?" she asked, lowering her voice sensitively.

Heimenross scratched first his right ear, then his left. Restlessly he slid around on the couch. "Well," he explained, "for example, I have had a constant craving for pizza for some time now. Every evening I order one from the pizza service around the corner – but the next morning I can't remember the taste of the pizza or the face of the pizza delivery boy. It's like someone else ordered the pizza."

Thoughtfully, the therapist stroked her chin. "Are you sure you're not dreaming up this pizza order?"

Heimenross laughed bitterly. "I only have to look at the empty pizza box – and at my stomach girth. No, the pizza consumption is real. Only the memory of it is suspended."

"Do you perhaps drink too much red wine with that?" asked the therapist, half joking.

Heimenross shook his head again. "I would not call one or two glasses too much. And besides, if my frequent blackouts were due to the wine, I wouldn't have my psyche examined, but my liver."

"Well," summed up the therapist as she closed her notepad. "This does indeed seem to be a rather special case with you. It would be best if you wrote down everything that preys on your mind over the next days. I, for one, will take a close look at my notes and think it all over again until the next session. Then hopefully we'll see more clearly."

Fatigued, Heimenross rose from the couch. He felt as if he had just had a failed operation.

3. StarWind

As part of their mission to explore planet Earth, the Kadahanians found the company StarWind. The first experiments with reprogramming an Earthling, who should serve them as an intermediary for their invasion plans, are promising as well.



The Earthlings, God and the universe

The business premises of the StarWind Company, which promised its customers comprehensive support in the area of "Energy Consulting", appeared bright and friendly. Located on the tenth floor of a modern office complex, the company's headquarters offered an eagle-like view over the city.

Behind a broad window front, which took up almost the entire outer wall, individual, generously proportioned offices were grouped around a showroom. The office furniture shimmered in transparent plexiglass that in the light-flooded rooms seemed to float in the air. Thus everything emanated the promising message of a new era: Transparency! Purity! Clarity! Future!

The name "StarWind" had initially caused laughter on Kadahan. The expedition leader – who was now sitting as office manager in the StarWind premises – could still remember the reactions of his co-deciders in the Future Commission. Most of them had taken his proposal as a joke. Was this not too obvious an allusion to the real objectives associated with the alleged energy supply? Wouldn't even the most stupid Earthling realise that StarWind was a Trojan horse?

But the expedition leader did not get unsettled by the laughter of the others. "I can understand that you find the name funny. But try to put yourself in the Earthlings' shoes. Remember what I told you about their spaceships? By our standards, they are rather bouncing than flying. The Earthlings can't even fly to their neighboring planet! They are already proud when they manage the jump to their moon without any problems. So how could they assume that beings from a planet light years away are among them?"

The expedition leader stroked his eyes with a finger – which on Kadahan was an expression of contempt for others. After the laughter had died down completely, he added: "Please do not forget: For the Earthlings, the universe is not a space for locomotion. They see other galaxies only from a distance. Therefore, the cosmos appears to them as one big mystery. And because their thinking constantly mixes with their feelings, they see the infinity of space as a kind of symbol for what they call 'God'."

"God?" a Kadahanian woman asked in astonishment. "What is this?" It was a younger participant who had been appointed to the expert panel for the first time.

The expedition leader sighed. "This is really hard to explain ... God is basically a synonym for everything that the Earthlings are not able to understand. It stands for everything that goes beyond their limited imagination, be it the intrinsic link between things in their world or the relationship between their own world and others."

"And why should it be of any use to allude to space with the name of our company?" the new commission member wanted to know. "Won't that rather disconcert the Earthlings?"

"In fact, quite the opposite will be the case," the expedition leader contradicted. "Precisely because they do not understand the universe, they are fascinated by everything that is linked to it. They even invent their own stories about space travel, in which they dream up what they cannot achieve. And 'star' is also a term they use for people who stand out from everyday life, for beings they look up to like to the stars. So alluding to distant stars and the secret power that emanates from them makes our company even more attractive to Earthlings."

Hairy Earthlings

While the expedition leader was able to assert himself on this issue, he had to give in to the concerns expressed on another point. His proposal to transfer the implementation of the project exclusively to disguised Kadahanians was rejected in the end. To most members of the expert panel, such an approach seemed too risky. What if the Earthlings should have a sensorium for extraterrestrial intelligence after all? Or if, despite all immunological precautions, harmful germs were transmitted to the infiltrated Kadahanians? What if, conversely, they could be identified as transmitters of diseases to the Earthlings?

No, these risks seemed almost impossible to control. So in the end it was decided that only the basic staff of StarWind should consist of Kadahanians. Even then, the measures that had to be taken for anti-microbe defense and camouflage proved to be quite extensive. Some of the problems only became apparent when the concrete planning began.

There was the hair issue, for example. On Kadahan, hair had been stopped from growing for a long time. It was considered as a superfluous breeding ground for undesirable microorganisms. Those who had not participated in the fact-finding mission could not believe at first that this was different with the Earthlings.

"And the Earthlings are really still walking around hairy?" asked a member of the expert panel. "Don't they have any depilatories?"

"Of course they have," the expedition leader made clear. "But they don't use them everywhere. Especially the head hair has an almost cultic meaning for them. There are even certain magic remedies that are said to make hair grow again when it has fallen out."

The questioner shook his head in amazement: "That seems pretty absurd to me ..."

The left corner of the expedition leader's mouth twitched slightly upwards – his emotional brain had been activated. "You must not forget that Earthlings are not a particularly highly developed form of intelligence," he explained. "They are still noticeably embedded in the more primitive forms of life from which they evolved. This also explains their attachment to their scalp hair. It shows us how powerful the primitive still is in them."

"I still don't understand it," admitted one of those present. "Why do they let their fur grow precisely on their head – just above the brain? Are they ashamed of their intelligence? Or is their intelligence so limited that they don't even notice it?"

The expedition leader stroked his forehead with his hand. "I don't think we should judge the Earthlings so much by ourselves," he said. "On our planet artificial insemination has been

standard practice for a very long time. The Earthlings know it too, but they only use it if there is no other way. In general, reproduction is still a very animalistic matter for them. Therefore they also need animalistic stimuli. This could be a reason for their clinging to the head hair."

"So it is a conscious commitment to savagery?" someone else asked.

"No," clarified the expedition leader, "not at all. Most of the Earthlings tame their hair regularly, there are even some very artistic fur forms. For many of them hair is also an expression of their personality, just like the patterns we paint on our scalps. But it all has a relation to reproduction at the same time. Even the clothing is more physical on Earth, quite different from our planet, where everyone walks around in wide capes."

"It will take some time to get used to this," remarked one who was scheduled to participate in the next mission.

The expedition leader nodded. "True, there's no denying that. Artificial hair is fortunately very easy to obtain on earth, as are Earthlings' clothes, of course. But that doesn't tell us how to move around in these clothes. We'll have to practice this intensively in order not to appear as foreign bodies."

"Respecively to be recognised as foreign bodies," one of them joked.

General whispering and laughter, then another one spoke up: "Well, that's cleared up. Much more important to me is another question: What criteria do we use to select suitable Earthlings for our program? And how do we ensure that they exhibit the desired behavior? Will the Earthlings respond accordingly to the instruments at our disposal?"

Undercover operation on planet Earth

The expedition leader – who was now at the time acting as office manager of the StarWind Company – had to smile when he thought back to these discussions. Involuntarily he even pulled both corners of his mouth upwards. He had trained himself to do so especially for the new Earth mission, so as not to attract attention with his extraterrestrial way of smiling. How long ago might the discussions on Kadahan have been? A few weeks? Or did the discussions even take place several months ago? The expedition leader could not say for sure. With the rejuvenation pill, even longer periods shrank to short moments for him. Time was just something very relative.

"Shall I begin my presentation now?"

The expedition leader turned to Mrs Black, his assistant. He still couldn't get used to her new appearance. Especially strange to him was the dark wig that now covered her head. Even though she had chosen a short haircut it seemed quite animalistic to him. No less irritating he found the glued-on eyebrows and the business suit, which the assistant already wore with an impressive matter-of-course manner.

He himself found it much harder to get accustomed to the uniform that the Earthlings' dress code required for business people like him. He felt the suit was like a prison for his body. And the tie he wore around his neck made him feel choking – although he had already loosened it in an unseemly way.

Of course, as long as they were among themselves, they could have actually taken off their disguises. Nevertheless, he had insisted on adapting to earthly customs at any time. Only in this way could the foreign rites – as he had experienced on missions to other galaxies – become a second skin for them. Only then would they move in it as naturally as the Earthlings themselves.

However, the strict code of conduct was also due to security concerns. Although the Earthlings as a whole lagged far behind the civilisation of Kadohan in their technical abilities, they had reached a surprisingly high level in some areas. This was particularly deceptive, all the more so because it contradicted the often not very cultivated manners the Earthlings showed among themselves.

So it could also not be excluded that the Earthlings had possibilities to monitor what was happening inside the offices of StarWind. Possibly others saw the new company as an unwelcome competitor and therefore spied on it. This was something they had to pay attention to. Such trivialities should by no means lead to a failure of the great mission of gaining new living space and new resources for the Kadohanians!

First external contacts

The presentation the assistant spoke of referred to the experiments with the Earthling they had chosen as the first intermediary for their project. The requirements to be considered in the selection process had already been determined on Kadohan: It should be a person who – according to the Earthlings' standards – was "close to nature", but at the same time had no reservations about the business world. The person should appear close to the people, but nevertheless be willing to take the lead. And he or she should warn of the dangers of industrial energy production, while at the same time appreciating the amenities that electricity offers.

So the choice was made for a certain Alfons Heimenross. With his half-long hair and the dialectal colouring of his language, he emanated – so the Kadahanian selection committee found – a kind of tamed wildness. He seemed close enough to nature to be found appealing by nature lovers, but at the same time serious enough not to meet with rejection in the business world. In addition, he was a passionate opponent of all forms of energy production that had previously been commonplace, but lived in an environment that depended heavily on intensive electricity production. So he seemed to be more easily reprogrammable than others in the interest of the Kadahanian mission.

Another advantage offered by Alfons Heimenross was that, as a politician, he had the necessary contacts to advance large-scale projects. What was also favourable: he lived alone. Picking him up for the nighttime reprogramming experiments was therefore much less problematic. It was enough to imprint him on the people who picked him up every night for this purpose. No consideration had to be given to possible family members.

At regular intervals they administered a hypnotic drug to Heimenross via a pizza service. This allowed them to transport him to the experimental laboratory like a sleepwalker. In the early morning they regularly gave him a special forgetting serum. As a result, his convictions changed insidiously, without him being able to remember the circumstances under which this happened.

Reprogramming of an Earthling's brain

The expedition leader nodded to the assistant who thereupon put on her demonstration glasses. The others – a total of ten Kadahanians took part in the mission – did the same. Now they could all see the assistant as well as the illustrative material she used for her presentation.

The introductory picture showed Heimenross in the large showroom of StarWind, next to the windmill dummy that seemed to grow towards the sky in the middle of the room. In order to reinforce this impression, they had even made a ceiling breakthrough. The wind turbine now seemed to pierce the ceiling and thus vividly symbolised the "reach for the stars" promised by StarWind. At the same time, it reflected the idea that the profits to be achieved with the new energy would "go through the ceiling". Furthermore, the dome that vaulted over the wind turbine lent it a sublime, almost religious appearance.

"Is everyone ready?" the assistant asked. After a unanimous nod, she began her explanations: "For programming the test subject, we have resorted to established image-pairing procedures. In addition, we have used neural amplification mechanisms. Whenever we could identify a brain region that responded positively to the stimulus, we amplified the corresponding brain activity with a reward serum."

The assistant tapped briefly against her glasses. These then conjured up a recording from the early days of the experiments. "As you can see, the test subject first reacted very unfavourably to pictures of concrete pillars and rotor blades," she commented.

In fact, Heimenross' negative reaction was extremely strong. He pulled a visibly disgusted face and even turned away from the picture when he was exposed to it for a longer time. All the more astonishing was the change that the assistant and her team had apparently brought about after only a short time.

Another tapping against the glasses, then another recording of the experiments appeared. This time the proband's negative emotional responding was already much less pronounced. "We first tried to change the subject's attitude by using a combination of concrete and piles of money or concrete and nature pictures," explained the assistant. "However, we were only able to achieve a satisfactory effect when we combined both approaches. The test person responded particularly well to pictures of sunflowers. Apparently the subject has a special emotional relationship to them."

The next recording already demonstrated the success of the test setup. It showed Heimenross in front of the miniature wind turbine, which in the virtual world was flanked on one side by a blooming sunflower and on the other side by a large pile of money. His face glowed with enthusiasm, full of passion he shouted: "Wind power is green, I want wind power, green is the future, green is wind power, we need more wind turbines, wind turbines are green, so green, they are greening so green ..."

"A bit excessive, don't you think?" asked the expedition leader to the group.

"Yes, and at the same time a bit too wooden," another agreed with him. "We should inject him with a bit more respectability. Otherwise no one will take him seriously!"

"Be patient – that was only the beginning!" the assistant made clear. "We first had to arouse a certain passion in the test person. Only then was it possible to immunise the subject against the negative side effects of the stimulus source."

A renewed tapping against the glasses conjured a big bird in front of the eyes of the expedition members. It flew straight towards the wind turbine and got caught in its rotor blades. Tumbling it fell down and hit the ground with a heavy thud. Into the animal's last twitching Heimenross shouted: "Only wind power is clean, nothing is purer than wind power. Whoever wants clean energy must be prepared to make sacrifices. The sacrifice of today is the foundation for the life of tomorrow. Only wind power can ensure the future of our children."

"That makes him look more statesmanlike," confirmed one of the group.

The assistant nodded contentedly. "Yes, we have certainly made significant progress in our experiments. But I must confess: It was hard work. The hardest part for us was overcoming the subject's resistance to cutting down trees for our reinforced concrete towers."

This statement was followed by another recording that illustrated what the assistant meant. While a chainsaw was cutting into a tree trunk, Heimenross covered his ears and pulled his face in disgust.

"In the end, however, we achieved the desired stimulus-response coupling," the assistant summed up. "But we had to increase significantly the secondary stimuli for this – especially on the monetary side."

She was tapping against her glasses again. Now Heimenross was completely unimpressed by the tree felling. While next to him a gigantic clearing machine cutted a swathe for transporting wind turbine parts into the forest, he explained unmoved: "The single tree means nothing, the forest means everything. We have to save the forest, for that we have to plant wind turbines, more and more wind turbines, because wind power is green, therefore it alone can save the forest".

Spontaneously everyone raised their index fingers next to their foreheads – a sign of highest recognition on Kadohan. Only the expedition leader corrected himself shortly afterwards and clapped his hands instead, in order to adapt to the customs on Earth. "Really a very impressive result, Mrs Black," he praised the assistant.

The prison of the name

He still did not succeed in suppressing the ironic undertone in his voice when he said "Mrs Black". It wasn't so much the fact that his assistant had named herself after her hair colour that made him smile. After all, he too – as "Guntram Groentraed" – had named himself after a colour, albeit in a less direct way.

No, it wasn't the name itself that seemed odd to him. He just couldn't get used to the fact that everyone on Earth was fixed to a certain name. On Kadohan all inhabitants were officially registered under an insignificant number. Names could be chosen freely – and changed at any time. As a rule, nobody stayed with a particular name for too long. Most Kadohanians changed their names at regular intervals – especially when they felt that a major change had taken place in their lives.

The only important thing was to inform the others about the name in good time. This was often an opportunity to have conversations that went beyond everyday talks. The change of name was an indication of real change – and at the same time a signal that those who gave themselves a new name wanted to talk about it.

The expedition leader cringed. The thought of being "Mrs Black" a whole life long seemed terrible to him. His gaze wandered to the window and got lost in the growing twilight. It was as if he wanted to penetrate the evening fog with his eyes and fly through the cosmic darkness to his home planet. He knew that Kadohan was floating somewhere out there, safe and lost at the same time.

4. The enlightenment

During a walk Alfons Heimenross comes across the company StarWind. Spontaneously he decides to arrange a consultation appointment.



Disturbing pictures

Lost in thought, Alfons Heimenross stared at the polished brass plate with the engraved letters: "StarWind". The glittering name on the shield seemed strangely familiar to him. And yet he was quite certain that he had never been in contact with this company before.

The day had gone pretty strange until then anyway. The nuclear accident, which had dominated the public debate for days, had also been the main topic in Parliament. Heimenross was very upset by the discussions. Admittedly, the accident had happened on the other side of the world. But the aerial photographs of the burning reactor, the images of the animals left behind and now dying miserably, and the recordings of the people driven from their homes were omnipresent.

Fortunately, the civil protection seemed to work: the government and the operating company had reacted immediately and sent rescue teams to contain the disaster. But in fact, what did that mean: containment? After all, no one could predict how the radioactive cloud would move on! That was exactly the uncanny thing about the threat: that it spread like a swarm of extraterrestrial warriors, whose form of existence was so different from all earthly life that no human could perceive it. This impression was reinforced by the special workers, who in their full-body protective suits looked like aliens themselves.

After the parliamentary debate, which had made him fully aware of the extent and consequences of the catastrophe, Heimenross had a feeling of suffocation. He urgently needed to go outside to collect himself. Sucking in the oxygen in deep draughts, he had moved further and further away from the parliament building until it was finally clear: he would miss the afternoon session. Never mind, he had said to himself, the agenda contained only items that did not concern his area of expertise anyway.

Furthermore, he thought that the solution of the nuclear problem had to be an absolute priority from now on. How could his colleagues in Parliament still debate about road traffic regulations and the expansion of nursery schools while the world outside was going under? No, first a way had to be found to leave nuclear energy behind, everything else was secondary for now.

The windmill dome

What a fortunate coincidence that his path, while these thoughts were driving him, had led him to this particular place! To a company that promised to show ways to alternative forms of power generation with its "Energy Consulting". Where had he heard the name of the company before? And why did the surroundings look so familiar to him, even though he had always ignored the new office complex, whose construction he as a politician had tried in vain to prevent?

But all this, he said to himself, should not matter now that it was about nothing less than saving the planet! He simply had to follow the hint of fate and take the first step towards a better future.

Resolutely Heimenross pressed the bell button next to the brass plate. Spontaneous visits were not his usual style, especially not in business dealings. Normally he had his secretary arrange the appointments – and usually the ones called up went to his office. But he knew, of course, that the beginning of a new era also required a departure from old habits.

When he opened the door to the business premises of StarWind, a feeling awoke in Heimenross that seemed to rise as if from a deep well. He had not felt something like that for a long, long time. It was like a fragrance evoking ancient memories – memories that got lost in the mist of the past as soon as he tried to catch their shape.

Directly behind the door he was welcomed by a spacious showroom, which contained nothing but a huge windmill dummy. At its upper end it was vaulted by a glass dome. Thus the sparks of light glittered even brighter on its rotor blades, which were spinning incessantly like a perpetuum mobile. It almost seemed as if the sun's rays were enveloping the structure in a gloriole.

Suddenly Heimenross realised what the feeling that floated through his veins reminded him of: it led him back to the church services to which he had accompanied his grandmother in his early childhood. He clearly felt the breath of the incense penetrating his pores, those stunning vapours, which had always made him feel as if his eyes were penetrating the skeleton of the church ceiling and looking straight into the very center of the sky.

Hypnotic glances

"Would you like a consultation?"

Startled, Heimenross turned around. He felt like a thief in the sanctum sanctorum. In front of him stood a neat young woman, obviously some kind of receptionist. "Yes," he stammered, "a consultation ... That would be ... would be a good idea ..."

The young woman smiled encouragingly at him. "Black," she introduced herself, "I'm the assistant manager."

Heimenross was quite pleased with the woman, whose dark hair went perfectly with her light blue suit. Only her way of shaking hands appeared somewhat awkward to him.

Although she was smaller than him, she gave him her hand from above, as if she wanted to bag a fish.

"We can just go to my office," she suggested. "There I'll check my schedule to see when we can arrange a consultation."

Heimenross trotted mechanically after the attractive assistant. He was still pretty dazed by the impression the cathedral-like showroom had left in him.

The assistant sat down at her screen and opened the calendar. "You're lucky," she said after a quick glance at it. "Just today someone called off. If you like, you can talk to our managing director right now."

Heimenross felt a little uncomfortable in his skin. The whole thing went a bit too fast for him. Particularly disturbing, however, was the way this Mrs Black looked at him. But what actually bothered him about this look? The young woman smiled at him in a cheerful way, her whole face emanated kindness and obligingness. Why then did he have the impression that her gaze was piercing his outer shell and penetrating his innermost being, or even that these eyes were looking at him from within himself?

The look had something hypnotic, Heimenross could not escape it. "That ... that would really be great," he heard himself say.

Gaily the assistant nodded at him. "Let's see if Mr Groentraed has time for you."

While she reached for the phone to announce the visitor, Heimenross had the strange feeling of seeing himself from the outside. It was quite bizarre ... Everything went exactly as expected in a business appointment: reception by a secretary, followed by a brief chat, finally the actual meeting. There was nothing unusual or even weird about what happened here. And yet it seemed to Heimenross that this was nothing but a dream. Or more precisely, that he had dreamed it all before. In short, it appeared to him as if he was dreaming of a dream he could only vaguely remember.

A visionary film

This feeling, however, disappeared immediately when he entered the office of the managing director. With his neatly parted hair, the shimmering grey suit and the perfectly fitting tie, Mr Groentraed emanated great self-confidence. The twilight of the daydream that had enveloped Heimenross quickly evaporated.

"What good can we do for you?" asked the managing director jovially after they had sat down in the meeting area with the transparent furniture.

Uncertain as to how he should initiate the unexpected conversation, Heimenross involuntarily fell into his political jargon: "Well, as an environmental politician, I ... well, let's put it this way: I would say we have to make a complete new start with energy supply."

To Heimenross' amazement, Groentraed put his index fingers to his temples. Did he find his proposal so far-fetched? But no, apparently he was only scratching himself. Relieved, Heimenross saw his counterpart nod.

"You are absolutely right," Groentraed agreed with him. "We just can't go on like this."

"Yes", Heimenross added with a touch of pathos, "with our current technologies we are putting the future of our children at risk! Here and now – and not in 20 years – we must develop viable alternatives."

A corner of Groentraed's mouth twitched. Was that a smile? Or rather the excitement that the managing director of a start-up naturally felt when meeting with a well-known politician?

But Groentraed immediately regained control of himself. "I think you've come to the right place," he underlined. "If you don't mind, I could show you a little film that illustrates our visions."

Of course Heimenross agreed. This was exactly what he had hoped for: a concrete suggestion for a change of direction.

Groentraed took his laptop from his desk and connected it to a beamer. At the same moment a bright flash of light from the opposite wall pierced Heimenross's eyes. On closer inspection, he recognised it as a wheel of fire. It circled around itself ceaselessly, kept in motion by its enormous flame arms. Incessantly it drew from itself the power to enlighten and warm the world.

Dazzled, Heimenross squinted his eyes. And only now, while soft spherical music began to accompany the short film, did he realise that what he saw was in fact a wind turbine. The impression to see a wheel of fire was simply caused by the fact that the sun shone so brightly on the windmill.

The sparkle was still visible when the camera gradually moved away from the close-up and showed the wind turbine from a greater distance. Now the sun's rays gleamed like diamonds on the large rotor blades. A voice whispered from offstage: "A new dawn has come ..."

Heimenross felt carried away by the flight of the camera, which was now slowly moving into the long shot. More and more the whole windmill emerged out of the morning mist that billowed at its feet, until finally, still illuminated by the rising sun, it grew up to the sky like an enormous torch. The further the camera moved away from it, the more its wings blurred with those of other windmills that lined up beside it.

Heimenross realised that what he saw was a whole wreath of wind turbines, which formed a kind of dam around a small town. Between them and the houses were deep moats filled with water. As the camera rose even higher into the air, it became clear that the other towns spread across the plain were also surrounded by such a circle of windmills and moats.

From a distance, the concrete towers of the wind turbines looked like jail bars. The towns thus appeared to be prison cells in which the inhabitants were locked up. On the whole, the scenery resembled a vast open-air prison. Heimenross, however, did not at all perceive the picture as his mind suggested. A feeling of security flowed through him at the sight of the windmill wreaths, a feeling of being sheltered, of protection against the hostilities of the unpredictable fate.

Yes, he thought, moved, while the camera stopped and showed the mock-up from the highest possible height: It was a nest that the windmills built around the cities. A warm refuge, impregnable to enemies. He nodded involuntarily as the voice whispered from offstage to the slowly fading spherical sounds: "StarWind: The future is now ..."

The gateway to the future

When the film was over, there was a short silence at first. Apparently the managing director wanted the film's impact to resonate a little in the potential client.

In fact, Heimenross needed some time to collect himself. The pictures had made a lasting impression on him. In the end, however, his political instinct gained the upper hand and he decided to rather express his skepticism. As he knew from many years of experience with lobbyists, this was the only way to distinguish between advertising messages and facts.

"A fascinating vision, indeed," he remarked appreciatively. "But perhaps a little beyond our capabilities ..."

The corners of the managing director's mouth twitched. "Of course, this is only a simulation. But beyond our capabilities? I wouldn't say that. All it takes is the political will to make the visions come true."

"Do you really believe that wind power has the potential of supplying an entire country with energy?" Heimenross followed up. "The wind doesn't blow all the time. So how can we ..."

Groentraed didn't let him finish. "If I may interrupt you at this point ... I would like to draw your attention to the moats that surround the settlement areas in our film. These ditches are designed as pumped-storage power plants in which the energy generated can be 'stored', so to say, until it is used. This ensures that there will be enough energy even in times of lulls."

Heimenross frowned. "And that works?"

"But of course," Groentraed confirmed. "All our simulations are based on many years of research and on calculations which our expert teams have checked several times, using a wide variety of scenarios."

"Okay, well," Heimenross conceded, "that is for the experts to decide. I can't assess that. But there is another question – the question of financial viability. The costs of such an ambitious conversion project would possibly go beyond the national budget. So, for that reason alone, it probably won't receive majority support."

The manager leaned back in his chair and fixed his client with his eyes. Just as before with the assistant, Heimenross again had the unsettling feeling of being looked at from the inside. Dazed, he glanced aside.

With a calm, almost soporific voice, Groentraed spoke to his guest: "Perhaps we should take a closer look at the costs ... Then you will see: today's savings are tomorrow's additional expenditure. You simply have to think on larger scales here! If we don't invest in the future today, we may have lost it tomorrow. And believe me: this will be much more expensive than the few extra digits after the decimal point that a project like ours will cause in your budget!"

Heimenross felt as if a helping hand was reaching out to him, trying to save him from falling into a deep, dark ravine. But still his emotions were struggling with his mind, which was trying to undermine the triumph of emotions with all sorts of pettifogging objections. He was confused. He hadn't felt this agitated for a long time.

A strong gust of wind hit him as he stepped back into the street. Heimenross paused and looked up to the sky: The wind blew the disheveled cloud robes from the face of the sun. Immaculate, the life-giving star looked down on him in all its shining glory, as if to show him the way to a new, carefree future.

II. The landing pillars. *Ten years later*



1. A nightmare

Maggie Rhode, resident of a house in the country, tries to distract herself after a nightmare by watching television. A talent show about "high-energy art" attracts her attention.



Fire wheels

Bathed in sweat Maggie sat in her bed. Mechanically, she shook off the long blonde strands of hair that had wrapped around her head like a spider web.

In her dream she had been surrounded by a circle of tremendous fire wheels. In front of the dark sky, it looked as if each of the giant wings was pulling a long tail behind it. The faster the movements became, the closer the tails came to one another, until they finally seemed to touch each other and form a single, closed circle.

Now Maggie was no longer surrounded by fire wheels, but by fireballs – by glowing red, flickering, red-hot fireballs. The longer they revolved around themselves, the more they expanded. They moved closer and closer to Maggie's body, so that she felt her scorching breath on her skin. And then, all of a sudden, a crackling and a hissing was heard, like someone throwing food to a gluttonous embers: The fireballs had slid into each other, now they raced towards her as a huge wall of fire ...

Get away from here, Maggie thought in panic, I must flee – but how? Where is the way out? The firestorm will bury everything under itself, there is no escape from it!

Feverishly she looked around for anything that promised rescue in dire need. Could she have missed something? Was there a remedy for the inferno that she had not yet thought of?

But it was too late. She could already feel the trembling fingers of flame reaching out for her. They groped over her body with a crackling sound, in a moment they would wrap around her neck ...

Her own convulsive wheezing saved her life by waking her up. She lay there motionless, her eyes wide open. One moment longer in this nightmare and she would have really suffocated from fear.

Take a deep breath, she said to herself, the nightmare is over, there is no more need for your sauna sweating and the insane fluttering of your heart! Now just stretch out your hand, turn on the light, moisten your parched throat, then everything will be fine again ...

Unfortunately, there remained a not insignificant problem: she couldn't move. A strange force was pressing her firmly into her bed. It was impossible to fight it. She could not lift her arm, not even bend her little finger, no matter how hard she tried.

Well, she said to herself, obviously I was wrong: I must still be asleep. Maybe it's even better this way, sleep is still the best means of recovery.

But then why were her eyes open? Why did she still have the feeling of lying on a barbecue grill when the nightmare was long gone? Why did the dizziness that had afflicted her at the sight of the fire wheels even increase in intensity now that she could no longer see them? Only then did she realize: the fire wheels had not at all disappeared. That she could no longer see them was only because she herself had become a part of them. Someone must have put her on one of the wheels. Now she had merged with them, her arms and legs were at one with the wings, they burned with them, the embers of the flaming wings enclosed and consumed them. Soon they would have drained her body of all energy. Then there would be only fire wheels and no bodies, only fire wheels, fire wheels everywhere, overshadowing and crushing all life.

Dreams of freedom

Again Maggie woke up scared and confused. She blinked her eyes, then ran her hand over the wall next to her bed. This time she wanted to make sure the dream was over. And indeed, it remained dark. Dark, calm and cool. The ghosts of the dream had finally vanished. Still shaky, Maggie groped for the alarm clock. The roller shutter was down, she had no idea whether it was still in the middle of the night or early morning. Her hand bumped against something metallic, she reached for it, but with her erratic movements she knocked the object to the ground. A violent impact, a clanging sound – the last beep of a dying alarm clock. So she had to get up, for better or worse, if she wanted to know what time it was. She sighed and gave in: now she was wide awake anyway.

Maggie swung her feet out of bed yawning and turned on the light. Drowsily she shuffled to the window and pulled up the shutter. It was still pitch dark outside. But out of the dark, flashes of red light pierced her eyes. For a moment she felt as if she had sunk back into the nightmare. Actually, that wasn't entirely wrong. The nightmare had only translated into its visual language what she had to live through every day.

Something moist, furry struck her hand. Champy, her four-legged companion, had got up from his flea market chair and licked her fingers.

She thoughtlessly stroked his cream-coloured head. "Good boy ... Just go back to bed. We're still in the middle of the night."

Champy looked at her with his big, dark eyes. When he realised that it was too early to go for a walk, he trotted back to his chair. Ritually he turned once around himself and then sank into the cushions, grumbling with relish.

Maggie closed her eyes briefly and leaned her forehead against the window. How long had she lived in this house now? Ten years? Or even longer?

In fact, soon it had to be eleven years. And yet she still remembered the advertisement that had drawn her attention to the old cottage, as if she had read it only yesterday: "For individualists and nature lovers: farmhouse for sale in a wonderful secluded location, ready for immediate occupancy, top transport connections, price on request."

Actually, she was only looking for an apartment in another part of town that could help her shorten the morning sardine can rides on the subway. But then, following a spontaneous impulse, she had reached for the phone and dialled the number of the real estate agency that had the house on offer. In fact, it turned out to be quite affordable, especially with the very favourable loans available at that time.

Thus the house purchase took on more and more concrete form. The idea of owning something in a few years, instead of permanently investing almost half of her income in the

right to temporarily use other people's property, was simply too tempting. She was aware that the way to work would then be even longer – but as an architectural draughtswoman she would be able to work from home to some extent. The space in the architect's office was limited anyway, so that the boss approved the applications for "home office" quite easily.

Industrialised idyll

On closer inspection, however, the isolated location proved not to be as "splendid" as the broker poetry had promised. Not far from the house was a highway, and although the few neighbours were "at a distance", they pursued hobbies that easily bridged this distance. One of them loved to create chainsaw massacres in the nearby forest, another was a hunter, who regularly went to war against anything that came too close to his shotgun.

Moreover, "ready for immediate occupancy" was a terminology that was very open to interpretation. It was true for people who appreciated leaky windows that made them feel living outside and who didn't mind putting buckets here and there to catch the seeping water in case of rain.

Unfortunately, Maggie had immediately fallen in love with the charming old house. And to lovers, flaws do not appear as such, but rather as appealing deviations from the norm that give the object of desire its special charm and personal charisma. So Maggie overlooked many a detail that would have immediately caught the eye of a neutral observer.

Indeed, all the shortcomings were things that were either correctable or not so important that they would have destroyed the advantages of a life on the countryside. The roar of the traffic was far enough away to train the brain to interpret it as the sound of the sea. And both the chainsaw massacres and the high-tech tally-ho took place only temporarily. After the necessary renovation work, the cottage came very close to Maggie's dream of a more independent life in the great outdoors.

But the dream burst when the wind turbines came. She was immediately startled when she saw the construction site on the opposite hill. When she heard that wind turbines were to be built there, she had even been relieved at first. Better than a new housing development, she had said to herself. It was only when the rotor blades started panting loudly for electricity, when their red flashes of light stabbed her in the eyes night after night, that she understood what was going on: The area around her house was about to be transformed into a single giant power plant.

And this had only been the beginning! Gradually, the remaining hills in the area were also converted into sites for wind turbines. Today, when she looked out over the landscape from an elevated point, it looked like a large industrial area – and at night, with the constantly twitching lights of the turbines, like an airport with countless runways.

So Maggie soon had to admit to herself that her dream of a tranquil country life had been shattered. The free nature had been deprived of its essential characteristic – freedom. Her departure from the city, conceived as liberation, had ended in a gigantic open-air prison, in a dense mesh of reinforced concrete towers, with the constant hammering of wind power rotors around the house, which burned into her ears like the drumbeats of jungle warriors.

Frieda and Champy

Maggie detached herself from the window and squeezed her nightmare-ruffled curls into a scrunchie. Then she stumbled towards the kitchen. Her throat was burning, she desperately needed something to drink. After she had put her mouth under the tap, she let herself fall onto the sofa in the living room.

It was not even four o'clock, but sleep was no longer an option. She felt as if she had run a marathon at night, exhausted and at the same time much too overexcited to lie down again. Maybe she should call Monica? The other day, when they had been talking about the sleep disorders they both suffered from, they had agreed to switch the phone to "mute" at night. So they would be accessible for each other at any time, in case they both happened to lie awake. But had Monica remembered to turn down the volume? She herself kept forgetting it from time to time. What if she were to wake her friend up with her call?

While she was still staring indecisively into space, a rumbling sound was heard from the garden door. It was Frieda, her chubby tigress, who had apparently just returned home from her night shift. Delighted not to have to wake up her tin-opener, she catapulted herself onto Maggie's lap with a courageous leap. She kneaded her caretaker's arms, rubbed herself against her chest with all her might, and purred at compressor volume. Judging by the intensity of her cuddling attack, she had to be very hungry.

Champy raised his head and looked over to his mistress, but remained lying on his armchair. He knew that Frieda was not to be trifled with when she made such claims to her mistress. The collective cuddling then could easily end with a bloody nose.

Meanwhile Frieda had almost reached her goal. "All right, you flatterer," murmured Maggie, "I'll prepare your meal ..."

As soon as Maggie made preparations to get up, Frieda jumped down from her lap and hurried ahead into the kitchen. So small and yet so confident, Maggie thought. That's what I call assertiveness!

After filling her tiger princess's bowl with a double-whopper portion, she went back into the living room and turned on the TV. She just needed to get her head clear, distract herself somehow, then maybe she would be able to sleep a little more after all. And most television programs were more effective than the best sleeping pill anyway.

Impassively, she zapped through the channel list. Bleeding bodies, heroic detectives, weather prophets, moaning women, sensational insights into the life of ants, starving refugee children, product sellers with a sweet smile in their voice, far-away worlds, a super fast car with a super clean engine, statesmen shaking hands ... No, this kaleidoscope had no calming effect on her. She herself no longer understood how she could get this idea.

A talent show

Maggie was just about to turn off the TV again, when she zapped into the replay of a talent show from the night before. She looked closer at the screen. The man in the back, in the middle of the jury: Wasn't that ...? Yes, it was exactly him: Alfons Heimenross, Minister of Energy and uncrowned leader of this country! What was he doing in a talent show?

When Maggie came across the show, there was just a kind of flourish. The camera first panned across the stage, then through the hall, across the rows of the lucky ones who were selected to watch this show live, and finally zoomed in on the tense faces of those hoping for

the favour of the jury. The corners of their mouths twitched in competition with the headlights, eyes shimmered expectantly, curls snaked up as in an oriental incantation ritual. Then the big moment arrived. The flourish ebbed, and the camera focused on a woman in a green pantsuite: the presenter. With the centimeter-thick layer of make-up and her hair glued to her head, she looked a little as if she had just emerged from an ancient Egyptian burial chamber.

Smiling like a sphynx, she stirred up the excited expectation even more: "Who are the winners of the evening? Who will take the crown? 'Energetic art': Well over a thousand artists have been inspired by this theme. We have presented one hundred works over the past few weeks, ten of which have made it onto the shortlist. And today you, ladies and gentlemen, together with our top-class jury, have made your decision: These are the winners!"

The moderator turned to the oblong table behind which the jury members sat. "Enlighten us, Mr Secretary," she addressed the Minister of Energy, who apparently was the chairman of the jury. "Who are our prize winners?"

Maggie scrunched up her face. For now Heimenross appeared on the screen in close-up: his greasy shoulder-length hair, which must have turned grey long ago, but was still trimmed to a youthful light brown by the minister; his eyes, constantly squeezed together, which had something lurking about them in spite of his laugh lines; the traditional jacket with the sunflower, which had been his hallmark since his early days in politics.

"First of all, I would like to thank you once again for the honour of chairing this jury," he began. "This competition has also shown me personally how far we have come in the meantime. It has made us realise that we have finally left our dirty past behind us. And this is exactly what our first prize winner has expressed in his work of art."

A dramatic background music resounded, into which a voice from offstage called out the name of the lucky winner. The camera first panned at the joyfully excited artist, then the screen was split, and the painting he had created appeared next to the winner of the bronze medal. It was a giant wind turbine whose rotor blades sparkled in the sunlight while the world at its feet sank into a dirty mist. On closer inspection, Maggie could detect in it the exploding reactor of a nuclear power station, abandoned lignite dumps, children struggling to breathe and seabirds dying in the oil slick.

Maggie sighed. Wind power will solve all our problems – it was always the same old story. She couldn't hear it anymore. Why hadn't she turned off the TV right away? She groped for the remote control she had put next to her on the sofa. But just at that moment Frieda returned from the kitchen and jumped back onto her lap, which she intended to use as an electric blanket after her long meal. The remote control fell to the floor.

Tired as she was, Maggie gave in and devoted herself to her tiger lady. Her purring was so loud that it drowned out the TV babble anyway. Only when Frieda curled herself up and her purring turned into soft vibrations, the TV show came back to the fore.

Wind power artists

Involuntarily, Maggie looked back to the screen – and once again glanced in the face of the energy minister. He just finished the laudation for the second prize winner: "... the installation of this artist has shown us how much the new energies have become part of our everyday life. No house, no street, not even the smallest blade of grass is conceivable without them, these protectors and guarantors of life on our planet."

The same fanfare followed as for the bronze medal winner, only this time not a concrete work of art was shown at the end. Instead, the camera took the spectators on a ride through a city in which glittering windmill dummies could be seen at every corner: at a bus stop, next to a charging station for electric cars, on a block of flats, in the courtyard of a school, where the artist had built countless wind farms out of papier-mâché with the children. To crown it all, the camera panned over a green area whose meadow was littered with sunflower-like pinwheels. That's typical, Maggie thought: Everything was permeated by wind power – only real wind turbines were nowhere to be seen.

Indignantly she shook her head. It really was enough now! She tried to reach for the remote control, but Frieda immediately extended her claws, as a sign that she was by no means willing to clear her human electric blanket without resistance. Sighing, Maggie leaned back and let the colourful flood of images continue to invade her living room.

The background music increased once again in pathos. Heroic elements mixed into it like in the films in which death-defying heroes ward off a threat from space and thus save their home planet from destruction. The camera panned at the host mummy. "And now, ladies and gentlemen," she announced, "the absolute highlight of the evening! From over a thousand suggestions, this work of art has emerged as your and our number one. As our all-time favorite, the one that most perfectly captures the theme of 'energetic art'. Mr Secretary, you have the floor."

Beads of sweat appeared on Heimenross's forehead as the camera zoomed in on him again. His voice trembled with excitement: "Yes, I think we have found a worthy winner. But first of all, let me once again thank everyone who took part in this competition. All of you, dear artists, have opened our eyes with your works to the beauty of the new energy from which our country draws its strength today. However, I believe that one work has succeeded in doing this in a particularly exemplary manner. For it allows us to immediately feel the harmony that emanates from the new energy. It is a work from the field of music, from an artist whom we have all long admired for his courage to tread new paths in sound art."

This was the keyword for the soundman to turn up the euphoric basses again. Into their dramatic booming the off-voice announced the name of the gold medal winner. At the same moment the face of a man appeared on the screen who could almost have been a twin of Heimenross – if he hadn't looked a lot younger. The same shoulder-length hair, the same world-enraptured grin, even the same green embroidered traditional jacket. Only the oversized designer glasses, which were probably intended to underline the artist's intellectuality, differed from Heimenross's outfit.

While the artist moved his hands in front of his face – which caused his glasses to vibrate alarmingly –, the piece of music that had won him the prize sounded from offstage. Maggie heard the all-too-familiar panting of windmill rotor blades, accompanied by the howling of the wind on a stormy day. In addition, some strong gusts were heard, blended together with something that resembled the rustling of tree crowns. After a while more sounds appeared, similar to the whistling of the wind in hollow tree trunks. They were supplemented by very high sound passages that reminded Maggie of a concert with glasses she had once heard in a pedestrian zone.

Of course, the piece of music was cleverly composed. However, it did not at all fulfill the expectations Heimenross had raised with his announcement. At least not for Frieda, who had put back her ears from the very first notes. A good opportunity to finally switch off the television, thought Maggie. And indeed, her tabby girlfriend didn't put up any resistance this time, when Maggie groped for the remote still lying on the floor. She even purred when the piece of music broke off abruptly.

Carefully Maggie stretched out on the sofa. Frieda immediately crawled into the crook of her arm to use her shoulder as a pillow. Her purr flowed evenly into Maggie's ear. So the sleeping god relented and opened the gates to his kingdom for her once more. Deeper and deeper Maggie sank down, wrapped in a cocoon of soft, warm fur that kept even the shrillest disharmonies away from her.

2. A strategy meeting on Kadohan

At a meeting of the Future Commission on Kadohan, a heated debate about the right time for the invasion of Earth is taking place.



The joy of returning home

It was an overwhelming feeling to return to the home planet after such a long time. Spontaneously, the leader of the Earth Exploration Mission, for which the name "StarWind" had become established, decided to call himself simply "Kadohano" for the time being. Enjoying the artificial weightlessness of his room, he looked out through the transparent plasma walls into the bright day. It was one of the things that struck him most about life on Earth: this constant desire of Earthlings to seal themselves off from their surroundings. Even their largest windows were so tight that hardly any sound or smell of the world penetrated their dwellings. So he had felt permanently locked up there.

On Kadohan, by contrast, outside and inside were connected in an osmotic way. The walls were transparent, the rooms were in constant exchange with the outside world. This led to a completely different attitude towards life, which was characterised more by being included in and embraced by the universe than by the feelings of isolation and being abandoned that determined the lives of the Earthlings.

The expedition leader let his gaze wander from one corner of the horizon to the other. All that he had taken for granted before suddenly revealed itself to him in its unique beauty. He had always known about the vulnerability of his home planet. But only now, after his long absence, when he felt the light of the two suns – Sija and Merza – in whose center Kadohan was anchored, a feeling for the unique balance rose in him, to which his planet owed its existence. Even a slight change in the magnetic field of one of the two suns could lead to its demise.

With their two suns, the Kadohanians lived on a planet without night. Instead, there were two days that differed in length and in the type and intensity of light. The days were named after the sun whose light shone on the respective part of the planet. One was called Sijan, the other Merzan. The light that came from Sija, the larger but much more distant star, was clearer, more brilliant than the light emitted by Merza. The Merza light, on the other hand,

brought out the contours of things more clearly. It almost seemed as if it made them shine from within.

The poison of darkness

Due to the rotation of Kadahan, sometimes the Merza day was longer, sometimes the Sija one. But it was always bright. For the expedition leader this was the most important difference to life on Earth, where a constant change of day and night took place, at longer or shorter intervals. Didn't the fact that their world regularly sank into complete darkness have to influence the nature of the Earthlings in a certain way? Wasn't it obvious that the clear impossibility of escaping the fall into darkness laid the seed of despair and blind rage against their own inevitable destiny in their souls? Couldn't this also explain the tendency of the Earthlings to exterminate each other again and again, even to destroy their own planet, their umbilical cord to the belly of the cosmos?

For the expedition leader, this also gave rise to a concern that made him hesitate to give the starting signal for the invasion of Earth: Didn't the special rhythm that shaped life on Earth have to change the nature of the Kadahanians in the long run? Wouldn't the resettled people become more and more alienated from those left behind? What if the all-pervading, all-decomposing poison of darkness would eventually tempt them to turn against their home planet?

To make matters worse, even after the takeover of the planet by the Kadahanians, Earthlings would still live there. Their characteristics would be transferred directly to the new arrivals, in addition to the influences of the life rhythm on Earth. In the end, a new species could emerge that would be clearly different from both the Earthlings and the Kadahanians.

Of course, the expedition leader knew about the alternative to this scenario. But he shied away from openly admitting the existence of this alternative. Indeed, they had cultivated harmful germs in their research laboratories on Kadahan that could wipe out the Earthlings within a few days. But no one could predict whether the deadly cocktail of microbes would not also irretrievably destroy all other life on the planet, thus rendering the whole expedition meaningless. Furthermore, such an approach also contradicted all the principles they had developed on Kadahan for dealing with extragalactic life.

Above all, however, the Earthlings had become far too familiar to the expedition leader during his stay on the planet. So he simply couldn't think about the extermination of the alien species in pure cost-benefit categories anymore. Sure, there were Earthlings who he was indifferent to. This Mr Heimenross, for example, which they had turned into a weapon to infiltrate the Earthlings' brains, was nothing more than a marionette for him, a tool whose loss would not have affected him deeply.

On the other hand: Was Heimenross still a real Earthling at all? Hadn't they long ago turned him into some kind of bastard by remodeling his brain for Kadahanian interests? Was it not exactly the new character they had implanted into him in the course of the personality change that made him seem so wooden and sneaky? Couldn't they have also strengthened other traits of his personality, which would have made him a fervent defender of what he was now trying to destroy, guided by foreign interests?

After all, it was precisely this malleability, the incompleteness of their existence, that attracted the expedition leader to the Earthlings. A civilisation as advanced as the Kadahanian one was indeed far less in danger of being doomed to extinction by misguided

actions than the civilisation on Earth. But the almost complete predictability of all developments took every moment of surprise away from life and prevented it from growing beyond itself, from touching or even breaking through its own limits.

The Earthlings, on the other hand, sometimes seemed to the expedition leader like those flowers with the far too large blossoms of which there were so many on Earth. If they were left to their fate, their own exuberance could be fatal to them. Then they bent down and paid for their heavenly striving with the premature sinking into dust. But if they were supported, if they were given even the slightest help in their growth, they would unfold a splendour that to the expedition leader would always seem like transforming a grain of dust into a sun.

The Future Commission

The expedition leader stretched and performed a slow-motion somersault in weightlessness. Then he switched off the weightlessness mode and began to get ready for the meeting of the Future Commission. He decided to paint the bridge sign on his naked skull to celebrate the day. It consisted of two larger circles framing a smaller circle – and thus symbolised the constellation of stars to which his planet owed its existence.

He had just completed the second golden circle, when a spicy scent began to spread through his room – the signal for the beginning of the conference! How was this possible? He had only just got up! Should he really have dawdled that much? Or was the interplanetary ride still in his bones, this floating between time and space that made every feeling for an orderly daily routine disappear?

The expedition leader hurriedly finished painting his skull, then he went to the mobility hatch. A moment later the downwards mode was activated and he rushed through a narrow shaft into the depths.

When he arrived at the distribution cross, he joined the queue of waiting people who had lined up in front of the conveyor belts leading in different directions. The expedition leader had the impression that the overcrowding on Kadahan had even increased since he had left for Earth. But this feeling probably only arose from his long absence. He simply hadn't been aware anymore of how cramped things had become on his home planet.

Fortunately, he did not have to wait as long as he had feared. After only a short time, one of the gripping arms that the passengers placed on the conveyor belts sent him on his way to the conference center. Once there, he again entered the appropriate mobility hatch, which carried him upwards in a few seconds.

The meeting room was, as was to be expected with this vital topic, full to bursting. Looking over the rows of seats arranged in concentric circles, the expedition leader discovered many familiar faces, but also some commissioners he could not remember. However, this did not necessarily mean that the composition of the circle had changed significantly. Maybe some of them had just taken their rejuvenation pill and therefore looked different at first glance.

New appointments to the Future Commission did not occur too often. In principle, everyone was allowed to become a member of all planetary decision-making bodies. However, the persons selected had to possess extraordinary competencies that justified such an appointment. It was a long way to the Future Commission, which was considered the highest planetary decision-making organ. Most of the commissioners had previously served on a number of subordinate commissions before they were admitted to the illustrious circle.

For the expedition leader, this was basically a matter of course: the most capable and engaging persons were also to contribute their expertise when setting the course for the future path of the planet. This is why he always wondered about the decision-making system on Earth. The decisions there were often made by those who had the sharpest elbows and the most poisonous tongues – and not by those who understood the matter in question the most or were most committed to the community.

This too, as the expedition leader found, was a sign of the low development level of the Earthling civilisation. Apparently the Earthlings were still strongly influenced by the behaviour patterns of the primeval horde, where loud roaring and strong muscles were more important than talking to each other and working out solutions to problems together.

Side effects of the rejuvenation pill

The expedition leader's gaze fell on a Kadahanian woman, who was the only one in the group with hair on her head. Of course he knew what this meant. The aging process of her body had already progressed too far by the time the rejuvenation pill was developed. So it had no longer worked on her.

The fact that his colleague let her hair grow was a sign that she was already inwardly attuned to the overgrowth of her person by the cosmic wilderness. Her long, grey curls fell down on her shoulders, surrounded her and inscribed themselves into her face like the lichens on the ancient oaks that the expedition leader had discovered on Earth.

It was precisely this Kadahanian woman who was chosen to chair the groundbreaking meeting of the Future Commission. Basically, the expedition leader thought, this was a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, the rejuvenation pill was used to renew the individual life circles again and again, to send everyone immediately on a new journey when their strength was nearing its end. On the other hand, however, it was precisely those who finally stepped off the merry-go-round of life that were seen to be enveloped by a breath of the infinite, which gave them a special wisdom.

This could of course simply be a habit, an adherence to traditional patterns of thought. However, the expedition leader rather suspected that this pattern of behaviour was related to the effect of the rejuvenation pill. Didn't it suggest itself that this led to a more daring, boisterous attitude to life, which in turn was accompanied by corresponding changes in brain structure? Or was it perhaps even the other way around? Did the rejuvenation pill change the brain structures and thus erase all that was associated with life experience and mental maturity? Did the physical rejuvenation have to be paid for with an infantilisation of the mind?

The necessary studies and empirical data were simply still missing here. After all, no one could say how many laps on the carousel of life the rejuvenation pill would allow individuals to take.

Glowing successes

The expedition leader's gaze still rested on the old chairwoman. Only now did he notice her indulgent smile, which she indicated with a twitch of the left corner of her mouth. Had he been staring at her the whole time? Embarrassed, he smiled back. Unwillingly he moved both corners of his mouth upwards, as he had become accustomed to on Earth. But this

even increased his embarrassment – the bilateral smile was a sign of contempt and arrogance on Kadohan.

Fortunately, the chairwoman did not pay attention to the gaffe. She had already stood up to open the session. "Now that our interplanetary globetrotter has found his way back to our world, we can finally begin the debate," she announced with faint irony. "Perhaps the most reasonable thing would be to begin with an overview of what the StarWind mission has achieved so far."

A slight disturbance arose in the audience. Most of the commissioners pushed themselves a bit deeper into their seat machines to activate the automatic adjustment of seat-back and armrests. Then everyone put on their demonstration glasses, which allowed simultaneous viewing of data or short films and eye contact with the other commissioners.

With a light tap on his glasses, the expedition leader brought out a diagram. It showed the distribution of the landing pillars, disguised from the Earthlings as facilities for the production of energy. "Well," he began his lecture, "as you can see, our mission has been quite successful so far. Once we had created the fairy tale of the wind energy miracle, the story spread almost by itself. It was like a microbial cocktail. We could just stand next to it and watch the germs multiply. Our task was simply – if I may put it this way – to find suitable germ carriers that could make the spread particularly effective. To speed up the process, we have also looked for possible adjuvants."

The glasses emitted a slight buzzing sound – a sign that several commissioners wanted more detailed information on that point. "Yes, of course", the expedition leader said, "that needs further explanation. An important finding for us was that the Earthlings cause a constant heating of their atmosphere with their energy production. If they should go on like this, it would lead to very unfavourable living conditions for them within a few years. So we have spread this information through our germ carriers in order to increase the pressure for action."

"Sorry, but that doesn't seem logical to me," someone interjected. "Surely the heating process could be stopped by some simple molecular splitting and rearrangement."

"Right", confirmed the expedition leader, "in our case that would be the obvious reaction. But you must never forget that the Earthlings are at a much lower level of technological development than we are. They are fascinated by the small and smallest particles that make up life, and they love to experiment with them. But they behave in this like children who are given a chemistry set. The only difference is that if one of their experiments fails, the whole planet is affected. They are not able to proceed according to a detailed plan, as our simulators allow us to do. And they don't have the kind of atmosphere control system we have."

"I still don't understand what our landing pillars have to do with it," another commissioner objected – a Kadahanian woman with a galaxy cluster as a skull painting, which gave her a very dynamic appearance. "Even if the Earthlings assume that the landing pillars provide them with energy, this won't help them to clean up their atmosphere. After all, energy is consumed in the production of the landing towers as well. Moreover, you need resources for it, the mining of which even exacerbates the disturbed balance. At least that's the result I get from the quick simulation – or can't it be transferred to the conditions on Earth?"

The expedition leader smiled – to his delight, only with the left half of his face, directed by his emotional brain. So his Kadahanian instincts were still alive! "Surely it can be transferred," he affirmed, "the simulation result certainly reflects the conditions on Earth. But you must always remember that Earthlings never act exclusively on the basis of rational considerations. Because their brain areas for feeling and thinking, unlike ours, are not

separated from each other, a strong emotion will overshadow even the few reliable predictions they can make with their limited resources. From this we could take advantage in the campaign to spread our landing pillars. All we had to do was combine the predicted negative effects of a heated atmosphere with the landing towers. In the sense of: The more landing towers, the more the atmosphere cools down. Or, more dramatically: The fewer landing pillars, the sooner the end of the world will come."

The Kadolian woman with the dynamic skull painting looked at the expedition leader in disbelief: "And that worked?"

The expedition leader nodded. "This strategy has been very successful so far. It not only suppresses doubt, but makes those who are nevertheless skeptical appear to be a wet blanket in the great project of saving the world. The permeability of the Earthlings' emotion-thoughts barrier was also very useful for us in other ways. For example, many Earthlings cultivate a very distinctive cult of growth. They are almost addicted to everything that grows and multiplies. For them, everything must always point upwards or forward. They fear all kinds of circular motion."

"That doesn't make sense to me," someone objected. "Aren't circular movements an essential characteristic of the living? And isn't it true that too much growth can even destroy life?"

A useful cult of Earthlings

Since the expedition leader did not answer immediately, his assistant took the floor. Grateful for the respite, the expedition leader looked over at her. In the reflection of the light refracted by the plasma walls, he noticed that she had chosen the same skull painting as he had: two large solar circles framing a smaller planetary circle. Apparently she had felt a similar joy of reunion on her return to Kadolian. After the long time in a foreign world this was only too understandable. Nevertheless, the expedition leader wondered how anyone could ever convince Kadolians to relocate to Earth, given this strong attachment to their home planet.

The assistant stood up and turned to the questioner. "I think the cult of growth is closely related to the short life span of Earthlings," she explained. "Precisely because their life star burns up as soon as it blossoms, they are constantly searching for things that will give them the illusion of everlasting life."

"And what does that have to do with our landing pillars?" the questioner wanted to know.

Now the expedition leader took the floor again. "I know all this is difficult for us to understand," he admitted. "From the perspective of the Earthlings, however, the landing towers are suitable as symbols of growth in several respects. First of all, even the Earthlings can construct them very quickly. In addition, they are higher than anything that grows on Earth by itself. Some Earthlings therefore even inhibit the natural growth of their most powerful vegetation types and prefer to replace them with landing pillars."

"But isn't that completely counterproductive for the actual goal of atmospheric control?" someone else wondered. "Or do the landing pillars also function as molecular exchange facilities?"

Amused about the lack of understanding of his fellow planetarians, the expedition leader twitched slightly with the left corner of his mouth. "No, of course not," he made clear. "The Earthlings are only blinded by the powerful radiance of the soaring towers. And the glittering rotor blades give them the feeling of having created their own little suns. So they don't

realise that with all those landing pillars they are accelerating the destruction of their planet rather than stopping it."

The expedition leader glanced briefly over at his assistant. Her restless winking showed that she wanted to add something. So he nodded at her and gave her the word.

"I think there is another point to consider here," she said. "The belief in the healing power of the landing towers has meanwhile led to massive support for their construction. This too sets a process in motion that the Earthlings perceive as growth: Those who erect landing pillars are rewarded, and from that reward, they can reward others by purchasing their products. This increases the amount of products, which in turn increases the number of rewards. Many Earthlings worship this self-reinforcing process like a super-organism from which the life of the individual organisms is fed."

"But doesn't that entail the danger," someone interjected, "that production will be pushed for its own sake – regardless of the usefulness of the products manufactured? And isn't that exactly an example of a destructive form of growth?"

The expedition leader was just about to answer, when the chairwoman of the commission interfered. "I think," she pointed out, "we're getting a little too academic. Basically I always find it stimulating to philosophise about extragalactic thinking and behaviour patterns. But the purpose of the StarWind mission is not to explore the intellectual horizon of another galactic species. In fact, it is about something very concrete – new resources and new habitat for our own species. And this is exactly what we should focus on right now."

The proposal met with general agreement. Almost all those present approvingly raised their index fingers to their temples.

The old chairwoman brushed an unruly curl from her forehead. In the light-flooded room her grey hair shimmered for a moment like a comet's tail. "Well," she summed up, "then we should start debating how to specify our landing and settlement plans."

Thereupon the Kadahanian woman with the dynamic skull painting spoke out. "When we look at the diagram with the flashing landing pillars," she stated, "the landing of our spaceships on Earth should actually be possible without any problems. Judging by the pattern of the light dots, the landing sites would even be sufficient for the fleets of spaceships from several planets!"

"I agree with that," confirmed another commissioner. His skull painting – a triangle formed by thunderbolts – identified him as a member of the invasion command. "The landing simulation leads to a clear result: the goals we pursued with the StarWind mission have been achieved. Cooling of the engines by the rotors of the landing pillars, flashing signals for marking the landing sites, antiiconographic function of the generated turbulence – all the conditions for the landing of our transport spaceships are fulfilled. The expeditionary force has done a good job – my compliments!"

Appreciatively, he raised his index fingers to his temples, albeit only briefly, with the casual nonchalance of an old warhorse to whom deeds count more than words.

Heated discussions

All eyes were fixed on the expedition leader. An uncontrolled twitching went across his face. It was exactly the situation he had been afraid of. Of course, it hadn't escaped his attention that nothing stood in the way of the invasion anymore. He himself had prepared the ground for it with his work. And there was no doubt for him that the Earthlings were a lower form of civilisation, whose demise would in no way affect the cosmic balance.

Nevertheless, the thought of simply eliminating this civilisation with a few precisely placed laser beams was hard to tolerate for him. And even though he kept telling himself that this was just an effect of the well-known intergalactic fraternisation syndrome that resulted from being too close to an alien species, the Earthlings had grown too fond of him to agree to the invasion in the planned form.

Only when the tense expectation that filled the room turned into anxiety did the expedition leader pull himself together. "If it is only a matter of the technical requirements, in fact nothing stands in the way of the invasion," he admitted. "However, I must point out that we should not underestimate the resistance potential of the Earthlings. Despite our superior means, we would have to expect considerable counter attacks, which could lead to significant losses."

"The way I got to know the Earthlings in the exploration reports, I can hardly imagine that they could break through the protective shield around our spaceships", the invasion commander contradicted. "For that they would need laser accelerators at light speed level – and from what I have heard, they are light years away from developing such systems."

The expedition leader nodded, but avoided looking the commander in the eyes. "This is certainly true. For ourselves, the invasion would probably be relatively risk-free. When I speak of losses, I am rather thinking of the Earthlings. At this point, an invasion would almost inevitably lead to the complete annihilation of their civilisation. And I don't think that is justified according to our intergalactic code of honour, nor does it make sense with regard to the future use of the planet. In fact, the planet could be so badly damaged by the defensive action that in the worst case, it would be of very limited use to us."

A murmur came up, which quickly grew into a wave of whispers and astonished interjections. The old chairwoman, however, only had to stand up briefly and shake her grey mane to nip the unrest in the bud. "Please, only serious speeches", she called those present to order. "The subject is too serious for meandering side conversations." Addressing the expedition leader, she added: "What would interest me personally is why an immediate invasion should be less promising than a later start of the mission."

"The main reason for this is that we could then take advantage of the demoralising effect of the landing pillars," explained the expedition leader. "Their construction has now developed such a momentum of its own that the Earthlings will be completely surrounded by landing towers in the foreseeable future. The feeling of being trapped, which will necessarily result from this, could be very helpful for us. If we start to dismantle the landing pillars right after our arrival, the Earthlings will not perceive us as occupiers but as liberators – which will significantly increase their willingness to cooperate with us."

"But do we have that time at all?" asked a veteran commissioner, who had previously attracted attention mainly by frowning. "What if the Earthlings completely destroy their planet's atmosphere if we delay the invasion too long?"

"I don't think this will happen," the expedition leader tried to dispel the concerns. "With our atmospheric control system, we will still be able to bring the molecules back into a life-sustaining equilibrium."

Now a heated debate began. Some supported the arguments of the expedition leader and were in favour of his plan to send the spaceship fleet to Earth at a later date. In their view, those who did not respect life in other galaxies cast a shadow on the life of their own civilisation by sowing the seeds of destruction within it. They were convinced that every life in the universe followed its own laws, which perhaps could not be understood by the completely different thinking of another civilisation. In their opinion, therefore, the

premature destruction of an alien culture could possibly suppress a development that was more promising than it appeared from today's perspective.

Others, however, took the view that the Earthlings did not deserve such consideration at all. Sooner or later they would turn their planet into a hostile desert anyway. Waiting for this to happen even seemed to this faction to be a lack of respect for the alien planet, where in fact numerous other forms of life were existing as well. Because the Earthlings themselves did not respect these other life forms, they were, in this view, not worth sparing. For these commissioners, the Earthlings were nothing more than a dead end in the cosmic development, an aberration that should be ended sooner rather than later.

Finally the chairwoman put her foot down and ordered that the two options – immediate or later start of the invasion – should now be voted on. It was a matter of a few seconds. The supporters of the first option tapped on the left side of their glasses, those who preferred the second option on the right side, the undecided on the middle.

Immediately afterwards, a diagram showed the result of the vote: There was a wafer-thin majority in favour of the expedition leader's line of reasoning. However, a supplementary amendment of those who supported a faster procedure also found a majority. It stipulated that the personnel for the StarWind mission should be significantly increased. In addition, more adjuvants were to be used to implement the scenario designed by the expedition leader as quickly as possible. In this way, an unnecessary further delay of the invasion should be avoided.

The corners of the expedition leader's mouth twitched frantically. No one could see what he was feeling. He himself probably couldn't have told it. A part of him had become a stranger to himself.

He detached his gaze from the ranks of the commissioners and let it wander out through the plasma walls into the vastness of space. Millions of suns were weaving the luminous texture of the cosmos out there. For them, the intergalactic clash between two planets was like the collision of two grains of dust in a desert, somewhere in the dark backyard of the universe.

3. Michael

During a walk through the forest, Maggie reflects on the activities of her anti-wind-power group. One of the group wants to carry out a daring experiment to provide the ultimate proof for the harmful effects of wind turbines.



Mist magic

The fog robes hung in the bare bones of the oaks as if they were interwoven with them. It was as if their gnarled skeleton was fanned by the breath of an invisible sorceress, who revived them and at the same time transformed them into other, unknown forms of life. Weightlessly the dark arms meandered through the billowing nothingness. A motionless silence prevailed, only broken now and then by the dance of a leaf as it embarked on its final journey.

Maggie took a deep breath. She was pleased with the fog that had risen in the morning. Of course, as she knew very well, this pointed to a sunny, bright day. But at least for this morning walk through the forest, she found refuge in the cave of mist. For a few hours she could imagine that everything was back to the way it used to be: that behind the scrawny leaf dress of the trees there was no blinking and flashing like at a highway construction site; that the broad track she was walking on had not been cut to transport the giant steel towers and wings of wind turbines through the forest; that the hill at the end of the path had not been pierced by wind turbines, but still allowed the free flight of the view over the waves of the hills.

She had always liked the fog: this pausing of life, through which things withdrew into themselves and thus became recognisable in their essence. The only problem was that the beauty of nature was now only visible through the filter of a fog fantasy. The cotton candy dreams of a winter morning, the ghostly whirring of a hot summer day, the miracle of a spring awakening, when life suddenly sprouted out of the winter hollow – all this was

overshadowed by the enormous reinforced concrete bars, for which "magic" meant nothing more than the conversion of moving air into industrially usable energy.

A glance at Champy, her four-legged companion, tore her from her thoughts. "What's wrong, my little one?" she murmured.

After Chappy had been frolicking around her the whole time, he was suddenly frozen in the position of attention: ears erect, right front paw raised and slightly bent, nose in the wind. Something seemed to worry him. Had he discovered a deer? Or a hunter lurking in the undergrowth for prey?

Maggie stopped and looked around. But she couldn't see anything unusual. There was nothing but a puddle-soaked trail, disappearing in the belly of the fog. She listened intently into the silence. All she could hear, however, were the drops of mist whispering on the leaves. But that could also be pure imagination, the brain's attempt to break the sepulchral silence with invented sensory impressions.

Or did she miss something? She listened again more closely ... And indeed, now she could hear it. A sound that reminded her distantly of the tawny owl's plaintive singing, this drawn-out "Uuuh", followed by a few shorter, dark trembling sounds. But didn't the owls rather let their lamentations resound at night and in the twilight?

Maggie stroked Champy's head. "No need to be afraid! I'm right here with you."

Champy looked at his mistress in astonishment, as if to say: "The only question is who is protecting whom here!" Nevertheless, he freed himself from his attention position and began to stroll along the path as before.

An invisible threat

Maggie yawned. If she hadn't promised Michael to bring him a few sandwiches, she would certainly have stayed in bed a bit longer after her half-awake night. After the nightmare and the failed attempt to distract herself by watching TV, she had only fallen into a restless half-sleep. Shortly afterwards the alarm clock had rung.

She still thought it was a crazy idea of Michael to pitch his tent under the wind turbines. But that's how he had always been: stubborn and headstrong. Once he had set his mind to something, he could hardly be dissuaded. And so it had been this time, too.

Maggie could still remember the beginning of this insane venture. It had been at a meeting of her anti-wind-power group, which met regularly in the village pub. They had just started exchanging the latest news when Michael rushed to her table.

"Now I know where my constant headaches come from," he had shouted into the discussion, quite out of breath.

Maggie still remembered the questioning looks of the others – their amazement that was not due to the content of Michael's words, but to his unusual appearance. For as a retired accountant, Michael was anxious to keep up appearances at any time. His hair was always neatly parted, although the thinned-out strands of hair on his head thus reminded of a half-empty filing cabinet. And in conversations, he usually stood back, spoke out only when he was given the floor and prepared his formulations well before arguing. So they all had to look twice to recognise "their" Michael in the excited little man with the tousled quiff.

Since everyone just looked at him in astonishment instead of reacting to his remark, Michael finally declared emphatically: "From the wind turbines! It's the wind turbines that cause my headaches!"

"And for that you're cackling like a flustered chicken?" Monica asked him, as sarky as ever. "These things give me a headache too. After all, each of us is tormented by them." Her big earrings tinkled as she turned away from Michael and reached for her wine spritzer.

But there was nothing to stop Michael that evening. "No, you got me wrong," he insisted. "I'm not talking about our worries and the trouble we're having with the windmills. What I mean is their direct, immediate effect on us."

He conspiratorially lowered his voice: "Infrasound is the problem – sound waves that are below our threshold of perception, but that make us sick in the long run."

Monica sighed: "Not exactly brand new information, I'd say. It's been known for years. Besides ..."

"That's right," Michael cut off her word, "the knowledge itself is not new. But now there are research results that clearly prove the harmful effects of infrasound on health. And here we are not just talking about a simple headache. Infrasound can throw the heart out of rhythm, lead to circulatory disorders, impair concentration ... In short, wind turbines pose a massive threat to our health."

At this point Mirko joined the discussion. "But this applies equally to road traffic and ocean waves, which also emit subsonic noise." Mirko was a physics teacher, his word had weight. But Michael was not to be deterred. "Maybe so," he admitted, "but wind turbines are everywhere – and more are being built every day! Infrasound is therefore a creeping threat that is increasingly penetrating our everyday lives. It is omnipresent, but at the same time invisible like the radiation from nuclear power stations. And in this case as well, the harmful effects on health have been denied for years – until they could no longer be ignored! If we draw more attention to these connections, people will certainly listen to us more closely. After all, this is a problem that affects everyone!"

Mirko shook his head. The little ponytail, to which he had tied back his hair, swept across his neck. "I think for now we should concentrate on what can be clearly proven. Tens of thousands of bats that flutter into the trap of wind turbines year after year, red kites that die with broken wings under them, the soil compaction caused by the concrete foundations – all this is obvious to everyone, and it is threatening enough. Therefore, we should put these things in the foreground and not point out to something that can easily put us in the corner of conspiracy theorists".

Michael widened his eyes. "Conspiracy theorists?" Maggie had never seen him so upset. "You want to say I'm a conspiracy theorist? The studies do exist, infrasound is not an invention of mine, and furthermore ..."

"That's not what I meant!" Mirko interrupted him. "I'm only thinking of what our opponents will do with our arguments. We all know how they love twisting our words around. And if the facts are clear, if I can present photos proving my accusations, I can just take the wind out of their sails a lot easier."

"But that doesn't impress many people at all," Michael replied, becoming somewhat calmer again. "Who cares about dead bats? But when it comes to one's own health, everyone gets interested. Then wind power suddenly loses its clean image. And that's why we have to emphasise the problems of infrasound much more. It is precisely because the danger is not so obvious that it is so threatening. It's like a virus or an invisible cloud of poison that slowly penetrates our bodies and destroys them from within."

No way out!

A piercing sound tore Maggie from her memories. It was the same wailing sound as before, only now it was heard much more clearly. Maggie stopped and listened. No, she said to herself, this is not an owl. It sounds more like ... Yes, exactly: like a sob. Someone nearby seemed to be crying profusely.

In the still very dense fog the sound had something eerie. It almost sounded as if the fog itself had been given a voice; as if the wrinkled oak branches, lost in the void above her, were actually the arms of mourning women deplored a dark fate.

Something wet bumped against Maggie's finger. It was Champy, pressing its snout into her hand.

She bent down to him. "Pretty scary all this, huh?" she asked, stroking the soft head fur.

But Champy turned away from her as soon as he had won the attention of his mistress. Barking loudly, he set up a few steps away from her in front of a broken branch he was about to chase.

"Already persuaded, you rascal," muttered Maggie, bending down after the branch. She stroke out and threw it into the mist gullet, from where Champy soon carried it back to her. Suddenly a swelling roar began to fill the air. From the nearby airbase fighter jets had risen to their game of cops and robbers. The rumbling was so loud that it drowned out everything else.

Maggie dived back into her memories. She remembered a day when she and Michael had set off for an anti-wind-power demonstration in the nearby town. In the beginning there was nothing unusual about the day. Of course, they had talked about the planned protest march, especially since initiatives from other parts of the country were also supposed to come. But they had also chatted about everyday things. Michael had told about his cat's whim to carry off his slippers and to defend them hissing when he wanted to take them away from him. And Maggie, as far as she remembered, had raved about the blossom of the magnolia trees, which was always so overwhelming and went by far too fast.

But then, as they were just walking down the pedestrian zone, Michael had suddenly fallen silent. "Do you feel that?" he had asked her with his eyes wide open.

Maggie had looked at him worried: "What? What should I feel?"

"Well – the wind turbines!" Michael had replied. "The infrasound. Can't you feel the waves penetrating your body?"

From that moment on it was obvious to Maggie that when Michael said "infrasound" he in fact meant much more than this. The word had become for him the epitome of everything that the wind turbines did to him. For him, even if he was not aware of it, it referred not only to the actual effects of infrasound, but also to the omnipresence of wind turbines, to the fact that there was nowhere to escape them: not in conversations with friends, not in the media, not in other parts of the world.

Not only the outside world, but also Michael's inner life was shaped by wind power. His entire feeling and thinking was permeated by it. The permanent dealing with something that was constantly setting new boundaries to his life, without his fight against it bearing fruit, tore him apart inwardly in exactly the way he claimed about the effects of infrasound.

Thus "infrasound" became more and more a fixed idea for Michael. There was no conversation in which he didn't bring it up at some point. "Have you heard about the new Kazakh experiment on infrasound?" he suddenly asked, for instance. Or: "Did you know that infrasound can make you seasick?"

The other group members mostly just rolled their eyes when Michael broached the subject. "Not again!" they moaned, whispering, but in a way that Michael could hear it.

A self-experiment

Once more Maggie picked up the spit-slimed branch, which Champy, wagging his tail, had placed in front of her feet. While she swung out for another long throw with the mega stick, she thought back to how Michael had announced his crazy resolve.

She still remembered the triumphant smile that outshone his whole face as he confronted the others with his decision. "Just so you know, I will put my body at the disposal of science," he had declared, enjoying the astonished looks of his companions.

"What does that mean?" Mirko had asked him mockingly. "Do you want to make yourself available as an object of study for budding doctors? Shall your organs be preserved in spirit to let future generations know of your sweet tooth?"

The small nod to his chocolate passion was intentionally ignored by Michael. "No, wrong guess," he countered. "'Experimental material' is perhaps the most accurate term." He savored once more the incomprehension of the others, then he specified: "I had a complete check-up yesterday by my family doctor, in preparation for my project. Because from tomorrow on, I will live under the wind turbines on that hill over there for six months."

He pointed out of the window to the hill where the rotor blades of the wind turbines were sparkling in the sun. "In autumn," he continued, "I will have myself examined once more in detail. Then we will see what effects the infrasound has on the human body."

The others still looked at him in astonishment. Monica was the first to catch herself again. "But that basically means nothing!" she argued. "Even if after half a year you are found to have health problems, you can't necessarily attribute this to the infrasound. The health damage can also be caused simply by the fact that the situation is psychologically stressful for you, that you are constantly thinking about the damage you could suffer from the windmills, that life under wind turbines just isn't pleasant at all ..."

Mirko also tried to dissuade Michael from his decision. "In fact, it doesn't prove anything when an individual suffers harm from living under wind turbines," he argued. "For that you would have to assemble a much larger group of test subjects. In addition, it is quite unrealistic to live so close to wind turbines. And above all, the main problem is that you can also suffer damage if you live further away from them. At least you'd need a control group that ..."

"Goodness me, how subtle you are!" Michael complained. Now the smile had disappeared from his face. "What I am planning is not a scientific experiment. I am only interested in using my own body to confirm results from animal experiments. This is supposed to be a wake-up call, something to shake people up! And maybe it's also a way to finally get more attention in the media."

All attempts to talk Michael out of his plan failed. The objection that the media would hardly be interested in an old man camping under a wind turbine simply bounced off him. The very next morning he pitched his tent under the wind turbines, determined to stay there until next autumn.

Wailing sounds

Maggie sighed. Had they unintentionally encouraged Michael in his plan by their appeasing reactions when he talked about infrasound? After all, he was not wrong in what he said. Only the way he said it, his fixation on this one aspect, the exaggerated presentation of the problem as an invisible threat, like a stealth attack on Earth by aliens – all this had just met with rejection from the others.

Nevertheless, after Michael's radical step, they were all plagued by a guilty conscience. Secretly, everyone blamed themselves for the fact that their fellow campaigner now spent his days in a tent under one of the wind turbines they all hated so much. That is why they had also agreed to support Michael in his action – as skeptical as they saw it. They visited him at his new "home" in turn, bringing him food and other daily necessities. After all, Michael had sworn not to move from his place for the next six months. At least, Maggie thought relieved, the six months were almost over.

The path, which had risen slightly the whole time, now ended in a bend. After that followed a last, short ascent, which led directly to the top of the hill.

The roar of the fighter jets above her head had ebbed in the meantime. Maggie could now clearly hear the pounding of the wind turbines, their relentless splitting of the air. The stomping noise was interspersed with the strange wailing sounds, which now could definitely be identified as sobbing.

Maggie paused briefly and listened. There was no doubt: The sobbing came from very close up, from the top of the hill, exactly from the place where Michael had set up camp. But that voice ... That wasn't Michael's voice ... It sounded more like a female voice, a voice that somehow sounded familiar to her ... But in the crying the voice melted away, it was hard to recognise a certain person behind it.

Deeply concerned, Maggie accelerated her pace. Champy had also returned to his attention position. As his mistress walked on, he did not leave her side.

Just before she reached the top of the hill, Maggie recognised a dainty figure near Michael's tent. At first she couldn't make out exactly who it was – only that it couldn't be Michael was immediately clear to her. The person there was much too delicate for that.

A few more steps, then she could distinguish the sunflowers on the red jacket of the person – sunflowers like on the jacket of ... Monica! Yes, this had to be Monica! But what was she doing here? And why was she crying?

"Monica!" she shouted when she arrived within earshot of her friend "For God's sake – what's wrong?"

Even before Monica could answer her, she saw for herself what had happened. Or rather, more exactly: from her friend's sobbing and the image that was presented to her eyes, a sense of the terrible thing that must have happened was formed.

"He's dead, Maggie", mumbled Monica in a soundless voice. "Dead ..."

Everything in Maggie shied away from believing the unbelievable. "But this can't be ... I was just with him yesterday. How can he ... from one day to the other ..."

She herself noticed that she only made nonsensical, incoherent sentences. So she fell silent and took the crying Monica in her arms, while tears welled up in her eyes as well.

At first glance, she might not have recognised that Michael was no longer alive. Of course she had noticed immediately that despite the fog he was not in his tent but a few meters away. His posture, however, did not point to a sudden heartbeat, an ambushlike encounter with death. He looked more like someone who had fallen asleep again after a heavy

nightmare. His face was half turned away from Maggie. Only the lower part was clearly visible to her. His head had sunk to one side and his tongue was hanging halfway out of his mouth.

Maggie closed her eyes for a moment. If Monica hadn't gone on a surprise visit to Michael – so it shot through her mind –, she herself would have been the one to find him. She closed her arms even tighter around Monica. To be at the mercy of such a situation all alone was certainly even harder to bear.

"This is all our fault," whispered Monica, after she had gradually calmed down a bit, caressed by Maggie. "If only we had listened to him! If only we had taken his warnings about the infrasound seriously! Our ignorance must have almost driven him into this suicidal adventure!"

She sobbed again. Maggie stroked her head, comforting her. For a while nothing was heard but the hectic pulsation of the rotors. Then Maggie objected: "You know that's not quite true, don't you? This whole project was all Michael's idea. We even tried to stop him with combined forces! And at the time being we don't know what he died of yet."

Monica looked at her from tear-stained eyes. "Of course we know," she insisted. "It's the infrasound that killed him. Whether it was the fear of infrasound or the infrasound itself – what difference does it make now?"

She took her smartphone out of her pocket, stroked the display a few times, then held it out to Maggie. "Look," she said, "that's what reality looks like."

Maggie reached for the smartphone and shielded it with her hand against the diffuse fog light. What she saw was a Facebook post from Monica: a photo of the dead Michael in front of the wind turbines, framed by the words: "Infrasound kills! R.I.P. Michael!"

"I think we owe it to him," Monica explained when Maggie looked at her in surprise. "So his death has at least some meaning – even if he has failed in his struggle in life."

Impious

Maggie didn't say anything. She didn't want to hurt Monica, she didn't want to argue with her. Not now, not here, in this situation. It would have seemed impious to her. But she found it just as impious to use Michael's dead body as an object of propaganda. Would that really have been what he wanted? And couldn't such a tastelessness even cause harm to their fight – especially if it turned out that the infrasound had nothing to do with Michael's death?

Champy carefully nudged her hand. At first he had attentively caught the scent of death, then he had joined in the whimpering of his mistress and the unknown woman. "Don't worry," Maggie reassured him by patting his head, "everything's all right."

Of course she knew that nothing was "all right". What momentum would result from Monica's unfortunate Facebook posting? How should they continue now? Was Michael's death not a turning point through which everything would change? And how were they to explain to Michael's children what had happened?

The sound of an approaching car put an end to her considerations. In her desperation Monica had called an ambulance. It had been a last attempt to brace herself against the finality of death. On the other hand, however, the death had to be officially recorded, the cause of death had to be clarified, a death certificate had to be issued, and the dead body had to be properly removed. The bureaucracy demanded its rights even in such a situation.

Two paramedics got out of the ambulance, followed by an emergency doctor. All three of them were still relatively young, in their mid-thirties at the most, and one of them perhaps

only in his mid-twenties, Maggie estimated. The emergency doctor and the younger paramedic had a distinctly ascetic stature, the older of the two paramedics seemed rather beefy.

"Is this the heart attack?" asked the emergency doctor, pointing at the dead Michael. Monica nodded.

"And you called the ambulance, I suppose?" he added as he walked past Monica and Maggie towards the victim.

"Yes," Monica confirmed, "I was just unsure, and so I thought it would be better ..."

"No doubt: exitus", the emergency doctor diagnosed without paying attention to Monica's words. "There's nothing we can do. This one checked out at least six hours ago."

He turned to Monica. "So you think it was a heart attack, colleague?" he asked mockingly.

"Well, I just thought ... because he ... he died so suddenly," Monica replied unsettled.

"Besides, he had been camping under the wind turbines for almost half a year. And as the infrasound damages the heart ..."

"Well, in this case our country will soon be extinct," joked the brawny of the two paramedics.

"Should I prepare the death certificate?" asked the other paramedic.

"No need to rush," the doctor decided. "I think we'd better have an autopsy on the body. You never know."

"Come on, let's have a smoke", the bullied man, addressing his colleague, suggested. "I'm still shaken from the ride over the mogul slope."

They lit a cigarette and puffed silently. In weightless processions the columns of smoke wound their way towards the wind turbines, behind which the sun slowly broke through the fog. Shimmering, the light fell down on the flic-flac of the rotor blades, which split it into a rain of lightning and threw it to the ground as splinters of sparks.

4. Under suspicion of murder

An unexpected incident at anti-wind-power protests puts Energy Minister Heimenross in a difficult situation. Fortunately, an employee of the StarWind company helps him to solve the problem.



A special on TV

Alfons Heimenross was satisfied with himself and the world. He stretched out on his television armchair with relish. He had even enjoyed a bottle of his favourite red wine – something he usually only did in hours of cosy togetherness with one of his female admirers. This really was a news show to his taste. It was exactly the way he wanted to be presented in the media – with himself in the center of attention. Starting point: a close-up of – Alfons Heimenross! Problem report, political assessment, warning against radicals by: Alfons Heimenross! Big finish: a close-up of – Alfons Heimenross! Judgement, admonishing words, combined with a call for the preservation of social peace. Perfect!

He poured the rest of the bottle into his glass and took another big sip. Now things were back to normal! Now he had regained the power of interpretation!

Not even 24 hours ago, everything had looked completely different. Exhausted from the eternal parliamentary feud, he had sunk down on the sofa and pressed the remote control. Relaxing at last, he thought, getting the mind off things, just drifting along...

And what did he see? Some overzealous busybody had actually blown up the case of the foolish old man who died under a wind farm into a special broadcast. And this at prime time, right after the main news!

Of course, he had already been asked about the story in Parliament. But there he had not attached any importance to the matter. Certain colleagues are just wont to look at even the smallest stain on the shirt of their political opponents with a magnifying glass. If he were to worry about this every time, he should have left the political stage long ago! Even the strongest heart can't stand such quibbling.

But now, after television had artificially inflated the incident, he was of course forced to deal with the matter. It was unbearable how these TV windbags approached the subject! In a

discussion round, alleged experts and supposedly affected people were allowed to spread all those adventurous theories that had not been reported until then for good reason.

"... as a result of infrasound, pathological changes in the cardiac muscle tissue can occur," he heard one of these smart-aleck scientists with the greyish hair and the obligatory smart guy glasses sum up. "And our studies have shown that this can also lead to cardiac arrhythmia."

"So you think the thesis that wind turbines can damage the heart is plausible?" the moderator followed up. It was the same heavily made-up woman that had recently presented the casting show about "Energetic Art" with him. What a TV whore, Heimenross thought bitterly. These people are ready to do anything if only the ratings are high enough!

"It is certainly not possible to make such a sweeping statement," the expert made clear. "But it is obvious that wind turbines emit infrasound and that infrasound – depending on how strong it is and how long you are exposed to it – can lead to heart problems in the long run."

"Isn't that exactly the case we are discussing here?" the woman in warpaint insisted. "And isn't it therefore safe to say that we are dealing here with a victim of wind energy?"

The expert shook his head. "No, it's too early for that at this stage. We'll have to wait for the full report on the investigation. Without wishing to anticipate my colleagues, I assume that the report will state a multifactorial causal chain."

"Could you explain this in more detail?" asked the anchorwoman.

"Well, someone who has a weak heart or other health problems is naturally more at risk of being damaged by infrasound. In that case, caution surely is advised."

The presenter looked briefly in the direction of the camera. Apparently, she just got a signal from the director. "Perhaps you could list a few specific precautions," she suggested.

The expert took a sip of the water that was on the table before him. "This is not so easy," he said thoughtfully. "The problem with infrasound is precisely that it is below the human threshold of perception. So we often don't even notice that we are damaged by it. But it's certainly not a good idea to camp under a wind farm for months with a weak heart."

Enraged Heimenross switched off the television. Even though the expert put the event into perspective and played down the incident, the whole tendency of the show displeased him. The title alone was telltale in his eyes: "Health risks from wind turbines?" Didn't such a wording already suggest that wind turbines could have harmful effects on health? And wasn't such an insinuation completely irresponsible in view of the enormous importance of wind energy for society, indeed for the whole planet?

Lazerov

Heimenross reached for his smartphone and scrolled through the number directory. Fortunately he knew the editor in charge. Now he would set him straight!

"It's me, Heimenross", he barked into his mobile phone as soon as someone answered. "I'm just watching your special about the old jerk under the wind farm – how the hell did you come up with this stupid idea? At our meeting the other day we had agreed something completely different! Why didn't you at least call me up first? I would have ..."

"Excuse me," a female voice asked, "to whom am I speaking?"

Heimenross began to falter: Did he dial the wrong number?

As it turned out, his contact at the TV station was not available at that time. That's why another employee had answered the phone. She blustered about social media, flash mob, public pressure and the duty to inform people and then ended the conversation rather abruptly.

Heimenross was boiling with rage. He hadn't been dumped like that in a long time! Now only Groentraed and his company could help. After all, he had only recently signed an exclusive consulting contract with StarWind. So he could expect the managing director to stand by his side in such a situation – no matter how late it was!

He was scrolling through his contact list again when his smartphone started buzzing – he had turned it down during the parliamentary debate. Heimenross looked at the display: it was Groentraed!

The StarWind boss did not bother with long speeches. He just made sure that Heimenross had already heard about the uproar in the social media about the dead old man under the wind turbines. Then he concluded that his business partner was certainly aware that something had to be done about it. Of course, Groentraed already had an idea ...

Shortly afterwards Heimenross heard the doorbell ring. In front of him stood a wiry man who introduced himself as "Lazerov, Head of Security of StarWind". In his hand he held a bulbous bag, which reminded Heimenross remotely of a medical kit.

Lazerov ... Heimenross wondered whether this was an indication of Eastern European roots. In fact, some KGB know-how might have been useful to him now. And hadn't Groentraed told him that they had recruited top people from all over the world for the security department that had been set up as part of the company's expansion?

Nevertheless, the man was rather unpleasant to him at first sight, not to say uncanny. It started with the way he shook hands. The initially limp handshake suddenly changed into a firm, almost painful grip. Involuntarily Heimenross had to think of ticks – of their habit of first crawling around on their victim's skin to find a suitable spot for their bloodthirsty bite.

In contrast to Groentraed, who always strove for a distinguished appearance, Lazerov, despite his classy suit, exhibited extremely uncouth behaviour. He just stormed past his business partner into the apartment, put his bag down and unsolicitedly crouched down somewhere – and that of all places in the very armchair where Heimenross himself had previously sat. There was something almost assault-like about that. Astonished, Heimenross watched the unusual behaviour, but said nothing. After all, he was dependent on the man.

At least Lazerov made an extremely energetic impression. "Okay, Alfons," he suggested, "I think it's best if we sort things out first. So what have we got?"

Heimenross tried to respond to the chummy tone. "Great idea," he said jovially, "let's start with a brainstorming session. I do that quite often as well! Would you like a drink, Laze... Excuse me: What's your first name again?"

The Head of Security looked at him as if he didn't understand the question. "Laze ... Yes, Laze is alright," he said. "You can call me Laze. And I don't want a drink."

Laze ... It should rather be "Lasse", Heimenross thought. "Lasse Lazerov" sounded pretty good. He had probably misunderstood it. "Well, Lasse," he started, without the other one paying attention to the pronunciation of the name, "it's all about ..."

While he was describing the events from his point of view, Lazerov took something out of his bag that looked like a dictaphone to Heimenross. Was he trying to record the conversation? But what would be the point of this? And couldn't he at least have asked for permission before doing so?

Increasingly annoyed Heimenross observed how the other fiddled around with the small device. He had difficulty concentrating on his report. Without looking into the eyes of his counterpart, he had the feeling he was talking to himself. Furthermore, he was irritated by the stubbly-haired skull that Lazerov turned towards him while he was installing the device. Under the blond buzz cut a kind of tattoo seemed to shimmer, something that for Heimenross looked like a triangle of jagged lightning bolts. In the diffuse light of the ceiling

spotlight, the flashes seemed like the quivering rim of a crater from which a volcano would hurl its lava fountains in the next moment.

Heimenross felt increasingly insecure. He faltered, he got muddled up, lost the thread ... It was as if he had never had a rhetoric coach. Then why did he spend so much money on rhetoric training?

Lazerov, however, was not in the least bothered by the sentences ending in the middle of nowhere and the missing bridges between the words. Only when Heimenross took a break did he briefly look up from the strange little device and readjusted it as soon as the flow of speech started up again.

"That's all?" he asked when Heimenross had finally finished his report.

Heimenross shrugged his shoulders. "You know ... I was actually only marginally involved in this affair. I heard of it in Parliament, in conversations with colleagues, and then in the evening, on television, when I ..."

"No matter, I think we're set now," Lazerov interrupted him. He took a tablet out of his bag and put the strange little device next to it. Then he casually touched both utensils with his hand and leaned back in his armchair.

The Information Densifier

This went too far for Heimenross! Since the security manager apparently wasn't in the mood to explain what he was doing, he got up from his seat without further ado and stood behind Lazerov. In this way, he hoped, he would be able to see with his own eyes what was actually going on here. How could he know whether this close-mouthed muscleman wasn't in fact making fun of him and was just playing some computer game?

What he saw, however, did not make the odd procedure any more transparent for him. Pictures and documents flitted by on the screen in rapid succession. As Heimenross suspected, they all were in some way connected with the events concerning the windmill victim: television broadcasts, police reports, statements from associations and parties, a medical bulletin, a cadastral map for the area around the wind farm ... But what was the point of letting all this simply rush by?

"What's that device next to the tablet?" Heimenross finally asked.

"An information densifier," Lazerov replied without turning his eyes from the tablet.

An explanation that didn't explain anything – Heimenross was just about to dig deeper when a list of names appeared on the screen that answered his question by itself. Apparently, the "information densifier" had connected and analysed all the information that could be gathered through electronic research, through Heimenross's report and probably also through the introductory strategy discussion at StarWind.

The result was a list of persons who seemed particularly promising for influencing the further development of the event. They were almost exclusively members of a local anti-wind-power initiative. Two of the names lit up red. According to the analysis of the "information densifier", these persons were of central importance for the course of events.

"Margaret, called 'Maggie' Rhode and Monica Gunter", read Lazerov. "Do you know them?" Heimenross shook his head. "No, never heard of them. Who's that?"

Instead of an answer, Lazerov clicked on the names. Thereupon several windows opened on the screen, in which the two women could be seen together. Lazerov stroked the screen with his hand. Images flickered past Heimenross's eye, which disappeared as soon as they reached his perception.

In the end, Lazerov had a full-size image appear on the tablet. It showed the two women crouching under a wind turbine on a foggy day. One of the women held the other in her arms, apparently with the intention of comforting her. Next to her, a man lay motionless on the naked soil.

Heimenross understood that this was a recording of the very incident around which there had been such hype in the social media. It looked like a picture that had been taken from a great height and then artificially enlarged. But how had Lazerov got hold of the image? As far as Heimenross knew, pictures of the event didn't exist.

"Have you ever seen one of these persons?" Lazerov asked, his gaze fixed at the screen.

As Heimenross again denied, Lazerov went back to the list of names. This time he clicked on the two highlighted names one by one, whereupon all sorts of information about "Margaret 'Maggie' Rhode" and "Monica Gunter" appeared on the tablet: address, profession, workplace, bank account, creditworthiness, current call list of the mobile phone, contacts, diseases, sexual orientation, sexual partners, holidays, hobbies, political convictions ...

Lazerov clicked on the address of Monica Gunter. Immediately, a kind of street-view image of the associated living environment was visible on the screen. Monica Gunter lived in a five-story apartment block in the city, in a side street with little traffic.

"Far from perfect," grumbled Lazerov. "Let's see how the other lady lives."

He clicked on the address of "Margaret Rhode". Once again a street-view image built up on the screen. "That's better," Lazerov noted.

Heimenross did not quite understand what Lazerov meant by this. What he saw was just an ordinary old house in the country. A bit out of the way, with colourful shutters and a half-wild garden, in which here and there a verdigris-covered clay figure stuck out of the weeds. He had liked the other place better.

Lazerov zoomed the house closer, until one of the windows with the crocheted curtains could be seen in close-up. One more click and they suddenly stood inside the living room, at least that's how it seemed to Heimenross.

An unequal game

The Head of Security was again playing around with the device he called "information densifier". Somehow he managed to make it possible for them to take a virtual walk through the cottage. As if they had sent someone into the house with a camera, they could inspect the premises at their leisure. No corner, however hidden, was safe from the gaze of the secret camera.

"Ah, she has a dog," Lazerov murmured to himself, "we have to pay attention to that ... But on the whole it's exactly what we need."

He looked for the mobile phone numbers of the two women and clicked on "Monica Gunter". Heimenross saw a kind of screenshot of the smartphone display appear on the tablet. Lazerov went to "Contacts", then to "Maggie", and typed a short message: "Must see you urgently. Can't talk on the phone. You better come right over. Monica." A moment later the message was on its way to the woman called "Maggie".

Lazerov again conjured the street-view picture of the cottage on the screen. Not five minutes later the door opened. In the light that fell outside the inhabitant of the house was clearly recognisable. Apparently the so-called "Maggie" had received the alleged message from Monica. She patted her dog, who obviously would have liked to accompany her, then closed the door and disappeared into the night.

For the first time Heimenross noticed the hint of a smile on Lazerov's face. Or maybe it was just a facial twitch due to tension. For it was only the corner of his left mouth that seemed to twist into a smile.

"Okay," muttered the strange visitor. "Let the game begin."

He turned to Heimenross: "One of us has to go to the pathology department, the other one has to get inside that house." He pointed to the picture of the cottage on the screen. "What would you like to do?"

Heimenross frowned. He didn't understand anything. "I don't know what ..." he stuttered. "Why should we ...?"

"This is not the time for explanations," Lazerov rebuked him. With a stern face he added: "If we don't act immediately, everything you have built up with StarWind over the past years is in danger. So what do you want: to discuss or to save the world?"

"It's all right," Heimenross gave in. He pondered briefly: "Pathology" sounded far more unpleasant than a visit to the cottage ... "I'll take the house," he decided. "And what am I to do there?"

Lazerov reached into his bag and pulled out a small, elongated object. "Okay, watch out," he instructed his comrade-in-arms. "You have to hide this box here somewhere in the house. Choose a concealed place, a place you would choose yourself if it was your own house. And don't let it fall down – this could be very unpleasant for you!"

Heimenross was highly suspicious: Was he actually asked to break into a house? But in view of the dramatic words with which Lazerov had described the situation, he only asked shyly: "And how am I supposed to get into the house?"

Lazerov opened the Street View program again and started a virtual tour around the house. In front of a garden door he stopped the camera movement and pointed with his head to the picture: "Here you are – the lady maintains a very open relationship to her environment."

When Lazerov enlarged the picture, Heimenross too realised that the door was only ajar. Everyone actually came in here. "Understood", he nodded. While the StarWind employee packed up his stuff, he asked casually: "And what are you going to do in the pathology department?"

Lazerov's left corner of his mouth twitched again. "Better not ask ..." He got up and put his bag under his arm. "Besides," he added, halfway to the door, "take some sausage for the dog. And remember, your time is limited. You better get going right away."

Heimenross felt like a recruit on the first day of his training. "But how can we find a way to coordinate with each other?" he wanted to know. "I think we should keep each other informed of our actions. Give me your mobile number at least, so ..."

"Failure forbidden," Lazerov cut him off. "If you have any questions, call Groentraed. But if you do everything as discussed, it won't be necessary. Just turn on the news tomorrow."

Sensational developments

Heimenross could still remember the queasy feeling that spread in him when Lazerov had left. For a few seconds he had just stood there and stared at the door that had fallen into the lock. He had even wondered whether the whole thing might not have been a dream after all. But then his gaze had fallen on the small oblong box, which was still lying on the table in a very real way. Carefully, as if it were an alien reptile, he had taken it in his hand. This strange rattling ... Should he check, he had asked himself, what was in the box? No, better not look

too closely! Lazerov was absolutely right on this point. The more he knew about the whole thing, the more the action became his own; the more he turned from a willing accomplice into a partner in crime.

So the next morning he had followed Lazerov's advice and simply waited. However, the whole time – no matter what kind of meeting he was in – he kept one eye on the news app of his smartphone. Finally, in the early afternoon, the time had come. A news alert announced: "Sensational development in the case of the windmill death!"

Luckily Heimenross was at that time only discussing the appointments for the coming week with his office manager. So he was able to retire to his office without any problems and click through the news portals at his leisure. On the radio, which he had also switched on for safety's sake, the report was even the top news item: "In the case of the man who allegedly died of infrasound and was found yesterday under a wind turbine, a surprising turn of events has occurred. A second, more detailed autopsy revealed that the man apparently had a high dose of arsenic in his blood. According to the police, a violent crime cannot be ruled out at this stage".

Shortly afterwards Heimenross had received a call from the TV editor who had been unavailable to him the previous evening. "Have you already heard about the new developments?" he asked. "We are planning a special feature about it tonight. Can we count on you for an interview?"

From then on things developed a momentum of their own, which was entirely to Heimenross's taste. Submissive requests for statements, embarrassed backpedaling of the scandalous journalists who only yesterday were talking about the end of the world by infrasound, full rehabilitation of wind power.

An insidious plan

Heimenross took another sip of wine and clicked again on the feature with his interview. He just couldn't get enough of it. The way he stood in front of the camera in such a statesmanlike manner and calmly made the point clear ... Without wanting to praise himself, this was a real masterpiece!

The newscaster began the report with a serious face: "In the case of the so-called 'windmill death', events have been tumbling over each other since noon today. After a lethal dose of poison was detected in the body of the deceased, the police received an anonymous tip about a suspect."

He turned his head to the side, where a second image window opened at the same moment. It showed Heimenross in close-up in front of the parliament building. "We are now joined by Energy Minister Heimenross", the news anchor introduced the interview. "Mr Secretary, what is your assessment of recent developments?"

"First of all," explained Heimenross, carefully weighing his words, "let me express my condolences to the relatives of the deceased. Their husband, father, brother has, so to speak, become a double victim, in so far as his death has been used in a horrible way for terror propaganda. For this is something we can no longer turn a blind eye to: that the future of our planet is endangered by terrorist activities."

"Terrorism is a hard word," the interviewer remarked. "Shouldn't we be more careful in the use of this term?"

Heimenross looked resolutely into the camera. "I don't like using that term either, believe me. But how else should we call it, when opponents of wind power kill one of their own in an insidious way to create the impression of a health hazard from wind turbines?"

"Perhaps we should first of all get an update on the latest developments," suggested the interviewer.

This was the sign for the director to play a film from the scene of the event. In the background an old cottage was to be seen, which Heimenross knew only too well. From off screen, a voice explained: "In this house this afternoon, the police confiscated the poison believed to have caused the victim's death. The main suspect is the owner of the house, 42-year-old Margaret R. Our reporter spoke to the head of the operation."

The camera zoomed in on two men, one of whom was wearing a police uniform. When asked whether the poison had been found with the help of sniffer dogs, he replied: "If needed, we could of course have requested sniffer dogs. In this case, however, this was not necessary because the alleged perpetrator chose a very obvious hiding place. The house has a storage cellar that can be reached through a floor hatch. Of course we searched for the poison there first."

Even at his fourth viewing of the report Heimenross still had to grin when he heard these words. He couldn't have chosen the hiding place any better! To the police it was "obvious", but at the same time the place was completely unsuspicious to the so-called "Maggie", the house owner. Even if she had descended into the storage cellar in the meantime, she would not have noticed the inconspicuous box behind the thick preserving jars.

While the two men continued their conversation a little longer, Heimenross noticed something that he had missed before. At the left edge of the picture, in the background: Wasn't that ...? Yes, indeed, it was the little dog he had to bribe with the sausage. That also had worked very well – although the dog had come barking to him when he opened the garden door. But at the same time he had wagged, so he was not necessarily hostile. In fact it was quite easy to bribe him with the sausage. As soon as he had received it, he trotted along behind Heimenross in a friendly manner, convinced that such a generous sausage donor could not be a bad person.

After the reporter had finished his conversation with the police officer, the window with Heimenross in front of the parliament building appeared again on the screen. The interviewer turned to him and asked for a final assessment: "So what conclusions can be drawn from these tragic events?"

Heimenross put on his doer's face, which was intended to emanate both concern and appeasement: "Well, I think that the intelligence services must keep an eye on the relevant groups. It is unacceptable that we should stand idly by while violent extremists engage in inhuman activities. At the same time, however, I would like to emphasise here and now that politicians always have an open ear for the concerns and needs of citizens. Those who express their reservations in a democratic manner will also be heard in the future!"

Heimenross switched off the screen and reached for his wine glass. He let the last drops of wine glide over his tongue. Should he perhaps allow himself a second bottle? No, better not, tomorrow another exhausting day was waiting for him, he couldn't afford to be hung over.

He stretched out on the couch and closed his eyes with satisfaction. Lazerov had kept his word: Everything had been put right in less than one day. Detailed planning, meticulous execution, discreet control of results – the head of a security department simply couldn't act any better.

Heimenross slipped over into a dream in which he lay on a beach, his body wrapped in the tingling pincushion of warm sand, his eyes fixed on wind turbines whose wings were

adorned by the sun with a sky full of stars. When he closed his eyes even in the dream, the windmills turned into tall Hawaiian women who fanned air at him with arms as long as palm trees.

III. The attack. *Ten years later*



1. Wind Day

On Wind Day, a new holiday, Maggie thinks back to what happened to her over the last years.



In the fairytale forest

There were days when Maggie felt as if the forest was a magic book, where behind every word the gate to another world opened. Each world was a universe unto itself. But it was only through the contact with the other worlds that it found its meaning.

Especially the first days of spring, which just now let their colourful ribbon wave over the forest ground, were such a magical time. Maggie put her head back. Blinking, she marveled at the kaleidoscope of the sky, which winked at her through the fresh canopy of leaves. Golden birds fluttered from branch to branch – or were these just drops of light that seemed to dance in the shadow play of the young twigs?

This, Maggie thought, had to be the time when the idea of the fairy tale forest was born. The skeletons of the trees, lifeless only yesterday, which suddenly, kissed awake by the milder sun, stretched out of their Sleeping Beauty night and blossomed into new life; the Cinderella coat of the forest floor, over which all of a sudden spread a glittering dress of stars; the silent blackbirds, who suddenly shook off the curse of the autumn witch and praised the reborn life with their sparkling songs – what else was this all but a fairy-tale dream come true, the work of a sorcerer who wrote his magic words as living poems into the world?

Maggie closed her eyes. Like on a weightless raft, she drifted through a sea of colourful scents. She felt the breath of the Earth, her sigh of relief after the winter's ice sheet had turned into a fertile sea of puddles. She deeply absorbed the spicy smell of awakening. A few more deep breaths, a last look into the enchanted forest, then she carefully removed the simulation mask from her face.

She was always amazed at how perfect the mask could draw the impressions on the canvas of the brain. Although the "Fairy Tale Forest" was her favourite programme, the other natural spectacles that could be experienced with the mask also had their charm. "Flight of Spikes", "Summer Meadow", "Palm Whisper", "Autumn Flames", "November Gossamer", "Ice Palace" ... Every season was represented with its own magic, for every mood the suitable programme was offered.

It had been Thilio who had brought her the simulation mask. "Maybe this will ease your phantom pain," he had said half-jokingly when she had unwrapped the gift. He didn't tell her where the mask came from. Probably a test copy he had gotten hold of at one of the trade fairs he had to visit on business. In any case, she herself had never seen anything like that before.

Of course the present was meant kindly. Thilio just wanted to relieve her wolf child feeling, which she had complained about again and again; this feeling of being cut off from something that was an integral part of her; this homesickness that had been gnawing at her since she was forced to leave her little house due to the expansion of the wind farm and had to move to the city.

Nevertheless, she had been rather annoyed at the souvenir initially. How could a surrogate of nature replace a real experience of nature? But at some point the feeling of inner emptiness had become so strong that she had put on the simulation mask. What did she have to lose?

At first it had been a strange feeling to move through nature without being in nature. In the meantime, however, it had become quite normal for her to live her dream of a fulfilled life in the country this way. "To lie down under the mask" had almost become a synonym for "taking a trip into the green" for her.

Maggie shook her head over herself. She never thought she'd get used to something like this! And yet it had turned out as so often in life: The heroic "I never want to live like this" shrinks to a meek "Actually, I never wanted to live like this" when there are no other alternatives. In the end, the survival instinct prevails, this animalistic sinking of teeth into the few life crumbs that are assigned to everyone.

Unexpected visit

The doorbell rang. Maggie looked at the clock: just before seven. Who could that be – so early in the morning?

When she opened the door, her eyes fell on four children about ten years old: three boys, whose parting, apparently pulled by their mothers, had already been half busted by the rascals' passion for chaos, and a girl with teetering pigtailed who tried to keep the gang in check. "Come on now," Maggie heard her hiss, "or have you forgotten the words again?"

Solemnly the girl started to warble, reluctantly supported by the grumbling of her three companions:

*"Wind, Wind, Wind,
we who are your children,
we beseech thee, Venerable Wind:
Give us power fast!"*

Four pairs of eyes looked at Maggie expectantly. She probably should have said words of praise or applauded now. But she just couldn't do it. "Wait a minute," she uttered instead. "I'll get you some sweets."

How could she forget that today was "Wind Day" again? If she had thought about it, she wouldn't have opened the door. But now she had to look for something in the kitchen that would satisfy the silly ritual: in thanks for the singing, the children were to be given something that symbolised the power of the wind.

On the kitchen table, the little umbrellas were still lying around, the decoration of the ice-cream sundaes she had bought for herself and Thilio yesterday on her way home. That might be something ... In the fridge she found an opened package of ice cream confectionery. She took out four pieces of confectionery, stuck the umbrellas into it and went back to the door. "The gift of the wind!" she duly proclaimed when she presented the symbolic wind harvest to the children. "May the wind be with you!"

The quartet grinned somewhat amused at the unusual gifts – the usual ones were pinwheels made of fruit gum or chocolate, which were produced especially for this day. However, this in no way prevented them from completing the rite. Four throats warbled cheerfully:

*"Thanks be to the Wind and its power,
the Wind, the Wind that creates everything!"*

Mister Energy

Sighing, Maggie closed the door. Sure, she said to herself, the kids couldn't help it. For them, the holiday, celebrated twice a year, was simply an opportunity to escape the dreary school routine. As a child, she too would probably have preferred to go on snack tours, take part in the flickflack championships and gaze at the windmill pyramids of the cheerleader groups instead of sitting at the school desk.

It was precisely this – the presentation of wind power as a never ending children's birthday party – that made the whole fuss so perfidious. It was a kind of emotional surprise tactic, ultimately a form of mental child abuse.

Of course, this was basically nothing new. There had been similar tendencies before. However, since the Ministry of Energy had been upgraded to a central government interface, they had increased significantly. Since then, no project was allowed to be implemented without first being examined by the Ministry of Energy. Everything was tailored to its needs. As a result, Alfons Heimenross – "Mister Energy", as he called himself – had become a kind of superminister, in fact even the actual ruler of this country. Since the "wind harvesting machines" were now exported to every corner of the world, he had almost become some sort of wind pope, directing the destiny of people all over the world. And it was Heimenross, Maggie thought bitterly, to whom she owed the loss of her little house. It was him who had set a minimum threshold of inhabitants for rural settlements. If the number of inhabitants fell below this limit, the houses had to be cleared for the construction of wind turbines.

Maggie rubbed her reddened eyes. Although the windows had been open all night, it had barely cooled down. The summer heat still stuck in the apartment like melted cotton candy. This had never been the case in her former dwelling. Behind the thick cottage walls there had always been a pleasant coolness, even in summer it had rarely been warmer than 20 degrees. That is why she would have liked to move to another country house when she had to leave her old home. But the compensation she had been paid had not been enough. It

was based on the market value – which had long since dropped to junk level due to the existing wind farm and its foreseeable expansion.

Thilio

A leaden exhaustion tore at Maggie's limbs. If only she hadn't gotten up so early! Wandering around in the flat wouldn't supply her with more oxygen either!

Yawning, she snuck back to the bedroom. Thilio still lay quietly breathing on his side of the bed. He had thrown the blanket off him, so that a ray of sunlight fell on his back through the not quite closed curtain. In the marble light of the morning his skin looked even smoother than usual. Almost like a Greek statue, Maggie thought.

Carefully she lay down next to Thilio and wrapped her arm around him. Muttering he put up with it. Maggie pressed her body firmly against that of her friend. Deeply she inhaled the familiar scent, a scent that was so different from the men she had been with before. Thilio's smell was much sweeter, almost like freshly suckled babies. His body, which was only covered with a thin fluff in some places, had nothing in common with the animalistic power that the male musk note usually exuded. Maggie was sure he would have provided a good model for the angel statues in old cemeteries.

Nevertheless, as Maggie found, Thilio had a distinct erotic appeal. Especially his bud-like skin was very attractive for her.

"You have a skin like a baby's bottom," she had said to him the other day when they were lying next to each other like right now. "How do you do that?"

Amused, Thilio had turned to her. "Didn't you know that I am the inventor of anti-aging creams?"

Smiling, she had responded to the joke. "So why don't you mix me one too? It might be useful for me as well!"

A mischievous glow flashed in the sky of his eyes. "Sorry: Trade secret!"

"How mean!" Her fingers, just playing with Thilio's full brown hair, had quickly crept to his ears and pinched his earlobe.

"Ouch! Just wait, I'll show you ..."

Maggie smiled with relish when she thought back to what had happened afterwards. Thilio's youthful exuberance, his strong arms ...

Although Thilio claimed to be her age, Maggie suspected he was actually much younger. Probably he only tactfully refrained from giving his real age. In fact she felt flattered precisely because an obviously much younger man found her desirable. For her this was like a fountain of youth. It is true, there was nothing she could do about the fact that life inscribed itself ever deeper into her skin. But inwardly, since she was with Thilio, she sometimes felt like a young girl again. The fire in her, which had almost been extinguished after she had moved to the city, had flared up again thanks to him.

She pressed her lips to the shoulder of the sleeping Adonis. Gradually the sweet poison of slumber seeped into her, she sank and sank, her arm went limp, although she imagined to wrap it even tighter around the smoothly breathing body as she fell. But hadn't they long since merged into a single body anyway? Did they not sink as ONE being into the vastness of space, where the deepest fall was synonymous with the highest flight?

The cosmic night embraced them with equanimity. Deeper and deeper they fell into the sea of stars, past suns whose light would reach the Earth only in thousands of years, and planets Maggie had never heard of. She felt the life that was cavorting on them, without having the

slightest idea what it looked like. And the shooting stars were suddenly within reach, each one a cosmic flower that light years away an unimaginably alien being had plucked and carelessly thrown into the ocean of the sky.

Arrested!

But then, all of a sudden, it was all over. As fast as she had dived into it, the dream spat her out again. When Maggie opened her eyes, she saw nothing but naked, bare walls all around her: she was still in custody. Her new life, Thilio, the comforting warmth of his body – all this had been nothing but a dream. In reality, she was still lying in this dirty-grey cell, whose bleakness was already the first part of her punishment.

Immediately the nightmare in which she was trapped took her back into its stranglehold. The grimacing images that seemed to be buried deep inside her just a moment ago came crashing down on her again with destructive force. Once again she heard the door slamming outside her house, she saw herself stepping to the window and looking at the police cars that had taken position right in front of her door. When she opened it, someone held an official letter under her nose. "Search warrant," she read, without understanding what she was reading.

She wanted to ask something, but by then the flood of uniforms had already poured into her house. It spread quickly, even into the most remote corners of her home. Maggie felt as if someone was poking around in her life with long, pointed sticks.

Finally one of the team had descended into her storage cellar. Shortly afterwards he emerged from the depths again, holding an elongated box in his hand that Maggie had never seen before. Triumphant, he presented it to the head of the operation. "I've already looked inside," he commented on the find. "If this is not poison, I'll take some myself."

Maggie remembered that she had looked at her mobile phone at that very moment: six missed calls! Five were from Monica, one from Mirko. Apparently, Maggie later combined, they had already heard about the new autopsy findings on the news. But even if she had answered the calls: The idea that she would be accused of poisoning Michael still wouldn't have occurred to her. So what difference would it have made if she had spoken to them?

Maggie could still recall the police officer straightening his back and setting himself up before her like an emissary of the Last Judgement. "Mrs Margaret Rhode, I have to arrest you temporarily," she heard him solemnly announce. "You are strongly suspected of having poisoned Mr Michael Pauly."

In custody

Maggie couldn't remember whether she had replied something or whether she was so stunned that she had just surrendered speechlessly to her fate. But what did it matter now? What counted was that she was now crouching in this cell, where life was reduced to a joyless surviving; that the emptiness surrounding her was only a foretaste of the coming days, weeks, months, perhaps even the next years, in which she would have to vegetate in a kind of vacuum; that she was trapped in an existence from which life was locked out – an existence that was limited to dreaming of life pulsating behind incorruptible bars.

Her old history book suddenly came to her mind. In the chapter on "non-European peoples" there had been a drawing that had both disconcerted and fascinated her. Whenever she

opened the book, she had to look at the picture, although it already haunted her in her dreams. The drawing showed a priest who was about to offer a human sacrifice to the gods. The chosen one stood tied up beside him, in a moment he would become a victim of the flames.

What kind of feeling was it, Maggie had asked herself again and again, to pay with the own life for the sins of the community? Was it a consolation to the victims that their lives were given a supernatural meaning by the special form of death? Or were they desperately hoping for a sign from the gods that would put an end to this profoundly inhuman practice?

And as for the spectators: Did they feel pity for the victim? Or did they even feel a perverse form of envy because the doomed ones were in a prominent position, high above the community, for a few seconds? Did they still perceive the one led to the scaffold as a member of the community, or was this person already as enraptured for them as the gods to whom this human life was to be given as a gift?

Only now, in this cell, did she get an idea of how the victim must have felt. Only now did she fully understand what it meant to have to heal a wound not caused by oneself with the sacrifice of one's own life. And only now did she feel the loneliness that must have surrounded those on whom the community had imposed their guilt in order to get rid of it. Couldn't this also be the real reason for her own banishment from the community – for her incarceration behind thick walls without any fault of her own? Was this not a kind of symbolic extinction, an expiatory sacrifice to restore the community to its disturbed balance?

The atonement

Maggie sat up and slid to the edge of her cot. She could only sleep a few hours on the worn out mattress before it pinched her somewhere. Then she had to give her back a rest to recover from the instrument of torture called "bed" here.

Lost in thought, she sat there and looked at the cell door, which had been firmly locked since the evening. Although it was completely dark in the room, the door shone brightly. It almost looked as if someone had coated it with a fluorescent material.

Maggie turned to the barred window. When she leaned back and tilted her head to the side, she could see the moon. It was all round, a glowing face with a few deep furrows clearly visible. With long, thin fingers he reached into the cell and bathed the door in a shimmering light. It almost seemed to Maggie as if the light would make the cold steel tremble; as if it would have to melt away under the magic of this touch and open the way out into life.

But of course that was pure wishful thinking. Or was it reality after all? Wasn't there a slight, almost imperceptible movement at the door? Didn't she even hear that unmistakable squeaking and creaking that it used to make?

In fact, the door had already opened a crack! Maggie was about to get up and float away into freedom on the moon's ray when she noticed a shadow slipping through the narrow gap into the room. I see, she thought, disappointed, it was only one of the guards! Probably an unannounced inspection to find drug stashes and mobile phones.

But no, it wasn't the guard ... Someone else had gained access to her cell. She felt that she knew the person, even if she did not immediately recognise who it was. She narrowed her eyes and looked more closely. Was that not ... Nonsense, that was impossible! Why should he visit her in prison – and this in the middle of the night?

Concentrated, Maggie watched the figure close the door. And now, as the figure turned its face to her again, there was no doubt left: this was none other than Alfons Heimenross, the Lord of the Wind! What the hell was he doing in her cell?

Maggie wanted to say something, but couldn't utter a sound. Something shut her mouth. Heimenross remained silent as well. Slowly, as if guided by an invisible force, he walked towards her. Stunned, Maggie saw him approaching her. What was he holding in his hands? When she took a closer look, she recognised that it was the rotor blade of a windmill. Brightly it sparkled in the light of the moon. Heimenross gripped it tightly with his fingers and held it like a monstrance in front of his chest. At the same time he moved his lips continuously without a sound being heard. He seemed like a priest in prayerful dialogue with his God. The murmuring sounded as holy as it was incomprehensible, as if its sense was only meant for the Most High and his faithful servant.

Closer and closer the Heimenross priest came to Maggie. It looked as if he was leading a procession of invisible believers who crept silently behind him. Soon he would have reached Maggie's bed, she could already smell the incense scent of his robe. The rotor blade now flashed directly before her eyes, she almost felt dazzled by it.

A moment later she sensed a cold breeze: Holy Heimenross had lifted the rotor blade. Now it hovered ominously over Maggie's head. Obviously he was a sacrificial priest who would offer her severed head as a gift to the gods! At the same moment the judging rotor blade rushed down on her neck.

Dream and reality

A hoarse scream rose from her throat. Confused, she looked around. Her gaze glided across the agitated sea of sheets in which she lay, touched the chest of drawers with the toy dog she had won at the last fair, and finally got lost in the wide-open, barless window through which the hot breath of summer penetrated into the room. She breathed a sigh of relief: This was undoubtedly reality, the remand prison was the past. But where was Thilio?

At the same moment she heard footsteps in the corridor. The bedroom door opened and Thilio put his head through the crack: "Did you say something?"

"Just a bad dream ..." She reached out for him. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

Thilio sat down next to her. "You were still sleeping so soundly, I thought I'd better make breakfast first."

Maggie leaned her head against Thilio's shoulder. As he tilted his head slightly to her side, their hair strands branched into each other. Like golden lianas Maggie's curls wound their way through Thilio's brown jungle.

Thilio gently stroked her back. "I'm afraid I have to go now," he regretted. "I have an appointment at half past nine."

Maggie snuggled up tighter to him. "Only five more minutes ..."

First encounter with Thilio

She thought back to the day she had first met Thilio. It had been very close to the apartment, on the green verge that separates the two main streets. She had already noticed Thilio from far away. He had been sitting motionless on a bench, his head in his neck, looking up into the branches of an old oak tree.

It was autumn, October was almost over, the path was littered with leaves shimmering golden red. When Thilio heard her steps rustling in the rotten leaves, he had reflexively lowered his head and looked at her. Maggie still recalled his absent-minded look, this aimless gaze of a person whose thoughts are somewhere else. But that was exactly why she had the impression of looking into the untarnished mirror of his eyes. And because she thought she recognised an indeterminate melancholy in it, she had smiled encouragingly to him as she passed him by.

She had already gone a few steps further, when she heard him say: "Every tree has its own language ..."

Hesitantly, she had turned around. At first she thought he was talking to himself. But when their eyes met, she noticed that this time he read in her eyes as attentively as she read in his.

"There might be something true about that ..." she had replied uncertainly.

Thilio had pointed to the tree in front of him. "Take this oak tree here, for example. Doesn't its language move in much more winding paths than that of the young birch over there?"

"That must be the wisdom of age," Maggie had joked. But because Thilio still seemed to be fascinated by the intricate stories of the oak, she sat down next to him and listened to the stories of the trees together with him.

How long could they have sat next to each other in silence? Probably not more than five minutes, Maggie mused. But in her memory it seemed like half an eternity. And strangely enough, even though they had hardly said a word to each other the whole time, it was as if she had known Thilio for years afterwards. So they had arranged a date for the evening as a matter of course.

Reunion with Champy

Maggie poured herself another cup of coffee. By the time she came into the kitchen, Thilio had already left the house. Tired, she had taken a yogurt from the refrigerator, in which she now stirred listlessly. The heat took away all her appetite. Furthermore, the dream still haunted her. As ridiculous as it was – in essence it was true. Admittedly, she had been acquitted in the end. But nevertheless she had not fully regained her freedom.

She wondered when she had first become aware of this. Probably during the conversation with Monica ... On the day after her release from prison, when Monica had brought back the pets she had taken in after Maggie's imprisonment.

Champy just couldn't calm down when he finally found himself reunited with his mistress after such a long time. As a cream-coloured ball of wool he hopped, jumped and whimpered around her, repeatedly bumping his muzzle against her nose and wagging his tail so extensively that he almost lost his balance. The whole dog was one big joy.

Maggie was so busy stroking and patting him that she initially hadn't even noticed Frieda's absence. When she recognised that her tiger lady was nowhere to be seen, she first blamed it on the cat-typical pouting, this childish revenge for being left alone.

"I wonder where Frieda is," she finally remarked. "Didn't you manage to put her in the basket?"

Embarrassed, Monica saw past her. "Well, I ... I had to give her to the pound."

Maggie stared at her in disbelief. "To the pound? Did I get you right?"

"You know," Monica justified herself, "it was just too cramped in the apartment with two pets in the long run. And besides, no one could foresee that you'd be released so quickly."

Maggie shook her head indignantly. "Why not? An error is an error. It was clear that I wouldn't stay away forever."

She could have wept when she imagined her freedom-loving Frieda locked up in one of the cages among all the other cats. Of course, that was also due to over-identification. After all, she herself had been sitting innocently behind bars for quite a long time. Nevertheless, as soon as Monica had left, she had called the animal shelter. But Frieda had long since been passed on to new owners. At least she had found a new home. It could have ended much worse!

Monica's verdict

Maggie forced herself to eat another spoonful of yogurt. She wondered why she still had offered Monica some of the cake she had baked for her – after such a breach of trust! Maybe it had simply been some sort of sluggishness. Or perhaps it was an aftermath of the bitter bread of loneliness – the only thing that had been abundant in prison. Those who had tasted it once did not throw away long-standing friendships lightly.

However, with her indulgence she had only covered up a fracture that was beyond repair. It only took a few minutes to make this obvious.

In the beginning they had talked about all sorts of trivialities: the recipe for the cake, the new supermarket on Monica's doorstep, the leaky gutter at Maggie's house ("I really need to have it done"), the favourite food of Champy, which again had become more expensive ...

Then Maggie had asked: "By the way, when is the next meeting of our anti-wind-power group?"

Monica had looked at her in amazement at first. "Do you really think we would just carry on like this – after all that has happened?" she finally asked back.

"No, of course not," Maggie defended herself, although she didn't know what for. "But the fight must go on anyway. I think even Michael would have ..."

She couldn't finish the sentence. The hatred that suddenly appeared in Monica's eyes paralysed her tongue like a fast-acting poison.

"I can't believe you still have the guts to say that name." Monica shook her head in indignation, almost disgusted.

Maggie looked at her without understanding: "You don't think that I have ... that Michael was ..."

Monica mockingly pulled a face. "What does it matter what I believe? What others believe? What you think others believe? No, you'll have to sort it all out with yourself. But do you know what I don't understand?"

Maggie looked at her questioningly.

"I don't understand how you could get the idea to serve our cause by doing this to one of us. Didn't you realise that such an act would turn everything upside down? That it would deprive us of all credibility?"

Poisoned acquittal

Maggie still recalled Monica's presumptuous look, the know-it-all manner in which she had talked to her. It had been immediately clear to her that there would have been no point in holding long discussions with her. After all, Monica's words merely reflected the general

opinion about the case. She herself knew very well that it had been a second-class acquittal. And even that she had only achieved because she had changed lawyers.

Her first lawyer had been firmly convinced of her guilt. All the time he had been pushing her to make a confession. In his view, this was the only chance to mitigate the "inevitable" punishment.

Her second lawyer, in contrast, had enforced a new, more precise taking of evidence. In the process, new inconsistencies had arisen time and again. For example, suspicious fingerprints had been found on the ominous box in Maggie's storage cellar – but none of Maggie's. And even if it was assumed that she had used gloves, it remained unclear how she would have carried out the poisoning. No traces of poison were found in the thermos flask or in the beverage bottles seized at the crime scene. And the autopsy had revealed no evidence of poisoned food either.

So how could Maggie have administered the poison to the victim? By force? But then why had there been no signs of struggle at the scene of the alleged crime? Had the crime been committed with the victim's consent? But wouldn't Michael have taken the poison himself then?

In view of all these unresolved questions, the court had no choice but to acquit Maggie in the end. It was and remained a circumstantial trial in which the evidence was not sufficient for a conviction. The principle "In case of doubt for the accused" kept her out of prison. It did not only mean, however, that there was doubt about her guilt. "In case of doubt for the accused" – that also meant that there were doubts about her innocence.

This was precisely the tenor in which the process was presented in the media. The unfavourable reporting was also fuelled by the derogatory remarks of political decision-makers. Alfons Heimenross in particular missed no opportunity to stress that an acquittal "for lack of evidence" was not the same as an acquittal "for lack of guilt".

Only little by little did Maggie realise that one could also be set free without being free. Not only was she shunned by her former friends like a leper after the trial. She had also lost her job as a result of the months in custody. Of course, she could have tried to fight for her right to return in court. But what good would that have done? She would not have regained a real place in the company anyway. Everyone would have turned away from her, and in the next "restructuring" she would certainly have been the first to lose her job.

The only one who had stood by her during this difficult time without any ifs and buts had been Champy. How often had he laid his head on her lap in the morning, when she no longer felt any strength in her to start the marathon of the day, looking at her from his mischievous eyes: "Come on, let's romp around outside! Just forget about the gossip ..." He had indeed been her only consolation! All the more she was grieved when he died unexpectedly soon after.

Crushed singing

This suffocating heat ... Maggie felt as if she was being pushed onto her chair by an invisible giant of pure fire. It cost her strength to brace herself against the heat and creep to the bedroom. She closed the window with a sigh. Only stuffy air flowed into the room anyway. Quickly she put on her thinnest summer dress, slipped into her flip-flops and went to the door. Maybe there was still some oxygen left on the street.

When she opened the front door, she almost collided with the caretaker. "Today is Wind Day," he admonished her. "You still have to install a pinwheel on the balcony."

Wearied, Maggie looked around: All the balconies and windows were covered with multicoloured pinwheels. They blinked and sparkled in competition with each other, everywhere the glittering wings were spinning. The wind, however, had nothing to do with it. The oppressive heat that had prevailed for days was accompanied by a complete lull.

Maggie simply went past the caretaker and stepped out into the street. She heard him yell something about "consequences" and "report" after her, but she was too tired to pay attention to it. Her head throbbed, glowing tongs pressed against her temples.

At the next crossing she turned right and leaned against the mighty chestnut tree, which almost imploringly stretched its branches towards the steel-blue sky. She closed her eyes for a minute, then shrugged suddenly. An unexpected noise had torn her out of her lethargy: Wasn't that the typical thrush song? But how was that possible in this place, in the middle of summer, in this heat?

She put her head back. Her eyes wandered searchingly through the shimmering branches. And then, finally, she discovered the loudspeaker, which was attached to one of the thicker branches. Now she remembered the campaign that had been announced at the beginning of the year: Everywhere in the city inhabitants were to be exposed to the sound of birdsong via loudspeakers. A study had clearly shown that this could contribute significantly to the well-being of people and thus also to the improvement of working morale.

2. Kadahanian switcheroos

At the meeting of the Future Commission on Kadahan, an outrageous suspicion is raised: The leader of the Earth Exploration Mission is alleged to have deliberately delayed the invasion.



Sun dust

The air glider gently touched down on the desert floor. The expedition leader folded up the canopy and jumped into the warm sand.

He had not made such an excursion for a long time. During the last visits to his home planet his diary had always been much too full. So he had constantly been rushing from one meeting to the next under the plasma roof of the big tent city. This time, however, he wanted to dive again into the atmosphere that had enveloped him since childhood.

Just at the moment of his landing, one of the two Kadahanian days was coming to an end. Slowly the Merza sun approached the horizon. The magic wand of its oblique light transformed the barren landscape into a sea of bizarre flowers. In their purple dress of rays, the rocks mutated into calyxes from which a violet pollen rained up to the sky. Once there, it married with the stardust to form a shimmering cloud, which covered things as a transparent veil. Nothing remained what it was, the things came out of themselves, they opened like buds kissed by the light and revealed the dream of their being.

But then the blossoms became gemstones, the gemstones turned into the battlements of sandcastles, and the sandcastles disintegrated into a cloud of dust that was swallowed up by the fading purple mantle of light. In the end, the expedition leader found himself surrounded again by the same shapeless rocks that rose from an extinct sea of sand. Solidified wave movements rippled over the sea surface. All paths led to nowhere, the writing had fallen silent.

What was beautiful about the days on Kadohan, however, was that every end immediately led to a new beginning. The vespertine crown of thorns passed seamlessly into the floral wreath of the morning. As soon as the last drop of light emitted by Merza had seeped into the sand, a gate opened up in the clouds on the other side of the sky, and Siah, the other sun of Kadohan, took over the scepter. The expedition leader only had to turn around to cross over from one magical world to the other.

Blinded by the abundance of light, he saw glittering fishes swimming through the morning, with a company of underwater horses on either side of the shoal. Exuberantly, they frolicked over the shimmering hills of clouds. Sparks flew from their hooves to the Earth and set fire to the sand, which, stirred by the wind, snaked up to the sky in columns of flame. The expedition leader let his gaze wander across the glistening plain, from which the flickering curls of the grass tufts shone out like stranded comets. Far behind, where the horizon was lost in space, he anchored at the dreamed silhouette of a mountain.

The gateway to the cosmos

The left half of the expedition leader's face twitched: his feelings were in turmoil. Yes, he said to himself, that was exactly the basic mood on Kadohan: a feeling of all-embracing shelter. Life here was like that of a child whose mother never slept and was always there for her dear ones.

How different was life on Earth, where people were regularly cut off from the nourishing power of light – in some places even for several months! Often he had felt hopelessly lost there – like a child abandoned by his mother in a dark forest, without knowing whether she will come back again.

On the other hand – so the expedition leader asked himself: Didn't this reflect the cosmic cycle much better than the sheltered life on Kadohan? Didn't the nights on Earth convey a much more intense impression of the reality of life, this rushing of a mote of dust through an inflated nothing?

Of course, the telescopes circling around Kadohan provided him with countless perspectives of the starry world, which he could call up at any time via his simulation mask. But this artificial contact with the cosmos was quite different from the immediate immersion in it, as it was possible in nights on Earth. Admittedly, with their light-flooded cities and their thick walls behind which they entrenched themselves, the Earthlings did everything they could to avoid such an experience. Nevertheless, their planet – unlike Kadohan – at least offered the conditions for it.

It was no different with the vegetative rhythm of life on Earth. On Kadohan, thanks to the atmosphere control system, they were largely independent of natural fluctuations. Although this was very convenient and allowed reliable planning for the future, it had the disadvantage that the days flowed by as monotonous sameness.

On Earth, it was exactly the other way around. True, the Earthlings also tried their best to control their environment and to influence it in their own way. But even if their technical and prognostic possibilities should eventually reach the level of the Kadohanian civilisation – some things they would not be able to influence even with the most sophisticated manipulation technique.

The seasons, the awakening and dying of vegetation, which in some regions was intertwined in an incessant feverish dream – all these things were inseparable from the essence of this planet. And couldn't this too be understood as a parable for the cosmic becoming and

passing away? Weren't the Earthlings once again closer to this than the Kadohanians in their world shrouded in the light cocoon of two suns?

The longer he lived on Earth, the more the expedition leader feared that the uniqueness of this planet could be lost by the planned invasion. Of course, the seasons and the day-night rhythm would have been untouchable even for the Kadohanians. But what if the essence of the planet was to be pushed even further into the background by them than it already was now, by the Earthlings? What if plasma tent cities were to grow out of the ground everywhere on Earth, cities from which the seasons would be locked out and in which light intensity, temperature, humidity and all the other atmospheric parameters would be automatically controlled, precisely tailored to the needs of the inhabitants?

It was undeniable that the Earthlings were not to be envied for their short life, a life constantly threatened by all kinds of unforeseeable dangers. The expedition leader knew very well that he wouldn't have swapped with them, even if he had the choice. On the other hand, life on Earth had also made him aware of the disadvantages and risks associated with the artificially optimised life on Kadohan.

The intensity of life, for example, was much greater on Earth. Could it be, he had asked himself over and over again, that in the end the same energy was always available for every single being – so that it was simply consumed much more slowly during a longer life span, which then went hand in hand with a less intensive attitude towards life? And didn't the awareness alone that one's own life could be over tomorrow lead to an increased sense of existence? To the desire to savor every second to the full, whereby every single moment came much closer to eternity than the seemingly endless life of the Kadohanians?

Furthermore, the completely optimised everyday life on Kadohan was linked to a feeling of total control over the planet. But this feeling was, as the expedition leader knew, an illusion. A dangerous illusion when he thought of how easily the fragile balance of the two suns, which held Kadohan in their midst as if in a cradle, could be shattered. And against the impact of a larger asteroid, they would have been just as powerless on Kadohan as on other planets. But the less aware they were of the fragility of their livelihoods, the greater was the danger of destroying them through carelessness.

Crossing the border

The expedition leader climbed back into his air glider. The heat emanating from Sija was hardly bearable even in a protective suit. Besides, it was time to set off for the conference center. He did not want to be late for the decisive meeting of the Future Commission, which was scheduled for that day.

He folded down the canopy and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then he gave the glider the signal to take off. With a soft whirring sound it rose from the ground.

Lost in thought, the expedition leader looked down on the rocky seas that rippled beneath him, interrupted here and there by some plasma tent cities. Of course he was aware that he had behaved wrong. Under no circumstances should he have developed any form of compassion for the alien species. Who would know this better than himself, who had already been in charge of so many missions to distant worlds? At the first sign of emotional closeness he should have asked the Future Commission to relieve him of his duties!

During the first period of his emotional aberration, however, he could not have been accused of a real breach of duty. Perhaps there was a certain carelessness, but no slackening in the efforts to bring the mission to a successful end. After all, he knew exactly what

depended on it. First and foremost, they urgently needed the Earth's water resources on Kadohan. For on the neighboring planet, whose ice lakes they used for their water supply, the deposits were almost completely exhausted, despite all their sophisticated water treatment processes.

The expedition leader blinked. He flew directly towards the still low Sija sun. No, he mused, the real border crossing had taken place later. Only when empathy and compassion had turned into a conscious coexistence, the neglect of duty had turned into infidelity and infidelity almost imperceptibly, against his will, into betrayal.

The moment he crossed the border ... He still remembered it as if it was yesterday. He had sat down on a bench in the middle of a green verge separating two roads. There he had read, his head in his neck, in the labyrinthine branches of one of those old trees he had learned to love on Earth. Each of these trees, he found, formed the winding paths of the cosmos in its own way.

While he was trying to decipher the peculiar writing of this particular tree, a woman had approached from the side. He saw her from the corner of his eye, but paid no further attention to her. Up to then, he had always planned the contact with Earthlings exactly in advance.

When the woman came closer, however, she slowed her step slightly and looked over to him. Thereupon he too had involuntarily lowered his head and glanced at her. And in that moment it had happened: For the first time, an Earthling's gaze passed through the gate of his eyes. For the first time he felt a real touch with this species that was still so alien to him, a touch that penetrated his outer shell.

The following seconds had been the decisive ones. Actually nothing had happened yet. He could have undone the border crossing and simply returned back to the other side. The woman had passed him by, he could have simply read in his tree again and forgotten the short episode. But he had done the opposite: he had addressed the woman.

Of course this had not been a conscious decision. Just as it was not a conscious decision to sit down on a bench at this very spot of the city. But shouldn't he have known who lived in that part of town? Didn't he realise what an explosive encounter he was risking through his imprudence? Or had he unconsciously even hoped for this encounter? Had he, by visiting precisely this place, been driven by the desire of getting to know his opponents – those who were not blinded by the sugar coating he sprinkled on the Kadohanian invasion plans?

When the woman then sat down next to him, the border crossing was virtually sealed. It had remained silent between them all the time, not a word had broken the silence. But perhaps, the expedition leader thought, this was exactly what had created the bond that made the alien creature familiar to him. For one thing he had learned on Earth: words only served there to weave a mask that kept people away from one another. Only those who were willing to be silent with others opened them a window to their soul.

"My name is Maggie, by the way," the woman had said at the goodbye.

It had immediately been clear to him that this was an invitation to enter her life. It was the last opportunity for a turnaround. Instead, he had taken the decisive step: He pretended he had to answer an urgent call, but actually used a translation programme to replace his alias with an appropriate first name. Thus "Groentraed" became "Thilio".

With this he had issued himself a visa to cross the border. He had given a name to the face he had turned towards this woman. He had become a part of another world.

Ominous foreboding

The air glider reduced the speed. A few more seconds, then the expedition leader could see the honeycomb-like building of the parking lot. The air glider unerringly headed for a free space. The expedition leader transferred to the waiting mini-glider, which should bring him to the conveyor belts. Then the air glider folded into a compact, square package and disappeared into its gap.

An indefinite uneasiness rose in the expedition leader as the incessantly waving grab arms placed him on the conveyor belt and sent him towards the conference center. Since he had been forced to include the head of the invasion command in his expedition group, the pressure on him had increased noticeably.

Even the cover name that the commander had chosen for himself showed his determination to launch the attack on Earth as soon as possible. "Lazerov ..." Didn't the name suggest in an almost obtrusive way what he had in mind? At first, the expedition leader had indeed feared that Lazerov's cover might be blown and the Earthlings would figure out the invasion plans. But then, when nothing of the sort happened, he had gradually got accustomed to the name and used it just as unscrupulously as his own alias.

However, this did not change the fact that he felt pressured by "Lazerov". Meticulously, the commander made sure that the construction of the landing pillars corresponded to the invasion plans. And whenever a new ring of landing towers was closed, he adjusted the number of spaceships that could fly in the invasion fleet in his simulation program. He had long since stopped trying to hide his impatience when he was admonished to be prudent and to consider all eventualities.

The expedition leader frowned as he entered the conference room. To his astonishment, it was only half occupied. And this, although the meeting should start in a few minutes! Could it be that the invitations were not sufficiently clear about the urgency of the items on the agenda? Or was another important event taking place at the same time? But what could be more important than the future of the planet?

But then, as he let his gaze wander over the rows of those present, an ominous premonition crept over him. Those who attended the meeting were mainly Lazerov's followers. Most of them, like him, believed that the invasion plans should be implemented today rather than tomorrow. So had Lazerov influenced the selection of the invited in his favour?

The expedition leader took another close look around. Could he have missed someone? Were the faces of those who were skeptical about his leadership simply more striking to him? But no, there was no doubt about it: almost only followers of Lazerov were present.

Even a glance at the head of the Future Commission did not help to lighten his mood. It was still the same as when the timing for the invasion was first voted on. Even the more advanced forms of the rejuvenation pill apparently were showing no effect on her. Her once grey hair had turned white, and the writing of age had engraved itself even deeper into her skin. An expression of bitterness trembled around her lips. No wonder, thought the expedition leader. It must indeed be a painful experience to feel one's own end relentlessly approaching, while all around you everyone was constantly rejuvenating.

"I think we can now begin the meeting ..."

The expedition leader involuntarily twitched when he heard the voice of the aged Kadahanian woman. It sounded very fragile, fragile and quiet, like the distant echo of those cracking noises that occur when someone steps on a rotten branch.

Everyone put on their demonstration glasses and pressed themselves into their sitting machines, which then gently nestled against their bodies. "We also had great success on the next stage of our mission," the expedition leader began. He had the diagrams with the new landing pillars appear on the demonstration glasses, rattled off the statistics on the latest development projects, summarised once again the impact of the adjuvants, which had significantly increased the willingness to install landing pillars, and then summed up: "In short: I think we are still on a very good path. Our project is making visible progress!"

Unpleasant questions

The expedition leader looked around anxiously. Not a finger was raised to the temple, as a sign of spontaneous applause. But had he expected anything else? He had noticed for himself that his presentation had been too routine, not enthusiastic enough. Everyone in the room could sense that he was no longer burning for the goals the mission was meant to serve.

Nevertheless, he was shocked by the threatening silence that followed his report. No one said anything. Instead, the expedition leader's demonstration glasses virtually vibrated from all the buzzing sounds that indicated the auditorium's need for explanation. Apparently, several members of the Future Commission had simultaneously activated the corresponding function.

He wanted to start with an explanation, but the thin voice of the chairwoman interrupted him: "With the great need for debate, we should perhaps have the discussion first ..."

She had hardly stopped talking when the thunderstorm of questions was already raining down on the expedition leader. "I have an interesting simulation here," began the first discussant, who, just like Lazerov, had painted an attack triangle of lightning bolts on his skull. "According to this, the energy that the Earthlings can gain from our landing pillars corresponds to a fractional amount of the energy they need for the propulsion of their means of transport. Consequently, even a small saving in this area could make the landing towers seem superfluous. And what weighs even more heavily: As far as I know, such calculations are already made among Earthlings. Will this not jeopardise the goals of our mission in the long term? Shouldn't we therefore push ahead with the invasion plans much more decisively?"

"I don't think we need to worry about that," reassured the expedition leader. "Through our intermediaries we have founded our own institutes, which on the basis of other mathematical operations achieve completely different results. Moreover, the expectation of salvation associated with the landing pillars is now far too firmly anchored in the population. Most people simply ignore arithmetic games that don't fit into this picture."

"But isn't it also true," another one followed up, "that the energy theoretically to be gained from the landing towers will soon reach an undeniable end? After all, there is a natural limit to expansion. The simulations clearly show that the rotors are mutually decelerating each other from a specific stage of expansion. And that will probably not even remain hidden to the Earthlings!"

The expedition leader cleared his throat. His mouth had become dry. This whole cascade of questions was, it became increasingly clear to him, unmistakably orchestrated by Lazerov. Obviously it was a concerted action!

He took a deep breath, then he explained: "Here too, we have had our institutes develop calculations that refute the criticism. According to these calculations, the landing pillars only have to be placed at the right angle to each other to avoid a braking effect."

"You're missing the point!" another member of the commission interfered – a Kadahanian woman whose skull was adorned with a stylised supernova. "At a certain level, the continued erection of landing towers becomes harmful to our own interests! When there are too many of them, the landing sites are simply not clearly enough marked. Each additional landing pillar only complicates our invasion plans. So I really don't understand why we don't strike at last!"

Despite the aggressive tone of the question, the expedition leader tried to give a calm answer: "I don't think that more landing pillars will endanger our mission. They will rather open up additional options. In any case, a special simulation programme, which we use for all new constructions, ensures that all landing pillars are erected in such a way that they can be used for the landing maneuvers of our spaceship fleet."

He looked over at Lazerov. Perhaps the commendable mention of his simulation program would appease him.

In fact, Lazerov was clearly satisfied with the help-seeking look of the expedition leader. However, this in no way prompted him to stand by his colleague. Instead, he behaved like a boxer watching his opponent stagger: He struck the decisive blow.

Proof of love

Slowly, savouring every second of his triumph, Lazerov rose. He let his gaze wander over the ranks of the commissioners, then he said in a low, threatening voice: "I propose that we put an end to the unworthy question and answer game at this point. No one in this room should have failed to notice that our expedition leader is trying to delay the invasion, no matter how important it is for our planet. I think everyone here has a right to know the reason for this, to put it mildly, highly peculiar behaviour."

Lazerov casually tapped against the demonstration glasses. Startled, the expedition leader looked at the film building up before his eyes. The images that now flickered past his eyes were all too familiar to him. They were pictures from Earth. Of a woman whose long curls fell as a golden shimmering wave over her naked torso. Her pear-shaped breasts trembled barely perceptibly due to the gentle, circular movements she made with her lap.

"Take your time," the expedition leader heard her whisper. "No one is pushing us. It's nice like this too ... The main thing is that we are together."

With these words she leaned forward to a man lying beneath her. It was him to whom the words were addressed. And this man was no other than the one who was "Thilio" for this woman.

The expedition leader felt how a rising heat set his face aflame. He could still remember the evening when the pictures must have been taken. How could he ever forget it? It was the evening when he had finally given in to Maggie's desire for physical closeness.

That he had resisted her advances for so long was not so much due to a lack of desire to be close to her. No, his main fear was disappointing Maggie. After all, artificial reproduction had long been established on Kadahan. Given the small number of newborns that could still be afforded after the introduction of the rejuvenation pill, this trend had even intensified. Everything about the few new Kadahanians should simply be perfect.

As a result, however, the desire for physical union with others had diminished more and more. In the end, it had almost been considered something pre-civilised, barbaric. Thus, as "Thilio", he had been unsure whether he would be able to indulge in animalistic ecstasy at all – even more so if this was to happen together with the being of an alien species.

Maggie had by no means urged him to give up his restraint. But in the end, her teasing did not fail to have its effect: "I like shy men. But you can overdo everything..."

So he had finally crossed the last border and let himself sink completely into her arms. In the beginning this extreme form of closeness to another being, which in this case also transcended the boundaries of planets and galaxies, had almost crushed him. But then it became the most intensive experience of his life – the most intensive, but also the most intimate experience.

It was therefore not simply embarrassment that he felt when he now had to share this experience with all the astonished commissioners who had always met him only in the outer shell of their functions on the planet. He also had the feeling that a secret was stolen from him that belonged to him and Maggie alone.

At the same time, however, it was only through the pictures that he fully understood how much the foreign planet had become his home. He only had to look at "Thilio's" wild, disheveled hair. Here too he had let Maggie shape him. He still had the teasing tone in his ear in which she had made fun of his Groentraed hairstyle: "Why are you always walking around with that severe parting? Let your hair grow! It'll look much better on you."

Maggie loved to bury her fingers in his fuzzy hair. How could he explain to her the bald shaved skull that he now had again due to his stay on Kadohan?

However, all these memories and everyday questions hardly touched the threshold of his consciousness. They were just like a heap of colourful pebbles that a tidal wave briefly whirls up from the bottom of a river. His conscious thinking was captured by completely different questions: How had Lazerov managed to take these pictures? How had he been able to sneak into Maggie's apartment to install his spy devices? And why hadn't he and Maggie noticed any of this? How could he be so careless! If only nothing happened to Maggie, now that he wasn't by her side to protect her!

The decision

Just as abruptly as it had started, the flickering of images ended again. Everyone took off their demonstration glasses. The expedition leader found himself surrounded by cold, piercing pairs of eyes, each one a mute judgement.

As if to put the oppressive silence into words, the chairwoman asked in her fragile voice: "Do you admit that the man in these pictures is you?"

For a moment, the expedition leader thought about presenting the "enemy contact" as a conspiratorial action to explore the Earthlings. But he immediately rejected the idea. Not only was the pleasure that this kind of "enemy contact" gave him much too clearly visible on the pictures. He would also have felt it a betrayal to Maggie not to stand by her. After he had become disloyal to his mission, he didn't want to betray additionally what had become the most precious thing in his life.

On his ponderous nodding, the head of the Future Commission announced: "You have proven unworthy of the task you have been charged with. I hereby relieve you of your function as expedition leader. The mission will be coordinated from now on by the head of the invasion command."

Lazerov rose. "I thank you for the trust you have placed in me. I will do everything in my power not to disappoint it. First of all, I think we should intensify preparations for the invasion."

Lazerov's triumph-soaked voice reached the ear of the degraded expedition leader only as if from far away. In his thoughts he was already back on Earth, with Maggie. Had he actually, he wondered, fallen in love with Maggie because he had fallen in love with the Earth? Was she the face of the Earth for him, so to speak? Or had he fallen in love with the Earth because he loved Maggie? Because she struck a chord in him of which he had not known before?

However, one thing was clear to him: If he didn't want to lose Maggie, the Earth had to stay what it was. And he knew that if he wanted to protect both from harm, there was only one solution.

His mind was made up.

3. Ascension

During a solemn speech on Wind Day, Alfons Heimenross makes an almost incredible announcement.



The annunciation

Alfons Heimenross was overwhelmed. The whole large parade ground, which had been called "Wind Square" for quite some time, was filled with the busy whirring of pinwheels. Everyone who had come to celebrate the wind had brought one of the miniature windmills. It was completely windless that day. But the pinwheels had an autonomous drive and could move under their own power. Could there be, Heimenross asked himself, a more fitting symbol for the inexhaustible, eternally self-renewing source of wind?

With solemn determination he entered the stage. Framed by mock-up rotor blades, it seemed as if it was lifted up by silent propellers.

"The Wind be with you," he exclaimed, arms outstretched, towards the cheering crowd.

"And with your spirit!" it echoed back.

Thousands of arms stretched out towards Heimenross for the wind salute. The sunlight glittered in the wings of the pinwheels. Like a sea of pearls, the sparkle flooded around the golden windmill column that adorned the center of the square.

"Friends! Companions! Comrades in faith!" Heimenross started again. "You all know that today is a great day. Not because it is my birthday – but because with this day, which I have dedicated to the Wind, I want to show all of us whose children we really are. Children of the Wind – that's what we are! We would be nothing without Him and His breath, which gives us the strength to live!"

"Thanks be to the Wind!" it echoed across the square in many-voiced singsong.

Heimenross put on a worried face. "Unshakable is, we confess, our covenant with the Wind!" he stressed. "And yet there are still some among us who do not profess the power of the wheel."

Heimenross paused briefly. An indignant murmur went through the crowd. The experienced orator let it swell a little, then raised his voice: "Very truly I tell you: These unbelievers are like graves covered with shining marble slabs. From the outside they seem pure and bright, but inside they are all rotten and putrid! However, their betrayal will not stop us. It is they

who will be harmed. They themselves will lose salvation through their betrayal and fall prey to eternal damnation!"

"So be it!" replied the crowd in chorus. "Yes, so it shall be!"

Heimenross let the murmurings on the square die down completely before he talked on. His voice now took on a more conciliatory tone: "But today, in order to let the last darkened souls be enlightened by the glory of the Wind, I have decided to set a sign. A sign I will bear witness to with my own life!"

In response to these words, a group of trombonists took position on both sides of Heimenross. While they sent a clattering fanfare across the square, a starry sky flared up on the large screen behind the speaker's platform. The stars were constantly in motion, as if being whirled around by mighty cosmic winds. Only a luminous point in the middle of them did not move from the spot. Gradually it grew bigger and bigger until it could finally be recognised as a spaceship. In the end it took up the entire width of the screen. Like a big alien bird it hovered over the heads of the crowd.

Heimenross took another deep breath. "This is the ferry that will carry me into the heart of the Wind," he proclaimed.

Thousands of eyes stared at him in disbelief. No one understood what he wanted to say. And nobody had ever seen a spaceship like the one on the screen, with trembling wings, ready to take off into the cosmic night.

"Yes," affirmed Heimenross, "I will leave the Earth. But you should not feel any grief over this – on the contrary, may joy fill your hearts! For look, we have long since planted the pillars of our faith everywhere on our planet. Our bond with the Wind is sealed, nothing can destroy it. So my mission on this planet is fulfilled. But there are still countless regions in the universe that are trapped in total darkness. Regions that know nothing of the Wind's redemptive power. This is where, the Good Wind willing, my journey will take me, so that even the darkest corners of the universe will be enlightened by the power in which our own planet shines."

Restlessness spread among the audience. Here and there some broke out into loud sobs.

Heimenross bent slightly forward. Tenderly, like a mother stroking her child over the head, his fingers touched the edge of the lectern. "Fear not!" he shouted to the crowd. "Even though my body will no longer be present on this planet, I will still be among you."

An assistant in a long puffy wind robe as worn by the wind servants for some time entered the stage. With his hands he reverently clasped a golden pinwheel. He lowered his head devoutly when he handed it over to Heimenross.

Heimenross solemnly presented the windmill monstrance to the crowd. "Behold," he proclaimed, "this is the wheel that seals our bond! Whenever it spins, my breath will touch you from its wings. Then take the wings, break them and spread them among yourselves. Thus I will always be in your midst and strengthen your community, so that you may devote all your energies to serving the power of the Wind, from which and for which we all live!"

The sobbing on the square now became louder once again. Some spontaneously fell to their knees and muttered blessings for the great windmill leader; for him, who did not even shy away from the sacrifice of his own life to spread the joyful message of the Wind to the farthest corners of the universe.

Heimenross closed his eyes and raised his arms to the sky. "Venerable Wind!" he exclaimed. "I am ready! Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven!"

From a thousand throats the crowd joined in the ritual words: "Truly, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. But just breathe on me and my soul will be healed."

Heimenross remained in his place in silence for a moment. Moved by his own speech, he wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. Then he stepped off the stage.

Abandonment

A feeling of deep abandonment spread across the square. The crowd writhed in helpless convulsions, like a snake whose head had been cut off.

No one even thought about going home. Everyone stared spellbound at the big screen, which was now the last remaining connection with the beloved leader. The pictures that could be seen there showed Heimross in the circle of his windmill disciples. Visibly moved, they led their leader to an elevator at the edge of the square. In it they all rushed down to a long tunnel, which they walked through in silence.

At the end of the underground corridor, the group reached a high vaulted cellar. In its center was a slightly elevated structure on which a kind of flight object was placed. Was this perhaps a secret rocket launching pad – the place from which the beloved leader was about to set off into space?

Heimenross now took leave of his disciples and entrusted himself to the care of a number of mechanics and engineers, who immediately engaged him in a lengthy conversation. Apparently they gave him final instructions for the forthcoming flight.

However, the way these men treated Heimenross seemed anything but submissive. Indignation spread in the crowd when the screen showed how disrespectfully the revered leader was received. He was not, as would have been appropriate for the situation, devoutly carried into the spaceship, but rather pushed rudely into the small capsule. And inside they did not carefully fasten his seat belts, but almost nailed him to his seat with brute force.

Despite all that, Heimenross let everything come over him like a prince of peace. Relaxed, he leaned back in his seat after he had received the last safety instructions and waited all alone to be raptured into heaven.

All of a sudden a thunderous tremor rolled across the square. Everyone looked around frightened. It took a while before they could locate the source of the quake. The epicenter was obviously the golden windmill column in the middle of the square. Something weird was going on inside. A loud, roaring sound emanated from it that nobody could assign properly. But then something completely unexpected happened: The windmill column opened at its upper end. The wings bent apart and formed a small trough that resembled the calyx of a flower. And in this calyx seconds later the space capsule appeared into which shortly before the beloved leader had climbed.

Ah's and Oh's were echoing across the square. Now the crowd understood: the secret spaceport was right under their feet. And the launch pad went straight through the windmill column!

As soon as the space capsule emerged from the hollow column, it began to rise like a yeast dough. It quickly grew into the spaceship that had been seen on the screen during Heimenross's speech. At the end the wings were flapping apart. Immediately afterwards the countdown for the launch resounded clattering from the loudspeakers.

At the same moment, an increasingly dense darkness began to shade the heads. The retractable roof, which had recently been put in place to protect against the vagaries of the weather, was raised. No one was to be harmed by the ascension of the windmill leader.

A tense calm lay over the square. All eyes were directed anxiously to the screen, to the unknown flying object, in which the great wind herald was feverishly awaiting his last great

departure. Some closed their eyes and folded their hands to unite their thoughts with those of the departing hero. Others tore their eyes wide open, not to miss the one great moment when the incredible would become reality.

And then it happened. Hissing and roaring like a freed predator, the spaceship detached itself from the ramp. As a bright rain of sparks, the spewed fire pelted down onto the closed roof above the square.

The spaceship quickly moved away from the sight of the marvelling crowd. Wistful glances followed it until it was only a small, shining dot among many others on the screen. Not for long, and even this last sparkling greeting of the intrepid celestial traveller was swallowed by the light floods of the universe.

Cosmic swarms of mosquitoes

A whirring sound woke the crowd from its torpor: the sliding roof disappeared again. Although the sun could now once again spread its full splendour across the square, the abandonment was even more tangible than before, under the protective cave ceiling. Like a forgotten torch, the windmill column shone in the middle of the square after its peak had closed again. And at the sight of the orphaned speaker's platform, from which the manna of inspiring words had rained down on them just a moment ago, tears welled up in many eyes again.

To comfort the crowd, but also to send a final greeting to the great wind preacher, the entire mosaic of wind turbines, erected thanks to the departed one, was once again presented on the screen. Country by country, continent by continent, the patterns drawn into the landscape by the red luminous dots unfolded in front of a night-black sky.

For many, this was the first time that the celestial sense of symmetry that characterised the work of the beloved windmill leader became clear. Nothing was left to chance, everything seemed to follow a superior plan, guided by universal harmony. Didn't the circular arrangement of the wind turbine pillars, which could be observed in all the constructions, testify to an almost supernatural sense of form and structure?

Devoutly the crowd immersed itself into the mystical windmill circles. A mood of quiet contemplation spread across the square.

But then again something unforeseeable happened. A few sparks suddenly appeared on the screen, disturbingly twitching around the harmonious pattern of the windmill pillars. Like a swarm of mosquitoes glittering in the sun, they approached the light circles, increasing rapidly in size. At the same time, the swarm spread further and further apart. In the end, it had grown into a whole armada of cosmic beacons that stretched almost across the entire width of the sky.

Just as the first ones were seized by a certain inner turmoil, the sirens began to wail. Questioning looks were exchanged, bouncing off each other, falling back into themselves. No one realised what was going on. No one understood anything. No one recognised anything. It was as if the world suddenly spoke to them in a foreign language.

Even the rattling words that now came out of the loudspeakers seemed incomprehensible: "Unidentified flying objects approaching Earth! This is an attack on Earth! I repeat: This is an attack on Earth! Go to the bomb shelters immediately or seek out a safe cellar room! Do not stay outside! Stay calm! All necessary measures for the safety of the population will be taken." Then it started all over again: "Unidentified flying objects ..."

A brief paralysed silence, a last glance at the light circles on the screen, which suddenly took on a completely new, no longer harmonious meaning – then the first screams of horror were heard, followed by hectic movement. A moment later the crowd disintegrated into a thousand individual pieces that quickly scattered in all directions. If the square had not been wide enough to give everyone a chance to escape, mass panic could easily have broken out.

The smile of the space traveller

Shortly afterwards the place was completely deserted. On the screen nothing but an indefinite flicker could be seen. It was not clear whether it came from extraterrestrial warriors or was due to a disturbed camera. All over the floor lay the colourful pinwheels, joyfully lifted into the air a moment before. Some of them, caught in the dynamics of their own drive, were still twitching helplessly across the ground for a while. Then they too surrendered to the general immobility.

Nothing moved. The celestial celebration had given way to a great emptiness. Only one lonely man had remained in the square. Relaxed, he leaned against the golden windmill column. He didn't seem worried at all. It even looked as if a satisfied smile surrounded his lips – though it was a little more pronounced on the left side than on the right.

This man was known on Earth as "Mr Groentraed", managing director of the StarWind company, even if he felt himself to be more like "Thilio". No one suspected that he actually came from a distant planet where he had been leading expeditions to explore foreign worlds until recently.

Why he was in such a good mood, unlike all the others who had stood in the square with him? Perhaps he was thinking of the ruse that had allowed him to get to a spaceship, despite the ban on leaving the planet imposed on him; of his special space travel skills that had enabled him to break through the security cordon of his planet.

Or perhaps he was thinking back to his conversation with Heimenross, the so-called "Mister Energy"; to the messianic glow in his eyes when he had suggested him to extend his wind power mission to other planets – although the enthusiasm of the great windmill leader might have been partly due to the fact that he had not told him about the lack of opportunities to return.

Did he think of how he had advised Heimenross to present his launch into space as a public event, with a screen on which everyone could follow every step he took and even his departure? A screen that – what Heimenross did not need to know – would reveal the true purpose of the venerated wind turbines? A screen on which even spaceships approaching the Earth with hostile intent would be clearly visible?

Or did he sink in a stream of golden curls in his thoughts? Did he indulge in the fragrant crackling they enveloped him in? Was he inebriated by the celestial smoothness of a mysterious little box his fingers were playing with? By the knowledge about the life-giving power of the pills he kept in it? By the dream of all the many years they would give him on this perfectly imperfect, constantly self-reinventing planet, which in its fragility looked like a vase of precious porcelain?

Did he know something that no one but him could suspect: that this story would end well?

4. Resurrection

Exhausted, Maggie blinks into the morning sun: Something unimaginable has happened.



Invisible hands patted Maggie's cheeks, stroked her hair, rubbed unknown scents into her skin. For a long time she hadn't enjoyed the touch of the wind so much.

Had perhaps, she wondered, all this fuss about the "power" of the wind and its most efficient use deprived the wind of its secret in the end – its freedom to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time?

Blinking, she looked over to the hills behind which the sun had just risen. In the oblique light the ruins of the wind turbines were not to be seen. Everything looked again as before. Of course she knew that this was just an illusion. Nevertheless, she enjoyed hearing the buzzard's cry again without worrying that the wings of the mighty bird would be broken at the rotor blades. Finally she was surrounded by the free rustle of the wind again and no longer by the greedy panting of the rotors.

A shuffling noise in the knee-high meadow in front of her attracted her attention. At first, only a raised red striped tail was visible, then the corresponding body emerged from the sea of grass. It was Stormy, her fiery red tomcat, who had recently decided to live with her. She had just returned to her old house when he suddenly appeared at her door. A shaggy fire devil, who had nothing left but his unshakable self-confidence. Generously he had shared his fleas with her, wrapping his tail around her legs. Somehow he must have sensed that he had come across a childless mother cat.

"Hey there, little robber," she greeted her housemate. "Feel like some breakfast?"

A pitiful meowing, with which Stormy took position in front of the kitchen window, was the answer.

Maggie smiled. How lucky she had been that her house had not yet been sacrificed to the wind turbines! In this case, the "Law for the Reappraisal of the Wind Power Age" provided that the former owners were allowed to return to their houses. The compensation received could be repaid in monthly instalments.

Others, she knew, had been less fortunate. Either the wind turbines had already displaced their houses, or their walls just protruded uselessly from the ruins that had remained from the countless reinforced concrete towers.

On the other hand, Maggie pondered: Would there have been an alternative to bombing the wind turbines? If the fighter jets hadn't received the order to go into action immediately and reduced the turbines to rubble, the alien spaceships would probably have continued to fly unswervingly towards their destination. In that case, Earth would probably be the colony of another planet by now. And then she too would not be standing here, dreaming of a better future.

Of course she knew that the future was really nothing but a beautiful dream for the time being. No one had the slightest idea where and how to dispose of the millions of tons of scrap metal left over from the wind turbines.

Maggie pulled her dressing gown tighter around her shoulders. The summer heat was over, in the morning it already cooled down noticeably. A light shiver ran over her skin. She had to think of the day after, of the morning when it gradually became clear that they had succeeded in fending off the attack on Earth. Hesitantly they had all crawled out of their bunkers and cellar holes into the daylight and had looked around carefully, fearing that a little green Martian might still be lurking somewhere.

Amazed, they had gazed at each other. The masks had fallen off their faces, everyone suddenly turned into what they were again. For a long time a strange shyness kept them from approaching each other – as if they were afraid of hurting the other if they came too close to the fragile shell of his being.

Never before had they felt the blood in their veins pulsating so intensely. From one second to the next they regained the sovereignty over their lives. Ashamed, they resumed their rights, like people who, after dancing naked in a public square, discover a photo of their excess in the newspaper.

It was a bit like after the war. There was wreckage everywhere, only a rotten skeleton was left from the former life. The outer world lay in ruins, just like the inner world. Everything had to be rebuilt. Life had to be learned anew. The future was an unwritten book again.

The sound of the garden door ripped Maggie out of her thoughts. It was Thilio. With a mumbled morning greeting he put his arm around her shoulders and sucked in the dew-damp air with her.

For a while they stood silently next to each other and listened to the morning concert of the crickets. Then Maggie mused: "An attack by alien warriors ... I still can't believe it! I thought this was only in the movies ..."

Thilio buried his face in her curls, in which the fragrant breath of the wind had caught. "You're right," he whispered, "it's just unimaginable."

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